



THE GREENING OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Challenging Practices, Imagining Possibilities

Edited by John M. Meyer & Jens M. Kersten

OXFORD

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*John Meyer and Jens Kersten
Arcata and Munich*

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Introduction

Environmentalism and Everyday Life

John M. Meyer and Jens M. Kersten

Environmentalism is dead; long live environmentalism! In recent years, there have been many—and disparate—internal criticisms of environmentalism in the postindustrial societies of North America, Europe, and Australasia: it is too reliant upon technocratic policy, its constituency is too white, male, and middle class, its rhetoric and framing is too gloomy, its concerns are expressed too abstractly, its solutions too focused on individual consumer choices and the individualization of responsibility. These expressions of dissatisfaction, proclamations of death, and calls for transformation have been expressed by both movement activists and scholars. Despite differences among these criticisms, they have generated distinctive ways of confronting challenges of environment and sustainability and also highlighted new ways of analyzing and understanding them.

Scholarly Tributaries that Feed the Turn to Everyday Life

The authors gathered together in this book represent an array of scholarly disciplines, countries, and interests; we are informed by a variety of intellectual traditions and approaches. Yet our work is unified by the pursuit of these new pathways to understanding and a conviction that far greater attention to everyday life must lie at the center of efforts to make sense of contemporary socio-ecological challenges. “Everyday life” is not an answer to these challenges, but attention to the everyday can help clarify the obstacles and opportunities for effective action to address them. In this way, we are better

positioned to address—and perhaps to overcome—some of the criticisms we noted at the outset. Rather than an abstract and technocratic orientation inaccessible to non-experts, we attend to experiences and practices familiar to all. Rather than projecting or reifying a class, gender, or racial profile onto “green” practices, we take these as open questions that are in part a product of how “green” and “environment” come to be understood in particular social and ecological contexts. Rather than promoting green consumerism and initiatives to encourage individual behavioral change, we focus on large-scale practices that lie at the intersection of individuals and social structures. As a result, the framing of environmental concerns turns away from the recitation of a litany of foreboding catastrophes and toward the possibilities for “greening” everyday life. These diverse possibilities are sometimes elusive and fragmentary, but nonetheless real. We are united by the conviction that greater attention to them is valuable and necessary.

Many tributaries flow together in this attention to everyday life. One is the activism and scholarship on environmental justice (EJ). For more than two decades, this work has emphasized the importance and consequence of conceptualizing the “environment” as—at least in part—“where we live, work, and play” (First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit 1991; Bullard 1993; Novotny 2000). Emerging first among anti-toxics organizers in poor and non-white communities in the US, an EJ lens has increasingly been used in other national contexts and also to highlight commonalities with movements and constituencies to promote sustainable livelihoods in the Global South—what Ramachandra Guha and Joan Martinez-Alier have termed the “environmentalism of the poor” (Guha and Martinez-Alier 1997; Schlosberg 2013). Julian Agyeman and his collaborators have built upon this foundation to advance what they have termed “just sustainabilities”—a pluralistic framework that allows them to discuss inclusive community spaces, alternative bases for livelihood and economic production, and environmental quality together (Agyeman 2013; see also Gottlieb 2001).

In a complementary fashion, Giovanna Di Chiro has highlighted the Marxist-feminist concept of social reproduction—encompassing practices of household provisioning and childcare that seek to provide for the health, education, and welfare of families and communities—as a framework for understanding the way that inequality and differential vulnerability to the effects of climate change, toxic pollution, and other hazards can impact and impair people’s ability to secure provisions for their daily lives and the lives of others in their communities. The gendered dimension of social reproduction is central and makes it clear that environmental injustice can neither be fully understood nor adequately challenged in the absence of attention to this dynamic (Krauss 1994; Di Chiro 2008). Since its beginning, EJ has stood in contrast to a dominant way of conceptualizing environmental concern, in

which “concern” was paradigmatically “about” a pristine and distant environment—often “wilderness” or “nature”—and was understood to be a distinctive expression of the postmaterial interests of affluent and educated populations (Offe 1987; Inglehart 1995; for a fuller explication, see Meyer 2015, 47–73).

