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UNDERSTANDING SUSTAINABLE LIFESTYLE: INSIGHTS INTO ONTOLOGICAL RELATIONSHIPS
BETWEEN HUMANS AND NATURE IN ECOVILLAGES

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UNDERSTANDING SUSTAINABLE LIFESTYLE: INSIGHTS INTO ONTOLOGICAL RELATIONSHIPS
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We argue that marketing fails to address the ecological crisis because of its ontological foundations. We draw from an anthropological approach to go beyond the anthropocentric duality and explore forms of relationships (ontologies) between humans and non-humans at work in ecovillages. Findings highlight the motivations for adopting sustainable lifestyles.

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In this research, we argue that the marketing paradigm fails to address the ecological crisis because of its ontological and epistemological foundations. Despite works studying eco-responsible behaviors, process of empowering consumers and more environmentally friendly consumption choices (e.g., Bajde and Rojas-Gaviria 2021; Kemper and Ballantine 2019; Meneses 2010; Mittelstaedt, et al. 2014), few works go beyond the modern duality that opposes humans to nature (Latour 1993; White 1967). Humans remain the only “*arbiters of sustainability*” (Arnould 2021, 3), while their dissociation from non-humans is contested (Descola 2013; Viveiros De Castro 2004). Consequently, as Arnould (2021, 2) notes, it is not possible to “*meet the sustainability challenge without a more profound paradigmatic change*”. Ecovillages critique the dominant social paradigm and offer an alternative and sustainable response (Casey, et al. 2020). Sustainability translates into material commitments but also into particular ways of interacting with nature, in order to “*regenerate social and natural environments*” (Hong and Vicdan 2016, 120). However, works do not provide an in-depth understanding of residents' relationship to nature and its link to the particular consumption of ecovillages. We suggest that marketing must go beyond the dominant social paradigm, which is steeped in dualism, to better address sustainability issues.

We draw on Descola's (2013) approach of four “ontologies” – analogism, animism, totemism and naturalism – to explore multiple forms of relationships between humans and non-humans at work in ecovillages. Descola's ontologies rest on the way human societies conceive of “physicality” (form, substance) and “interiority” (intentionality, mind, consciousness) of other beings, which are then perceived to be similar or different. Next, we briefly describe each ontology that is connected to both specific cultural groups/societies and geographical areas (Table 1). In **analogism**, all elements, including beings, are differentiated from each other through a discontinuity of both interiority and physicality. This creates a feeling of disorder that is solved by the search for correspondences among heterogeneous components. **Animism** considers that most beings (humans, animals, plants and certain objects) possess an interiority similar to those of humans, while being characterized by a discontinuity in their physicalities. Relationships between humans and non-humans are intersubjective. In **totemism**, particular sets of humans share physical and moral properties with non-humans in the form of a continuity of both their interiorities and physicalities. In **naturalism**, only humans have minds, consciousness. However, naturalism posits a continuity of physicalities of beings along a continuum that relies on physical, chemical and biological laws. We thus further the author's suggestion that the porosity of ontological boundaries may create – what we call – “ontological hybridities”, i.e. the co-presence of several ontologies within individuals.

In order to explore ontological infiltrations in naturalism, we use an ethnographic observation (Arnould 1998) conducted in a French ecovillage (Eotopia) (Table 2). Observation and participation helped to capture the culture of the community (Geertz 1973; Mauss 1989). We also conducted 5 hours and 25 minutes of informal conversations and 6 hours and 40 minutes of recorded group discussions, as well as more formal interviews (5 hours of audio) with key informants (Levy 1981; Thompson 1996). These interviews sought to gain an in-depth understanding of the residents' consumption choices and life history (Becker 1953). Data were analyzed from an interpretive (Goulding 2005), phenomenological perspective (Merleau-Ponty 1945).

