

imperative to act accordingly. However, there is no clear link between societal status and engagement in climate action, with members of 'elite' climate cultures being similarly prone to climate inaction than their less well-off counterparts. This is all the more worrying given that these sections of society tend to experience high levels of efficacy that reflect their above-average educational, cultural and financial capital.

7.2 Climate action as 'elite project' obscures climate-cultural diversity

Germany's climate-cultural diversity turned out to be much higher than is generally assumed in both, academic literature and public debate. However, this only became apparent when the investigation moved beyond 'elite perceptions' expressed through expert interviews and 'official' media messages. As Beck has poignantly pointed out (refer to section 2.4), climate policy will only ever cease to be an "elite cloud-cuckoo-land" if a majority of very different people agree to vote and act accordingly, and do so, in many ways, against their own personal interest.

Views expressed by members of elite climate cultures were thus surprisingly homogenous, given the apparent diversity of actors involved (ranging from elected politicians to YouTubers). Here, prevalent discourses by and large reflected the climate-cultural orientations of the socio-political establishment that implicitly accept the IPCC-consensus, the necessity for rapid climate action and the need to consider related questions of responsibility and efficacy. This confirms that official calls to (climate) action are mainly noticed and internalised by those in society who speak the same language as the originators of these messages. Elites from political, scientific and some corporate and social spheres form 'discourse coalitions' (Hajer, 1993, 2004) that also dominate the debates around climate action, for instance in conventional media formats (e.g., television, prestige print media). Those who are not part of these particular elite discourse coalitions often accuse the media of being complicit with these narratives, as several social media statements indicated (see chapter 5.3). Similarly, craftsmen and farmers interviewed for this study also believed that the media were generally biased towards the climate movement (see sections 6.2 and 6.5).

Experts interviewed by and large participated in these particular elite discourse coalitions (see chapter 4). For example, they stated (nearly) unequivocally that climate action needed to be undertaken by the whole of society – mirroring political calls that ask everyone to contribute. However, the question remains how this can be achieved when such official political calls for action address only some sections of society (endowed with the relevant types of capital). Predominantly speaking to the public as if it were one uniform entity completely overlooks the everyday reali-

ties of large sections of society that have less capital at their disposal (cf. section 2.5, Norgaard, 2011) and thus do not belong to such elite climate cultures.

In contrast to this 'elite consensus', climate cultures of the less capital-rich parts of the population were found to vary considerably, ranging from radical pro-climate action perspectives to climate change scepticism and even denial. The detected extent of both radicalism and expressiveness of these sceptical narratives was especially surprising. These discourses were particularly loud, yet it is granted that they may not actually be practiced by as many people as their pronounced presence suggests. Nevertheless, it is vital to acknowledge their manifestation in German society as it points to the existence of deep cultural disagreement over how the challenge of climate change ought to be handled. More so, for climate action to actually become an inclusive, society-wide project, social and cultural diversity must be recognised as an integral part of it. Instead, current approaches focus on concepts or buzzwords like individual *carbon footprints* or *zero waste initiatives* which runs the risk of continuing to approach society with unequivocal messages.

'Avoiding CO₂ has never been easier' versus 'Rise against Left-green incitement'¹

Thus, in reality, perspectives on climate change often diverge substantially, as indicated by this subheading. This becomes particularly evident in debates on social media (see chapter 5). Here, a pronounced propensity of people to seek out spaces that are frequented by like-minded others has been observed (cf. Bourdieu, section 2.4). Social media providers' notorious algorithms further propagate the entrenchment of such 'echo chambers' (cf. Walter et al., 2018). This is quite problematic from a democratic perspective: when one does not have to fear opposition and rejection, one may dare to raise points in a much less self-censored, more un-reflected and radical manner. This 'cultural cocooning' creates an atmosphere of unawareness or even ignorance of alternative standpoints within society.

An eclectic mix of views linked to climate action was also found in the focus group discussions (see chapter 6), linking climate-cultural diversity and occupational context. Here, divergences in opinion did not result in the same level of contestation that characterised many social media debates. Instead, focus group exchanges were less heated, as members *shared* this particular social space. Yet, looking at these group discussions at a whole, disagreement began already regarding the significance and urgency ascribed to the challenge of climate change, and measures needed to address it. For instance, and paradoxically, members of the strategic sustainability division of the mobility provider were comparatively relaxed

1 Two social media statements (see section 5.3).

about the threat posed by climate change. They believed that a lot was being done already for the climate in political and corporate spheres. This stood in sharp contrast to the statements made by members of the NGO and (to an extent also) the green startup whose work was also closely related to the issue, but who seemed much more alarmed. This shows that the way discourses typically unfold in conversation more or less directly points to the cultural regularities that shape people's climate-related everyday practices and experiences, including those in the workplace.

