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Strategies of De-growth: The Role of Eco-communities in Politics of Change

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Declaration

I, Greta Juskaite, declare that this thesis is a result of my research investigations and findings. Sources of information other than my own have been acknowledged and a reference list has been appended. This work has not been previously submitted to any other university for award of any type of academic degree.

Signature.....

Date.....

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Any errors are mine alone

Abstract

In the age of climate change, political efforts to ensure sustainability for future generations have manifested in the rise of the ‘green growth’ objective and the green economy model. However, critics have argued that instead of reacting to a visible problem, structural change through a creation of a system that would no longer yield them, is needed. From here, the target to address the global environmental crisis ought to be the hyper-consumerist culture that solidifies the growth imperative, as opposed to the practices borne from it. One such critique is identified in the idea of de-growth, which seeks to question the use and misuse of capital by drawing public attention to the damaging effects of the global growth imperative on the environment and, in effect, broader social relations. Here, de-growth suggests a structural change based on simplicity and need rather than desire and accumulation. From here, the focus of this study is on why societies function the way they do, examining primarily the ideologies that govern them and, most importantly, exploring the possibility of change. To do that, this study argues that individual eco-communities can be considered to offer a foundation on which de-growth may be grounded and realized in practice to then be able to spread more globally. This study appropriates Gramscian conceptual framework as both the theoretical inquiry that problematizes the issue area and a tool to analyze the de-growth movement as a bottom-bottom approach led by eco-communities. Further, this thesis adopts an interpretivist research design and, thus, uses empirical findings to illustrate theoretical reasonings. From here, this study builds its theoretical argumentation based on empirical evidence collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observation in Suderbyn Ecovillage, an eco-community chosen as a study site, to determine the broader role of eco-communities in the de-growth movement, and further, the overall potential of de-growth as a Gramscian counter-hegemonic strategy to inflict structural change.

Keywords: *Gramsci, ideational power, hyper-consumerism, de-growth, eco-communities, voluntary simplicity, ecovillage movement, environmental resistance.*

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ECOLISE	Network for grassroots initiatives for climate change and sustainability
EVS	European Voluntary Service
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GEN	Global Ecovillage Network
IR	International Relations (academic field)
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NSD	Norwegian Center for Research Data
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
Rio+20 Summit	United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development
SCI	Service Civic International
TNCs	Transnational corporations
UN	United Nations
UNCED	United Nation Conference on Environment and Development
UN-ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
WCED	The World Commission on Environment and Development

Chapter 1: Introduction

In October 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released a report yet again warning about the tragic effects of climate change and calling for politicians to take action (IPCC, 2018). With the recognition of greenhouse gas-based irreversible environmental damage, and the growing warning narratives fostering societal awareness, climate change, and the search for solutions to it, has become a leading issue on the international politics arena in recent decades. Here, efforts to minimize negative effects and ensure sustainability for future generations have manifested in the shift towards ‘green economy’ politics, i.e. restructuring the economic system from one based on industrial growth into one based on green growth (Dryzek, 2013). However, scholars have argued that climate change is a result of a much larger structural problem based on a cycle of extraction, production, consumption and disposal that drives the growth of Western economies and, in effect, environmental degradation (Leonard, Fox & Sachs, 2007). To accommodate the wasteful consumption of Western societies, we are using 70% more natural resources than the Earth can regenerate in a timely manner, meaning that the system is on a verge of collapse (Global Footprint Network, 2019). Thus, one could argue that green production will change little in a hyper-consumerist culture, thereby leading to a more radical questioning of the very foundation that drives consumerism and productionism in the first place (Newell, 2012).

To address environmental degradation, but arguably continue accommodating Western consumption and production patterns, green growth imperatives have become the dominant political answer to climate change. Here, the solutions to environmental crisis are sought through, most notably, development of environmentally sound technologies and greening the production within the same profit-driven system (Dryzek, 2013). However, even in light of green growth, environmental activism that departs from the green growth narrative has risen significantly in recent years, further raising societal awareness about the urgency of environmental issues. Activists, grassroots initiatives and non-governmental organizations continue working on clean production, protection of forests and oceans, fair trade, waste management, etc. It has been argued, however, that for the crisis to be successfully addressed, a connection between all of these points of intervention, as well as an abandonment of the green growth narrative, must be made (Leonard, Fox & Sachs, 2007). De-growth is one of the movements that challenges the economic growth model and argues for the importance of a

structural change in order to achieve sustainability (Kallis, Demaria & D’Alisa, 2015). Here, the focus is not merely on changing the way goods are produced but changing the system of production and consumption as a whole, encompassing closed-loop, zero waste, renewable energy, equity, labor rights and local living economies as joint essential elements to sustainability. Further, de-growth does not only question and criticize the economic growth objective but proposes restructuring the economy altogether with a focus on simpler way of life, thus addressing precisely the consumerist culture as the main issue rather than only the over-production of goods that support it. As such, this research will focus on a de-growth transition as a grassroots-led structural *change*, considering alternative social attitudes as the first order of inquiry.

1.1. Research problem

While there are different ways of conceptualizing change and ways of bringing about change, voluntary simplicity movement could be considered as one. Voluntary simplicity, as a lifestyle that propagates non-materialist pursuit of human well-being, has been practiced for years but often met with ignorance by the society at large (Alexander, 2015). While in the past, communities and individuals have often been compelled to pursue simple living based on religious and spiritual beliefs, more recently voluntary simplicity became an objective of environmental, anti-consumerist movements. Simple living advocacy, directly opposing the culture of hyper-consumerism, has been growing in recent years and manifesting itself in the rise of eco-communities such as ecovillages, transition towns, permaculture communities, urban gardens, etc. (Alexander, 2015). However, prescribing such communities to agents of change in global environmental politics is not commonly considered. According to Wapner (2005), “the conventional understanding is that environmental activists are politically effective when they influence state behavior. That is, they bring about change by lobbying states to enact environmental policies. According to this view, widespread human behavior shifts because of states.” (p. 346). Here environmentalist actions are understood as a bottom-up approach to achieve a desirable top-down decision. But a different strategy, bottom-bottom, is rarely considered to hold any power in global politics. A bottom-bottom approach here would mean an organic shift in societal norms thereby leading to a larger structural transition. As consumerism drives the growth-based economy, voluntary simplicity would negate the need to growth and over-production.

Further, it has been argued that considering de-growth in purely economic terms, as well as considering the simplicity movement in purely social terms, will not be sufficient for a change of any kind to occur (Latouche, 2009). Instead, both must be met under the politics umbrella and prescribed by the society at large as intertwined in order for the broader movement to be successful (Alexander, 2015). From here, a change in societal and political mindset must occur to condition the de-growth transition. Voluntary simplicity communities are thus essential here in creating alternative culture, values and practices that would first and foremost counter hyper-consumerism in ideological terms, which then, in turn, would negate the need for further growth and allow for de-growth to step in, in both political and economic terms (Alexander, 2015).

While many see voluntary simplicity communities as agents of change, it has been argued that such communities run the risk of becoming closed off from the ‘outside’ world, becoming sanctuaries for those seeking to escape the status quo, as opposed to engaging in the spread of questioning the system at large (Wallmeier, 2017). According to Alexander (2015): “simple living movements must not seek to ‘escape’ the system, but radically ‘transform’ it” (p. 135). Therefore, a closer examination of an eco-community as an agent in global environmental politics is needed in order to understand whether or not they have the potential to bring about a structural transformation.

This thesis will consider neo-Marxist theorizations, specifically those of Antonio Gramsci, where a change in the system is seen to occur only through a long-term strategy reliant upon the formation of a strong resistance front on a societal level (Cox, 1983). Here, collective action, grouping of people, exercise of autonomy and spread of alternative/radical ideas are all symptoms of the formation of what may be conceptualized as the counter-hegemonic front – one that constitutes the grounds for new meanings of ‘reality’ and therefore challenges the mainstream, or hegemonic, ideology and system (Cox, 1999). The rising climate and economic crisis have potentially contributed to the rapid growth in numbers of eco-communities worldwide and the people that are willing to subscribe to alternative lifestyles, therefore creating an opportunity for the ‘ecovillage movement’ to become a well-tuned counter-hegemonic front (Kallis, Demaria, D’Alisa, 2015). From here, an examination of such a community could help better understand the de-growth agenda, its bottom-bottom approach, and whether or not it can withstand the mainstream pressure.

1.2. Research objective and research questions

Looking at an eco-community as a practical application of de-growth may offer a better insight into how grassroots actions can be mobilized and used to form and strengthen the counter-hegemonic front, one that opposes mainstream environmentalism based on green growth imperatives. Therefore, this research aims to explore the de-growth strategy by looking at the composition and functions of an eco-community and the motivations behind people that join it in order to understand if eco-communities are systematically functioning revolutionary institutions or reaction-based escapist colonies. The premise behind an in-depth look at such a distinction is the potential it has to lead to a better understanding of transformational power of the counter-hegemonic movement itself. From here, research questions to be answered through the course of this study are:

- To what extent can eco-communities be considered as a Gramscian resistance front? Are they reactionist or revolutionary?
- Given the consideration of eco-communities as practical applications of the de-growth ideology, what is the potential of de-growth as a counter-hegemonic movement?

1.3. Methods

This research is based on an interpretivist research design, meaning that it does not aim to generate universal truths, but to exemplify certain theoretical reasonings (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). From here, this study takes Gramscian theory as the entry point, considering a de-growth transition as a Gramscian resistance strategy. To exemplify such theoretical inquiry, this research used a selected eco-community (Suderbyn Ecovillage) as a study site, considering it as a practical application of de-growth. Further, participant observation and semi-structured interviews with the residents of the community were performed as primary data collection methods. Finally, a thematic analysis of the collected data was performed, and the findings were interpreted using Gramscian conceptual tools in order to answer the research questions.

1.4. Structure of the thesis

This study is structured into six main chapters. Following the introduction, **Chapter 2** presents the theoretical literature. Here, the theoretical framework, which supports this study, is introduced, followed by a discussion about mainstream and alternative ideologies in terms of environmentalism, thus providing the background information and situating the study within existing debates. Further, presenting the methodology of this research, **Chapter 3** first explains methodological inquiry of this study. Second, the conceptual tools to be used in this research are explored in detail in this chapter. Lastly, Chapter 3 gives an overview of the data collection methods used in this research, as well as the ethical implications and limitations of this study. Further, **Chapter 4** presents the main findings derived from analyzing the collected data. Here, the chapter provides a detailed presentation of the chosen study site and an exploration of the motivations and opinions of the residents of the chosen eco-community. **Chapter 5** uses the conceptual tools of this study to discuss the main findings in accordance to the posed research questions. Finally, **Chapter 6** presents concluding thoughts and sums up this thesis.

Chapter 2: Politics of change and the environment

2.1. Power to change and power to resist change

Classical International Relations (IR) scholarship often deals with the state or non-state actions and the implications of those action on a broader, global society. But what drives actions to be taken in the first place? What are the forces at work that create a particular medium for actors to work, for societies to function and for governments to rule in the ways that they do? Most importantly, how does power to change and power to resist change work in the face of crisis?

Within the discipline of IR, global environmental crisis is most often addressed through conventional theoretical understandings of world order, and thus, power. Realism, arguably the most prominent IR theory where State is seen as the main actor, argues for every action to be the product of the pursuit of individual interests through the use of power (Barnett & Duvall, 2005). From here, power is understood in material terms and seen as a tool of intimidation, which, if used correctly, leads to opposing actors behaving against their own interests. Here, environmental reform is approached merely through bargaining between states (Newell, 2012).

In contrast to the state-centric, power politics-based realism, liberalism and its branches focuses on cooperation as opposed to competition (Barnett & Duvall, 2005). Here, the focus departs from power as both the means to an end and an end in itself. Instead, liberalism argues for the importance of liberal ideals that guide actions in global politics. In relation to global environmental change, international public arena, as a decision-making sphere, is the primary focus in this line of reasoning (Newell, 2012).

Further, introducing a substantially different view, constructivist scholars argue for the existence of social norms that may legitimize certain actions and condition the context within which they are exercised (Newell, 2012). In this way, power is understood in ideational, as opposed to material, terms, however, it does not challenge the purpose for which it functions. Constructivists most often focus on the constitution of actors' identities and interests through the creation of normative structures, but rarely see the normative structure as a power holder in itself (Barnett & Duvall, 2005). This is where a neo-Marxist theory offers a significant insight into the use of power in both material *and* ideational terms and the power of the structure within which actors operate, in turn contributing to further the understanding of the dynamics of global environmental politics and change.

Marxism is known as the pioneer critical theory in IR and one of the most influential theories in the discipline to this day. One of the main reasons why Marxism claimed the ‘critical’ position is the unit of analysis. This is so, as differing from mainstream theories, Marxism departs from state or individual-based analysis, and instead focuses on the power of the overarching system that governs them (Cohn, 2016). Here, capitalism, is treated as the focal point and seen as an overarching system – a force that creates hierarchies and inequalities in a given society. Following this train of thought, Marxist and neo-Marxist scholarship treats the system as the main structure within which power, in both material and ideational terms, may be operationalized to construct class-division in a given society (Vogler, 2011). The actors, however, are never acting independently of the system, but always in accordance to its rules and norms, thereby making the system – a power holder in itself. The relevance of Marxist and neo-Marxist scholarship in understanding global environmental change lies in its commencement with identifying root causes of environmental crisis, as opposed to focusing merely on the ways to govern it (Newell, 2012). Here, the conception of the inherent contradiction between capitalism and sustainability, as well as identification of a broader range of actors in both promoting and resisting change, beyond those of states and international institutions, offers a critical account of global environmental politics.

This brief overview of the use of power was provided to reason the theoretical position taken in this study. It is important to note, however, that power and change can be understood in different ways based on the theoretical perspective the conception derives from, as well as different criteria against which power is analyzed (such as actor vs. structure). As this study is concerned with change and the use of ideational power in global environmental politics, a neo-Marxist, specifically Gramscian, theory and central concepts are chosen as the most appropriate to help better understand the way ideas may be used to both serve and resist the system. As such, the following will provide a detailed account of Gramscian theoretical framework in order to set up the following discussion about the ideological power struggle in global environmental politics.

2.1.1. The use of ideas to govern societies: ideational power

Classical Marxism stems from the late 19th century writings of Karl Marx, who was primarily concerned with hierarchies in a given society that are continuously produced and reproduced by and through the economic system (Cohn, 2016). From here, Marx argued that

capitalism is in itself designed to create inequalities in a society, where the elite class (bourgeoisie in Marxist terms) profit off of the working class (proletariat). This is so, as capitalism allows for the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the top few, who then are in a position to hold material power over the rest of the society, and thus widen the gap between the rich and the poor (Cohn, 2016). Further, according to Marx, power by the elite is used in two ways to keep the proletariat at bay and the capitalist system stable (Watson, 2017). First, laborers are payed less than what their labor is actually worth in order to keep the labor, as a commodity, profitable in the market place. Second, the laborers are kept as an individualistic group by rejecting their right to form unions in order to prevent the rise of a unified knowledge of mistreatment, which would then threaten the enforcement of lowered wages. ‘False consciousness’ is what Marx called the condition under which the proletariat must be kept in order to continue the capitalist cycle (Watson, 2017). From here, class struggle seen by Marx is not just between the elite and the working class, but between the laborers and the system, which sustains the unequal distribution of wealth and thus – power.