Results show that Eotopia adopts a lifestyle strongly tinged with animism and analogism, while maintaining a naturalist foundation. We find that animism permeates all

aspects of the ecovillage, which is thought as an animist ecosystem. Indeed, Eotopia claims to be “*a forest populated with equal beings*” who live in an “*equilibrium characterize by horizontality and equity*” between humans and non-humans. This leads to precise rules of consumption to respect the condition of “*quasi-similar beings*” of non-humans (Descola 2013, 286): exclusively vegan mode of consumption (food and goods); prohibition of possession of any type of animal; prohibition of destruction of species considered harmful or disgusting in naturalism (rats, flies); prohibition of overexploitation of plants. To deepen the preservation of beings, Eotopia adopts a sustainable lifestyle based on voluntary simplicity and minimalism (Wilson and Silvia Bellezza 2022): rudimentary comfort, food and material self-sufficiency, resources management and recovery/reuse of goods and materials. **Analogism** is not as directive and constraining; however, it nurtures practices based on the circulation of a “*permanent flux*” between beings (Descola 2013, 226). These exchanges lead residents to make objects for their magical effects (e.g., Fernandez and Lastovicka 2011); to use alternative medicine; and to perform magical rituals (Mauss 1902). Despite these infiltrations, **naturalism** remains and resurfaces in certain situations. This leads to collective tensions in ontological experience, mostly between naturalism and animism (which is very prescriptive about practices). Thus, rules for treating non-humans sometimes run up against the naturalist threshold of accommodation, for example when pests become sources of discomfort (e.g., flea infestation). These ontological tensions cause the entire community to abandon its animist orientations, returning to naturalist practices (e.g., use of chemicals to eradicate pests). Residents also experience individual ontological tensions, especially when they have naturalist urges to circumvent (animist) rules. This creates conflicts among residents but also their temporary or permanent exit from the collective.

Findings bring to light the coexistence of several ontologies in the practices and representations of an ecovillage. This ontological hybridity leads residents to have multiple conceptions of the human/nature relationship that influence their practices. We make two main contributions. First, we deepen the understanding of behaviors described as magical (e.g., Argo, et al. 2006, 2008; Fernandez and Lastovicka 2011) which are based on an analogical conception; and of sustainable behaviors of biodiversity preservation which are based on an animist conception. Thus, highlighting the ontological hybridity allows for a better understanding of the (non-naturalist) motivations of alternative lifestyles (degrowth, voluntary simplicity, minimalism, etc.). Secondly, findings deepen research on conflict in ecovillages (Hong and Vicdan 2016) by showing how this lifestyle is ontologically experienced and managed: we shed light on ontological, intra- and inter-individual conflicts and tensions. Our findings open up new perspectives for thinking about sustainability through the lens of coexisting relationships to nature.

Appendix

Table 1. The distribution of existing beings according to interiority and physicality, adapted from Descola (2013)

	Similar interiorities	Dissimilar interiorities
Similar physicalities	Totemism (Australia) Humans and non-humans share physical and moral properties.	Naturalism (The West) Only human have a consciousness. Continuity of chemical and biological laws.
Dissimilar physicalities	Animism (Amazonia, Siberia...) Beings are identical internally (spirit, communication, social rules). Differentiation by body.	Analogism (China, Mexico...) Singularity of all beings. Disorder solved by the search for correspondences.

Table 2. Residents' profiles of the Eotopia ecovillage

Name (Gender)	Nationality	Age	Marital status	Time spent in the ecovillage	Education	Work activities
Ada (F)	French	7	Single	Daughter of Benjamin and Yazmin	Not in school, home-schooled	
Benjamin (M)	French	37	Married with 1 child	Founder of Eotopia	Bachelor's degree	Translator and writer
Charlène (F)	French	≈ 25	Single	Arrived in December 2020 and left in spring 2022	General Certificate of Secondary Education	Unemployed (former socio-cultural animator)
Franck (M)	French	≈ 30	Single	Arrived in August 2020 and left in October 2021	N/A	Unemployed
Guillaume (M)	French	26	Single	Arrived in January 2021	General Certificate of Secondary Education	Conducts free yoga classes
Koeko (M)	French	25	Single	Arrived in November 2020	Master's degree	Freelance web developer
Mylène (F)	French	36	Single	Arrived in October 2021	Bachelor's degree	Online therapist
Paula (F)	Spanish	≈ 25	Single	Arrived in August 2021 and left in the	General Certificate of	Freelance Spanish teacher

				summer of 2022	Secondary Education	
Quentin (M)	French	29	Single	Arrived in September 2020	Master's degree	Drawer (former engineer)
Yazmin (F)	Mexican	36	Married with 1 child	Founder of Eotopia	Master's degree	Unemployed (former teacher at the University of Puebla, Mexico)

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