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Culture and Sustainability: thinking of alternatives to capitalist ways of life

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Capitalist economic theory seems to play a central role in shaping how we live together in society. Capitalism could be defined as an economic system in which goods and services and the means by which they are produced are mainly owned privately by individuals or corporations, as opposed to an ownership of property and means of production by the state. Despite private ownership the economy remains regulated in various ways by the state. Capitalism can be divided into the complementary processes of production (by companies, industries) and consumption (by individuals), which interact with one another. Without dismissing the heterogeneity of the numerous theories which constitute capitalist economic theory and the various forms in which capitalism is present in countries across the globe, what I wish to focus on are the premises capitalism is based upon. Reference to “the” capitalist economic model in the present analysis is thus to be understood as reference to such founding principles and ideas, which are present across various shapes of capitalism today. Two such principles are the search for a maximum financial profit within production and the goal of high levels of consumption among individuals. Increasing levels of profit and increasing levels of consumption constitute economic growth and are encouraged by states. Production and consumption, characteristics of the economy, also shape social life and are central components in the ways of life of cultures that have adopted principles of capitalist economic theory and shaped them into one form of capitalism or another. If culture is defined as a set of attitudes and values which shape social interactions and individuals’ way of life, and as the group of people who share these things, then capitalism seems to have become an important component of many a culture.

With this approach to capitalism and with its link to culture in mind, what I would like to examine is the sustainability of the capitalist economic model. I would also like to look at alternative models which have emerged alongside capitalism, and at their approach to sustainability. Sustainability is here defined as the possibility for humans to continue living a decent life on earth a long way into the future. The sustainability of a culture or an economic model is then its ability to last, its ability to enable people to satisfy basic needs and live well today and in the future. The main obstacle to sustainability observed today is the finiteness of the earth’s natural resources, and so sustainability consists in living well today within the limits of our resources, without compromising the ability of future generations to do the same. Linking the notions of sustainability, culture and capitalism, the main research question I have chosen to guide the present analysis is: How is the theme of
environmental sustainability treated in cultures built around capitalism, and in cultural movements which have emerged as a reaction to capitalism? The widespread capitalist economic model shapes ways of life globally, but there is considerable scientific evidence that the large scale production and consumption particular to it are linked to a multitude of environmental issues. How could these issues be addressed? Can the capitalist economic model be maintained but changed in order to make it more sustainable? What would modern alternatives to this model look like and how do they address the need for sustainability? Could alternative ways of life that have been developed serve as new models for the wider society? Could these alternatives be generalized? These are the questions I will attempt to provide answers to. My research method will be document analysis, and I will look at policy documents, academic articles and books concerned with sustainable development, the green economy and its critique, and alternative ways of life (voluntary simplicity, the solidarity economy and degrowth).

There is mounting evidence of the environmental degradation caused by economic activity – be it resource scarcity, biodiversity loss, climate change, or pollution, all advancing at an unprecedented pace and often irreversible – to such an extent that the possibility of continuing this economic activity far into the future becomes threatened by environmental degradation. I will look at these issues in Chapter 1, and at how concerns over sustainability emerged in sustainable development discourse and led to the green economy. Capitalism is linked to large-scale resource use and environmental impact, which now threaten economic activity. The green economy seeks to address these two issues by “decoupling” economic activity from the environment. I will look at this in Chapter 2, and highlight a few cultural assumptions the green economy is based up on. I will show that the form of sustainability that green economy presents is insufficient on the long term, and turn my attention towards different ways of life which have emerged as alternatives to capitalism. I will thus look at the voluntary simplicity movement, the solidarity economy and degrowth in Chapter 3, and examine their approach to sustainability.
State of the world’s environment today

Economic activity is linked to a multitude of negative environmental impacts and considerable resource use. Some of the negative impacts outlined in the *Global Environment Outlook 5* (UNEP, 2012) are deforestation, water, air and land pollution, the use of harmful chemicals, waste (particular attention is given to waste from electronic devices), and climate change. Pollution, deforestation and climate change, among others, are linked to considerable biodiversity loss: the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF, 2015) estimates that of the 2 million to 100 million¹ different species living on earth, between 0.01 and 0.1% become extinct every year. This could mean tens of thousands of species lost every year, at a rate 1000 to 10 000 times higher than what the natural extinction rate would be if humans did not exist (WWF, 2015). Economic activity has effects not only on the environment but also on human health, among others by exposing humans to the numerous chemicals used in industries. Many of these have not been tested for their effects on the human hormonal system, and have been shown in recent years to be responsible for disrupting hormonal functions, causing diseases and notably infertility (WHO, 2013).

In terms of resource use, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP, 2011, p. 10) notes that the volumes of extraction of fossil fuels, minerals, ores (from which metals are obtained) and biomass have been multiplied by eight between 1900 and 2005. Volumes of extraction are projected to reach 140 billion tons in 2050, almost three times the 60 billion tons used in 2005 (UNEP, 2011, p. 11, figure 2.1). In addition to the extraction of non-renewable mineral resources, using up renewable resources faster than they are able to renew themselves is also an issue (see Latouche, 2006, p. 17). The *Global Environment Outlook* notes that increases in the size of the global population increase the demand for resources, among others water, food, energy and materials (UNEP, 2012, p. 9).

Perhaps the most alarming negative environmental impact associated to economic activity is climate change due to global warming. Contemporary research gives indeed a near absolute certainty² that climate change, advancing at an unprecedented speed especially since the 1950s, is caused by

¹ The total number of species living on earth is difficult to estimate since many are unknown to science.
² This is based on a 99.9% certainty, a 95% chance of being correct that climate change in the 20th century is at least 90% caused by human activity.
humans as a result of economic activity. This is because economic activity is associated to large emissions of carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide and methane into the atmosphere, which cause global warming. To present this phenomenon briefly, infrared radiation from the sun is trapped as heat by gases in the earth’s atmosphere – this is called the greenhouse effect. It allows life to exist on earth, since without this heat trapped in the atmosphere the earth would be covered in ice. Ozone, carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide are a few examples of greenhouse gases, which present only about 0.04 per cent of the composition of the atmosphere. Studies show, however, that levels of some of these gases are rising, notably the amounts of methane, nitrous oxide and carbon dioxide. Atmospheric levels of carbon dioxide have varied throughout the earth’s history, from 180ppm in colder cycles to 280ppm in warmer ones, but between the industrial revolution and now carbon dioxide levels have risen up to 380ppm – an unprecedented magnitude (at least in the last 800 000 years (IPCC, 2014, p. 4)) reached at an unprecedented rate, and which is still growing (Waskey, 2012, pp. 641-642).

Average temperatures have risen globally since the beginning of the industrial revolution, and especially since the mid-20th century. There is a natural variability in the earth’s surface temperatures of ± 0.1°C from one year to another, but a warming of up to 0.65 ± 0.08°C has been observed between 1951 and 2010 (IPCC, 2014, p. 6). This is largely believed to be a consequence of the considerable emissions of greenhouse gases (GHGs) into the atmosphere by industries, notably through the burning of fossil fuels (oil, coal and natural gas) and pollution. Since it seems largely caused by human action, human action can also be taken to slow down the warming of the global atmosphere, one of the main solutions proposed being the reduction of GHG emissions (Waskey, 2012, p. 644). Not letting temperatures increase past 2°C above pre-industrial levels and limiting atmospheric concentrations of GHGs to a carbon dioxide equivalent of 450ppm are set as global goals in order to limit the effects of climate change.

