

“Sustainability” and the Consumer: The Ideological and Discursive Limits of Environmentalism

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“Eating is an agricultural act.”

– *Wendell Berry, “The Pleasures of Eating”*

In 2018 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a report that outlined the potential dangers of “global warming of 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels” (IPCC 2018). This prediction of a potential world more racked by extreme temperatures, irregular precipitation patterns, and degradation of human life is coupled with a call for “transformative systemic change, integrated with sustainable development” (IPCC 2018). This dual necessity to change what we are doing in the present and to develop technologies for future societal arrangements leads the scientists to point to a need for changes to material practices as well as social structures and values. Without the fundamental reordering of society, according to the report, climate change threatens to become more dangerous to human life and less easy to combat. The scientists warn that only approximately eleven years remain at projected levels of green house gas emissions and carbon sink destruction before this 1.5 °C change in average global temperatures occurs.

Singled out as a crucial element of the imminent threat of climate change is agriculture, and food production more generally (IPCC 2018). The portion of human activity devoted to land use alone is responsible for at least 25% of global emissions every year (Smith et al. 2014). This statistic is imperfect, as it includes forestry and other non-agricultural land use industries, and is also a low estimate for emissions from food production in total, as it doesn’t include the much greater effect of food processing, transportation, or post-consumer waste (Sonneson, Davis, and Ziegler 2009). The huge impact of the whole chain of food consumption, from farming to eating, is intimately tied to the social relations that the climate scientists call to reorder. Consumption is a material process, and the social structures that surround and maintain its current form have material effects. Climate experts point to a radical change in consumption patterns as a potential first step in alleviating the highly deleterious impact that current food production has on global ecosystems and atmospheric conditions (Sonneson, Davis, and Ziegler 2009, 20).

While based in the same rational-scientific understanding of climate change as the IPCC report, mainstream discourse around climate change is entrenched in neoliberal power structures. The UN scientists represent powerful voices in a structure of discussion and meaning making which at once centers Western rational-scientific understandings of ecological systems (Simpson 2017) and atomized, or at least individualized, conceptions of social actors (Mirowski 2013). The report was reported in news outlets, and commented on by politicians in many countries of the world (Watts 2018). Still, neoliberal power structures perpetuate the capitalist economic order by promoting individual, consumer-oriented responses to climate anxieties, limiting political or practical responses to the dire message of climate scientists. Though concern for climate change is common among over half of Americans, a country with a belief in climate change lower than the global average (Fagan and Huang 2019), it is dissipated through ideological structures that confine ecological and political discourse to individual (or, at least, non structural) reform.

The material reality of climate change is, thus, a social creation. A huge contributor to this material reality, the social maintenance of food systems must be understood sociologically to understand the impasses between current practices and the twelve-year bench mark set by climate scientists. As elaborated upon later, one of the most direct responses of producers and retailers in the food industry is to establish a market for what is referred to here as “sustainable” food. These foods, demarcated in some way to be more environmentally friendly than other comparable products, are sold alongside other “conventional” products in supermarkets or at grocery stores and farmers’ markets that specialize in them. Whether or not these products are ecologically sustainable, in that they might help mitigate greenhouse gas emissions or other environmental destruction from production process, or correspond to the best practices producers

might engage in are important lines of scholarly pursuit. But, in light of the social mandate given by climate experts and neoliberalism’s hindrance of it, so too is an understanding of how such products are perceived by consumers. Examining the anthropological component of the sustainability of food, widely seen as a primarily technological problem of production and distribution methods, confronts the historical, economic, and political reasons for the existence of the current mode of food production. Institutions tied to food production use neoliberal logic to fit into the meanings consumers have of the world and to hem discourse about food within confines that keep current practices unchallenged in any meaningful way. An account of how consumers have internalized ideological structures and how they deploy discursive frames in their own understanding of food sets the ground work for a political response to such a bodily important yet ecologically destructive industry.