A second tributary that has buoyed this attention to everyday life is interdisciplinary academic work advancing a “new materialism.” Pushing back against the dichotomy between human agency and vitality on the one hand and “dead” matter on the other, scholars including Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, Stacy Alaimo, Noortje Marres, Philippe Descola, and many others have drawn our attention to the inescapably complex webs or assemblages of humans and nonhumans within which action and agency exists (Latour 2007; Alaimo 2010; Bennett 2010; Marres 2012; Descola 2013). This work operates in many different registers, but what is notable here is that it offers renewed confidence in our ability to attend to the material world without collapsing into narrowly reductionist and deterministic frameworks. Material concerns do not exist in isolation from normative values; new materialists can offer resources for seeing the inescapable connections between these.

Erik Swyngedouw, Maria Kaika, and others might not identify with the “new materialism” label, but their close attention to metabolic flows in and out of homes and cities brings to the forefront elements of everyday life often literally hidden beneath the surface: those that enable us to heat our homes, flush our waste, cook our meals, and draw a bath (Kaika 2004; Heynen, Kaika, and Swyngedouw 2006). As Fiona Allon argues in Chapter 3 in this volume, the privilege of a middle-class lifestyle in postindustrial society has often been premised upon the ability to block out this “smell of infrastructure.” Yet many initiatives to “green” everyday life have confronted an infrastructure in crisis and promoted alternative means of managing stormwater runoff, waste disposal, energy generation, and other currents central to our daily lives. In doing so, they make this infrastructure far more visible. Further, as David Schlosberg and Rom Coles argue in Chapter 1, a new materialism encourages us to perceive and trace these material flows.

A third stream contributing new possibilities for greening the everyday is reflected in what has been termed “social practice theory.” Scholars including Elizabeth Shove, Gert Spaargaren, and others have crafted a framework for examining everyday practices such as bathing, heating and cooling, and shopping and cooking, as mid-level phenomena that can neither be reduced to individual-level behavior nor reified as the product of inaccessible, abstract structures. In doing so, this body of scholarship lends greater specificity to the more casual ways in which many of us write of the relation of theory to practice. Cecily J. Maller, in Chapter 4, illustrates some of the ways that this

approach allows us to make sense of home-buying and home-renovating decisions, thus identifying both obstacles and opportunities for change.

These three diverse streams do not fully encompass the theories and frameworks that inform various chapters in this volume. Yet what they do illuminate, we believe, is the growing range of intellectual resources available to cultivate a new way of thinking about, studying, and acting to address environmental challenges. The book, then, brings together these distinctive ways of engaging with materiality across disciplines and research agendas. Rather than promoting a single methodology (such as social practice theory) or root an analysis in a single intellectual tradition or framework (such as EJ or new materialism), we are convinced that what is notable here is the diversity of complementary approaches to engaging the everyday material world.

By publishing this diversity within a single book, we hope to facilitate dialogue among scholars and students in different disciplines and to enable many to see opportunities for collaboration, conversation, and learning that may not have been evident before. Developing a greater understanding of the multiple ways in which a shared set of concerns are investigated and have come to be understood across intellectual traditions is, we believe, one of the true rewards of interdisciplinarity. This egalitarian approach stands in contrast to another conception in which a singular integrative methodology approach is taken to be the superior and universal one. Interdisciplinarity, then, comes to be understood as scholars from multiple disciplines all adopting this same “master” framework (on these two distinct ways of understanding interdisciplinarity, see Meyer 2014). While such an approach may generate insights, its more top-down or imperialistic standpoint also tends to exclude others, who share the same subject, but not the same framework.

The shared subject matter of the chapters in this volume is the “environment” most familiar to residents of postindustrial societies: the material world of homes and households, backyards and gardens, urban and suburban spaces, and the wide variety of infrastructure that makes life in such environments possible (on this “everyday” understanding of environment, see also Vogel 2015). Understood in this way, the material world does not stand in contrast to social values and activities, but is thoroughly enmeshed with it. Practices become an appropriate subject of inquiry precisely because they bring together an engagement with the material world with the need to closely attend to values, interpretations, and activities. An engagement with practices, in turn, demands attention to their social location—they might be more widespread among urban or suburban dwellers, for instance; among members of one class or another; or by the race, gender, and other dimensions that characterize their practitioners. In this sense, this volume simultaneously illustrates the shared attraction of a turn to the everyday and the inescapable plurality and ambivalences surrounding efforts to “green” everyday life. It

draws together the empirical and the normative; the movements and the everyday practices in a way that offers distinctive insight. The book as a whole, and individual chapters within it, balance theoretical explorations with analysis of specific everyday practices. This has the virtue of both illuminating theory through practical examples and cultivating a greater depth of insight from the discussion of particular practices.