The 2014 Synthesis Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2014) provides extensive scientific data on the effects increasing GHG emissions have on the global climate today, and looks at what the projected future impacts are for different levels of GHG emissions during the next forty years. It also outlines ways to mitigate or adapt to climate change. The large scale of research involved and integrated into this report makes it seem like an adequate overview of the

2 “The IPCC is now 95 percent certain that humans are the main cause of current global warming” (IPCC, 2014, p. v).
3 For more detail, see Waskey, 2012 and IPCC, 2014, pp. 2-6.
4 The ± sign used here refers to the range of uncertainty of the 0.65°C estimate: the average temperature rise observed is of 0.65°C, but this has a range of uncertainty of 0.08°C – temperatures may therefore have risen between 0.57°C and 0.73°C.
state of the global climate today. In terms of the current state of the world’s climate, the IPCC Report notes (see IPCC, 2014, pp. 2-8) that changes in the global climate are made visible through a warming of the atmosphere and oceans, a decrease in global levels of snow and ice and a rise in sea levels. Some effects which are already observed include ocean acidification, changes in rainfall patterns and the melting of ice and snow. These changes affect the quantity and quality of water supplies, as well as the geographic distribution and activities of various terrestrial and aquatic species. In terms of extreme weather events, the number of days and nights on which global extremes of cold temperatures are reached has decreased since the mid-20th century, while the number of days and nights on which extremes of hot temperatures are reached has increased. Changes in rainfall patterns, extreme rainfall in some regions and extremes of high temperatures cause droughts and floods which among others have a negative impact on agriculture. Other impacts of extreme weather conditions are more frequent heat waves, wildfires and cyclones.

Further increases in temperatures between now and 2100 are projected to intensify these already existing effects of climate change. Looking at some future human risks, the IPCC Report notes (see IPCC, 2014, pp. 13-16, 69) that droughts, floods and extremes of high temperatures will decrease the yield of crops, which will likely pose a threat to food security. The amount of renewable surface water and groundwater will likely decrease in dry subtropical regions but increase in higher latitudes. Climate change is also projected to increase already existing health issues especially in countries with low income, extend the geographical distribution of certain diseases, and increase the risk of injury or death from extreme weather conditions. Temperature rises will make working outdoors and growing food increasingly difficult, especially in areas where heat is combined with humidity. Coastal areas are affected by rises in sea levels\(^5\), and large migrations of populations are expected overall, due to changes in regional living conditions. Projected impacts vary globally but regions lacking financial resources, infrastructure and services are likely to be the most affected. Climate change is also linked to biodiversity loss (see IPCC, 2014, p. 13): there is evidence of important periods of species extinction in the earth’s history already during periods of climate change of smaller amplitude than the one observed today, which makes it highly likely considerable species extinction will be observed over the next century.

The extent of these projected impacts depends on the cumulative amount of GHGs emitted over the next decades, and on the associated magnitude of temperature rises. A rise of 2°C above 1950 levels

\(^5\) At low levels of GHG emissions, rises in sea levels are estimated at 0.5m in 2100 and up to 1m in 2500. On the other end of the spectrum, at high levels of GHG emissions, rises in sea levels are estimated at 0.8m in 2100 and up to 6.6m in 2500. These rises are relative to 1986-2005 sea levels (IPCC, 2014, p. 74, Figure 2.8 (c)).
is considered to be a threshold after which many of the risks described start to gain momentum. This level of warming is also likely to trigger phenomena accelerating warming, such as the melting of large areas of permafrost in the Northern Hemisphere, which would cause methane – trapping 25 to 30 times as much heat as carbon dioxide – to be released into the atmosphere (see Waskey, 2012, pp. 642-643). Climate change is already advancing rapidly: the IPCC Report notes (IPCC, 2014, p. 20) that without any additional mitigation efforts than those currently in place, temperatures are expected to rise by 3.7°C to 4.8°C above 1850-1900 levels by 2100. In order to keep temperatures below a 2°C increase, anthropogenic emissions (emissions caused by humans) of GHGs should be reduced by as much as 40 to 70 per cent in 2050, compared to 2010 levels. Furthermore, IPCC sets as a goal the gradual reduction of GHGs down to zero by the end of the 21st century. The IPCC suggests different measures towards mitigation, mainly a transition to renewable energy emitting little or no carbon dioxide. I will come back to this particular point, but I would first like to look at the broader responses to environmental degradation over the last few decades, most notably in sustainable development discourse.

**Global responses: sustainable development and the green economy**

The emergence of awareness of environmental degradation during the second half of the 20th-century would deserve a lot more in-depth analyses than can be provided here, but I would nevertheless like to outline a few major developments (see Waskey, 2012, p. 644). On a grassroots level, the modern environmental movement emerged during the 1970s, with a goal of influencing decision-makers to take environmental concerns further into account in policies and raising public awareness over environmental degradation, operating among others through campaigning and political activism. The assessment in the 1960s that atmospheric levels of carbon dioxide were rising, among others, also raised concerns amongst the scientific community. On a political level, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was held in 1972 in Stockholm – a first “official” sign of governments’ concern about the environment, degrowth economist Serge Latouche (2006, p. 21) notes – and the United Nations Environment Programme was created. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development or “Earth Summit” was held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. This conference resulted in the adoption of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the members of which have met annually since 1995 at a Conference of Parties to discuss advances in the implementation of the convention. The notion of “sustainable development” emerged in the 1980s, spread notably by the 1987 Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987), and gave rise to
the “green economy”. These two notions remain central in shaping responses to environmental degradation today.

I will now look at what Agenda 21, the action plan resulting from the United Nations Conference on Environment in Development in Rio, considers as appropriate responses to environmental degradation. I will then compare these to the policy responses outlined in Rio+20. The notion of development will be important in this section. It is worth noting that the term “development” can refer both to a process and a stage of this process: countries’ long term process of working towards certain goals such as poverty eradication, employment and health – an overarching goal being perhaps human wellbeing which meets people’s needs – or the stage of this process which a country has reached at a given time. Countries may thus be considered more or less developed depending on the extent to which they have achieved the set goals, “developed” countries being the ones in which goals are considered to be largely achieved. Discourse around development in international institutions such as the United Nations is largely responsible for determining what the goals pursued are.

In 1992 when Agenda 21 was published, the goals set for development were still largely economic ones: development was the process by which countries gained larger access to neoliberal economic markets. Agenda 21, however, calls for a “balanced and integrated approach to environment and development questions” (UNCED, 1992, 1.2) – an integrated approach, meaning that questions relating to the environmental and those relating to (economic) development are combined and treated as one. Policies aiming to foster economic growth and those focusing on environmental protection should be “mutually supportive” (UNCED, 1992, 2.9.d). Agenda 21’s relative novelty is this combination of economic considerations with environmental ones in the notion of “sustainable development”. Trade and environmental protection are both considered desirable (and compatible) components of development.