This study provides an understanding of the way ideology and discourse around consumption confine ecological action and awareness through an analysis of interviews about “sustainability”<sup>1</sup> and consumption more generally. My four interviews with the primary grocery buyers in the households of professors and former professors at four year colleges and universities covered their grocery shopping routines as well as more abstract considerations of food’s potential ethical and aesthetic qualities. In what follows I trace the view my interviewees had of themselves, other consumers, and social processes more generally to see the practical limits of the discursive meaning of “sustainability”. My interviews show that clear environmental convictions not only do not match with material behavior, but are warped by the rituals surrounding grocery shopping to not fully align with scientific voices that, in climate discourse more generally, are considered experts. This uneven alignment allows for “sustainable” food to hold multiple meanings, existing as a potential palliative to respondents’ own carbon footprints, yet more associated with its added price and aesthetic qualities in light of the existence of other consumers acting within the industrial food system. “Sustainability,” understood by consumers as a quality of products in and of themselves rather than the production processes that created them, falls flat of eliciting the type of consciousness of production that climate experts call us to attend to. Investigating the way that ecological convictions are dissipated along ideological lines in food consumption shines a light on how ideology diffuses ecological concern more generally, laying out a path of action toward the politicization of consumption past its current, tacit neoliberal political role. In the face of ecological peril, deciphering this meaning making is a practical political question.

In this paper I first outline the aspects of neoliberal social order that constrain subjects to individualistic conceptions of consumption and consumer action. Relying on Marx’s model of capitalism as a social system that operates by obfuscating the exploitation (of labor and the earth) that defines the production it coordinates, I use the work of Althusser and Foucault to show how institutions shape subjects’ behavior and the meaning they make of the world both in their interactions with institutions themselves (as ideology) and in their interactions with each other (through discourse). After outlining the limits on the meaning of “sustainability” in a neoliberal world, I turn to my interviews. I look at the types of meaning that my respondents find important when shopping, finding that what they consider personally important (the influence of children and notions of health) and what they consider structurally important are both confined by

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper I use quotation marks around the word “sustainability” when talking about the claims made by producers and retailers, as ideology and discourse work on the level of representation. When I refer to actual production processes I drop the quotation marks.

individualistic constructs expedient to the class rule legitimated by neoliberal social order. “Sustainability,” held along with these individualistic types of meanings, is thus confined by ideology and discourse, as well as the material position of my respondents, to refer primarily to an aestheticized quality of products and the consumers who purchase them, rather than the political, material understanding necessitated by the current climate crisis. I conclude with an account of where the potential for this latter type of understanding exists in my interviews, and how meaning might be shifted more generally toward a realization of the social nature of our material, ecological existence.

#### IDEOLOGY, DISCOURSE, AND SUBJECT FORMATION

Beyond statistical inquiries of the climate impact of populations and industries writ large, such as the IPCC report cited above, theorists have taken on the ontological and psychological effects of climate change’s enormity. Morton’s popular academic account of climate change assigns it the status of a “hyperobject”, “massively displaced over time and space relative to humans” and material on the same fundamental level as “worms, lemons, and ultraviolet rays” (Morton 2013, 10). Its enormity is not only social, created by processes manufactured and maintained by the ideological processes investigated here, but ontological, effecting systems of existence, temporality, and other seemingly objective processes. Metaphysical speculation aside, this account points to the profundity of social processes’ impact on the material environment. Ideology and discourse, as models of the social limits that create understandings of the material world and, thus, the social processes that create the hyperobject looming over us, must be seen, first and foremost, as material. They provide not only the institutional context within which the material destruction of the planet occurs, but the system of meaning making that licenses its destruction. Theoretical inquiry into the way ideology and discourse shape meaning provides a framework that can account for the materiality of the social processes that perpetuate the industrial production of food.

Neoliberalism is a pervading logic of mainstream environmental discourse, and shapes the institutions that produce food ideology and consumers’ discourse about the ecological potential of their actions. Historical and economic features of the Keynesian economic system(s) that dominated many global economies began to contradict the needs of capital accumulation in the 1970’s, and neoliberal economic reforms served as a political response to this threat to the class power of the industrial and mercantile bourgeoisie (Harvey 2005, 12). Part of this political agenda promoting the marketization of everything was the dismantling of unions and working class solidarity more generally (Harvey 2005, 53). The limit on how climate change and potential responses to it are framed is tied to the dis-unification and individualization of social subjects that has proved expedient to class rule (Mirowski 2013). While many thinkers have seen developments such as the 2008 financial crisis and the rise of neoconservatism as indicative of the end of the neoliberal era (Castree 2010, 7), the effect of neoliberalism as a logic, as a social force that unifies (or unified) political, legal, and other social action within a relatively cohesive conceptual frame, still has profound presence in social orders. Referring to my respondents as neoliberal subjects is not intended to enter into a debate of economic or historical eras, but merely to serve as a shorthand for the complexities of current power relations.