How this Book Came About

The idea for this book initially took shape in conversation between the two of us—John and Jens. Despite our differences in discipline, language and nationality, and academic references, we found a shared sense that everyday material practices were central to our ways of conceptualizing environmental concerns. The opportunity to organize a workshop on this theme at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society in Munich became the catalyst for enlarging our conversation. The level of interest generated by our call for proposals was considerable and the disciplinary perspectives and subjects of interest were diverse. Chapter authors include both internationally prominent and emerging scholars from anthropology, communication, cultural studies, history, law, philosophy, political science and political theory, public health, sociology, and urban studies. They reflect upon practices in the US, Canada, Australia, Germany, and elsewhere. Yet the chapters consistently and effectively reach across both national and disciplinary boundaries. The coherence of the contributions to this volume reflects the intensive exchange of ideas during this workshop. The gathering itself helped to sharpen our sense of a shared conversation; one that simultaneously interrogates existing practices of everyday life and presses outward to explore new possibilities that might be perceived as marginal or “alternative” today, but that might become more widely viewed as feasible or desirable in the future.

Who Should Read this Book

The bridges we built at the workshop reinforced our own sense of crystalizing a nascent transdisciplinary agenda. Scholars interested in the fields discussed, as well as activists, policymakers, and other practitioners, will find conceptual insights, cases, and strategies that are relevant and path-breaking.

At the same time, the engagement with everyday practices also convinced us that the papers presented at the workshop could be crafted into a book light on disciplinary jargon and accessible and interesting to students. The volume should fit especially well in an upper-division undergraduate course in

environmental and sustainability studies, urban and regional planning, cultural geography, and environmental politics, sociology, and law. Topical courses on “environment and society,” “strategies for sustainability,” and “materialism and social practice” were also identified by workshop participants as excellent fits for this material. By creating a volume that can reach out in these ways, we aim to expand the conversation about this distinctive approach to addressing ecological challenges.

Chapters focus on the household, community, transportation, and urban and suburban spaces for biodiversity. In doing so, they offer rich accounts of the significance of a variety of things and practices including: home building techniques, household cleaners, street alterations for rainwater catchment, and designs to encourage bicycling. While many authors advance an understanding of relatively “mainstream” practices, others explore the potential for more “alternative” practices to be scaled up. All authors explore how human experience is interwoven with material flows, nonhuman beings, ecological systems, and technological infrastructures. All also explore what contributor Chelsea Schelly has described as the non-environmental motivations and appeal of “environmental” behavior. In sum, we believe that the book can effectively address a palpable yearning among our students—and indeed among ourselves: a yearning for more constructive ways to theorize and strategize environmental action, for movements that are more inclusive in both their constituencies and their vision, and for approaches to change that are both feasible and yet also cultivate our imagination and ambition.

Overview of the Book

The first two chapters of this book offer very different conceptual introductions to the volume as a whole. While Chapter 1, by David Schlosberg and Romand Coles, is primarily forward-looking in its identification of a shared concern with everyday material conditions of life to be found among contemporary movements, Andrew N. Case, in Chapter 2, offers a historical perspective, describing one key way in which the “everyday” has been at the center of environmental attention in the past, with ambivalent consequences.

Schlosberg and Coles survey new movements and initiatives that are not content to just challenge unsustainable practices, but also cultivate alternative flows of energy, food, and material goods. In doing so, they tease out commonalities among these disparate efforts—what they term the pursuit of a “sustainable materialism”—and also offer several theoretical lenses that can help us make sense of the rise of these movements and better appreciate their significance.

While Schlosberg and Coles describe these movements as a reflection of dissatisfaction with the individualistic and consumer-oriented approaches to environmental concerns, Case reminds us that one particularly popular effort to tie environmentalism to everyday life, a generation ago, was subject to precisely this criticism: that it fostered an individualistic orientation and thereby turned away from larger structural concerns. Case traces the emergence and impact of the *50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth*; an iconic, bestselling, US book that has played an outsized role in encouraging us to conceive of the greening of everyday life as a matter of individual responsibility. As such, it offers the basis for reflection upon both the possibilities and the limitations of such an approach today as well.