“Unsustainable” production and consumption patterns are an important theme throughout Agenda 21. The Report states that “the major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of production and consumption, particularly in industrialized countries” (UNCED, 1992, 4.3), and notes that there are great imbalances between the production and consumption patterns of developed economies and those of poorer countries: while levels of consumption are high in certain countries, others struggle to meet basic needs (UNCED, 1992, 4.5). The Report attributes a variety of environmental issues to unsustainable production and
consumption patterns, in areas such as health, human settlements, agriculture, management of water resources, waste management, transport and energy, and calls for changes to these patterns.

What kind of change is then sought? In Chapter 4 of the Report (UNCED, 1992, 4.1-4.27), dealing with consumption patterns, article 4.6 mentions that “Some economists are questioning traditional concepts of economic growth” (UNCED, 1992, 4.6). This chapter also calls for more research on production and consumption patterns, among others, as article 4.10.c states, in order to “Examine the impact of ongoing changes in the structure of modern industrial economies away from material-intensive economic growth” (UNCED, 1992, 4.10.c). It seems such considerations can be interpreted in two ways. One interpretation would be that they raise the question of whether it may be possible to move away from the concept of economic growth altogether, among others because it is deemed in its essence to be material-intensive. Article 4.6 mentions the consideration already given to this kind of change and article 4.10.c calls for research into what the impact of this kind of change would be. Another interpretation would be that articles 4.6 and 4.10.c indicate that economic growth could be maintained but in a different form, that a certain type of growth should be abandoned – material-intensive growth and the traditional concept of growth – but that economic growth in another form could be pursued.

As I will show, the second interpretation is the one that has been favored, giving rise to the emergence of the “green economy”, a central component of which is reducing the material-intensity of production but not questioning growth. Both options are present throughout the Report: some sections maintain growth as a goal while emphasizing the need for further resource-efficiency and reduced environmental impact – changes which would be possible through technological improvements to production processes (see UNCED, 1992, 4.17.a, 4.18-4.19). Other sections call for changes to lifestyles (UNCED, 1992, 21.7) and behavior, and allude to alternatives to growth – most notably article 4.11, stating that:

“Consideration should also be given to the present concepts of economic growth and the need for new concepts of wealth and prosperity which allow higher standards of living through changed lifestyles and are less dependent on the Earth’s finite resources and more in harmony with the Earth’s carrying capacity” (UNCED, 1992, 4.11).

Here the Report calls for a move away from economic growth altogether and towards a different vision of prosperity, for changes to ways of life and for reduced material-intensity. Such considerations are important components of the alternatives to capitalism I will examine further on, and it is interesting to see that such ideas are already present in this policy document. For the most part, however, these kinds of changes have not taken place over the past twenty years since the
publication of this document. The insufficient implementation of Agenda 21 likely explains why economic growth remains a central goal for national governments today.

I would now like to look at how sustainable development is defined twenty years after the Earth Summit of 1992, again in Rio de Janeiro, at the Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. The outcome document of the Rio+20 Conference, entitled *The future we want* (UNCSD, 2012) examines measures to be taken to foster sustainable development in various fields, such as poverty eradication, agriculture, water use, employment, and environmental protection. In Rio+20 sustainable development is defined as a “balance” (UNCSD, 2012, 39, p. 8) between economic, environmental and social goals (see UNCSD, 2012, 3-4, 6, p. 2). The balance between economic and environmental goals sought in Agenda 21 thus remains, but the social dimension of development is added to the definition of sustainable development as a third component of this balance. In Rio+20 one of the main ways of working towards this balance is the pursuit of economic growth which takes into account environmental concerns: economic growth achieved through the green economy (see UNCSD, 2012, pp. 10-14). This notion is relatively recent, and was not yet present in Agenda 21. Positive environmental impacts Rio+20 associates to the green economy are fewer negative impacts on the environment, reduction of waste, lower resource intensity (less resources are needed as resource-efficiency increases) and a more sustainable management of natural resources (UNSCD, 2012, 60, p. 12).

The possibility of changing unsustainable consumption and production patterns is still mentioned in Rio+20 (see UNCSD, 2012, 4, p. 2; 58.o, p. 11; 61, p. 12; p. 43), although far less detail is given than in Agenda 21. To compare Agenda 21 and Rio+20, the search of a balance between environmental and economic (and social) goals remains a goal in Rio+20, but the concern over unsustainable consumption and production patterns central to Agenda 21 has faded. The idea that it could be possible to let go of the pursuit of economic growth, an idea suggested in Agenda 21, is not mentioned in Rio+20 and growth through the green economy is presented as one of the pathways towards sustainable development.

Regarding the notion of green economy, one can note that it emerged in the 1990s and gained influence among others when the Rio+20 Conference adopted it as a means to foster sustainable development (see Wanner, 2015, p. 22). The expansion of the notion of green economy can also be attributed to the 2008 economic crisis (see Jackson, 2009, pp. 103-114). As a result of this crisis, a large consensus emerged around the idea of using some of the funding used to stimulate economic recovery by investing it among others into low-carbon “green” technologies, agriculture and the
protection of ecosystems. This series of investment programmes is referred to as “the Green New Deal”. The Global Environment Outlook 5 thus considers that the green economy has great potential for environmental protection, given its resource efficiency and low carbon dioxide emissions (see UNEP, 2012, p. 16). The IPCC report also suggests technological changes as pathways to mitigating climate change: using wind and solar energy, bioenergy, nuclear energy and carbon dioxide removal technologies (IPCC, 2014, pp. 20, 24). One can note that if such a technological change were achieved over the next decades this would indeed be very beneficial for reducing GHG emissions and mitigating climate change – one of the major environmental issues associated to economic activity. However this change is not currently happening and, on the contrary, global carbon dioxide emissions are growing: IPCC notes that GHG emissions have grown between 1970 and 2011. What is more alarming is that the decade with the largest carbon dioxide emissions was the decade between 2002 and 2011, despite a growing number of policies aimed at addressing climate change (IPCC, 2014, pp. 5, 44). Furthermore, reducing carbon dioxide emissions does not address other impacts of economic activity, such as resource scarcity.

Sustainability within sustainable development discourse

My analysis so far has shown that there is large scientific evidence of a multitude of environmental issues associated to economic activity, one of the most alarming of which is global warming. Assessment of sustainable development discourse shows that it defines sustainability as a balance between economic, environmental and social objectives. A comparison between the Rio Earth Summit of 1992 and the Rio+20 Conference shows that the content of this balance has evolved over time. Focus has shifted from the possibility of questioning growth and changing unsustainable consumption and production patterns to a focus on the green economy, seen as a major pathway towards achieving sustainable development. I will now look at a few central aspects of the green economy and at its approach to sustainability.
I would now like to outline the implicit approach to humans and nature capitalist economic theory is based up on, and which makes the search for further sustainability while staying within a capitalist economic model problematic. I will then look at some critiques of the conception of sustainability present within the green economy, focusing on the notion of decoupling and the pursuit of economic growth.