Antonio Gramsci, commonly classified as a neo-Marxist thinker, built upon the fundamental Marxist ideas of systemic production of inequalities, but theorized in broader terms looking at the way power structures work through the use of ideas (Cox, 1981). Instead of focusing on the class struggle in material terms alone, Gramsci’s conceptualization was broader as he recognized the system beyond economics, but saw the role of government, media, education, church, etc. as central elements creating power. Thus, the focus here is on why societies function the way they do, examining primarily the ideologies that govern them.

One of the central concepts in Gramscian thought is that of *hegemony*. Hegemony can be understood as a form of power, a leadership of one group over another, a state of subordination, but not necessarily direct elite domination (Forgacs, 2000). Here, Gramsci departs from Marxist ‘material determinism’, where power over the lower class is primarily held in terms of material constraints. Instead, Gramsci saw power of the elite to be much more nuanced, where the combination of both coercion (material) and consent (ideological) is needed in order to sustain the system and retain the overall hegemony (Forgacs, 2000). From here, material power is reinforced by the use of ideas that are initiated through the governing institutions, thereby creating behavioral norms in a given society (Cox, 1981). Thus, hegemony is, what Gramsci called, ‘ethico-political’ referring to the “ideological, moral and cultural cements which bond a society together” (Gramsci, 2000, p. 190). From here, hegemony is reinforced through *civil society*, thus making the process of establishing hegemonic domination,

and further the larger social order – what Gramsci called *historic bloc* referring to the structure comprised of state and society – internal rather than external (Cox, 1983) (Mittelman & Chin, 2005). Civil society, here, refers to organizations and institutions that produce and reinforce a particular ideology in a society, which then accepts it voluntarily and slowly makes it a social norm for others to subscribe to (Mittelman & Chin, 2005). Church, family, educational system, media, unions, as well as bigger organizations such as NGOs (non-governmental organizations), all constitute civil society. The use of civil society to exert domination is what Gramsci called ‘power of consent’ – the form of power that eliminates the need for coercion and allows for systemic control by the ruling class (Cox, 1983). However, while hegemony is widely associated merely with ideological use of power, the economic system is still central in this line of reasoning. According to Gramsci (2000): “for though hegemony is ethico-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity” (p. 212). From here, ideology is used to reinforce the economic system which then *together* constitute hegemony (Forgacs, 2000).

2.1.2. Ideological revolt

Karl Marx argued for revolution as the ultimate goal to escape the exploitative system (Cohn, 2016). Knowledge is at the center of the emancipatory process for Marxists, due to the power of ‘false consciousness’, which ultimately structures and sustains the hierarchal and exploitative system. For Marx, knowledge does not exist in the absence of human activity and it is always interchangeable (Foley, 1986). From here, questioning and sifting through existing knowledge is what gives rise to alternative ideas and power to the proletariat who then are able to revolt against the elite and the system under which they are governed.

Similarly, however powerful the dominant ideology may be, Gramsci saw the rise of alternative ideas – counter hegemonies, as the ultimate goal (Cox, 1983). Here, recognizing the unfair nature of the system within which the society functions may lead to the development of alternative ideologies, which challenge the hegemonic front. Such a challenge is seen to have the potential to change the existing social order – *historic bloc* (Cox, 1983). However, as establishing hegemony is a participatory and continuous process, the same way that hegemony is constituted, counter-hegemony may be borne through civil society. From here, civil society should be understood as the overall domain where ideas are constructed to form societal

consent, thereby being central in *both* hegemonic and counter-hegemonic processes (Forgacs, 2000).

Further, according to Gramsci, there are two possible counter-hegemonic strategies: *war of movement* and *war of position*. The former refers to a quick systemic transformation due to weak civil society, leaving the hegemonic front vulnerable to external shocks (Cox, 1983). The latter refers to a long-term strategy, often a transition from a war of movement, where the foundations of a new order are built up and strengthened slowly over time (Cox, 1983). Resisting the hegemonic pressure, igniting doubt in the existing system, and building strong counter-hegemonic civil society is essential for both of these strategies to bring upon change. However, a hegemonic cooption of the counter-ideology, or what Gramsci called *transformism*, is a possible outcome of the hegemonic struggle (Gramsci, 1999). Here, the counter-hegemonic ideology is incorporated in the hegemonic ideology to gain consent from the society that would allow for the 'business as usual' by creating an illusion of a systemic shift.

2.2. Environmentalism over time

Following the above provided theoretical reasoning, subsequent sections will identify what this thesis argues to be both the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic fronts, agents within them, and the use of environmental discourses to sustain them. This is done to narrow down the focus of this study and to set up the issue at hand.

2.2.1. Identifying the hegemonic front

Ever since the Industrial Revolution, national development through technological advancement and economic growth has been the leading objective of states across the world. With changing dominant economic systems (from mercantilism to capitalism) economic growth as an objective has been understood in different terms: either as maximization of state power, or as maximization of societal wellbeing (Watson, 2017). Nevertheless, economic growth has been and continues to be the driving force of every modern economic tradition.

Karl Marx in the early 19th century identified capitalism as the root cause of social and economic inequalities in a given society. Marx's critique of capitalism was directly regarded to Adam Smith, the first advocate of fundamental liberal economic ideas, most notably associated with capitalism and free trade (Watson, 2017). Capitalism, as a socio-economic system,

emerged in 16th – 17th century and quickly changed then dominant mercantilism, driven by accumulation of wealth to accumulate power and control over other nation states (Watson, 2017). The main difference between mercantilism and capitalism was the lack of state intervention in the latter, compared to the heavy state control of the economy in the former, as well as the promotion of open international trade. The market here was seen to be the regulating force where capitalist economies may engage to generate profit, thus negating the need for state intervention and control. In short, capitalism can be characterized by accumulation of wealth, labor-wages relationship, ownership of the production of commodities, market exchange and competition, and profit motivation (Andreucci & McDonough, 2015).

The post-1945 period, often remarked as the ‘golden age’, was dominated by the liberal Keynesian economic model, which favored government intervention to facilitate market efficiency (Cohn, 2016). Following the oil crisis in 1973 and increasing political pressure to return to the orthodoxy liberal principles of deregulation, free trade and privatization resulted in the spread of what is known as a neoliberal economic model (Cohn, 2016) (Phillips, 2017). Here, the capitalist economic system was globalized leading to unprecedented rates of economic growth in the global North through international trade, the rise of Transnational Corporations (TNCs) and foreign direct investments allowing for cross-border free flow of capital (Clapp, 2011) (Phillips, 2017). Smith, along with other liberal theorists that proceeded, advocated for free trade based on comparative advantage principle (Watson, 2017) (Clapp, 2011). Here, the argument followed, states engaging in free international trade may increase their wealth and thus domestic economic growth by specializing their production. In other words, states ought to engage in international trade by producing and exporting goods they have a comparative advantage over, i.e. least opportunity cost, and import goods they have higher opportunity cost for, thereby eliminating competition of production and creating a win-win situation for all parties involved. With neoliberal globalization, the comparative advantage principle justified not only the rise of international trade but international investment enabling TNCs to move their production to countries with lower wages and lower production standards, thus maximizing their profits and ensuring accumulation of wealth (Clapp, 2011). This, in turn, created the foundation for corporate power to rise and dictate self-favoring conditions through political lobbying, thus becoming an actor within the global political economy along with states and non-state international institutions (Phillips, 2017).

Karl Marx saw capitalism as the driving force of material inequality and social injustice. However, the fundamental Marxist ideas about capitalism could be further reduced to an analysis of the economic growth objective within it. Economic growth, as discussed above,

manifests itself in every liberal economic model, thereby it could be seen to be the primary driver of the negative capitalist effects. Gill and Law (1993) coined the idea of ‘structural power of capital’ pointing towards the fact that the *structure* of the economic system allocates power to those who possess wealth and have the ability to move it across borders quickly. This in turn reinforces the power of capital, the power of the structure itself and the power agents within it. The force that drives this closed circle is thus economic growth. From here, the hegemonic front could be seen to be comprised of a collaboration of different entities that facilitate the production and reproduction of the hegemonic ideology, which here can be identified as economic growth.

2.2.2. Mainstream environmental discourses: forging the hegemony

According to Gramsci (1999), ideas form an ideational structure, which supports and protects the governing system. However, the rise of alternative ideas may lead to the formation of a counter-hegemonic front, one that challenges the existing social order and has the potential to structure a new historic bloc (Gramsci, 1999). While ideational changes may bring about a transformation in the broader material structure, counter-hegemonic ideas may also be coopted by the hegemonic front leading to the reinforcement of the status quo (Gramsci, 1999). From here, the following overview of the changing environmental ideologies over time is meant to provide an insight into how environmentalism, as a counter-hegemonic ideology, has been coopted by the hegemonic front over time to support the growth imperative that defines the governing structure.

Late 1960s – early 1970s mark the beginning of modern environmentalism and mainstream environmental politics, leading to the first modern battle between competing counter-hegemonic environmental discourses (Woodhouse, 2018). Here, a number of local environmental movements arose in the West that had varying focal points: consumer movements, population stabilization, pacifism, action youth movements, anti-industrial pollution protests, among others (Woodhouse, 2018) (Fried, 1998). Further, following a number of publications painting a grim picture of the future, most notably Meadows’ ‘The Limits to Growth’ (1972), the environmentalist reach entered the global scale. Here, the global public attention was brought to the intertwined nature of economics and the environment, as well as the negative realities of industrial growth (Dryzek, 2013). With visible environmental damage caused by heavy industrial activities on a local level, ‘The Limits to Growth’, talking

about ecological collapse within a century's time due to continuous industrial growth, caused a discursive shift in the political debates at the time, as well as sparked the rise of anti-Malthusian critical thinking in academia and the emergence of political ecology, as a scholarly field focusing on politically-based, as opposed to planetary, negative environmental effects (Robbins, 2019).

Further, growing public environmentalism was targeting the absence of environmental narratives in politics at the time, sparking politicians to react. On a local level, pollution and clean water control was the primary goal for politicians responding to the new wave of environmentalism, resulting in the establishment of environmental ministries in most Western countries in the early 70s and, thus, marking the beginning of environment as a mainstream political issue (Hajer, 1995). The local and regional political response to the newly arisen environmentalism resulted in the public awareness of the *global* level consequences of industrialization, as well as the social, environmental and economic effects of a broader system operating on a growth model (Dryzek, 2013). From here, environmentalist ideology for the first time threatened the mainstream discourse of growth through survivalist narratives calling for a systemic change. At the time, de-growth, as a concept encapsulating an alternative system, was first coined by radical thinkers in France (Fournier, 2008) (Kallis, Demaria & D'Alisa, 2015). Here, neo-liberal economic model was criticized through the increasing attention put towards the ignorance of environmental damage in politics and economics. However, while in the face of pressure, the dominant global environmental discourse did not adopt the proposed anti-capitalist paradigm.

In 1972 environmental politics were put on a global spectrum through the UN Conference on Human Environment (known as the Stockholm Conference) held that year (O'Neill, 2009). Here, a number of environmental issues were discussed and met as a responsibility of the international community to find solutions. According to O'Neill (2009): "Stockholm also marked the beginning of a debate over the relationship between environmental protection and economic development" (pp. 28). Following this debate, a narrative of 'eco-development' was put forward, which allowed for the continuation of global capitalism and later became what is now known as 'sustainable development' (Latouche, 2009).

In the wake of the rise of radical environmental movements calling for political and economic change, The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) was formed in 1983 by the United Nations (Meadowcroft, 2005). WCED was aimed at finding long-term solutions to existing environmental and social issues. In 1987, a report titled 'Our Common Future', unofficially known as the 'Brundtland Report', was released by the

Commission, introducing the concept of ‘sustainable development’ as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland, 1987, para. 27). The idea of sustainable development quickly gained international attention and became a success as it bridged environmental concerns in the North with development objectives in the South, thereby justifying the continuation of economic growth through sustainable production in the name of development of the world’s poor (Meadowcroft, 2005).

The discourse of sustainable development was further mainstreamed through the 1992 UN Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, where it entered the international politics arena successfully by proposing a win-win strategy – environmental protection coupled with further economic growth (Dryzek, 2013). Thus, environmentalism, as a counter-hegemonic ideology questioning the growth-driven system became coopted by it, as it continued to push the same economic objectives through the ‘green lens’.

A final subtle shift in the hegemonic front could be seen in the rise of market environmentalism and ecological modernization narratives, where the former refers to free market solutions to environmental issues, mainly pricing environmental goods and services, and the latter – technocentric approach to environmental issues, both being practical reinforcements of the sustainable development discourse (Adams, 2009). Further, ecological modernization as a discourse gained popularity following critiques of sustainable development, as it was seen to offer a departure from economic growth as a cause of environmental damage, instead focusing on the positive aspects of the existing economic system and the growth of technology as a source of solution (Barry & Smith, 2005). However, while ecological modernization focuses on innovation and structural change, it does not assume that existing political, social and economic institutions need to undergo a change (Hajer, 1995).

The environmental discursive shifts over time, from ‘sustainable development’ to ecological modernization, have contributed to the formation of the ‘green growth’ imperative (Wanner, 2015). Following the 2009 UN General Assembly adoption of a resolution for the preparation for Rio+20 Summit, the concept of ‘green economy’ emerged and quickly became the focal point in international politics (Kenis & Lievens, 2015). Green economy as a concept encompasses the green growth objective and as a discourse proposes an emancipatory domain for economic actors to engage in green action without the need to wait for top-down decisions. A number of publications in the following years such as the UNEP report “Towards a Green Economy: Pathway to Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication” (2011), the OECD

report “Interim Report of the Green Growth Strategy” (2010), the World Bank report “Inclusive Green Growth” (2012), among others, have all endorsed green economy (Kenis & Lievens, 2015). The timing of the green economy emergence – following the 2008 economic crisis – and four distinguishable factors of this strategy: sustainability, technological innovation, sustainable entrepreneurship and sustainable consumption, was a recipe for success. However, as Kenis and Lievens (2015) have argued, green economy could be seen to be a mere continuation of the sustainable development agenda, as it does not regard economic growth as a strain on planetary resources, it supports international competition as opposed to cooperation in the face of ecological crisis and it fosters free trade. Thus, all of this combined has created a pathway for green economy to become the hegemonic ideology where environmentalism is further being coopted by the economic growth objective.

2.2.3. Critiquing the mainstream

A number of academic critiques arose over the years and were conceptualized as ‘radical’ due to their fundamental rejection of mainstream environmentalism, most notably deep ecology, eco-feminism, eco-anarchism and eco-socialism (Adams, 2009). Collectively, these academic ideas proposed a change in thinking about the human-nature relationship on an individual level by rejecting the principle of human domination over the environment for the sake of human advancement, which is inherent in mainstream environmentalist narratives discussed above.

Deep ecology comes from the writings of Arne Næss, who in the early 1970s critiqued the ‘shallow ecology’ narrative by rejecting the separation between humans and nature (Adams, 2009). He argued for the intrinsic value of nature and the “recognition of the equal rights of organisms to live and blossom” (Adams, 2009, p.190). A number of scholars continued the deep ecology discussion in 1980s challenging the established anthropocentric ideas and inspiring radical environmentalist groups.