In Part II of the book, four authors turn to the household—particularly, as a middle-class phenomenon in Australia and the US—to examine ways in which environmental concern has played out in both the practices and the imaginary of everyday life. In Chapter 3, Fiona Allon reflects upon the use of water, energy, and waste in these households, drawing our attention to both the norms and values that are literally built into the infrastructure of these homes. A wide variety of emergent practices compel us to confront the significance of this every day, yet intentionally hidden, infrastructure as they seek to alter and remake the material flows necessary for everyday life in this environment. Cecily J. Maller is interested in a similar set of relationships in Chapter 4, utilizing two empirical surveys of home buyers and renovators in Australia to illuminate the ways in which everyday practices tie together ideas of homemaking with the expanding dimensions of the average Australian home. Only by better understanding the links between the three key elements of a social practice: meanings, materials, and competencies, Maller argues, will it be possible to identify strategies for greening households.

In Chapter 5, Teena Gabrielson takes a different approach to the household imaginary; like Andrew Case, she begins by examining the role of a series of popular books: in this case they are books that seek to document toxic hazards within the home. Gabrielson reads these works not just for their accounts of these hazards, but for what they reveal about contemporary postindustrial anxieties and about the gendered, raced, and classed notions of the home itself. Finally, in Chapter 6, Brad Mapes-Martins offers a set of historical meditations on the role of a politics of “tending” within the environmental movement and identifies some ways in which the post-2008 financial crisis reintroduced opportunities for such tending at the level of neighborhood and community.

Attention to the communal level lies at the core of Part III of the book, titled “Infrastructure.” To be sure, there are complementarities between Part III and Part II. Yet the chapters in Part III manifest some of the challenges faced by those seeking to modify urban infrastructure in a manner that reduces the use

or waste of water, materials, and energy. In Michael J. Lorr's chapter, Chapter 7, we can see both some of the successes and limitations of efforts to create "greener" housing and infrastructure through two case studies (both in the US) from Chicago and Jacksonville, Florida. The successes are tied to the personal interests and values of the developers and are limited by these factors as well. Lorr goes on to describe some ways in which the cultivation of democratic publics might also overcome some of these limitations. In Chapter 8, Sayd Randle arrives at similar conclusions based upon her participant observation in a watershed-based project to capture rainwater runoff in urban Los Angeles. While the very existence of the project seems to demonstrate the success of a communal-oriented approach to material flows and everyday life, the volunteer efforts needed to maintain this new infrastructure often belie this communal commitment.

In Part IV, chapters by Shannon K. Orr and Jens M. Kersten are paired to offer very different—but perhaps equally unexpected—accounts of the spaces within which biodiversity might be cultivated. In Chapter 9, Orr examines the potential for suburban yards to offer greater opportunities for habitat. By contrast, in Chapter 10, Kersten draws our attention to the biodiversity that flourishes in even highly urban places such as New York and Berlin, and the often surprising spaces within which these species thrive. Kersten is most interested in the fact that much biodiversity exists in seemingly neglected urban spaces and finds that a policy of benign neglect most often characterizes the management of such biodiverse spaces.

In, respectively, Chapters 11 and 12, both Piers H. G. Stephens and Jennifer Meta Robinson are interested in what it takes to cultivate a sense of connection or belonging with the land. Stephens begins by examining the many ways in which contemporary notions of property, particularly those with roots in the philosophy of John Locke, work against such a connection by reducing our notion of property ownership to mere "possession." He then identifies ways and spaces—such as community gardens—that have allowed for the recovery of a richer and more complex notion of ownership. The local food farmers and gardeners studied by Robinson would seem to concur with the sort of notion of land ownership that Stephens advances, yet her account of the multidimensional challenges in sustaining a life rooted in the land make it clear that they cannot be reduced to a single prescription.

Mobility is another key element of everyday life, and chapters by John M. Meyer and Yogi Hale Hendlin focus on challenges related to cars and bicycles, respectively. Meyer's chapter, Chapter 13, begins with a consideration of some of the attractions of the private automobile, many of which have been tied to an imaginary of individual freedom. In describing these, however, the goal is not to reify them but to identify ways in which a concern for freedom might instead foster a far more diverse system of mobility,

challenging the monoculture of automobility that dominates so many post-industrial spaces today. In a complementary fashion, in Chapter 14, Hendlin's attention to the many and diverse attractions of bicycling, as well as the many obstacles to its more widespread adoption, also encourages us to see the ways in which what often seem to be personal choices about mobility are, in fact, highly structured by the built environment within which these choices are made. Hendlin reinforces this point through a survey of bicycling practices in Los Angeles.