Conception of humans and nature in capitalism

In an article entitled “Explicit and implicit cultural policy: some economic aspects”, David Throsby (2009) examines the cultural implications of economic policies. Throsby’s argument is based on Jeremy Ahearne’s distinction between explicit and implicit cultural policy (see Throsby, 2009, pp. 179-180). Policy which clearly mentions cultural considerations and presents them as one of its central objects is an explicit cultural policy. It may also be that policy which has no apparent link to culture and does not mention it as its object nevertheless presents certain cultural considerations – this is then implicit cultural policy. Cultural considerations in implicit cultural policy may be hidden intentionally, so that a policy dealing with another matter can be used as a means to spread certain cultural assumptions. The presence of cultural considerations may also be unintended, if the policy’s authors consider the cultural assumptions they are making as reflecting a common cultural norm instead of realizing that the cultural assumptions in fact reflect the authors’ own cultural background or even merely their personal views. In either case, whether the inclusion of cultural considerations is intended or not, implicit cultural policy can spread the cultural considerations included in it into the field the policy applies to or geographical region, for instance, in which the policy is implemented. Implicit cultural policy can thus contribute to shaping culture just as much as explicit cultural policy.

Throsby notes that neoliberal economic policies contain implicit cultural considerations: they favour individual rather than collective action, private property instead of common goods, competition between individuals instead of cooperation, and markets rather than state intervention (Throsby, 2009, p. 181). Rather than seeing them as interdependent members of a community, for instance,
capitalism considers human beings as individuals, who each pursue their own interests (Nederman, 2005, p. 263). The principle of rational choice claims that individual action is motivated by the search of a maximum benefit to oneself in any situation. This conception of individuals and the values associated to it can be spread through national and international institutions’ economic policies, as Throsby’s analysis shows. Serge Latouche and Tim Jackson note that these kinds of values are also spread through the media (notably advertising) and education, and reinforced by their presence as norms in people’s everyday life (see Latouche, 2006, pp. 160-167 and Jackson, 2009, pp. 162-164).

In addition to a certain conception of human beings and of their interaction in society, another implicit cultural policy spread by economic policies is a certain approach to nature. Jackson (2009, p. 125) notes that the amount of natural resources available or the environmental impact of economic activity are absent from economic models. Nature is then as though a bottomless pit of resources usable without limits and unaffected by economic activity. When nature is taken into consideration, included into green economy discourse, this discourse swallows it whole: the role of nature within the economy is spread to encompass all of nature and to reflect its full value. This is something Thomas Wanner (2015) notes in an article entitled “The New ‘Passive Revolution’ of the Green Economy and Growth Discourse: Maintaining the ‘Sustainable Development of Neoliberal Capitalism”. Wanner considers green economy discourse as a “neoliberalisation of nature” (Wanner, 2015, p. 33): nature is reduced to its monetary value and its contribution to the economy (see Wanner, 2015, pp. 25-26, 33-34). It is very interesting to see that the Global Environment Outlook (UNEP, 2012) for instance, although it acknowledges the importance of the “non-market value” (UNEP, 2012, p. 9) of the environment, nevertheless uses economic terms in its approach to nature. It thus mentions the “ecosystem services” (UNEP, 2012, p. 9) provided by nature, its “natural capital” (UNEP, 2012, p. 9), and notes that the (financial) costs of forest degradation and deforestation will likely be greater than the costs of the 2008 economic crisis. Wanner notes that the value nature has on a market does not reflect its full value and that despite being treated as a commodity, nature is an autonomous entity (Wanner, 2015, p. 26). The relationship between humans and nature determined by capitalism, its conception of nature as an object at the disposal of economic activity, can be considered an implicit cultural policy spread though capitalism, and among others through policies around the green economy, a shape of capitalism. As I will show, the conception of humans and their relationship to nature is radically different in the alternative ways of life I will discuss in Chapter 3.

Unlimited growth with limited resources: Relative and absolute decoupling
In addition to such implicit components of the green economy, I would now like to look at how green economy discourse addresses (explicitly) the issue of sustainability. A notion which should first be clarified is that of economic growth, one of the guiding principles of modern economics. In macroeconomics, economic growth is defined as “The positive trend in the nation’s total real output or GDP over the long term” (Lipsey and Chrystal, 2007, p. 639), output being “The goods and services that result from the process of production” (Lipsey and Chrystal, 2007, p. 646). In other words, growth is an increase over time in the amount of goods and services produced within a country. This production of goods and services is measured by the country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Growth refers to real GDP, measured in constant pounds/euros/etc. which take into account inflation, as opposed to nominal GDP measured in current pounds/etc. without adjusting for inflation (Mankiw and Taylor, 2008, pp. 616-617). A country’s GDP can increase in nominal terms from one year to the next due to inflation, but stay the same in real terms – this is not considered growth. In order for GDP to increase in real terms from one year to the next and for there to be growth, a country’s income must increase. An increase in GDP means that the amount of goods or services produced a given year must be greater than the amount produced the previous year. Economic growth is generally a goal pursued in all capitalist economies.

The production of goods and services uses natural resources and has an environmental impact, and both of these tend to increase as volumes of production increase. The green economy, however, seeks to break this link through decoupling: dissociating increases in GDP, in the monetary value of goods and services, from an increase in the resource use and the environmental impact of the production of these goods and services. This means that resource use and environmental impact do not increase when GDP increases, or do not increase at the same rate as GDP. Economic growth can then be pursued while reducing its harm to the environment.

Tim Jackson’s book *Prosperity without Growth* (Jackson, 2009) presents an insightful critique of the notion of decoupling. Jackson distinguishes between relative and absolute decoupling and seeks to show that absolute decoupling from the environment is a “myth”, be it widespread by green economy discourse. As Jackson (2009, pp. 67-86; cf. Wanner, 2015, pp. 30-31) notes, relative decoupling is a decline in the amount of resources used and in the environmental impact per item of goods or services produced over time. Absolute decoupling, on the other hand, is a decline in the total resource use and environmental impact over time – without regard to how many products are

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6 This refers to the study of the economy as a whole, and to economic exchanges at national or international level, as opposed to microeconomics, which studies such exchanges at the level of individuals or companies.

7 Gross domestic product measures the total income earned within a country, be it by the country’s nationals or by foreigners within the country’s borders, calculated over one year (Mankiw and Taylor, 2008, p. 613).
produced or what resource use or environmental impact each of them has. To take as an example the production of a product \( P \), relative decoupling means that the amount of resources used to produce one item of product \( P \) decreases over time, as well as the environmental impact of each item. However, even if each item is thus more resource-efficient and has less environmental impact, resources continue to be used and there continues to be an environmental impact as long as this product is produced. Furthermore, the overall amount of resources used and the overall environmental impact over time can even increase: if the number of items produced over a period of time increases greatly, then it may be that more resources are used and more damage is caused to the environment than over a previous period of the same length because so many items are produced – even if each item is now less damaging. This is the general trend Jackson highlights within current economic activity: despite improvements in relative decoupling in some advanced economies, there is no global trend towards relative decoupling. Furthermore, the global amount of resources used and environmental impact are growing and so absolute decoupling is not taking place (see Jackson, 2015, pp. 68-76).