In 1980s – 1990s, eco-feminism arose challenging both the mainstream and other alternative environmental ideologies, calling for a specific attention to be put on gender in human and non-human environment relations (Adams, 2009). Here, eco-feminism argued that the capitalist profit maximization results in environmental exploitation and degradation where women, especially marginalized women, are affected the most.

In the late 1970s, eco-anarchist scholarship arose arguing against the structure of domination (Adams, 2009). In short, eco-anarchism viewed the hierarchy within our society to

be directly translated into the hierarchy between humans and nature, where the former dominates the latter. Therefore, opposing industrialism, bureaucracy and statism was central in eco-anarchist scholarship (Adams, 2009). Fundamental eco-anarchist ideas had been adopted by radical environmentalist groups over the years, inspired protests and boycotts, influenced operations of non-governmental environmental organizations and given roots to broader ideas of decentralization, participatory democracy, self-sufficiency and egalitarianism (Adams, 2009).

Finally, eco-socialism, rooting in Marxist thought, has argued for social concerns such as wealth distribution, quality of life and social justice to be heavily affected by environmental issues, that, in turn, have been induced by social actions (Adams, 2009). While historically Marxism lacked a sufficient account of the environment, in 1970s-onwards socialist critiques of capitalism started to include the environmental dimension by making links between capitalist accumulation and environmental exploitation and degradation. Here, eco-socialist scholarship laid down the foundation for the rise of radical ideas of decentralization, communalism, utopian socialism, among others (Adams, 2009).

In response to the rising growth imperative and the rise of system-challenging ideas in the 1960s and 70s, scholars started proposing green economy models based on ‘simple living’ principle rather than growth. Most notable contributions here can be identified in Daly’s ‘steady-state economics’ and Schumacher’s ‘Buddhist economics’ (Woodhouse, 2018). Schumacher, in his ‘Small is beautiful’ (1973) publication, called for less focus to be placed on material well-being and instead placing the value on human happiness, which cannot be attained through unsustainable use of resources. The argument goes on to stress the importance of minimizing consumption and situating the economy towards the local. Schumacher advocated for simplicity and moderation, as opposed to wealth accumulation, as a key to well-being and happiness (Woodhouse, 2018). A few years later, Herman Daly put forward his alternative economic model with the publication of ‘Steady state economics’ (1977), further arguing against the growth imperative (Adams, 2009). Daly (1991) defined a steady-state economy as: “economy with constant stock of people and artifacts, maintained at some desired, sufficient levels by low rates of maintenance ‘throughput’, that is, by lowest feasible flows of matter and energy from the first stage of production to the last stage of consumption” (p. 17). Here, Daly argued that, given that natural resources are finite, reaching a steady-state economy is not only necessary but inevitable. However, to do that, an ideological shift in the society is needed where human happiness is not valued in terms of growth.

2.2.4. De-growth: forging the counter-hegemony

Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen criticized development and growth-based economic models in the 1970s, and, as a result, laid down the foundations for what later became the idea of de-growth (Bonaiuti, 2015). He argued that development of any kind is inevitably connected to economic growth, and growth, even zero-growth proposed by steady-state theory, will ultimately lead to resource exhaustion. Therefore, a declining economic model, or de-growth, ought to be the ultimate goal and the only viable option for the future (Bonaiuti, 2015).

The initial critique of sustainable growth by Georgescu-Roegen in 1970s marked the first phase of the de-growth debate (Kallis, Demaria & D'Alisa, 2015). Here, Georgescu-Roegen began his theorizations by insisting on the need to relate economics to the biosphere (bioeconomics). This is so, as “the fundamental aim of economic activity, unlimited growth of production and consumption, being based on finite sources of matter/energy, is not compatible with the fundamental laws of nature”, specifically with the law of entropy (i.e. second law of thermodynamics) (Bonaiuti, 2015, p. 26). Here, Goergescu-Roegen argued that scarce resources were being overused and wasted, while at the same time abundant sources of energy, such as solar, were underutilized (Latouche, 2009). Similar ideas were revisited in the early 70s by scholars such as Gorz (1975) and Illich (1973), who are often prescribed to the early pioneers of de-growth (Fournier, 2008). However, with ‘Limits to Growth’ and the rise of sustainable development discourse, the initial idea of a declining economy, while still occasionally echoed in theorizations of critical thinkers at the time, was put aside for the time being.

Early 2000s marked the second phase of de-growth, this time driven by the critique of sustainable development, which took the mainstream position after the first debates about de-growth in the 70s (Kallis, Demaria & D'Alisa, 2015). Here, de-growth positioned itself directly opposing capitalism within the sustainable development and green growth discourses, calling the clean capitalism an ‘oxymoron’ idea (Fournier, 2008). This is so, as capitalism proposes measuring success in terms of growth, which is problematic for de-growthers as the economy may grow through the increase of the consumption of medical services, weapons, insurance, etc. in response to the increase of illness, crime and conflict, accidents, ecological degradation, etc. Therefore, justice, democracy, equality, environment, and other factors are ignored in the economic growth model (Fournier, 2008). From here, the idea of sustainable growth is not seen as a viable option for the proponents of de-growth, as any rise of green production will still ultimately lead to damaging effects on the society, ecological or otherwise. Thus, the issue here is not with the development of green technologies, but the use of them within the growth

narrative, which propagates the continuous increase of production and consumption (Fournier, 2008). From here, de-growth as an ideology seeks to question the use and misuse of capital, and the distribution of capital within a society, by drawing the public attention to the damaging effects of global capitalism on the environment, as well as broader social relations.

Further, de-growth, in its second phase, first emerged as a slogan for anti-globalization and anti-capitalism social movements in France, Italy and Spain in the early 2000s (Kallis, Demaria & D'Alisa, 2015). At the time, de-growth became an idea under which people propagating a simpler lifestyle could mobilize. The movement grew rapidly gaining following in its practical applications through reusing things, second-hand shops, co-operatives, the sharing principle, public transport, etc. Further, the theoretical ideas of Georescu-Roegen were revisited as de-growth found its way into academia with the establishment of the Institute for Economic and Social Studies on Sustainable Degrowth in Lyon in 2001 and academic collective Research & Degrowth in 2007 (Kallis, Demaria & D'Alisa, 2015). The latter then started promoting international conferences, the first one held in 2008 in Paris, where de-growth was finally started to be used in English and gained international recognition thereafter.

Sergey Latouche (2009), one of the main academic contributors to the second-phase of de-growth, stated that: “It is significant that most environmentalist discourses make no critique of the growth society and confuse the issue with vague talk of sustainable development” (p. 3). Therefore, de-growth still acts first and foremost as a platform for alternative ideas to arise. By critiquing and questioning economic values, de-growth does not provide a definitive blueprint for an alternative, utopian society, but it does propose steps to be taken that would lead to the escape from growth economy. According to Latouche (2009), eight distinctive steps can “trigger a process of de-growth that will be serene, convivial and sustainable” (p. 33). These steps are conceptualized as the ‘eight R’s’ by Latouche (2009): *re-evaluate* – mainly pointing towards the hierarchical human-nature relationship, *reconceptualize* – pointing towards the need for change in societal values, *restructure* – “adapting the productive apparatus and social relations to changing values” (p. 36), *redistribute* – changing distribution patterns both between the North and the South and within each society, *relocalize* – moving primary production back to the local level, *reduce* – reducing consumption, production, and travel/transport patterns, and *re-use and recycle* which would lead to the reduction of waste (Latouche, 2009). From here, the de-growth ideology becomes a radical discourse challenging the global mainstream by, firstly, questioning and criticizing it, secondly, by not proposing distinct alternative but suggesting steps to be made that could lead to one, and finally, by implying societal resistance.

2.3. Environmental resistance in practice

Since 1960s grassroots environmental movements have entered the global arena due to the increasing awareness about the connection between globalization and environmental degradation, as well as the increasing politicization of environmental issues on a global scale (Ford, 2011). However, it was not until the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) that environmental organizations and movements mobilized and entered the transnational politics arena. The number of grassroots engagements in global environmental politics has risen since and continues to rise today (Ford, 2011). From here, the following sections will explore environmentalism in practice, identifying possible agents of the counter-hegemonic movement and its practical manifestation.

Social movements, while contested in academic literature, could be defined as “networks of informal relationships between a multiplicity of individuals and organizations, who share a distinctive collective identity, and mobilize resources on conflictual issues” (Diani, 2000, p. 387). Social movements may vary in size and space upon which they operate – from local, acting within certain borders and focusing on a specific local issue area, to global, transcending national boundaries and making connections between the local and the global. Due to the increasing social awareness of the connection between globalization and environmental degradation, social environmental movements today often act on a global scale targeting the global root causes of local issues (Ford, 2011).

Further, environmental movements often engage with a broad set of issues as they make connections between environment, economy, human rights, politics, etc. In so doing, environmental movements blur the boundaries between strictly environmental and other social issues, challenging the system as a whole, as opposed to a particular factor within it (Ford, 2011). Further, according to Amore (2005), when studying resistance politics, it is important to understand that resistance may manifest itself in varying forms. While the most common association when describing a social movement would correspond to protests, demonstrations and public declarations, resistance may be manifested subtly through everyday life practices and may not be as visible as loud militant gatherings (Amore, 2005). Thus, it is noteworthy to distinguish environmental movements, composed in NGOs and pressure organizations that engage in challenging top-down actions, from grassroots movements, that work on a bottom-up strategy by engaging in the pursuit of alternatives through ‘living the solution’ (Ford, 2011).

An example of the latter strategy can be identified in the ‘ecovillage movement’, which, as per the focus of this study, is going to be discussed in detail in the sections below.

2.3.1. Eco-communities: counter-hegemonic front in practice

Eco-communities are communities comprised of a group of people living together and practicing sustainable lifestyle with sharing principles and, therefore, can be considered as a practical application of de-growth ideology (Cattaneo, 2015). A diverse list of institutions may fall under the description of an eco-community, such as ecovillages, communes, colonies, urban gardens, etc. Eco-communities vary in their functions and ideologies: educational centers, spiritual retreats, urban eco-gardens, rural ecovillages, etc. (Litfin, 2009). All of them, nonetheless, practice environmentally sound living and, while not always openly prescribing to the de-growth ideology, sharing, as opposed to growth-based economy, is a central principle of such communities. Sustainable practices performed in eco-communities range from organic agriculture and permaculture, crafts, energy conservation, local economy, and many more.

Ecovillage, a form of an eco-community, was defined by Robert Gilman (1991) as a “human-scale, full-featured settlement in which human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world in a way that is supportive of healthy human development and can be successfully continued into the indefinite future” (p. 10). Such a definition has been contested over the years for being too idealistic and utopian and thus not representative of an ecovillage in reality (Van Schyndel Kasper, 2008). While Gilman’s definition describes an ideal ecovillage and thus does not characterize ecovillages today, it does, however, depict an overall objective that ecovillages are guided by.

Further, the formation of ecovillages can be traced back to the Western ‘back to the land’ movement of the late 1960s (commonly known as the ‘Hippie movement’) (Dawson, 2006). The ‘back to the land’ movement arose with the changing environmentalist discourse and the rising societal environmental consciousness. Thus, the premise behind the movement was to escape the productivist and consumerist system by returning back to the nature, forging sustainable and self-sufficient lifestyles (Calvario & Otero, 2015). Further, ‘back to the landers’ propagated autonomy, ecology, simplicity and self-sufficiency as their core values, and critiqued the mainstream materialist culture and the system of capitalism. Alternative lifestyle forged by the movement involved not only ecological farming, but community living and alternative localized economy that allowed them to escape the capitalist wage labor and market place, thus making them a de-growth society (Calvario & Otero, 2015).

Today, ecovillages strive for a maximum quality of life through minimal environmental impact. This is achieved in a multitude of ways, as ecovillages often differ in terms of their primary objectives, be that spiritual, ecological, social, or otherwise, as mentioned above (Litfin, 2009). However, most ecovillages engage in finding ways to minimize their ecological footprint through low-impact settlement designs, promoting sustainable local economies and organic and local food production and processing (Dawson, 2006). Further, ecovillages promote participatory, community-scale governance and social inclusion. This is not to say that ecovillages are always self-sufficient or are able to be fully isolated from the outside society (Van Schyndel Kasper, 2008). However, by engaging in organic agriculture, promoting ‘voluntary simplicity’ principle and implementing a form of a ‘sharing economy’ (to a stronger or lesser extent), as well as, by “promoting a culture of trust and compassion” (Dawson, 2006, p. 54), ecovillages create an alternative society where happiness of the people, in social terms, does not come at the expense of the natural environment to the same extent as it does in the ‘modern society’.

2.3.2. The global dimension of eco-communities

Eco-communities, specifically ecovillages, today differ from their predecessors of the ‘back to the land’ movement, which resulted in the composition of communities that were not offering a broader alternative to the outside modern society, apart from that of escaping it (Wallmeier, 2017). In contrast, eco-communities today forge networks and relationships with the outside, thus, they do not disconnect from neither one another nor the larger social and political environment (Litfin, 2009).

The Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) was established in 1995, connecting hundreds of ecovillages worldwide and spreading the ideology of sustainable living (Litfin, 2009). Currently, GEN lists around 10,000 communities all around the world, however, there are many more communities not part of the GEN network that practice the simpler lifestyle (Global Ecovillage Network, 2019a) (Litfin, 2014). Internet is used as a tool for such communities to connect, share their experiences and practices, and spread the ideology worldwide. Thus, according to Litfin (2009), ecovillages can be classified as a movement as they “address the interrelated problems of social alienation and ecological degradation by building sustainable communities locally from the ground up while simultaneously consulting a global network for education and social change” (p. 126-127). Further, globalized society enables activism to spread across the borders and thus inflict more pressure beyond that of a local level (Adams,

2009). This is visible in the ecovillage movement, which increasingly gains power on the transnational politics arena due to the GEN network being able to present an organized presence in the UN conferences and other events (Litfin, 2009). Thus, while alternative actions of an individual community may be insufficient, a network of communities, such as GEN, offer the spread of the alternative in ideological and material terms.

Further, individual people and small groups may be considered as agents of change in global terms. According to Escobar (2005): “when people “practice” their everyday lives, they are thus reproducing or creating culture” (p. 302). From here, individual ecovillages may be considered to offer a foundation on which alternative ideologies, such as that of de-growth, may be grounded and realized in practice to then be able to spread more globally, precisely through the people that adopt and reproduce it. Thus, every eco-community could be considered to give grounds for the rise of collective identity among its residents, which manifests in collective abandonment of the system (Cattaneo, 2015). As such, the global dimension of eco-communities may be reduced to their local-level role, as individual communities have emancipatory properties due to their constant reproduction of counter-hegemonic ideas, which then, in theory, can shrink the portion of society governed by the hegemonic front.

2.4. Conclusion: de-growth strategy and eco-communities as environmental resistance front

As discussed above, de-growth first and foremost serves as a basis under which alternative ideas may rise and challenge the mainstream social order (Latouche, 2009). What de-growth looks like in practice, therefore, may be everything that can be considered non-capitalist practices and institutions (Kallis, Demaria & D’Alisa, 2015). From here, ecovillages, the same as other types of eco-communities, can be seen as de-growth practices and institutions to a larger or smaller extent. This is so, as they all share the same principles of sharing, simplicity, and commons.