Here the focus will be on the more personal effect of the dominant logic of power: the way neoliberalism shapes subjects by excluding certain types of meanings from being created. The directly political and legal aspects of neoliberalism are, of course, crucial to this process of subject formation, and any response to the climate crisis must be able to answer to current political and legal realities; their relation to the current discussion will be taken up in the

conclusion. Foucault’s quip that “‘in neoliberalism... Homo Economicus is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself’” (quoted in Mirowski 2013, 58) succinctly underscores the types of subject positions that neoliberal ideologies produce. The “arbitrary bundle of ‘investments,’ skill sets, temporary alliances (family, sex, race), and fungible body parts” that comprise neoliberal subjects limits understandings of social action. Rather than the inalienable subject of liberalism, the neoliberal subject is one that must constantly seek, establish, and retain its wants and needs at the risk of giving up its very subjectivity. If everyone is an entrepreneur of himself, then a self that is coherent within neoliberal logic only exists insofar as it is a successful entrepreneur, a rational manager of wants, needs, and duties. Any type of social cohesion proves itself to merely be a temporary alliance of atomized individuals, and social action, insofar as it is possible, is construed only as the potential coordination of these individuals.

Investigating the way neoliberalism produces subjects entails an investigation of the meanings subjects attach to various discursive objects. While much of the meaning people have of the world around them might be seen as politically neutral, what is referred to here as cultural, because neoliberal power structures have such an intimate reach, much of people’s unquestioned understandings of the world are political, or ideological. Marx calls ideology an “ensemble of social relations” that tie individuals to the mode of production (Marx 1978 [1888], 145). Althusser (1971), expanding from the base/superstructure model common in many Marxist accounts, offers a structuralist account of how meaning making occurs within this ensemble. Ideology exists to Althusser as “the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects” (Althusser 1971, 175), a system akin to language that comprises all of the aspects of social life that make non-social individuals into “distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects” of a social order (Althusser 1971, 173).

Hailing or interpellation is the process whereby ideology confirms a subject position. Althusser uses the example of a policeman calling “‘Hey, you there!’” (Althusser 1971, 174) and having someone turn around, but an example closer to this analysis would be the claims on food packaging (‘shade grown coffee’, ‘organic herbs’, ‘local eggs’) or the claims of retailers (the implications of the term ‘Whole Foods’, the aesthetics of the organic section). These instances of interpellation call out to the subject, so to speak, reinscribing them within ideology much as Althusser’s police officer inscribes the person he hails in the ideology of the carceral state. This process is constant (Althusser 1971, 175). It is therefore more accurate to call one “always already” a subject, rather than an individual that is made into a subject of ideology (Althusser 1971, 176). Ideology creates certain forms of subject positions that align with the dominant power structures of a society so as to allow the reproduction of the social order (Althusser 1971, 145).

Practices surrounding food are ideological (they interpellate subjects) rather than neutrally cultural (inscribing apolitical learned behaviors onto subjects). The reproductive aspect of food culture goes farther than merely ensuring that people continue to buy food produced by capitalist firms, for the necessity of food for the continued embodied survival of workers and the relative difficulty of producing food outside of a capitalist mode of production (both, to a certain extent, historically created) would ensure this material form of reproduction (Althusser 1971, 131). Understandings of food such as ‘Chinese,’ ‘healthy,’ ‘manly,’ or, to the point, “sustainable”, might have politically neutral aspects, but insofar as any understandings perpetuate the current mode of food production and class rule they must be seen as ideological rather than merely cultural. Buying food and eating it are both instances of interpellation, whereby the ideological associations surrounding food culture are re-constructed and reinforced

as subjects come to define themselves via a politically stilted interpretive frame inscribed and certified by institutions (Althusser 1971, 143).