Looking at our product \( P \) again, and at its total level of resources used and total environmental impact over a period of time, in order for them to stay at the same level over time, resource-efficiency should increase (less and less resources used per item produced) as fast as economic activity increases (more and more items produced), which is not happening worldwide. If the goal would be for the total resource use and environmental impact to decrease – this is what Jackson refers to as “absolute decoupling” – then three options seem possible, the first one being that (1) resource-efficiency increases greatly even as the number of items produced over a period of time increases. In a nutshell this is what green growth discourse promotes, but this form of absolute decoupling does not seem possible on the long run: the resources used and the environmental impact of product \( P \) cannot be decreased indefinitely, but only down to a certain minimum past which it is then not physically possible to decrease. Indeed, the production of a material product will always use a certain amount of resources and have a certain environmental impact, how little they may be, as long as this product is produced. Resource use and environmental impact per item can be reduced towards such a minimum, but if volumes of production keep increasing then the total resource use and environmental impact will eventually increase. This increase in volumes of production is a goal in the pursuit of economic growth. If the goal of countries’ economies is to thus always produce more, then the environmental impact and resource use of economic activity will tend to increase on the long run even if resource use and environmental impact per product produced are reduced towards a minimum. It is important to note that this increase is slower than if there were no efforts in relative decoupling. Relative decoupling does therefore seem useful and even necessary
given the earth’s finite natural resources, however achieving absolute decoupling in a growing economy does not seem possible.

To come back to how absolute decoupling could be achieved, other options would be that (2) resource-efficiency increases and the number of items produced remains the same, or (3) the number of items produced over a period of time decreases. Jackson shows that some progress has been made in terms of relative decoupling through resource-efficiency (this is present in what I have named options (1) and (2)). Resource use and environmental impact are, however, increasing globally and resource-efficiency does not make up for the considerable growth; there is therefore no absolute decoupling at a global level. Option (3) would be called a recession in a growth-based economy, but it can also bring us outside the capitalist economic model based on growth. This will the object of Chapter 3.

Taking a more global approach to absolute decoupling than the three options I have just outlined for product \( P \), Jackson summarizes the link between environmental impact and growth by using the Ehrlich equation, created by Paul Ehrlich and John Holdren (see Jackson, 2015, pp. 77-78). Defining (I) as the environmental impact of human activity, (P) as population size, (A) as affluence, measured in income per capita and (T) as technological intensity of economic activity, measured in environmental impact per dollar of income, the Ehrlich equation states:

\[
I = P \times A \times T
\]

In this equation, population (P) and income per person (A) are currently increasing. Relative decoupling is a decrease in technological intensity (T). To achieve absolute decoupling, on the other hand, environmental impact (I) should decrease, which may result from one of three things:

- population size (P) decreases (which is not happening)
- income per person (A) decreases (which is not favored in a growth-based economy)
- technological intensity (T) decreases at such a speed that environmental impact (I) decreases even as population size (P) and income per person (A) continue to increase

If none of these three things are happening, no absolute decoupling is taking place.

This is an important point made, and highlights the fact that reducing environmental impact is not exclusively a technological issue which could be solved by increased resource-efficiency. It is not possible to reduce environmental impact through technology alone if population size and income are ever-increasing. Reducing income per capita seems necessary, which can be done through political and economic choices: producing and consuming less, especially for advanced economies where levels of production and consumption are the highest.
Another important point to note is how relative decoupling is used in industries. Jackson (2009, pp. 92-95) notes that production in capitalist economies is motivated by a search for profit. A central characteristic of these economies is therefore the search for efficiency, in terms of labour and resource use, since this can lower production costs and lead to greater profit. Technological improvement can decrease resource use, or increase labour productivity: fewer resources or fewer hours of work are needed to produce the same amount of products. Such increases in efficiency bring production costs down. For an industry, being able to sell their product at a lower price increases demand for it, and this pushes towards an increase in volumes of production. So although the purpose of relative decoupling through increased resource-efficiency is to reduce environmental impact by using fewer resources for producing the same amount, we can see that increased efficiency can actually bring industries to produce more. Their total resource use is then not lowered, and there is no absolute decoupling.

Something worth mentioning is that the process of transitioning towards a green economy can itself be problematic in various ways. Ulrich Brand examines how this transition would be possible, and highlights some obstacles to it (see Brand, 2012, pp. 30-31), which include competition over scarce resources and the continuing pursuit of economic growth. Brand highlights the fact that policies in place continue to promote unsustainable consumption and production patterns, and the fact that economic considerations are generally given higher priority than environmental ones.

Reaffirming the legitimacy of capitalism

I would now like to look at an interesting analysis of how green economy discourse addresses the issue of sustainability. Thomas Wanner (2015) considers that sustainable development discourse followed by green economy discourse dissipate concerns over environmental degradation and reaffirm the capitalist economic model. A first point is framing. Wanner notes that discourse around sustainable development emerges in the 1980’s and 1990’s as a response to critiques highlighting the negative environmental impact of economic activity. Wanner notes that the link between economic activity and the environment is framed differently in sustainable development discourse and in environmentalist critiques of capitalism. The idea of “framing” is very interesting: looking at a situation, an observer can say “this is what is happening here, this is what this situation is about”. This is not something unequivocal: a same situation can be presented, interpreted, framed in different ways. Sustainable development discourse’s and environmentalist critiques’ analyses have
indeed a different ways to frame a same situation. Wanner notes of the Brundtland Report, a key
document in spreading the notion of sustainable development: “In no uncertain terms, the report
shifted the framing of environmental issues from a situation whereby the environment was
threatened and degraded by economic development” (Wanner, 2015, p. 27) (this is the framing in
environmentalist critiques), “to one where the economy and economic growth were threatened by
the very environmental issues growth had created” (Wanner, 2015, p. 27) (this is the framing in
sustainable development discourse). The motive for limiting the environmental impact of economic
growth is that environmental degradation not hinder economic growth. This type of environmental
risk management is present in both sustainable development and the green economy.

Wanner notes that sustainable development discourse presents environmental concerns and
economic growth as compatible. He sees this as a way of legitimizing capitalist economic activity and
moving attention away from the criticisms addressed to it. Wanner sees green economy discourse as
an extension of sustainable development discourse, which goes even further than the latter: while
sustainable development considers the environment and economic growth to be compatible and
seeks compromises between them, this is not the case for the green economy. In green economy
discourse, growth and environmental concerns are disconnected through the notion of decoupling
and now that the economy is becoming “green”, growth can continue without limitations. The notion
of green economy masks the tensions and blurs the incompatibility between environmental concerns
and economic ones, and reaffirms the legitimacy and hegemony of the capitalist economic model
(see Wanner, 2015, pp. 27-28).

Sustainability in the green economy

Our analysis of the green economy has shown that it, as capitalism in general, is based up on a
conception of humans as individuals pursuing their own interests, and of nature as an object at
humans’ disposal. These implicit elements of the green economy seem to go against the idea of
sustainability, since the pursuit of sustainability limits individual action and suggests a different view
of the relationship between humans and nature, considering them to be somehow interdependent.
In dealing with the issue of sustainability, a central notion in green economy discourse is that of
decoupling. A closer examination of this notion shows that it is largely insufficient for sustainability,
as economic growth is still pursued, pushing resource use and environmental impact to increase,
even if this increase is at a slower rate than before. Transitioning towards a green economy does
present potential for a certain degree of sustainability if it is achieved, although this can be difficult
for various reasons. Overall, the green economy appears to be a way to legitimize the pursuit of economic growth amidst concerns over the state of the world’s environment. Growth is not sustainable on the long run, and it is to models letting go of the pursuit of growth that I would now like to turn.
I will now look at three economic, social and cultural models which present alternatives to the capitalist economic model: voluntary simplicity, the solidarity economy and degrowth. None of the three are indifferent to capitalism but have emerged largely in reaction to it, as alternatives to this economic model and the ways of life associated to it. The three models are compatible with one another to a great extent and often share similar concerns. One important difference between the three approaches, however, is the unit of analysis of each approach: voluntary simplicity starts from individual consumption patterns to move to a broader conception of communities and society. The solidarity economy focuses on community, seen as a group of people who share common resources, needs and aspirations and depend on one another. Although their angle is different, voluntary simplicity and the solidarity economy share a number of the same principles. Degrowth, finally, examines alternatives to capitalism from a macroeconomics perspective, looking at environmental sustainability on the larger scale of a whole society. These different units of analysis give the three approaches an interesting complementarity. A central component in these models is that they do not only look at preventing environmental degradation within a capitalist system, but examine the cultural causes of environmental degradation associated to capitalism and at how they could be changed. I will outline some central characteristics of each movement and highlight their approach to sustainability.