Further, capitalism is central in the de-growth critique, as it argues against the proposed conception of ‘green capitalism’ (Andreucci & McDonough, 2015). This is so as capitalism is inherently growth-driven, and growth, even ‘green growth’, is never fully sustainable as it does not reduce consumption levels but merely changes the goods to be consumed, thereby retaining the hyper-consumerist culture. While de-growth is seen as problematic under capitalism, the proponents of the former do not reject the possibility of coexistence completely (Andreucci &

McDonough, 2015). This is largely due to the reluctance of de-growthers to be the face of anti-capitalist discourse, even though it often times is. According to Latouche (2009): “de-growth society means neither an impossible return to the past nor a compromise with capitalism. It means going beyond modernity” (p. 90). Thus, the aim of de-growth is not to propose a single alternative economic model that would be the opposite of capitalism, but to first and foremost induce questioning of the existing system (Latouche, 2009). Only when societal ideological shift occurs, can a formation of a new system occur in a sustainable fashion. The target is thus not the system itself, but the knowledge production practices within it (Latouche, 2009). Eco-communities, thus, can be argued to create the physical platform for the spread of alternative knowledge.

Moreover, eco-communities usually do not take part in political debates and participate in advocating for change only through ‘living the solution’ and knowledge sharing, therefore, adopting a bottom-bottom approach (Cattaneo, 2015). From here, eco-communities are often times seen to act as sanctuaries from modern lifestyle rather than political entities. However, the number of eco-communities worldwide is rising, suggesting a shift in power between the establishment and the society at large through the increase of the number of people leaving the mainstream system (Cattaneo, 2015).

In sum, this chapter sought to show how, considering Gramscian theory in environmental politics terms, the discourse of sustainable growth/green economy could be prescribed to the hegemonic front, where the system led by the economic growth model manufactures consent in the society through the use of green ideology. In this line of reasoning, the discourse and practice of de-growth offers an alternative, and therefore can be seen as the ideological counter-hegemony. Today, de-growth is commonly seen as a radical ideology both in academia and politics, however, it is rapidly gaining wide societal interest and following. Further, considering Gramscian counter-hegemonic strategies where change is brought upon from within the system, specifically civil society, grassroots actions in accordance to the de-growth ideology can be understood within these terms. The question then arises whether or not grassroots actions (e.g. eco-communities, urban gardens, cooperatives, etc.) can withstand the hegemonic resistance. Therefore, an empirical examination of an eco-community as a practical application of the de-growth ideology, from a Gramscian theoretical perspective, may offer an insight into the, currently visible, broader ideological battle and the possibility of change.

Chapter 3: Methodology and research design

In order to be able to analyze the position of eco-communities in the global environmentalist ideological battle, as well as to examine the possibility of a structural change, this chapter is going to move away from a theoretical topical discussion and engage with the methodological framework of this research. From here, this chapter is going to first, outline the methodological reasoning behind the chosen research design. Second, Gramscian conceptual framework as a set of analytical tools to be further used in the analysis are going to be explored. Finally, this chapter is going to introduce the data collection methods used in this research, as well as provide a brief overview of ethics and limitations of this study.

3.1. Methodology

In this study, Gramscian theory has been heavily embedded in the methodology of the research, being taken as the logic of inquiry in both ontological and epistemological terms, i.e. when identifying and defining the issue to be studied and used as a tool of analysis. Further, this research is informed by constructionist – interpretivist philosophical presuppositions, meaning that it adopts constructionist ontological and interpretivist epistemological philosophies. This is so, as this research does not aim to test a particular phenomenon, but to illustrate it through a particular point of view, assuming multiple realities based on different perceptions and interpretations that the constructionist – interpretivist philosophy of science allows (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). Robert Cox (1981) has famously stated that “[t]heory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose.” (p. 128). With this, Cox (1981) argued that theory, as a research tool for understanding and interpreting a particular phenomenon, is a lens of a specific perspective and therefore should first and foremost be understood as such. From here, the aim of this research, as according to the interpretivist orthodoxy, is not to explain, but to *understand* a particular issue, puzzle, phenomenon, focusing on grasping subjective meanings of social actions and events (Bryman, 2016). This is achieved in this study by using Gramscian theory as a tool of interpretation and a lens through which the world is seen, thus having both epistemological and ontological connotations.

Further, according to Cox (1981) there are two types of theories based on the purpose for which they are used: problem-solving and critical. The former refers to an approach where theory is used to guide the problem-solving process without questioning the “institutional and

relational parameters” (Cox, 1981, p. 129). Here, institutional, social and power relations are taken at face value, thus assuming the social and political order as fixed and stable. Critical theory, on the other hand, is based on questioning the status quo, understanding the historical production of the existing world order, and the process of change, thereby going beyond problem-solving (Cox, 1981). Further, critical theory looks at the big picture, focusing on the root causes of a particular problem by untangling the interrelated nature of social, political, economic and institutional components. According to Cox (1981): “critical theory can be a guide to strategic action for bringing about an alternative order, whereas problem-solving theory is a guide to tactical actions which, intended or unintended, sustain the existing order” (p. 130). Thus, critical theory is inherently value-laden, a normative framework that criticizes the existing social and political order and posits an alternative (Cox, 1981). From here, problem-solving and critical theory is used for different purposes as they generate different results. For the purpose of this study, where social and political resistance and *change* is the focus, normative theoretical perspective could be considered to be necessary. As such, this study appropriated Gramscian theoretical framework to both identify the issue area and to analyze the possibility of change, as opposed to finding a fix in the status quo. From here, the following section will explore the way Gramscian theory is operationalized in this research to analyze eco-communities as agents of resistance and the broader transition process.

3.2. Conceptual thinking tools

For the purpose of this study, theorizations of Antonio Gramsci have been adopted as a conceptual framework used first as a lens to situate the research problem, and second as a frame of analysis. Gramsci wrote his greatest contribution to academia, the ‘Prison Notebooks’, in 1929-1935 where he built upon the Marxist critique on *economism* in the context of state-society relation at the time. While his writings are situated within the context of time and circumstance within which they were written, according to Mittelman and Chin (2005): “his theoretical efforts to transcend economism are applicable to conceptualizing resistance at the turn of the millennium” (p. 18). As this thesis is concerned with the way structural change may occur through bottom-bottom approach led by eco-communities, the following sections will explore the way that Gramscian conceptual tools may be used to analyze and explain such a strategy.

3.2.1. Determining emancipation

To investigate the counter-hegemonic front a look at the level of emancipation from the mainstream *common sense* is central in Gramscian thinking. Common sense refers to the “traditional popular conception of the world” (Gramsci, 1999, p. 199). First and foremost, common sense enables the continuation of hegemonic domination as it constitutes an unquestionable societal subscription to a particular ideological dogma. Further, due to the societal ideological subscription, common sense is both manifested and reinforced through everyday societal practices according to the ideology that governs them (Gramsci, 1999, p. 328). From here, common sense of practices and philosophies is both produced by and produces the hegemony. As such, common sense here can be understood as the economic growth imperative, which today manifests itself as ‘green growth’ in the mainstream environmentalism as discussed in Chapter 2. From here, emancipation from the common sense entails an alternative thinking of those in the counter-hegemonic front. Questioning the status quo of green growth, as well as developing alternative everyday practices that oppose the common sense, is at the center of the emancipatory process. Following such reasoning, the basis of prescribing eco-communities to a counter-hegemonic front in this study is looking at the everyday practices within it and analyzing the conception of the world of the people within the community to see whether or not emancipatory processes, in both material and ideological terms, can be identified.

Further, going beyond the common sense, or developing a class consciousness in Marxist terms, does not happen organically in Gramscian theory. Instead, the rise of *intellectuals* in a given societal context is needed. Gramsci argued that an ideology is not created on its own, but it is a direct product of intellectuals whether within the elite or the subaltern group. According to Gramsci (1999): “Each man [...] carries on some form of intellectual activity, [...] he participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought” (p. 9). From here, there are two types of intellectuals: traditional and organic. The former refers to the ones that think of themselves as independent thinkers, but in fact act in accordance to the hegemonic dogma. Here, the intellectual functions refer to giving and manufacturing consent and operationalizing the coercive state apparatus to thus ensure the stability of the hegemonic front (Gramsci, 1999). Organic intellectuals, on the other hand, are the ones that recognize their own situatedness within the larger structure, often belonging to the subaltern group, and propose an alternative,

emancipatory ideology from within (Berling & Bueger, 2017). Subaltern emancipation is here directly tied with organic intellectuals constructing class consciousness and providing the larger subaltern group with a new common sense. Thus, the proposed counter-hegemonic front cannot be considered as such without the identification of organic intellectuals within it. This is so, as the rise of organic intellectuals and a successful spread of their alternative, counter-hegemonic ideology leads to an *organic crisis*, meaning that “great masses have become dethatched from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously” (Gramsci, 1999, p.276). As it has the potential to reach a condition where the emancipation from the common sense is spread out to a point where a transition could manifest itself, identifying whether eco-communities are led by traditional or organic intellectuals is thus essential. In order to achieve that, an examination of motivations and broader conceptions of environmentalism of the people that live in eco-communities will be performed. The findings here will be compared to traditional and organic intellectual functions to determine which one they can be prescribed to, and, thus, the potential they carry.

3.2.2. Resistance strategies

Emancipation from the common sense leads to an appropriation of different resistance strategies, which Gramsci conceptualized in military terms as *war of movement/maneuver* and *war of position*. The following will discuss the difference between the two strategies and the way they can be used to analyze the empirics of this study.

War of movement is a short-term, spontaneous siege, but only possible during a period of an organic crisis when the hegemonic front is already vulnerable (Gramsci, 1999). Here, most notable condition for the war of movement strategy to take place is weak, underdeveloped or non-existent hegemonic civil society, which allows the resistance front to overwhelm the state. War of movement could, thus, be classified as a *reactionist* strategy, meaning that it manifests itself spontaneously and in direct response to a particular issue. Long-term goals are not the priority of the war of movement, instead, the objective is to overturn the current historic block without any intervening time or space (Cox, 1983). From here, identifying escapist traits in eco-communities, i.e. characteristics that point to the community being closed off from the society at large and seek to escape the system, would mean the resistance strategy is reaction-based, which, if manifested under wrong conditions, does not impose a broader structural transformation.

War of position, on the other hand, focuses on a long-term change, specifically targeting civil society as the medium within which the change ought to occur (Gramsci, 1999). War of position, thus, “slowly builds up the strength of the social foundations of a new state” (Cox, 1983, p. 165). From here, war of position could be classified as *revolutionary*, meaning that it is a long-term strategy of not simply escaping, but transforming a particular structure. It manifests itself through a creation of an alternative civil society front that could successfully sustain it. This way, alternative knowledge is spread out more widely in an attempt to create a new common sense in a given society which, thus, would allow the revolution, in a sense of pushing the old out and allowing for the new to be born, in Gramscian terms, to take place (Gramsci, 1999). Thus, the war of position strategy could be considered as revolutionary, meaning that it is transition-oriented. From here, identifying transition traits (as opposed to escapist) in eco-communities would lead to determining whether or not eco-communities can be prescribed to the war of position, or a revolutionary counter-hegemonic front.

A third strategy that falls in between the reactionist and revolutionary, an unintended outcome, could be identified in the Gramscian concept of *passive revolution*. War of movement, while often unable to lead to a successful transition, is often times seen to create conditions for war of position to take place. However, systemic transition is not a certain result of war of position either, as both of these strategies may lead to “the introduction of changes which [do] not involve any arousal of popular forces”, i.e. passive revolution (Cox, 1983, p. 166). This is a failed or incomplete transition, a condition under which the struggle for hegemony continues, but it can be shaped by different processes within it in relation to the obstacles attained. One such process is *transformism*, which refers to a slow hegemonic cooption of counter-hegemonic ideologies, or elements of counter-hegemonic movements, resulting in the illusion of a transformation, as discussed in Chapter 2 in terms of past cooption of environmentalist ideologies by the mainstream (Cox, 1999). Passive revolution may also result in utopianism, where the ‘perfect system’ cannot be attained due to the divorce between materialist and ideological capabilities within the counter-hegemonic bloc, which then, in turn, would allow the hegemonic front to re-establish itself (Cox, 1999). Thus, both practices and ideologies are necessary for either of the two counter-hegemonic strategies, based on given conditions, to be successful. From here, whether eco-communities are reactionist or revolutionary, or have started as reactionist but evolved into a revolutionary front, they run the risk of falling under passive revolution and, thus, becoming unable to proceed with a successful broader transition due to unintended manifestation of utopianism or hegemonic cooption of its fundamental ideas. As such, an examination of the ‘ecovillage movement’ in accordance to the de-growth ideology

would determine the transformational potential of the broader movement beyond the distinction between escapist and revolutionary characteristics of an eco-community.

3.3. Data collection methods

As discussed above, this study aims to illustrate the theoretical reasoning behind the proposed issue area as per the adoption of interpretivist research design. As such, this research is not concerned with making empirical generalizations, but instead seeks to make analytical ones, thereby focusing on theoretical rather than statistical analysis (Lund, 2014). From here, to analyze the possibility of a de-growth transition led by eco-communities, this study focused on one eco-community as primary source of empirical data to further be used to make theoretical arguments. The main data collection methods used in this research were participant observation and semi-structured interviews, conducted in February 2019. The subjects of the participant observation and interviews were people from a selected eco-community as a study site. The following sections will provide a brief presentation of the selected study site, a description of the way access was gained and an overview of the data collection methods and their use in this research. Finally, a look at ethics and limitations of this study will be provided before moving on to the discussion of the findings.

3.3.1. Case study and access

According to Leander (2008): “restricting the scope of an empirical analysis does not have to be done at the expense of its theoretical ambitions” (p. 23), as focusing on small groups of agents and practices may be used to exemplify a broader theoretical argumentation. This was the reasoning for choosing one study site as an exemplary case that would then be used as an illustration of theoretical reasonings when answering the research questions.

The case study chosen in this research was Suderbyn Ecovillage – an eco-community located at the Swedish island of Gotland, situated in the Baltic sea. The ecovillage was sampled through a web search and selected based on convenience and criteria that would inform the research questions (thus purposive sampling method). As discussed in the previous chapter, eco-communities vary in their functions. Here, the goal for sampling was finding a community that has environmental, as opposed to spiritual, educational, self-help, etc., objective in its primary function, although these might overlap to some degree. Suderbyn Ecovillage presents

itself as a community propagating sustainable lifestyle and “striving for self-sufficiency, [...] renewable energy, [...], question patterns of consumption, social structures and cultural stereotypes” (Suderbyn Ecovillage, 2019a). As such, the eco-community was chosen based on the alignment of their mission statement with the focus of this study.

Further, access to the case study chosen was gained through forging a connection through email, which presented a detailed description of the research topic, problem, methods and their potential role in the research. I was informed that the ecovillage had to vote on my research request, as per their internal community rules, on which I had no control over. They then decided to grant me access and invited me to live and participate in their daily lives fully. From 14th February to 1st March 2019 I was living in the ecovillage, partaking in the normal routine of the community including volunteer tasks, leisure activities, community building activities, etc.