Figure 3: Climate activists of the group 'Extinction Rebellion' occupy office of Bavarian economic committee in Munich²³



Thus far, dominant climate debates entirely overlook these discrepancies between regular discourses in (cultural) capital-rich settings, and debates and views expressed by the rest of the public (i.e., 'non-elite' climate cultures). The media analysis (and to an extent also the focus groups) revealed a significant (and potentially widening) gap between elite climate cultures and those attributed to other parts of the public. The remarkable unawareness in research and policy of the existence of some of these (non-elite) climate cultures, as well as the growing distance between them, represents one of the key findings presented in this study. This is especially the case regarding the scepticism that sometimes even cumulated in climate change

2 © Robert Haas, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 14/07/2021: <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/muenchen/muenchen-extinction-rebellion-wirtschaftsbeirat-buero-1.5351464> (accessed 16/09/2022).

3 The picture reads: *occupied – now the climate protection lobby sits here and your motto: at full speed into the crisis.*

denial and repeatedly manifested in the presentation of elaborate conspiracy theories: here, the IPCC-consensus and the societal imperative to deal with impending climate change were not only second guessed but in fact severely doubted or even denied. This was unexpected insofar as German society is not usually described in the literature as particularly climate-sceptical (cf. Grundmann, 2007; Tranter and Booth, 2015; Walter et al., 2018).

The extent of disagreement over how to react to climate change is illustrated by the following two visual examples that serve as a kind of summary of the insights presented. Here, the contrast becomes so pronounced that one must wonder how these perceptions can possibly coexist *in one society*: in Germany, activists of the group *Extinction Rebellion* and people following this AfD politician on Facebook seem to live in completely different realities as people following the AfD member of the Bundestag Stephan Brandner on Facebook.

This scene (refer to figure 3) shows *Extinction Rebellion* activists occupying the office of an economic body in Munich. The group criticises the economic committee's alleged inaction regarding climate change and accuses it to practice lobbying that further inhibits existing efforts.

Figure 4: Facebook post by AfD member of the Bundestag Stephan Brandner⁴



4 The post reads: climate hysteria is not a good advisor – the bill of the CO₂ ideology is being paid by the small man.

By contrast, this posting (see figure 4) by the AfD member of the Bundestag Stephan Brandner⁵ illustrates particularly well how the topic of climate change is being instrumentalised in populist discourses that supposedly side with the ‘small man’.

That these two entirely opposing standpoints exist in Germany exemplifies how easy it is for representatives of each to talk at cross purposes. While the members of *Extinction Rebellion* express fear for the future, claiming not at all enough is being done for the climate, other climate cultures outright reject the prioritisation of climate matters. In this view, the ‘small man’, as it is phrased in this Facebook post, is being asked to forego what is personally and subjectively deemed important for the benefit of the climate, whilst the privileged instigators of these same messages are perceived not to contribute themselves. Here, the critique in form of underscoring the lack of climate initiatives’ relevance to people’s lives functions as an outlet for the experienced irritation with elitist perspectives and the pronounced privileges they reflect. The point here is not to argue for radical revolution but for the inclusion of the majority of the German population that thus far has simply not been reached by the way climate action is propagated today. As shown, privileged people live profoundly different lives in terms of both, cultural meanings and financial means. Their experiences thus show little or no resemblance to the everyday realities and practices of those who have less capital at their disposal. When this gap between attribution and experienced reality is not considered, this leads to some groups already feeling excluded by the way these calls to action are even sent out. This is extremely problematic as feelings of not belonging or being excluded encourage a tendency to look and listen the other way whenever climate change is raised as an issue. Here, a clear link exists between more rightist/populist political orientations and hostility towards environmentalism in general, and climate policy in particular (see chapter 5, denial subculture). This position regularly coincides with nativist and anti-immigrant views, this aforementioned hostility towards all elites and strong support for individual choice and autonomy.

Relatedly, *Fridays for Future* is often viewed as a group of particularly privileged young people. For instance, German comedian Felix Lobrecht calls the movement “something only for grammar school kids” in a recent episode of climate activist Luisa Neubauer’s podcast *1.5 degrees*⁶. He bemoans that the movement only addresses the white middle class, thereby excluding many people and their realities from the very beginning.