Voluntary simplicity

“Voluntary simplicity” or “simple living” (Alexander, 2011, p. 135), is a way of life seeking to reduce individual consumption of material goods. This movement has spread since its emergence in the United States in the 1990s, but remains the most prominent in the US and Quebec (De Bouver, 2008, p. 16). The term “voluntary simplicity” was created in the 1930s by Richard Gregg, inspired by the thinking of Gandhi, and prominent authors within this movement include Duane Elgin, Joseph Dominguez, and Cecile Andrews (Alexander, 2010). Australian founder of the Simplicity Institute and the Life Poets’ Simplicity Collective, Samuel Alexander (2011, p. 136) notes that voluntary simplicity involves a strong questioning of what material possessions are truly required for wellbeing, and
comes to the conclusion that very little is actually sufficient. Things such as food, water and shelter are deemed necessary for a human being to live well, but the high levels of consumption which characterise capitalist economies are considered largely unnecessary.

A central component of practicing voluntary simplicity within a capitalist economy is choosing to buy less products but also considering carefully which products the individual does buy. A “simple liver” – a person practicing voluntary simplicity – examines their own consumption patterns, questioning whether they could spend less money in some areas, or perhaps use some of the money spent for one area for another area instead (Alexander, 2011, p. 143). Another way of being more reflective of one’s own consumption patterns is to think about the effects associated to the production and consumption of the goods and services one purchases. By choosing to buy a product or another, the consumer is encouraging its production, but also encouraging the social, ethical, environmental, etc. effects associated to it. Therefore, when considering which product to buy, one should consider what kinds of phenomena one wishes to encourage and only buy products with the effects of which one agrees (Alexander, 2011, pp. 142-143). These kinds of considerations in practicing voluntary simplicity lead to different choices between individuals. Indeed, Alexander (2011, p. 143) notes that voluntary simplicity is not a fixed series of rules defining how a person should live, but a way of questioning consumption patterns and finding personal answers in an individual’s daily life. In a book looking at voluntary simplicity from the perspective of sociology, and especially at the emergence of voluntary simplicity in Belgium in recent years, Emeline De Bouver (2008, p. 15) similarly observes that degrees of how “radically” voluntary simplicity is practiced vary from one simple liver to another. The utility of science and technology, among others, are questioned and they are only used when they are considered a true advantage (Alexander, 2011, pp. 137-138).

There are nevertheless certain common features amongst simple livers: housing is generally small and resource-efficient, sometimes in the form of collective housing such as ecovillages, which I will look at in my discussion of the solidarity economy. Simple livers tend to travel by bicycle or public transport when possible, rather than owning a car. Clothes are often bought second-hand since this is less expensive and less resource-intensive than new clothing. Food is generally local and organic and involves little or no meat. People practicing voluntary simplicity often grow their food themselves (Alexander, 2011, pp. 144-145).

Using less money goes hand in hand with simple livers’ approach to work: an idea present in voluntary simplicity is that individuals can pursue work they enjoy for a low income and even have fewer working hours, because their lesser material consumption does not require the higher levels of
income necessary for buying numerous material goods (Alexander, 2011, p. 139). Reducing their working hours gives simple livers more free time. They can use this additional free time for activities they value and enjoy the most, such as time with their friends, family and neighbourhood, gardening, artistic expression, engagement in their community, and staying well-informed to continue to make well thought out consumption choices. Free time can also be used to pursue various personal interests. This is considered to foster wellbeing and personal development. Reducing the consumption of material goods (and, as a consequence, being able to have fewer working hours) is therefore not seen as a deprivation but as a way towards a better quality of life.

Alexander distinguishes voluntary simplicity from poverty: voluntary simplicity is the result of a choice whereas poverty is not, and it advocates for having sufficient material possessions to achieve wellbeing (even though this is a considerably lower level of possessions than that generally promoted in developed economies) whereas poverty is defined by a lack of such sufficiency and is not the result of a choice. Some of the principles of voluntary simplicity are rather ancient. For one, the idea of “enlightened material restraint” (David Shi, cited in Alexander, 2011, p. 136), understood as the well thought out choice of living with less material goods, is a central element of voluntary simplicity. Alexander notes that this idea is also present in various spiritual and religious traditions as well as branches of philosophy, amongst thinkers such as Confucius, Diogenes, Jesus, Mohammad, or Gandhi – but it appears against the current trend in an age where high levels of consumption are the norm (Alexander, 2011, p. 137).

As Alexander and De Bouver note, individuals have various reasons for adopting voluntary simplicity as a way of life (see Alexander, 2011, pp. 138-142 and De Bouver, 2008, p. 19). These include ecological and humanitarian reasons: an individual may choose to reduce their consumption in order to reduce environmental stress caused by high levels of consumption. It may also be in order to contribute, by consuming less material goods, to reducing the imbalance between the abundance of material goods in richer countries and the lack of sufficient goods to satisfy basic needs in poorer countries. There are also personal reasons for adopting voluntary simplicity: the additional free time simple livers gain by working less can be used for the activities they find most meaningful and voluntary simplicity can therefore be seen as a way towards further wellbeing.

According to De Bouver (2008, p. 20), an individual’s adherence to the principles of voluntary simplicity generally starts when they realize they are dissatisfied with their way of life and become

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8 For a more detailed analysis of the link between voluntary simplicity and subjective wellbeing, see van Dijk, 2014.
Voluntary simplicity clearly appears to be a more environmentally sustainable way of life than the capitalist economic model: the lower demand for products characterizing simplicity can reduce the use of natural resources and the environmental impact associated to production. The kinds of products used by simple livers also reduce environmental stress: favouring organic food can reduce land, air and water pollution associated to the use of harmful pesticides, and growing it locally can reduce pollution associated to transport. Eating less or no meat reduces the amount of resources used for growing cattle. Using transport associated to less or no carbon dioxide emissions also reduces individuals’ contribution to air pollution. Practicing simple living, especially if this movement spread even further, could also contribute to reducing the proportion of the world’s resources utilized by developed economies. Other benefits of voluntary simplicity include increased levels of subjective well-being, and stronger social ties within communities. I have looked at voluntary simplicity mainly at an individual level, but voluntary simplicity also gives great importance to fostering solidarity within neighbourhoods and communities, and, on the long run, within society as a whole. This emphasis on solidarity, cooperation and building stronger social ties is a common feature in voluntary simplicity and in the solidarity economy. I will now look at community level initiatives towards sustainability by turning my attention to the solidarity economy.