Further, while access to the community itself was gained, access to the people within it was still needed to be acquired. Thus, the participant observation, as a data collection method further discussed below, became a sampling method as well. As such, the first six days were used as a ‘getting to know’ period, where the residents could get used to my presence, at the same time allowing me to learn about the regular community procedures. As the community knew my reason for being there, I asked people to participate in interviews in the ‘morning meetings’ happening every weekday. This was done several times to make sure that everyone who wanted to participate were reminded about it and thus had the chance to do so. In the end, 11 interviews were conducted.

3.3.2. Participant observation

Participant observation is a core data collection method of an ethnographic research (Bryman, 2016). It refers to a method where a researcher embeds him/her self in the natural environment of the subjects which he/she intends to analyze. It is done through observation through participation. Participant observation is particularly useful to get a more rounded account of what is actually happening, as interviews or literature only gives a glimpse into the reality, which, without direct observation, is only a one-sided view (Bryman, 2016). Thus, participant observation was chosen in this study to get a better understanding of how an eco-community functions and get access to its residents.

Participant observation was done through me imbedding myself in the daily life of the ecovillage. I was doing volunteer work most days, participating in community meetings and

social activities. As such, I was able to get a more rounded account of what an ecovillage is and how it functions. Detailed notes were taken during the course of the participant observation. Further, as mentioned above, participant observation allowed me to get access to the residents for interviews. By imbedding myself in the daily life of the ecovillage, I was able to forge relationships with its residents, which then made the residents first – more inclined to participate in the interviews, and second – to give more honest answers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted during the second part of the participant observation, which is further discussed below.

3.3.3. Semi-structured interviews

A format of semi-structured interviews allows for more flexibility and insight into the interviewee's perspective (Bryman, 2016). Following the interpretivist research design and, thus, realizing that there are multiple and intersubjective realities, interviewing as a data collection method was selected to get an in-depth insight into the particular personal understandings of reality in terms of the proposed research problem (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). As the focus of this study is practices based on ideological prescription, the aim of the interviews was to get a glimpse into the individual motivations, understandings and experiences, which then could be used to analyze how they fit within the counter-hegemonic front and to further illustrate theoretical reasonings. From here, 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted.

Further, having a set of open-ended questions, that would keep the interview within the theme to be addressed without restricting the researcher to go beyond them and address themes and topics that emerge during the course of the interview, allows for richer and more detailed answers (Bryman, 2016). As such, in this research, an interview guide was used (see appendix A), but the order of the questions varied in each interview to make it more organic and conversational and to allow the space for follow up questions, as well as intervening questions upon the rise of new themes. The preliminary interview guide was prepared prior to arriving at site and adjusted based on the six participant observation days before the first interview took place.

Moreover, the interview participants were anonymized as their identifiable traits, apart from that of being residents of the chosen ecovillage, do not bring any value to the study and, thus, are not considered important. From here, the interview participants were named as A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K (labeled according to the sequence of interview conduction) and will

be referred to as such from here on out. The aim of data collection here was to get a diverse sample to be able to get varying perspectives, therefore both long-term and short-term residents were invited to participate in the interviews. As such, the interview participants were six long-term residents and five short-term residents (for the list of interview dates and residency status of the participants see appendix B).

3.3.4. Use of other sources

While the core of this study is based on the analysis of the chosen eco-community and its residents, this research relies heavily upon other sources of information. Most notably, the de-growth declaration, drafted during the first de-growth conference in Paris in 2008 (Research & Degrowth, 2010), is used in this study as a source of practical (as opposed to strictly academic) information of what de-growth entails. Here, the declaration is used to compare the broader de-growth objective and the proposed de-growth transition with the mission and practices of the chosen ecovillage. This is done in order to see whether the chosen case study site, and in effect eco-communities more broadly, can be situated within the de-growth movement.

Moreover, the website of Suderbyn Ecovillage is used to further inform the research. Here, the Suderbyn Ecovillage website is used to analyze the goals and aims of the eco-community as a whole. This is done to support the results of the participant observation and give as accurate account of the chosen study site as possible.

3.3.5. Ethics and limitations

Prior to going on field, a registration with the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD) was done. This involved a detailed description of the proposed study and the methods to be used to ensure ethical boundaries would be upheld. The processing took around one month, which also took a strain on the timeline of this research. During the NSD registration, a consent form was drafted and later distributed to the participants prior to each interview, which included a detailed description of the topic and research design, their role in the research, the way collected data would be processed, and the anonymity and withdrawal enclosures. Although some interviewees stated that they do not mind being named, I felt like it would not add any value to the study, thereby, prior to going on field, the decision was made to anonymize

everyone, and this was then stated to the participants. Thus, no identifiable traits of the participants are used in this study, apart from the fact that they are, or have been at the time, residents of Suderbyn Ecovillage. Upon collecting signatures, as well as getting a verbal consent, the interviews were recorded and then transcribed at a later date.

Further, participant observation as a data collection method is in itself an ethics and limitations bound approach. It has been argued that “researchers’ *physical presence* in the research setting is tied not only to the potential biasing of research processes and analysis, but also to its potential to alter events in the field” (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, pp. 97). However, as discussed above, this research adopts constructivist – interpretivist methodological stance, thereby recognizing that “research findings [result] from intersubjective, meaning-focused processes that themselves interact with and potentially shape the world” (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 40). From here, I was aware that my presence in the community already shapes my findings, and, thus, my actions were always taken in accordance to that understanding. The community as a whole includes every resident, short or long term, in decision-making and community building processes. I too was offered and welcomed to participate in all of the community proceedings. While the participant observation approach was overt, meaning that the community knew about my purpose there fully, I had to use my judgement when deciding to what extent my presence and actions were needed. This led me to step back at times or abstain from voting in the meetings to minimize my impact, however recognizing the fact that it cannot be completely neutralized.

Finally, this research relies upon internal validity when assessing the quality of the research, i.e. aiming to derive to conclusions based on coherence between the observations and theoretical ideas when making an argumentation (Bryman, 2016). As such, this research, as discussed above, does not aim to develop statistically generalizable results, but to illustrate a particular phenomenon. Further, the findings of this research cannot be replicated as there is no way of ensuring that both the researcher and the researched will produce identical data, thereby changing the findings altogether (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012). This means that this study, as per its interpretivist design, is context and circumstance specific.

Chapter 4: Community living, environment and global change: Suderbyn ecovillage and its residents

The following chapter will discuss the results of the data analysis and identify major themes and points of interest that emerged during the course of this process. This will be done in order to set up theoretical discussion that will follow.

4.1. About Suderbyn Ecovillage

According to the introductory description of the eco-community on the Suderbyn Ecovillage webpage, “Suderbyn is a local international hub for transitions, sustainable development and permaculture” (Suderbyn Ecovillage, 2019b). Further, the community strives towards creating “a prosperous living environment while minimizing [their] environmental footprint” (Suderbyn Ecovillage, 2019a). The functions of Suderbyn ecovillage are divided into two fractions: a cooperative and an NGO ‘Relearn’. The cooperative is the collective responsible for housing, food and maintenance. The NGO ‘Relearn’ works with educational projects, training and networking on a local, regional and global level. ‘Relearn’ works together with organizations such as the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN), ECOLISE (network for grassroots initiatives for climate change and sustainability), Service Civil International (SCI), European Voluntary Service (EVS), and others (Suderbyn Ecovillage, 2019c).

The ecovillage is largely international in its composition with people from mostly European countries including, but not limited to, Sweden, France, Hungary, The Netherlands, Belgium, Turkey, Russia, Spain, etc., and there are about 20-25 people residing in the ecovillage at any given time. The number fluctuates as people come and go quite often, making only around half of the population there consisting of permanent residents. The ecovillage has a vast number of long-term volunteers that reside in the ecovillage from as short as one month to a year. These volunteers engage in a variety of projects within the ecovillage, whether it be building, gardening, administrative work, or other. It is viewed that volunteers are offered a learning experience in organic gardening, renewable energy, closed loop systems, etc., and in return, the ecovillage benefits from new ideas that the volunteers bring, extra manual help in building and developing the community and global exposure that a relationship with these volunteer services (most notably EVS and SCI) offer.

Further, the ecovillage, currently, is largely dependent on rent collection from residents and visitors as its main income, which allows the ecovillage to sustain itself financially. The ecovillage does not aim to make a profit, but to create conditions that would enable them in the most affordable way possible. As such, the ecovillage has scaling-up plans that would involve creating employment opportunities for its residents and additional income for the community as a whole to sustain projects within it, as well as growth of the community itself. However, currently most long-term residents have to seek employment outside of the community in order to be able to pay their dues.

Overall, the community is structured around the basic principles of permaculture: *care for the Earth*, *care for the people*, and *fair share* (Holmgren, 2007). The following sections will discuss these principles in more detail and the ecovillage, as an organization, in accordance to them.

4.1.1. Care for the Earth: the ‘ecology’ of the ecovillage

‘Care for the Earth’ in permaculture ethics refers to sustainable husbandry of soil, water, and forests, i.e. management of natural resources that would maximize the future flourishing of natural environment (Holmgren, 2007). This is the first, and considered the most important, principle as it is argued to determine the flourishing of humans within nature. This is so, as permaculture ethics assert that humans cannot thrive in a degraded environment, thus caring for the environment means sustainable maximization of prosperity, not just of the natural environment, but of the people that inhabit it (Holmgren, 2007).

As Suderbyn Ecovillage prescribes to the permaculture principles, the ecovillage aims to develop its garden accordingly. The garden, however, is in its early stages as only recently more efforts and resources have been dedicated to making it a fruitful source of community food resources. The aim is to continue developing the garden so that it could provide more to the community and limit the consumption of commercially bought products as much as possible. To maximize the productivity of the garden, it has been divided into seven horseshoe-shaped suntraps that protect the garden from the northern winds and effectively capture the heat from the sun creating a greenhouse effect. The garden is managed on a rotational basis allowing the soil to regenerate to ensure its future productivity.

4.1.2. Care for the people: the ‘community’ of the ecovillage

‘Care for the people’, in permaculture ethics, refers to looking after the self and the community (Holmgren, 2007). The focus here is on rebuilding non-superficial relations between people, re-defining the way people interact not just with nature, but with each other. In the ecovillage this is achieved through its structure that ensures well-being of the community as a whole and individuals within it. As such, the ecovillage is structured around different platforms under which the community gathers, where each is meant to focus on different aspects: community life, day-to-day organizations and emotional well-being.

Sudernbyn Ecovillage has weekly community meetings where big decisions take place. The meetings, as of recently, are run by adopting *sociocracy* as a decision-making tool to maximize the efficiency of the meetings. Sociocracy refers to a decision-making process which is based on consent (Echstein, 2016). In other words, “[i]n applying the principle of consent, sociocracy doesn’t ask for a ‘yes’ but does provide an opportunity to give a reasoned ‘no’.” (Endenburg, 1998, as cited in Echstein, 2016, p. 3). Here, the process revolves around posing an issue or a reform and agreeing upon it, or the solution for it, by exhausting all posed argumentations against it. The premise behind such a process is to minimize objections that are not validated in an opposing argument, therefore maximizing efficiency of the meeting (Echstein, 2016). When I was present in the community, the sociocracy practice was in the beginning, learning stage. Nonetheless, decisions were made, everybody in the community was allowed to voice their argumentative opinions and the community would effectively derive to a compromise.

Further, the ecovillage has Monday morning meetings dedicated to planning out the week. These are day-to-day issues concerning meetings where the tasks for the week are allocated. Shorter morning meetings take place every weekday where the tasks for the day are seen through to make sure that everything that needs to be done is planned and accounted for.

Lastly, to ensure ‘social sustainability’ of the community, social meetings that deal with emotional state of the residents take place weekly. This type of meeting is called the ‘sharing circle’. Here, the residents of the community have the chance to talk about their feelings, their personal lives, their emotional state, etc., in order to bring the community closer together and avoid division or friction. Thus, regardless of the size of the community and the small space it occupies, there are organized structures in place that sustain the community life and ensure the well-being and inclusion of all its residents.

4.1.3. Fair share

‘Fair share’ in permaculture ethics refers to “set[ing] limits to consumption and reproduction” (Holmgren, 2007, p. 7). Fair share is assumed for everyone, including non-human entities, meaning that no more than is needed must be used and consumed, and the surplus must be redistributed (Holmgren, 2007).

Suderbyn Ecovillage employs the fair share principle in its aim to create a zero-waste community through closed loop systems. At this stage, however, the community is not self-sufficient in terms of energy and food. Currently, solar panels only power the communal shower and the majority of food supply is bought from organic sources outside of the ecovillage. Further, in February 2019 the community was building a wind turbine, which was meant to power the ‘dome’. This is (was at the time) the main project in the ecovillage (‘Closed Loop Baltic’): creating a closed loop system where food and energy could be produced with no throughput. The ‘dome’ refers to a large geodesic dome structure inside of which there is a micro-biogas digester and aeroponic pipes, the former meant to use organic waste to produce energy, and the latter to cultivate soil-free plants (Suderbyn Ecovillage, 2019d). Moreover, the ecovillage strives to re-appropriate as many resources and ‘waste’ as possible through the use of dry toilets, natural building, composting, etc. The ecovillage also operates a ‘car pool’ of three cars run by biogas, a fuel alternative to diesel, which can be commercially bought. The carsharing system is currently used by the residents of the community, however, the project is aimed to be scaled up to include residents of Gotland. Moreover, as the community is located close to town, bicycling is a popular form of transport and the ecovillage runs a ‘bicycle pool’, where a number of bikes are communally owned and shared for a designated rental fee.

From here, the fair share principle, as implemented in the ecovillage, resembles that of voluntary simplicity. Suderbyn Ecovillage employs a holistic approach to its operation, meaning that organic agriculture, natural building, inclusive decision-making, etc. are all reinforced through each other, enabling the community to create culture and lifestyle based on need as opposed to desire. In other words, the ecovillage strives to integrate its operations in harmony with the natural environment within which it is placed, allowing its residents to pursue non-materialist path towards human well-being.

4.2. The ecovillage from its composition: focus on the people

The people in the ecovillage collectively share the vision and the mission of Suderbyn, as an organization they belong to. However, individual motivations and opinions were the focus of this research as per its interpretivist design. Thus, a look into the motivations and opinions of the residents is needed to answer the questions posed by this research. The following will, thus, provide an overview of the major themes and points of interest that emerged and were identified during the course of thematic analysis of the conducted interviews.

4.2.1. Communal living and eco-lifestyle

Voluntary simplicity “as a way of life that involves consciously minimizing wasteful and resource-intensive consumption” (Alexander, 2015, p. 133) was identified as the common thread between the participants when expressing their reasons for choosing to live in an ecovillage. Both long and short-term residents were expressing the need to get out of the hyper-consumerist culture they see today. According to Participant A, Suderbyn offers an alternative for people running away from “materialistic modern life” where they can “serve more and demand less”. This view was largely shared among the participants, as most expressed a degree of dissatisfaction with their life before coming to the ecovillage, a need for change in lifestyle and a need to find alternative ways to pursue happiness.