Finally, Chapter 15 by Karen Litfin and Chapter 16 by Chelsea Schelly both examine everyday life in alternative communities. While life in these communities stands in significant contrast to the more widespread practices of postindustrial life in urban and suburban communities described by other authors, both Litfin and Schelly are particularly interested in what lessons or insights these less conventional ways of life might have to offer the rest of us. From her global study of "ecovillages," Litfin distills principles that might allow for the scaling up of practices that have proven successful at that level. For Schelly, household practices in the wide variety of unconventional homes she studies consistently reveal a theme that ties in not only with Litfin's chapter but with a great many other chapters and studies throughout the book: what she labels the non-environmental motivations for so-called environmental behavior. If we are to pursue the greening of everyday life, it seems clear that serious engagement with these diverse motivations, values, and concerns must become far more central. Doing so can reveal hopeful possibilities but also tensions, ambiguities, and challenges. It is our hope that, by clearly addressing the challenges, this book might also cultivate a more broad-ranging vision of the possibilities.

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Part I

Concepts and Movements

1

The New Environmentalism of Everyday Life

Sustainability, Material Flows, and Movements

David Schlosberg and Romand Coles

1.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we examine the genesis and impact of a number of new social movements in several industrialized countries—movements that represent new growths of radical democracy, but in ways that illustrate innovative collective responses to, and critiques of, a range of problems with the production, supply, and circulation of everyday material needs. From fast-growing parts of the environmental and environmental justice movements, to community responses to a post-carbon necessity and a climate-challenged world, to an embrace of new domesticity in crafting, a range of movements offer new modes of organization, forms of resistance, and prefigurative models of democratic living, all immersed in re-formed relations with each other and the natural world.

We posit three key analytical frames that help us think about these movements theoretically, politically, and environmentally. First, beyond an individualistic-, value-, or interest-based postmaterialism, we see such movements as representative of a new and sustainable materialism—that is, embodied by and embedded in collective institutions of material flows. Second, we examine these movements as a form of resistance to what Foucault called circulatory power. Beyond resistance to various problematic practices of industrialized food, energy, and production of goods, we argue, these movements are creating and participating in alternative circulations of power and material nature in new collectivities. They are examples of reconstruction, in addition to resistance. Third, and related, these movements read a

maladaptation, or a misaligned relationship, between humans and the non-human world as a key challenge, and rethink and redesign the practices and processes that supply us with the basic needs of our material lives in a way that acknowledges the human immersion in—and deeply co-constitutive relationship with—the flows of the nonhuman realm.

Ultimately, our argument is that there is a way to theorize, understand, and link a wide variety of new movements and practices. These groups are themselves responding to, and tying together, concerns about and resistance to the disconnect and capture of the political process, the dominant and encompassing circulations of power, and the alienation and resultant destruction of the nonhuman realm. Previous theoretical reflections have focused on single values or concerns—sufficiency (Princen), sacrifice (Maniates and Meyer 2010), or justice (Schlosberg 2007). While each of these frames remains absolutely key, we see promise in a particular reading of new materialism—a concern with power, politics, and sustainability represented in the materials and flows through both human and nonhuman communities. These movements represent a new politics of sustainable materialism, an environmentalism of everyday life.

Our intent is not to universalize, nor to discount the specific motivations of a variety of creative movements, but to theorize the connective tissue that seems to hold these movements together to form a pluralistic mosaic of this new form of environmental action. Our goal is simply to develop a new and unique theoretical approach for understanding a range of these movements, to draw political and strategic links between seemingly disparate group interests and foci, and to provide a framework for examining additional movements and contexts.

We start with a general overview of the types of movements to which we refer, then turn to a discussion of the various frameworks of our analysis. We then close with some potential critiques and concerns and our initial responses to those.

1.2 Food, Energy, Making: New Materialist Movements

A variety of movements can be seen in the sustainable materialist frame we discuss. Recent food movements serve as one example here—the growth of farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture, food policy councils (FPCs), and more. Between 1994 and 2012, the number of farmers' markets in the US rose from 1,755 to 7,864—with a 9.6 percent annual growth rate in the last year alone (USDA 2013). A growing network of FPCs are another case; FPCs, which consist of diverse constituencies in states and cities, are grassroots democratic networks that, on the one hand, resist junk food in schools, food