The solidarity economy

There is no single definition of what solidarity economy is. Under this term are grouped a variety of small scale initiatives in which people living in a certain area decide to build together a project which gives them certain beneficial outcomes. The fact that such projects are run by a certain group of people and for the group of people running them is a central characteristic in solidarity economy initiatives. Projects include alternative currencies, community energy, locally-grown food and certain types of housing, as well as ecovillages. Participants are all responsible for their shared project and rely on each other – there are thus exchanges, social ties, solidarity between participants, who form
a “community” around the project. There is an emphasis on collective decision-making and self-sufficiency. A principle these projects are based upon is that local people know best what their own needs and resources are and can build on them together, instead of basing their way of life on an external model, on conventional modes of production and consumption which characterize the dominant capitalist economic model. These ways of life thus present an alternative to capitalism, and a unifying element between these initiatives is not a particular model or way of operating but rather the refusal of the capitalist economic model and the will to construct a different way of life on a small scale. Ways of life build on the resources available in their particular context: these may be nearby forests with certain resources, springs for water, a climate allowing certain plants rather than others to be grown and certain forms of renewable energy to be developed, etc. Since initiatives largely make use of the environment they are set up in, they are sustainable in this environment. Initiatives also build upon the needs and desires of local people, which together with the variety of environmental settings explains the diversity of initiatives within solidarity economy (see Miller, 2010). There are, however, networks and an exchange of information between various initiatives.

Solidarity economy initiatives can coexist with conventional modes of production and consumption, for instance if a community energy project is set up in a neighbourhood and participants have a more sustainable approach to energy consumption without changing other aspects of their employment or consumption patterns. Moving furthest away from capitalism, there are also ecological communities and ecovillages in which ways of life are almost entirely based on the solidarity economy and there is a large degree of self-sufficiency in all aspects of life, be it food, housing, or energy. Stefan Wolf’s documentary A New We: Ecovillages and ecological communities in Europe (Wolf, 2010) looks at ten such communities. Core principles and values these communities are founded on include interdependence and reliance on each other of members of the community, collective decision-making processes, a certain proximity with nature, and various degrees of self-sufficiency.

These communities are, at their origin, groups of people who have chosen to live together, united by certain common values and a common desire to live in a particular way. This way of life is generally different from the way of life of the society outside of the group of people. This creates a feeling of belonging, around shared values, a common lifestyle and a common habitat. Members of a community rely on each other (a resident in Damanhur mentions the “brotherhood” between residents) and seem to have strong social ties with one another. All of the communities shown in Wolf’s documentary grow some of their own food, with self-sufficiency in food ranging from 15 per cent up to 95 per cent. Food is often grown using organic agriculture and residents usually have a

9 All quotations in this section are from Wolf, 2010.
vegetarian diet. Water often comes from springs nearby or walls. Energy supply is often photovoltaic, sometimes houses have no electricity. The communities are of various sizes. Wolf shows communities from only two permanent residents up to about a thousand. The number of temporary residents or local people involved with the projects but who do not live there varies. There are different kinds of governance. In several of the smaller communities (with about 50 people or less) decisions are made through a consensus. Larger communities tend to have a more hierarchical political system and elected leaders.

There is a kind of proximity to nature in these communities. Lifestyles in these communities are a way of working alongside nature to live from the food and shelter it provides. As an example of this kind of respectful attitude towards nature, one of the founding principles in Matavereno is for the villagers to work in “cooperation” with each other but also with nature, while in Finca Tierra presents a “nourishing, caring”, “loving” relationship with nature, considered as “Mother Earth”. There is thus a sense of belonging to nature, a relationship where it is not nature which is included among the many objects at man’s disposal as is the case in capitalist economies, but man that is included among the many entities which comprise nature. This conception of nature is a kind of inversion of the relationship to nature associated to the capitalist economic model.

Could communities such as the one Wolf shows be sources of inspiration for the larger society? Wolf’s documentary mentions that the residents of Sieben Linden have a 73% smaller carbon footprint than the average German. One of the members of Sieben Linden explains this through many different factors: people in Sieben Linden have a plant-based diet with a low consumption of animal products, and grow a large part of their own food themselves. Materials used for housing are local (the straw used for building straw bale houses, and the wood from their own forests) and houses are very well insulated which uses less energy. Tools and appliances (television, video-projector, washing machines) are shared instead of individuals each having their own. Children’s clothing is passed from one parent to another and clothes in general circulate instead of being thrown away: if someone no longer wants to use an item of clothing they put it into a common place from which anyone can take clothes they like. The interviewee explains that in Sieben Linden “things are viewed to be well used instead of owned”. A lot of the goods used in the community are thus common goods instead of private property: they do not necessarily belong to one person in particular, but can be used by whoever needs them.

It seems solidarity economy initiatives address the need for sustainability in numerous ways, notably by being built on local resources available in a given area. These initiatives can be centred around
one aspect of life or encompass many, as is the case of the ecovillages I have mainly focused on. One similarity between voluntary simplicity and the solidarity economy is their focus on what basic human needs are, and how an individual can live in a way which satisfies their needs or a community construct a project or a whole way of living together which addresses some of the community members’ common needs. A third alternative to the capitalist economy I will now look at is degrowth.

Degrowth

I will base my analysis of degrowth mainly on Tim Jackson’s book *Prosperity without growth* (Jackson, 2009) and Serge Latouche’s book *Le pari de la décroissance* (Betting on degrowth) (Latouche, 2006). While the solidarity economy and voluntary simplicity look at sustainable lifestyles from communities’ or individuals’ perspective, degrowth theory looks at alternatives to the capitalist economic model based on growth from a macroeconomics perspective: how could sustainability be practiced within a whole society?

For Serge Latouche (2006, p. 17), degrowth is not a unified theory which would be the opposite of growth, but a thinking which tries to let go of the objective of growth in order to be able to imagine other models. Looking at ways of moving towards a “society of degrowth” (Latouche, 2006, p. 149), Latouche outlines eight objectives (eight “R”s) of degrowth: reevaluate, re-conceptualize, restructure, redistribute, re-localize, reduce, reuse, recycle. Reevaluating and re-conceptualizing consists in a change of values. Values associated to capitalism should be replaced by solidarity, cooperation and the importance of social ties (see Latouche, 2006, pp. 160-180). Restructuring consists in starting to change modes of production and social structures while abandoning capitalism. Latouche (2006, pp. 188-189) notes that although capitalism as a system and a series of values should be abandoned, certain things present within capitalism such as money, salaries for work or the existence of exchanges of goods can be kept in a degrowing society. Land, employment and revenue should be distributed more evenly (see Latouche, 2006, pp. 191-196). Latouche and Jackson agree that work should be “redistributed” by reducing working hours, which would reduce unemployment.

For Latouche, re-localizing means scaling down production and exchange of goods to smaller areas (see Latouche, 2006, pp. 202-206). Local production should always be favored if it has the capacity to meet the needs of an area, and interregional or international exchanges should be limited to the
The objective of reducing is similar to the considerations of voluntary simplicity: individuals should reduce their consumption, the waste they produce (food, clothing, various products) and their consumption of (resource-intensive) meat. Transportation of goods and of individuals should also be reduced (see Latouche, 2006, pp. 218-224). Latouche suggests internalizing firms’ external costs linked to transport – in other words, having the cost of transport reflect its environmental impact – by increasing taxes on transport considerably.