Many people are looking for a change and I don't know anybody here that didn't come for a change. So not being happy in their own life, and not feeling the future for the society, and really wanting to try something different and see what's the hope and what can I do. (Participant B)

Further, according to Participant C: “by producing more yourself and by needing less you don't step into the consumer realm”. From here, ecovillages are places that provide the conditions for people to step out of the consumerist society without the loss of quality of life. They provide alternative ways of living for those, who are already looking for a change, looking for a lifestyle that emphasizes social, as opposed to material, sources of human well-being.

Further, according to Cattaneo (2015), eco-communities “are characterized by their environmental (eco-) and social dimensions (community), which, in combination, are

considered by eco-commoners to be largely missing from living arrangements in (post-) industrial societies” (p. 166). As such, the underlying reasons for engaging in voluntary simplicity vary among the ecovillage residents and, thus, may further be divided into two broad threads of ecology and community values. This division, as well as the overlap between them, will now be discussed in the following sub-sections respectively.

4.2.1.1. Environmental dimension

For the majority of the participants, a pursuit of an eco-lifestyle is the main driver behind choosing to live in an ecovillage. Care for the environment and global environmental issues, such as climate change, are shared concerns in the community. The ecovillage as a whole strives to reduce its collective environmental footprint and develop an ecologically sustainable lifestyle. As such, Suderbyn has always, from its formation to now, been focused on the eco factor of an ecovillage, using permaculture principles as “the lead star” to strive for sustainability (Participant K). The ecological profile of Suderbyn is largely advertised and therefore the ecovillage attracts people who share the ecological focus. As such, many participants expressed that living in an ecovillage gives them more control of their environmental impact, meaning that the ecovillage provides them with conditions to pursue an eco-lifestyle, which, even if desired, would not be so easily attainable outside of the ecovillage. According to Participant F:

I think part of the trying to live in a self-sufficient way is that you know how the things work, you know the working conditions, and you know how the food is produced and what impact you have on the environment, whereas getting things from the outside you don't know as much about how they're made. So, it, sort of, gives you more of control over your environmental impact to do things yourself.
(Participant F)

While this view is shared among the participants, there is also a shared recognition that the ecovillage is not a fully self-sufficient society in terms of their energy and food consumption. However, according to Participant D: “what happens here is what people want to make happen”, meaning that the ecovillage is an organizational structure that allows for the *strive* for self-sufficiency, as per its core values, however, for it to be truly realized the people within the ecovillage must develop practices that would sustain such aims. From here, while the aims themselves are shared, the community has a lot of people frequently coming and going,

as discussed in the section above, which obstructs a timely development of such practices. Because of the constant stream of volunteers and almost a half divide between permanent and short-term residents, all of the participants have expressed that Suderbyn, as opposed to other, more family-styled ecovillages, is largely a ‘learning center’.

It’s a perfect place if you don’t really know what you want yet, you can come and explore so many things because there’s a lot of people, there’s so many different projects and so many things that still need to be established, whether it’s ways of decision-making, ways to treat water, ways to grow food, ways to do outreach, ways to share space. (Participant C)

As such, the ecovillage allows the space for people to experiment as it is seen to be an exchange: a learning experience for those who seek it and a source of new ideas for the ecovillage as a whole to develop new practices. However, the downside of the ecovillage as a learning center is that it takes away from creating a homestead, a society consisting of families rather than separate individuals forming a family. Participant C conveyed: “I don’t want a continuous burden of having to be a teacher all the time”. While being a place where people can come and learn about sustainability and self-sufficiency, the challenges of that are highly recognized by the residents.

That’s a big part of what we do and what we are now, being a learning center and a place where people get inspired and can inspire us. And at the same time, it is also a challenge, because it means that you’re constantly working to accommodate people and that leaves less time to focus on us who stay here all the time. (Participant D)

A different side of the challenge of freedom to explore within the ecovillage is felt by some of those who stay in the community for a shorter time. As discussed in the section above, the ecovillage has a number of large projects, the main one being the geodesic dome (‘Closed Loop Baltic’), the only one of its kind in Europe being developed as a prototype to be later scaled up. In reference to being allowed the space to explore, Participant A conveyed:

If you ask me personally, we have too many projects and not enough people, or not enough prepared or educated people for the projects. And people like to emphasize that it’s a playground and you’re here to experiment things and it’s all nice and cool that they let you do that, but these are serious moneys behind and projects on a

European, international or global level, like with this ‘dome’, I don’t really feel comfortable trying to figure things out there as in a playground. (Participant A)

From here, to deal with arising issues, as well as to be able to successfully attain its ecological goals, the ecovillage puts a lot of its energy in developing a harmonious and sustainable community focusing on the social aspects of what it means to share a physical and emotional space with a number of people. These aspects will now be discussed in the following sub-section.

4.2.1.2. Social dimension

According to Participant C: “people really come for the ecovillage more than for the permaculture, and then more for the village than for the eco”. Community living is a major aspect of an ecovillage lifestyle, which involves the principles of sharing, collective decision-making, and social well-being. Community life in the ecovillage is seen to be a more natural and practical way of living as it allows for more time and space to pursue personal development. Sharing is thus a major aspect here, “that’s really the future for many aspects: sharing the resources, sharing equipment, sharing work, time and work force” (Participant B). Sharing also allows for shared responsibilities, meaning that more time can be allocated to personal use, which contributes to the restructuring of the work-life balance, allowing people to work less and indulge in leisure activities more without the loss of quality of life.

However, with community life comes challenges, like discussed in the section above. As the ecovillage is largely diverse in terms of nationalities, age, gender, long-term and short-term stays, etc., according to Participant G, the “unique structure of flat hierarchy” creates challenges in achieving long-term goals of the community, most notably creating a stable base for people to live and work. However, the strength of diversity and communal living corresponds to the sharing principle in terms of forging non-material connections between the members of the community; “it’s a lot of personal development and personal growth involved in this living, and learning how to communicate without violence and learning how not to judge” (Participant B).

Further, in the view of Participant D, largely shared among other residents, the community life contributes to the productivity of the ecovillage as a whole in terms of its ecological goals. An eco-lifestyle cannot be created individually, in order to have a meaningful impact, it ought to be based on individuals coming together and sharing different practices (organic agriculture, natural building, etc.) (Participant D). From here, sharing resources and

values creates a culture opposite that of individualism, which maximizes the potential to reach shared goals. The cultural change in terms of moving away from individualism was a common thread among the participants and seen as the first and crucial step to *change*, which is now going to be explored in the sections below.

4.2.2. Change

As this research is concerned with global structural change and considers the possibility of ecovillages as agents of the de-growth transition movement, the theme of *change* was a major point of interest here. Thus, the following will discuss the opinions of ecovillage residents on global change in terms of environmental politics to set up the discussion about their overall influence and position.

4.2.2.1. Culture

The ecovillage collectively bases its existence in an argument against the culture of individualism in modern western societies. This view was a common thread among the interview participants, who commonly expressed the need for a cultural shift to achieve sustainability in both environmental and social terms. According to Participant A: “if you look through history, people always lived in tribes and groups of families together, and then with this civilization we got this division that people die amongst four walls”. Further, there is a shared view that the modern society is heavily reliant on service, which contributes to the detachment from individuals within the society, as well as their conception of the world.

I think, for humans, from the animal perspective, it is natural way of living in groups, and we are definitely social animals and we are in need of social interactions. But the way how we tend to interact right now is just limited by spending common time together, but then all of us end up in these nuclear families in our own boxes, or apartments, or houses with our fences, not only on our fields but also in our minds. (Participant J)

This detachment includes the relationship between modern practices and environmental degradation, therefore attaining an eco-lifestyle must first come with the individual emancipation from the hyper-consumerist and individualistic culture. The inability to escape the mainstream culture, thus, creates polarization in the society between the mainstream and

the alternative culture, whether offered by ecovillages or something else entirely (Participants G and J).

From here, all of the participants expressed their opinion for the need of a broader transition, a structural change that involves the ecological and social values starting with the culture that sustains them. According to Participant H: “if we want to create this new kind of world, we cannot create it with the same kind of values”. From here, the next sub-section will explore the ways ecovillage residents engage themselves in contributing to this transition in order to determine their level of agency.

4.2.2.2. Exerting influence

While the recognition of the need for a change is shared by the residents, the approach to ‘activism’, as expressed by the participants, varies. Some have expressed their engagement in ‘living the solution’ terms: “I think it is important to live it out, not just talk about it” (Participant K). Others expressed this in terms of not being able to influence the masses, thereby choosing to develop and practice an eco-lifestyle to be able to show a practical alternative as opposed to actively trying to change existing practices that other people indulge in: “it’s a matter of zone of influence, I would say. I really chose to lead by example and to do the stuff and stop talking” (Participant B).

Further, some participants have expressed not just a level of dissatisfaction with the current system, but a level of distrust with the systemic process itself. From here, the process of change itself is seen to be mainstreamed, thereby requiring not just an alternative as the end result, but an alternative practice as a means to attain the desired ends.

I do not believe that we can truly change things within the same system that we are now, I don’t believe in the political system, I don’t believe in voting for something and saying that this person will save us when the system and its roots themselves are rotten. (Participant H)

I believe much more in social change and human change on small scale, and things that people can implement themselves. I don’t think that solutions will come from the same institutions and organizations who created the problem, which are the ones offering these billion-dollars plans... it’s going to create the same problem, I mean, you can change the color of the car but it’s just the same car. (Participant D)

From here, activism, in terms of asking for a change from the top-down is considered to be inefficient by most the residents and, thus, a different way of ‘fighting’ is needed. Participant C conveyed the inefficiency of protests by pointing out that it is “always fighting *against*” [emphasis added]. In effect, ecovillages disengage from the ‘fight’ itself and instead “just do and build” in order to develop a small-scale result of the change they want to see on a larger scale (Participant C).

If you want to win with militant activism you become as violent as they – the evil persons or whatever – are. It’s so hypocritical in so many ways. Of course, there’s a wide range of activism, but still... If you protest and you don’t provide an alternative, or you don’t provide an actual solution that doesn’t recreate the same thing, then you’re not doing much, except hopefully setting people on a path to question things. (Participant C)

Ecovillages, in effect, not only question the mainstream but offer this alternative to both change as the end result and as the process that leads to it. According to Participant B: “I think ecovillages can really lead by example”. Local action, here, is seen to be central, as no change can be swiftly achieved on a broad scale. Thus, “if you want to make a change you need to start from yourself” (Participant J). This view is shared among all participants. Further, the local action is seen to have the potential to spread and reach the broader masses. According to Participant H, while Suderbyn Ecovillage has on average only 20-25 inhabitants at any time, the number is much higher if counting the people that have come and gone, people that visited or heard about the ecovillage through others. Thus, in terms of change, ecovillages should not only be considered by what they do locally, but according to their influence on people through which their message spreads.

From here, the following section is going to explore the de-growth agenda in more detail and compare its aims to those of Suderbyn ecovillage and its residents.

4.3. The role of eco-communities in the de-growth movement

In order to determine the role of eco-communities in the de-growth movement, an exploration of the de-growth declaration, as a constructive proposition of a course of action by the counter-hegemonic front in global politics, is needed. From here, this section will look at the de-growth declaration, put forward by the participants of the Economic Degrowth for

Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity Conference (the first de-growth conference) held in Paris in 2008.

First, the de-growth declaration lays down descriptive points on why a de-growth transition is desirable. Most notably these points address the problem of economic growth, overproduction and overconsumption, which leads to the increased use of resources inevitably manifesting in environmental degradation (Research & Degrowth, 2010). Further, the negative social aspects such as poverty and inequality, both between and within countries, is pointed out here. Second, in light of the proposed issue, the de-growth declaration calls for “‘right-sizing’ global and national economies” (Research & Degrowth, 2010, p. 523), i.e. “reducing the global ecological footprint [...] to a sustainable level” (Research & Degrowth, 2010, p. 523). This would involve reduction in the North and increase in the South of consumption levels, in effect leveling out economic activities and redistributing wealth. Finally, in order to achieve such goals, the de-growth declaration suggests the necessity for a “paradigm shift”, away from economic growth and towards de-growth, in western societies (Research & Degrowth, 2010, p. 253). As the focus of this study is on how structural change can be achieved, the following will examine the proposed paradigm shift in more detail in order to determine the role of ecovillages in this process.

The de-growth declaration defines the process of de-growth as “a voluntary transition towards a just, participatory, and ecologically sustainable society” (Research & Degrowth, 2010, p. 524). Further, the de-growth declaration outlines the characteristics of a de-growth transition as follows: i.) putting “emphasis on quality of life rather than quantity of consumption” (Research & Degrowth, 2010, p. 524), ii.) prioritizing the “fulfillment of basic human needs” (Research & Degrowth, 2010, p. 524), iii.) basing social change on “diverse individual and collective actions and policies” (Research & Degrowth, 2010, p. 524), iv.) reducing “dependence on economic activity, and [increasing] free time, unremunerated activity, conviviality, sense of community, and individual and collective health” (Research & Degrowth, 2010, p. 524), v.) encouraging “self-reflection, balance, creativity, flexibility, diversity, good citizenship, generosity, and non-materialism” (Research & Degrowth, 2010, p. 524), vi.) “the principles of equity, participatory democracy, respect for human rights, and respect for cultural differences” (Research & Degrowth, 2010, p. 524). From here, the values and practices of eco-communities, as discussed above looking at Suderbyn Ecovillage, can be paralleled to the de-growth transition characteristics respectively: i.) and ii.) ecovillages are voluntary simplicity communities focusing on the reduction of consumption without the loss of quality of life, iii.)

community life and thus collective action to social change is at the base of ecovillage lifestyle, iv.), v.) and vi.) ecovillages do not only focus on ecological, but human sustainability, prioritizing the well-being of its residents through inclusion, participatory decision-making, respect, cultural diversity, non-materialism, redefined work-life balance, etc. Thus, ecovillages, as according to the characteristics of what a de-growth transition should look like, could be considered to be small-scale agents of change. However, the extent of their contribution to the broader paradigm shift needed for a successful transition remains to be questioned. Thus, the following chapter will examine the role of eco-communities and their members in accordance to the conceptual tools of this study in order to derive to substantiated conclusions.

Chapter 5: The counter-hegemony of de-growth: the potential for transition

Following the above provided overview of the empirical data, this chapter will move to link the findings with theoretical considerations of this thesis. From here, the primary goal of the following chapter is to discuss the findings and theoretical reasonings in accordance to the research questions posed in this study. To do so, this chapter will first, focus on the role of eco-communities in global environmental politics and whether or not they can be considered as agents of change. Here, the discussion will be based on exploring different common sense and the perceived role of intellectuals, using the above discussed findings to make an exemplary case in point. Second, this chapter will examine the overall potential of the de-growth movement through a discussion of Gramscian resistance strategies in relation to the empirical findings. Following the discussion of this chapter, the conclusion of this thesis will be provided.

5.1. The role of eco-communities in global change

In order to understand the potential that eco-communities have to inflict a broader change, it is essential to determine the role of eco-communities in global environmental politics. The role of eco-communities is often times reduced to their individual functions, as being local sites for environmental and social sustainability. As such, eco-communities are not considered to be political (or a-political) and thus they are not seen to have power in global change processes (Cattaneo, 2015). However, this position can be challenged when considering change as a bottom-bottom approach, which implies the spread of local actions. As discussed in Chapter 4, the community, meaning the residents, is what drives the local functions of eco-communities, but they, as opposed to the physical structure they occupy, are not always locally bound. From here, the role of eco-communities in global environmental politics can be understood through the role of the residents and people that prescribe to their overall mission, who then are able to influence others.