5 Facebook post by Stephan Brandner: <https://www.facebook.com/stBrandner/photos/a.1769206119967250/2587552268132627/> (retrieved on 28/12/2023)

6 See *Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland*, 27/01/2022: <https://www.rnd.de/medien/felix-lobrecht-im-podcast-mit-luisa-neubauer-fridays-for-future-ist-so-ein-gymnasiastending-HIBGHC6FXBFPDIYZ7JNBAE3TXA.html> (accessed 16/09/2022).

This is confirmed by insights from this study, as members of non-elite climate cultures also rejected any attribution of responsibility to themselves for the living conditions of future generations. They do so by discrediting climate activism among young(er) people through practices of ridicule and ascriptions of limited life-experience and immaturity. Climate activists' calls to assist those most threatened by climate change (now and in the future, here and elsewhere) are interpreted simply as attempts to further limit people's freedom. Young climate activists and influencers as well as the *Fridays for Future* movement are currently running the risk of being engulfed by such elite discourse coalitions. This might result in only certain capital-rich sections heeding the demands of the movement to further their own interests, spurring even more aversion and resentment in the process. One farmer complaining that the protestors are being courted by politics and even invited to speak to the Pope (see chapter 6) confirms this.

One main reason why it is so hard to forego climate-harming practices is because they serve a host of social purposes. For instance, forms of conspicuous consumption associated with mobility practices are being used as a means to display one's status. In this way, capital-rich groups further remove themselves from the rest of the population's practical realities and necessities by the luxury of being able to afford their 'pure gaze' (cf. Bourdieu, section 2.4). By contrast, 'common people' are more likely to engage in 'functional consumption', as Bourdieu writes. Here, an environmentally sustainable but notoriously erratic *fairphone* will never become a crowd pleaser, whilst in elite circles the social- and climate friendly USP serves as a means for identification. This implies that taste is not naturally given or individually chosen but derives from the social conditions people find themselves in. Largely freed from many financial and social constraints, those at the top can develop their tastes, setting consumption standards for the rest of society.

Besides, at the current conjuncture, climate action is only deemed feasible if measures are perceived as tolerable, not limiting, and realistic to implement. The following debate about organic supermarkets took place in the author's social surroundings:

A: This can never be profitable, when each individual walks up with their own container and they first have to each press the tare button. You end up with endless lines at the check-out. If only five people go to the self-filling unit, this will take forever. It will take forever because these processes are just so fundamentally unworldly that you cannot supply the public through them. These supermarkets take it as their right to have these processes for a small elitist group of people who can then say they are morally superior. [...] besides, so much falls through from these filling stations that it makes the shop seem pretty mucky.

B: You know what is missing? The shopping experience, the colourful product assortment ('bunte Warenwelt'). When I go to my usual supermarket, I have every-

thing under one roof. That's just really convenient. I go there with my grandson and he loves it and it is a real item on our agenda of the day to go shopping [...]. And I think a lot of people feel that way.

This example illustrates that powerful corporate and political decision-makers asking consumers to buy *organic* fails to acknowledge obstacles that depend on one's social position. Here, reasons for not wanting to buy organic products had nothing to do with affordability but with the desire to enjoy the 'shopping experience' offered by conventional stores. Messages that aim to rationally convince people of organic foods' climate benefits fail to reach people who value this shopping experience, with far-reaching consequences for planetary health. It is vital to understand these markedly different reasons why both elite and non-elite groups are not (yet) engaging in climate action. This study made a clear contribution to knowledge on this important issue.

7.3 Differentiating climate cultures: Responsibility, efficacy and knowing

Specific combinations of responsibility, efficacy and knowing are what characterises the different climate cultures. As outlined in chapter 2, climate cultures are defined according to these three aspects and how they potentially translate into different forms of collective climate-related denial.

Members of elite climate cultures (see chapter 5) regularly indicated that it remains unresolved who in society should initiate climate action. At times, responsibility was ping-ponged from the political to the corporate, then back to the individual sphere, then again onto civil society. To an extent, this diffusion of responsibility (cf. section, 2.5, Norgaard, 2011) served to deflect attention away from the requirement to involve the whole of society, and especially one's own social sphere. Yet the need for climate action to become a society-wide effort was also recognised by some of the capital-rich participants: a clear tension emerged between political and individual responsibility, with more collectively oriented politicians acknowledging that all social spheres should contribute. In this view, society needs to come together and act responsibly under the lead of the political sphere. In contrast, more conservative politicians emphasised choice and autonomy and thus individual responsibility.

Within the realm of public climate cultures, opinions regarding climate responsibility also varied markedly, with two broad trends emerging: members of the public were either radically pro-climate action, strongly endorsing individual responsibility. They did think they themselves were influential (belief in consumer power internalised), setting them apart from the collectivist elite (sub)culture. Yet mem-