In terms of reusing and recycling, Latouche (2006, pp. 236-238) calls for regulations making products more lasting and reusable. This goes against the widespread principle of programmed obsolescence: products are generally designed to last only a certain period of time in order to be thrown away and replaced by new purchases. The goal sought is that individuals will then keep buying products, allowing companies to keep producing them. Latouche calls for legislation which would stop this phenomenon and notes this would reduce waste. Latouche also notes recycling should be more widespread, which is something that does seem to have improved since the publication of Latouche’s book in 2006.

Tim Jackson (2009) notes that growth does not take into account the finiteness of natural resources, and that this calls for alternatives which would take these natural limits into account. His theory of degrowth is based on the notion of prosperity. Prosperity is generally defined as economic growth. Jackson sees this as a goal for poorer countries but considers it should be abandoned in advanced economies (Jackson, 2009, p. 41). Instead, Jackson defines prosperity as the ability to exert certain fundamental freedoms within the limits set by the finiteness of natural resources and by the size of the global population.

Jackson notes that growth is set in a dilemma (see Jackson, 2009, pp. 61-65): growth seems necessary for an economy to be stable, necessary to maintain social stability and to provide employment, but is unsustainable. On the other hand, letting go of growth seems necessary to achieve sustainability but seems socially unstable, since in a growth-based economy a lack of growth or recession is associated to unemployment and social instability. Jackson (2009, p. 187) notes that this dilemma between unsustainable growth and the instable absence of growth is generally not recognized as an issue in politics. What Jackson’s book sets out to do is to examine how it would be possible to let go of growth and transition towards a non-growing sustainable economy which would continue to maintain social stability.
Jackson seeks to create an “ecological macro-economics” (Jackson, 2009, p. 121), an economic model taking into account ecological limits, which are absent from conventional economic models (Jackson, 2009, p. 123). Looking at the current economy, Jackson (2009, pp. 128-133) examines the sector of immaterial services (gardening, recycling, food cooperatives, and community performing arts are cited as a few examples). This sector has low labour productivity: it employs many people but makes little financial profit per hour of work. Since increases in labour productivity are a key driver of growth, this sector does not contribute to growth and can even slow it down. However, Jackson sees the fact that this sector employs many people as something positive: this kind of activity should be sought in order to increase employment, but not in order to increase growth – it would therefore be a basis of a degrowing economy. Growth comes with increasing labour productivity (mainly through technological improvements, one hour of work produces more than it did before), which decreases the need for labour, leading to unemployment. To maintain the same level of employment as before despite productivity gains, volumes of production therefore need to be increased, which constitutes growth. This leads to the claim that growth is needed to ensure employment. Jackson’s analysis of the high labour intensiveness and low labour productivity of the immaterial services sector shows that employment can be ensured without pursuing a growth in volumes of production. Furthermore, Jackson notes that many find working within immaterial services fulfilling and meaningful.

Although a focus on work associated to low labour productivity can increase employment, Jackson does note that a decrease in labour productivity should not be sought in all sectors, especially in the production of exported goods, since increased labour productivity decreases firms’ labor costs and allows them to remain competitive on international markets. When the number of working hours would decrease in these sectors, what could be done instead of letting this lead to unemployment would be to distribute working hours more evenly, so that more people would have access to work but each individual would have fewer working hours (Jackson, 2009, p. 134).

Another characteristic of moving towards a degrowing economy is that the proportion of spending used for investment and that used for consumption should change: more money should be invested and less used for buying consumer goods. What money should be invested in would be green technologies and environmental protection – as set out in the Green New Deal. Jackson calls for more research on what the effects of such a shift from consumption to investment would be (Jackson, 2009, pp. 136-140).

Sustainability in voluntary simplicity, the solidarity economy, and degrowth
It seems that the three alternatives to capitalism which I have outlined present a much stronger form of sustainability than that present in sustainable development or the green economy. These movements address some of the underlying causes of unsustainability by letting go of the objective of (unsustainable) economic growth and basing ways of life not on high levels of consumption and production but on basic individual needs, a different conception of community, social relations, and the relationship to nature. They build on existing resources and try to practice sustainability in everyday life. Voluntary simplicity and the solidarity economy consider the individual or the community to be the main catalysts of change, whereas degrowth looks at how the larger scale institutions and policies – within which these individuals or communities try to practice a more sustainable way of life – could be transformed so that they, too, would foster environmental sustainability. Perhaps my choice of three different alternatives to capitalism has made my analysis of each less thorough, and each approach would deserve to be presented in more detail. I have, however, given an overview of each approach, underlined some of their specific characteristics and tried to show in what ways they present sustainable ways of life.
CONCLUSION

I have thus tried to outline how the issue of sustainability is addressed in cultures built around capitalism, mainly in the form of sustainable development and green economy discourse, and how alternatives to capitalist ways of life deal with sustainability. Sustainable development has turned mainly towards the green economy, seen as a means to foster sustainability. The green economy aims to maintain the principles of capitalism while “greening” capitalism, transforming it into a form less damaging for the environment mainly through technological improvement. I have shown that this option is not viable in the long term: there is a structural incompatibility between the logic of capitalism and the logic of environmental sustainability. It seems it is not possible to reconcile the capitalist economic model based on growth with the demands set on our way of life by the finiteness of natural resources. It seems that on a political level the environmental impact of economic activity is largely treated as if it were mainly a technological issue. Such an approach overlooks the fact that this is a fundamentally cultural issue, resulting from our way of life based on production and consumption generalized as a global model. This issue cannot be resolved by technology alone and without calling into question its cultural origins. Technological improvements whilst staying within a capitalist economic model are not sufficient to achieve sustainability within ecological limits, and changes to ways of life and different economic models should therefore be examined further. It seems that what is needed to ensure long-term sustainability is a change of values, a change of ways of life, a cultural change.

The alternative ways of life which I have examined – voluntary simplicity, solidarity economy and degrowth – all seem to have considerable potential for environmental sustainability, but can also bring other benefits such as further wellbeing, social justice and community engagement. The existence of these alternatives begs the question: why are we not all living in these ways? Why have we not let go of capitalism? This is a question I would now like to briefly examine. On an individual level, there is perhaps a lack of awareness of the depth of these issues. Emeline De Bouver notes that the adoption of voluntary simplicity as a way of life starts with becoming conscious of social and economic issues but also with a dissatisfaction with one’s own daily life. If this kind of dissatisfaction does not appear, if an individual does not feel any need to change their lifestyle, then they would most likely continue living the same way. People may also feel that these issues do not concern them, or think that there is nothing they, personally, can really do to address them. At personal and social levels, what is really needed is a change of values, the will to change one’s ways of life, the will...
to let go of the considerable levels of consumption developed economies take for granted and continue to promote. Deep societal change towards reduced consumption and production do not seem possible without individuals being convinced that they, personally, should change. Obstacles at an institutional level are perhaps industries and powerful lobbies who do not wish to reduce their profits and can pressure governments not to adopt policies towards sustainability. Moreover, capitalism has been a predominant model in politics for such a long time that the process of moving to different ways of life seems unpredictable, perhaps difficult to control. Jackson notes that growth seems necessary for social stability since we have grown so accustomed to this model. Despite these obstacles, letting go of capitalist ways of life seems urgently necessary, and consideration of the possible expansion of alternative models deserves great consideration.