Following Gramscian theoretical view, the historic bloc is sustained through ideas that ground practices, in turn creating a status quo. The same way, a successful counter-hegemonic transition ought to be rooted in ideological foundation that supports the alternative practices

(Gramsci, 1999). Thus, agency of the residents of eco-communities cannot be determined without the identification of what Gramsci called ‘common sense’ – an ideological foundation that sustains the historic bloc. More specifically, common sense refers to the general understanding of the world and its functions, guiding individual actions accordingly (Gramsci, 1999). From here, the development of alternative ideologies that manifest in alternative practices can be considered to be an emancipatory process. This is so, as it leads to the formation of a new common sense – one that challenges the mainstream and gives grounds for a counter-hegemonic front to establish itself and form a new historic bloc, thereby emancipating a given society from the hegemonic understanding of the world and the behavioral norms and values that come with it (Gramsci, 1999). Thus, the following will explore common sense in relation to the ideas and practices of eco-communities as well as the mainstream environmentalism. This is done in order to determine the level of emancipation of the residents of eco-communities and, thus, their agency in change, i.e. their potential to spread emancipatory ideas.

5.1.1. Common sense: mainstream and alternative

Considering green growth imperative as the current driver of the hegemonic front, the dominant common sense – the mainstream understanding of the world – could be identified in the culture of hyper-consumerism and productionism. Recalling the discussion of Chapter 2, the hegemonic front is reinforced through the rise of green growth narratives, which, in light of growing environmentalism, reshapes the system by changing the goods to be consumed, but continues supporting existing consumption and production patterns, thereby retaining the underlying hegemony of economic growth. For such a strategy to be utilized, the society at large has to subscribe to the hegemonic ideologies and practices of hyper-consumerism. In other words, the overall hegemony of the economic growth imperative is a global level objective. However, for it to function, it has to be rooted in local, individual actions, but for those individual actions to be functional, they have to be supported by a culture that legitimizes them (Bossy, 2014). As such, hyper-consumerist culture is the Gramscian common sense as it drives the hegemony of growth by justifying individual actions. Here, the general society voluntarily engages in wasteful consumption as per the cultural norms they follow, which in turn warrants the over-production and unsustainable use of resources to support these societal habits. As such, the system of over-consumption and over-production is created in which negative effects, such as environmental degradation, flourish.

To successfully challenge the hegemonic front, the counter-hegemonic movement must follow the same pattern of structure. From here, the global level counter-hegemonic front must be rooted in local, individual practices, which must be sustained by the alternative common sense that emancipates the society from the hegemonic thinking. As such, the hegemonic common sense would be challenged leading to the development of legitimized alternative local practices, which then would strengthen the global counter-hegemonic movement. From here, the following will consider voluntary simplicity as the alternative, emancipatory common sense that legitimizes local practices of eco-communities, which, in theory, would result in the strengthening of the counter-hegemony of de-growth.

The idea of voluntary simplicity, as discussed in Chapter 4, directly challenges the green growth-driven mainstream environmentalism, and can be identified as the overall ideological position of eco-communities (Alexander, 2015). Based on the empirical findings, the residents of Suderbyn Ecovillage communally and individually prescribe to the voluntary simplicity principle. The eco-community as an organization propagates simple living and the residents all express the need to escape the hyper-consumerist culture and engage in basic needs-based lifestyle. Further, as discussed in Chapter 4, the residents of the eco-community all recognize the advantages of voluntary simplicity, as it reshapes their lifestyle, but does not disrupt their quality of life. Most importantly, the residents recognize the disruptive nature of materialistic lifestyle, thereby recognizing the hegemonic common sense as such, and thus exhibiting emancipation from the mainstream thinking, as well as posing the need to change it. Expressing individual and collective emancipation when describing the ecovillage, Participant H conveyed:

I think what we are trying to achieve is basically to create a mini society with a different lifestyle, I mean, a lifestyle different from the mainstream, one that is closer to nature, one that works together with nature, one that is not based on consumerism and that is based on real human values of connection, of support, and of creating things together, and of just doing things differently and not being slaves of the system (Participant H).

From here, voluntary simplicity can be argued to be the common sense of the ecovillage collectively and its residents individually, where the former grounds the alternative common sense and the latter voluntarily prescribes to it.

Further, recalling the permaculture ethics principles described in Chapter 4, eco-communities propose not only an alternative lifestyle as per their eco-conscious practices, but

alternative values and principles, according to which they develop those practices. From here, voluntary simplicity as a lifestyle is further grounded in permaculture principles in Suderbyn Ecovillage, according to which, practices of voluntary simplicity lifestyle are developed. Thus, the development of alternative lifestyle, and its adoption by the residents, is sustained and justified as the principles of care for the Earth, care for the people and fair share create a common sense, i.e. a culture of voluntary simplicity. The manifestation of the new common sense is also based on the recognition of the lack of permaculture principles in the mainstream culture, making it one that ought to be challenged and changed.

What we aim to create here is a community where our values and what we believe in are the center of what we do and how we interact with each other. So, there are many different ways of describing these values and all, but you can put it simply with the ethics of permaculture, which is taking care of the Earth, of the land, taking care of the people, and fair share for everyone, including non-human beings. (Participant D)

As such, eco-communities can be argued to have emancipatory properties as they present alternative conceptions of the world, create culture of simplicity by reshaping values and norms that govern them and distinguish them from the mainstream.

Finally, the overall counter-hegemony of de-growth can be considered to be supported and legitimized through eco-communities grounding the alternative common sense, which directly opposes the mainstream growth imperative. However, for the counter-hegemonic movement to translate into the formation of a new historic bloc, in other words, manifest into a successful transition, the spread of the alternative common sense is essential. As such, the potential of de-growth as a counter-hegemonic movement depends on the potential of the spread of voluntary simplicity culture in a broader societal context.

5.1.2. The spread of alternative common sense: the role of intellectuals

While eco-communities could be considered to give the physical foundation for alternative common sense to be produced and reproduced, the spread of it depends on the people that prescribe to it. Eco-communities here can be seen to occupy the one half of the bottom-bottom approach, being the foundation for ideas and practices to arise and develop. However, for those practices to be transferred to the other 'bottom', whether it be another eco-community,

general society, different communities, etc., the link between them – the people adopting the alternative common sense – must be actively engaged in the knowledge spread process.

As discussed in Chapter 3, emancipation from the mainstream common sense is not an organic process, instead, it must be carried out by intellectuals, specifically organic intellectuals, in a given society (Gramsci, 1999). According to Gramsci (1999), traditional intellectuals consciously or unconsciously reproduce the mainstream common sense, and thus the hegemonic front that is supported by it. As such, traditional intellectuals do not carry emancipatory potential. Organic intellectual role, on the other hand, refers to the conscious spread of alternative common sense to seek a broader societal emancipation (Gramsci, 1999). Here, organic intellectuals recognize their subaltern position in the society and seek change through not only prescribing, but spreading, counter-hegemonic ideas. Organic intellectuals are, thus, commonly understood in this line of reasoning as people that provide leadership and organization to the counter-hegemonic movement. However, for a counter-hegemonic movement to successfully challenge the hegemonic front, the spread of emancipatory ideas ought to occur. Therefore, this study looks at organic intellectuals as first and foremost ‘organizers of culture’, thus analyzing their ability to spread the alternative common sense, as opposed to providing traditional leadership to a societal movement. From here, the following will consider the residents of eco-communities as both traditional and organic intellectuals in order to determine their role in the counter-hegemonic movement.

Based on the empirical findings of this study, eco-community residents do not fit within the description of traditional intellectuals, as they do recognize the mainstream common sense as such and actively seek to escape it. From here, the eco-community residents exhibit emancipatory traits, meaning that they consciously do not contribute to the reproduction of the hegemonic ideology. However, even with the prescription of alternative common sense, the residents of eco-communities, most notably, express passive ways of seeking a broader change. From here, whether or not eco-community residents can be considered to hold organic intellectual function, i.e. have the potential to spread voluntary simplicity principle as an alternative common sense beyond the context of eco-communities, remains to be questioned.

Further drawing on the empirical findings, Suderbyn Ecovillage is commonly referred to as a ‘learning center’ by the residents. This conception comes from the fact that the eco-community, not only welcomes, but heavily depends upon short-term volunteers who join the ecovillage for a learning experience and in return bring both material and ideological value to the community. As such, volunteers leave the eco-community with now altered common sense,

thus having the ability to spread the alternative ideology on a broader scale. According to Participant C: “a place like this is super valuable as a learning center, as this kind of incubator of people who might then go and do their own thing”. Further, the international composition of the volunteers coming to the eco-community means that, upon their adoption of the alternative common sense, the short-term volunteers will be able to spread it on a global level by influencing people they interact with in the future, thus beyond the local foundation of the ecovillage. Many short-term residents that participated in this study have expressed their experience in terms of ‘inspiration’, where they foresee using the knowledge gained in the ecovillage to alter their lifestyle or undertake their own projects in the future. Here, a return to the ‘modern way of life’ is seen to be improbable. From here, considering short-term residents of eco-communities globally, they can be argued to carry the potential to create an alternative culture in accordance to the counter-hegemonic common sense in the ‘modern society’ where eco-communities do not hold the grounding structure.

Moreover, according to Gramsci (1999), what separates traditional and organic intellectuals is the awareness of their situatedness within the societal hierarchy of the latter. From here, organic intellectuals do not only recognize the mainstream common sense as such, but their own subaltern role in the society. Drawing from empirical findings, some residents of Suderbyn Ecovillage expressed their reluctance to engage in a broader spread of influence precisely due to their recognition of the subordinate societal role they occupy, thereby conceding their limited potential to influence others. As such, many participants of this study shared the view of their ‘zone of influence’ as limited to friends and family (Participants A, B, C, I, J). While the importance of the spread of alternative common sense was recognized, local approach is adopted here, where influence spreads through small scale actions and through influencing individuals, who then are able to influence other individuals, as opposed to masses. Participant B expressed the effectiveness of adopting ‘leading by example’ strategy in an attempt to exert influence on others as follows:

I’ve been in a phase where I was talking a lot and saying what people should do, because when you’re super engaged and really believe in something you want to shake people, but this is not working fine. And now that I’ve been really super close to walking the talk, I would say, it’s really now that I can see that at least my family and friends are really making a change, because I am showing that it’s possible. So, in this way, I think ecovillages too can really lead by example. (Participant B)

From here, considering eco-communities across the world and people that prescribe to their proposed alternative common sense, past and present residents, although passive in terms of engaging in ‘living the solution’ as opposed to active knowledge spread, can be described as ‘organizers of culture’ in Gramscian terms, and thus carrying organic intellectual function. This is so, as ‘passive activism’ implies a creation of new norms and values, as opposed to the fight against the existing ones. As such, residents of eco-communities create a culture within the community they reside in and spread it by leaving the community and bringing those norms and values to a new place. It is passive when compared to active protests and demonstrations, but it is organic when looking at protests and demonstrations as asking for top-down solutions. In this sense, past and present residents of eco-communities do not ask for a solution but create one themselves through living according to the alternative common sense, both in contexts where it is embraced and not. By engaging in passive activism, thus, they become organic intellectuals creating culture in which others can join in voluntarily.

However, alternative culture may be argued to facilitate escapism, as opposed to transition. Thus, the next section will look at the broader implication of organic organization of alternative culture by exploring the overall counter-hegemonic front in terms of reaction and revolution-based strategies.

5.2. Counter-hegemonic strategies

As discussed in Chapter 3, the distinction between reactionist and revolutionary strategies could be made by identifying escapist and transitional traits within the counter-hegemonic front. From here, the following sections will discuss empirical findings through an exploration of escapist and transition traits found in the collected data. Further, the counter-hegemonic strategies as Gramscian wars of movement and position will be discussed to set up further exploration of the overall potential of the de-growth movement.

5.2.1. Reaction or revolution?

Following Gramscian theoretical position, a counter-hegemonic movement may adopt two possible strategies, in accordance to given contextual conditions, to produce a successful structural transformation. These strategies are war of movement and war of position, where the

former can be characterized as reactionist, and the latter – revolutionary, as established in Chapter 3. From here, the following will explore empirical findings in accordance to these two strategies.

Recalling Chapter 4, based on the opinions of Suderbyn Ecovillage residents, people tend to come to eco-communities in search of a change. This change, however, does not necessarily mean a broader societal transition. People recognizing the mainstream common sense as such search for an alternative in which they can retrieve, thus escaping the system as opposed to changing it. This is important, as escapism, as argued in Chapter 3, characterizes a reactionist strategy, which is not valid in the broader counter-hegemonic movement. According to Participant I, ecovillage is “a refuge” for people who “don’t feel comfortable in the mainstream society”. From here, the physical structure of an eco-community can be considered to facilitate individual escapism.

According to Wallmeier (2017), most people living in communities today hold occupation outside of the community. As such, people do not escape the ‘modern society’ fully as they support themselves financially through engaging in the regular job market and retrieve to the community for the purpose of spiritual, ecological, educational, or other benefits it offers. Based on the empirical evidence, a portion of long-term residents of Suderbyn Ecovillage seek jobs outside of the community to be able to accommodate their life in the eco-community. However, the ecovillage, as discussed in Chapter 4, has plans to eliminate its dependence on the outside through an internal project that would create employment opportunities for the community members. From here, this elimination of external dependence, if achieved, could be argued to facilitate individual escapism.

Further, the risk of escapism and isolation was recognized by some of the participants of this study. However, the clear aim of not being closed off from the society at large and sharing the local level solutions, such as organic farming or eco-building, is at the forefront of the Suderbyn Ecovillage mission. According to Participant G: “we’re trying to work for all aspects, not just building from an eco-standpoint, but what value would it bring not just for us, but for outside of Suderbyn as well”. Nonetheless, when considering eco-communities at a larger scale, the risk of escapism, whether intentional or unintentional, is present. As such, the broader strategy of eco-communities could be classified as reactionist, as it is fundamentally based on a reaction to the system they recognize as unfair and, thus, seek to escape. However, it can also be argued to be revolutionary, as it does seek to change that broader system based on, and sustained by, the mainstream common sense, and it does so by collectively escaping it

but, at the same time, creating something new that can then be replicated in another place, thereby being transition-oriented. From here, as both reactionist and revolutionary traits are identified, a further analysis of war of position and war of movement is needed.

5.2.2. War of movement or war of position?

Based on the different counter-hegemonic strategies in Gramscian thinking – war of movement and war of position – a further distinction between reaction and revolution can be made. As established in the section above, eco-communities do exhibit escapist traits, which already implies reaction, however, this should not be taken for the face value yet. This is so, as even an escapist community may be part of the war of position, which, as established, can be considered to be a revolutionary counter-hegemonic strategy. For it to be such, however, long-term formation of a strong civil society front has to be the main goal.

Considering the formation of eco-communities in terms of a reaction resulting from emancipation from the mainstream common sense, the ‘ecovillage movement’ would be a war of movement strategy – a quick emancipatory reaction to inflict a broader societal change. However, according to Gramsci (1999), war of movement may become war of position over time, where the former creates the conditions for the counter-hegemonic civil society to rise, and the latter then sustains it and moves to establish a new historic bloc. From here, the rise of eco-communities as a reaction based on societal emancipation from the mainstream common sense could be traced back to the ‘back to the land’ movement and the rise of intentional communities in 1960s-1970s. At the time, communities were largely escapist, based on “transgressive withdrawal *from* mainstream society, [as opposed to] withdrawal *to* a specific setting” (Wallmeier, 2017, p. 163), and the latter is argued to be more visible today. The withdrawal of the ‘back to the land’ movement, was largely characterized by the facilitation of individual escapism, which was not oriented towards a broader structural change in the society at large (Wallmeier, 2017). As such, the ‘back to the land movement’ could be considered to have been a reactionist war of movement, which did not inflict a broader hegemonic change. However, it did facilitate the rise of the alternative common sense and, later, institutions governed by it (e.g. ecovillages, urban gardens, permaculture communes, voluntary simplicity communes, co-operatives, transition towns, etc.).

In contrast, communities today are more concerned, not with escaping the system, but with creating one, thereby using collective escapism strategically to facilitate broader change

(Wallmeier, 2017). As such, eco-communities today are grounding, sustaining and spreading the alternative common sense, thus building upon the war of movement facilitated by ‘back to the landers’. This is done primarily through the connection between communities and their engagement in the politics of change on a local, regional, and global scale. Eco-communities on an organizational level are involved in sustaining and spreading the alternative common sense primarily through networks such as the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) discussed in Chapter 2. Taking GEN as an example, the network facilitates knowledge and practice sharing between eco-communities worldwide and gives a representational face to grassroots initiatives in international politics, as per its consultancy status in the United Nations Economic and Social Council (UN-ECOSOC) (Global Ecovillage Network, 2019b). As such, even with individual escapism within communities, the organizational structure of eco-communities such as Suderbyn Ecovillage disallows the collective community to withdraw from the mainstream society, instead leading it to contribute to forming and sustaining a civil society front governed by the alternative common sense. From here, the community collectively facilitates a withdrawal, or escapism, *to* a society not only governed by the alternative common sense, but oriented towards its spread. Therefore, eco-communities today can be argued to be a part of a long-term, systematic strategy of change, and as such – Gramscian war of position.

5.3. The potential of de-growth as a counter-hegemonic movement

As discussed in Chapter 2, de-growth can be first and foremost understood as a critique of the mainstream growth imperative and the sphere under which alternative ideas may mobilize (Latouche, 2009). As such, it is a movement towards a societal and systemic change. According to scholars, the main challenge for de-growth movement is its continuous “marginalization within political mainstream and wider public debates” (Büchs & Koch, 2019, p. 156). From here, with the spread of voluntary simplicity as the alternative common sense through eco-communities and organic intellectuals within them, it may be argued that de-growth as a counter-hegemonic movement is strengthened. This is so, as with the increase in masses that exhibit emancipation from the mainstream common sense, de-growth movement may grow to where it would no longer be marginalized, but embraced, due to the increased prescription to the alternative common sense – the culture of voluntary simplicity. From here, as the main obstacle shows the potential to be overcome, de-growth as a counter-hegemonic movement arguably carries the potential to grow and facilitate a broader transition respectively.

However, going back to theoretical considerations, there is one remaining challenge in the de-growth movement – the risk of passive revolution. Passive revolution in Gramscian thought refers to an unsuccessful or incomplete counter-hegemonic transition, one that did not result in the establishment of a new historic bloc (Gramsci, 1999). Passive revolution may manifest in transformism – the mainstream cooption of the alternative common sense, thus ensuring the persistence of the hegemonic front and the existing historic bloc (Gramsci, 1999). De-growth, currently, can be argued to resemble the peak of environmentalism in 1970s, which, as discussed in Chapter 2, was coopted by the mainstream creating the green growth imperative to ensure the continuation of the profit driven system. This was possible at the time because only war of movement strategy was applied. While the de-growth movement can be argued to be a combination of a reactionist and revolutionary strategies, as it exhibits both escapist and transition traits, it may still be vulnerable to passive revolution. This is so, as arguably an incomplete transition from a war of movement to a war of position is visible in the de-growth movement, as it builds upon the ideas of the ‘back to the landers’ and now operates to sustain and spread the alternative common sense, but continues retaining reactionist escapist strategies to do so. As such, it continues to be vulnerable to external shocks.

Further, the current climate change crisis and the societal awareness of it, as well as constant political and academic debates about addressing the climate issues, and the growing environmental movements in a form of protests and demonstrations in the West, suggests a level of ‘organic crisis’ – a condition when the hegemonic ideas, or the mainstream common sense, is under societal questioning, creating space for new ideas to be brought in (Gramsci, 1999). Here, the hegemonic ideological domination becomes no longer sufficient, thereby leading to the need for coercion to control the society at large. As, according to Gramsci (1999), coercion alone is not a sufficient long-term strategy, an establishment of a new historic bloc is needed. Organic crisis is thus the stage where “the old is dying and the new cannot be born” (Gramsci, 1999, p. 276). Counter-hegemonic, or resistance strategies are hence implemented during this stage, which then results in either a new, counter-hegemonic ideology-led historic bloc, or the appropriation of the counter-ideology into the ‘old’ hegemonic historic bloc, i.e. transformism (Gramsci, 1999). Currently, the needed level of organic crisis is not yet present for either transformism or the formation of counter-hegemonic historic bloc to occur. This is so, as the counter-hegemonic movement is still in the process of spreading the alternative common sense, thus not yet at the stage where a transition could be practically carried out. However, if and when the paradigm shift was to reach the society at large, the mainstream may act to defend

its hegemony. If this were to happen, the de-growth movement may be unable to finish the transition and thus undergo a passive revolution.

Moreover, as discussed in Chapter 3, passive revolution may also manifest in utopianism – a divorce from ideological and material capabilities where the alternative ideas cannot be carried out due to the limited or non-existent material and practical grounds (Cox, 1999). As this study has argued, de-growth movement can be understood to be grounded, at least partly, in eco-communities, thus having the needed material foundation for its practical realization. However, most eco-communities, including Suderbyn Ecovillage, while having matching values with the de-growth ideology, in reality do not meet complete autonomy and self-sufficiency required to make them sites of de-growth fully. While eco-communities avoid escapism by remaining dependable on the outside, the lack of complete withdrawal may be argued to make the de-growth movement at large utopian. This is so, as even in an eco-community setting that already exhibits the strive for change, the core objectives of the de-growth movement are not being realized in practice, making it that much more difficult of an objective to be implemented in the mainstream society. From here, whether de-growth movement led by eco-communities would be able to avoid passive revolution remains unclear.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Debates about a de-growth transition are not new in academia, but arguably ever more important in a time when the crisis of climate change looms and questions about how it can be successfully addressed are posed every day, both on a societal and political realm. Further, environmental movements in a form of protests and demonstrations demanding for change are taking place more frequently than ever in the West. While political attempts to address the current environmental crisis have been made through, most notably, green economy solutions, critics argue that instead of reacting to a visible problem, a structural change through a creation of a system that would no longer yield them is needed (Newell, 2012). De-growth offers the latter address by calling into question the hyper-consumerist culture that is both the driver and the product of the capitalist growth imperative producing environmental, and in effect social, issues. As such, this thesis sought to understand the potential of the de-growth movement and the strategies it may employ to bring about a broader change. The following will thus consider the findings of this thesis in sum in relation to the posed research question.

First, this thesis looked at the de-growth movement through eco-communities, as its identified agents in practice, in relation to reactionist and revolutionary strategies to determine to what extent the movement is oriented towards a structural change as opposed to a mere reaction to a problem. The distinction between reaction and revolution in this study was made using Gramscian conceptual framework and analyzed by identifying traits of escapism and transition in eco-community functions respectively. To further inform the distinction between reaction and revolution, a look into traditional and organic intellectual roles of eco-community residents was provided.

Relying on empirical findings from Suderbyn Ecovillage as a selected study site, this thesis determined that eco-community residents can be seen to carry organic intellectual function because they use eco-communities most notably as sites to learn and adjust their common sense – popular conception of the world that governs societies through the production of cultural norms and values. The eco-community residents prescribe to the alternative common sense, in this study identified as the principle of voluntary simplicity, and as such they recognize the hegemony of the mainstream common sense and actively seek to escape it. However, for eco-community residents to be fully considered as organic intellectuals, thus contributing to the revolutionary counter-hegemonic strategy, an active spread of alternative knowledge must be

present based on the theoretical inquiry of this study. Here, the eco-community residents were determined to employ a strategy to influence others through leading by example. As such, they spread the alternative common sense and, while may not provide traditionally understood organic intellectual leadership to a counter-hegemonic movement, they may, nonetheless, be argued to have active agency in the movement.

Further, even with eco-community residents possessing organic intellectual functions, and thus being agents of the revolutionary strategy, eco-communities, as sites where the alternative common sense of voluntary simplicity is grounded, may risk being escapist colonies on an organizational level as it was the case in the communities led by the ‘back to the land’ movement in 1960s-1970s. Here, the analysis was carried out in accordance to the Gramscian conceptions of war of movement and war of position to further determine the resistance strategies of eco-communities. Based on the empirical findings, and previous research (Wallmeier, 2017), eco-communities today can be argued to exhibit collective escapism *to* a new structure, as opposed to individual escapism *from* the modern society. This is so, as they actively engage in the spread of the alternative common sense and, most importantly, the creation of a new structure in accordance to the alternative principles that others can join voluntarily. This is done through engagement with other communities, the Global Ecovillage Network, and the outside society, thus grounding and sustaining a counter-hegemonic civil society front and exhibiting war of position strategy. As such, eco-communities do not only provide a physical structure for the counter-hegemonic ideas to mobilize, but act as agents in change themselves and, in so doing, avoid becoming closed off from the society at large. From here, because of the identified organic intellectual role of eco-community residents, and the active role of the physical eco-community foundation, revolutionary transition-based long-term strategy, i.e. war of position, can be argued to persist. It is, nonetheless, noteworthy that reactionist individual escapism remains within the ‘ecovillage movement’.

Second, this study sought to understand the overall potential of de-growth as a counter-hegemonic movement to carry out a broader transition. According to the de-growth declaration put forward after the first conference on de-growth in 2008, the transition cannot occur without a paradigm shift (Research & Degrowth, 2010). Following the above provided reasoning, the paradigm shift can be seen to have the potential to be carried out through eco-communities and their residents spreading the alternative common sense through a bottom-bottom approach. However, while the foundations of a war of position are visible in the de-growth movement led by eco-communities, reactionist war of movement traits remain, as per the identified escapism.

From here, it can be argued that currently de-growth remains in an incomplete transition from a war of movement to a war of position, and as such, is subject to passive revolution. This is so, as the creation of a new historic bloc is currently unattainable due to the insufficient spread of alternative common sense for the paradigm shift to occur, which is needed to sustain the rise of the counter-hegemonic order. However, if the societal questioning of the mainstream common sense rose to a level needed for a transition to be carried out *without* the adoption of the alternative common sense (e.g. the continuous rise of traditional environmental movements asking for top-down solutions to the existing climate crisis), the counter-hegemonic front would potentially experience a passive revolution, either in a form of transformism or utopianism, as it would become vulnerable to external shocks. The results of such an outcome are currently difficult to foresee.

Moreover, whether it brings a transition or not, how would a de-growth society on a global level look like remains unclear. The proponing arguments of de-growth in current debates stress its potential for increased human wellbeing (Büchs & Koch, 2019). Here, the argument is built on the notion that the rise in GDP does not reflect human well-being. Instead, economic downscaling is desired, as it would not only reduce stress on the natural environment but reshape considerations of happiness and life satisfaction, that are not based in materialism (Büchs & Koch, 2019). Further, as discussed in this thesis, as well as argued by both de-growth opponents and proponents, economic growth, as a socio-economic objective, is anchored in the “minds, bodies and identities” (Büchs & Koch, 2019, p. 160) of the society at large. As such, the transition to de-growth cannot be made merely through institutional restructuring, but it ought to be achieved through a paradigm shift. As discussed above, whether such a shift is possible or not remains to be questioned and this could be attributed to the unknown outcome of the transition. In current day and age, the economic growth objective governs welfare, education, work, families, etc. The de-growth transition advocates propose a change through introduction of basic income, work time reduction, redistribution, cooperative economy, etc. (Büchs & Koch, 2019). While these proposed changes are rooted in the argued understanding that they will increase human wellbeing coupled with environmental benefits, the possible implications of a transition are unclear when it comes to the alterations to the currently embedded “thinking about rights, justice, freedom, private property, individual responsibility, etc.” (Büchs & Koch, 2019, p. 160). As such, more research on de-growth and the ways it may be carried out is warranted.

In sum, considering the findings of this thesis, eco-communities ground the alternative common sense of voluntary simplicity and residents of eco-communities spread it through ‘passive activism’, i.e. leading by example. However, in order to solidify this theoretical argumentation, more research is needed. Further, this thesis sought to understand a bottom-bottom approach to change, considering governing ideologies as the first order of inquiry. The focus here was not on de-growth as a utopian system, but as a realm under which alternative ideologies may mobilize and spread to inflict structural change. However, it was beyond the scope of this study to identify all considerable agents of the de-growth movement and all of the possible roles they carry, thus making it difficult to derive to concrete conclusions on the overall potential of de-growth as a counter-hegemonic movement. As such, more research is warranted to identify other grounding structures of voluntary simplicity and agents within them that may be contributing to the societal paradigm shift need for a de-growth transition to occur, as well as the overall effectiveness of a bottom-bottom strategy in the politics of change.

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Appendix

A. Interview guide

Personal

1. When did you join Suderbyn and how long do you plan to stay?
 - a. Reasons why? (for joining, staying longer, leaving)
 - b. Expectations upon coming?

Suderbyn

1. How would you describe Suderbyn and its goal?
2. Most important aspect of Suderbyn: ecological, social, economic, combination? In what ways?
3. Personal goals?

Ecovillages (based on personal experience)

1. Why do people in general go to ecovillages?
2. How important is it that such communities exist? (Value of ecovillages)
3. What kind of difference do ecovillages make? Suderbyn?

Personal

1. How do you think your experience here will impact your life when/if you leave?
2. How important is it to you to spread awareness/impact others? How do you approach that?

Anything else to add or expand upon?

B. Interview participants

The table below lists the interview participants and the dates of interview conduction. As the participants were anonymized, only the distinction between short and long-term residency is made. Short-term residency includes volunteers that stay from one month to one and a half years; long-term residency includes permanent residents that have been living in the community from one and a half to ten years.

Interview participants	Interview date	Short or long-term residency
Participant A	20 Feb. 2019	Short-term resident
Participant B	22 Feb. 2019	Short-term resident
Participant C	23 Feb. 2019	Short-term resident
Participant D	24 Feb. 2019	Long-term resident
Participant E	25 Feb. 2019	Short-term resident
Participant F	25 Feb. 2019	Short-term resident
Participant G	26 Feb. 2019	Long-term resident
Participant H	27 Feb. 2019	Long-term resident
Participant I	27 Feb. 2019	Long-term resident
Participant J	28 Feb. 2019	Long-term resident
Participant K	28 Feb. 2019	Long-term resident



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