Interpellation, and thus the whole process by which food comes to fall within the influence of dominant power relations, occurs through interaction with institutions that comprise Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) (Althusser 1971, 145). These interrelated institutions interpellate via material practices (Althusser 1971, 166). In a discussion of “sustainability”, examining grocery shopping as one such material practice offers an opportunity to see how a taken for granted mode of securing a biophysical need interpellates my respondents as neoliberal subjects. This quotidian interaction with food retail, marketing, and production “represents in its necessarily imaginary distortion not the existing relations of production (and the other relations that derive from them), but above all the (imaginary) relationship of individuals to the relations of production and the relations that derive from them” (Althusser 1971, 165). Despite the allusions to actual practices of food production that adorn packages and informational texts within the store, since my respondents are always already neoliberal subjects, “sustainable” food does not offer a representation of capitalistic food production (i.e. a glimpse at the base) but rather simply a representation of food products *per se* (a superstructural form of meaning). My respondents’ inferences from particular food labels might refer to the base, but this meaning is trapped within the relations of production. “Sustainability’s” own materiality, its own potential to shape material practices, is inscribed by the meaning subjects already have of food and the grocery store.

Ideology, the limiting of meaning in interaction with institutions, leads to the limiting of meaning in discourse, subjects’ interaction with each other. Foucault, inspired by Althusser, sees discourse as “at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers... to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality” (Foucault 1982, 216). This selection, organization, and redistribution is achieved by excluding different subjects and manners of speaking or writing from discourse. The most crucial type of exclusion that Foucault lays out for the current discussion is the “will to truth,” a historical process of dividing the true and untrue that, over time, influenced by the institutions that Althusser helps to understand and other ritual forms of power, has influenced “the history of material, technical and instrumental investment in knowledge” (Foucault 1982, 219). Because the limits on what is considered true or false, or even within the realm of meriting such a consideration, have their own development over time, exclusion has a positive function. Rather than simply limiting what could be, it has shaped material and intellectual “investment”, and thus formed what is. Interaction with institutions with vested interest in the status quo for their own survival confers limited meanings that perpetuate the dominant power relation, but subjects acting apart from these institutions perpetuate the mode of production in their own right. One is always already a subject; what can make sense to subjects and be signified by them, discourse, is thus always already shaped by power relations.

The generative effect of the limitation of ideology through discourse, the continual reproduction of the mode of production through systems of meaning making that exclude action that might jeopardize the status quo, reproduces the material relations that the neoliberal order arose to ensure. My respondents, interpellated by “sustainability” in their interactions with “sustainable” foods and brought into discourse about them through our interview, offer a glimpse at the complicated set of meanings that keep this power structure afloat. Since such interactions can only occur within the context of neoliberal power, a logic that lends capitalist domination coherence, the interpellation of “sustainability” also entails, at the very least, an interpellation as

consumer. While true about any ideological structure or set of discursive limits within the domain of neoliberal hegemony, since the interpellation and discourse of “sustainability” refer directly to the way food is produced, it is important to incorporate a model of the mode of food production to understand how such ideology and discourse are internalized and perpetuated. The ideology and discourse of “sustainability” must be situated in the larger ideological structures central to the industrial capitalist order. Situating these objects of analysis in the larger context of capitalist production, and, hence, domination, provides a finer understanding of what limits the meanings “sustainability” has for my respondents and what barriers lie in the way of the social reorganization called for by climate experts. My interviews deal with the interpellation of “sustainable” food and the possibilities this interpellation allows for discourse; an understanding of the system that brings these interpellating objects into existence clarifies the discursive boundaries of “sustainability”.

The social relation of production of primary importance to the current analysis of consumption is the commodity form. The products lining the shelves of every supermarket are commodities. Though my respondents buy food to eat it, that is in so far as they are “articles of utility” or “use-values” (Marx 1978 [1867], 321), and see the products in the grocery store as simply as food, with all of its cultural and ideological trappings, my respondents make their selections from the end result of a long line of producers and merchants, stretching from the checkout line at the store back to the seeds and other “inputs” farmers used to make the product initially. All of the labor that went into every step of making each food item is represented in the different prices offered, as the different business interests along the way (farmers, silo owners, factory owners, shippers, the supermarket itself, etc.) all engage in their business dealings to turn a profit (Marx 1978 [1847], 209). The simple fact that consumers must pay at least enough to account for the cost of producing each commodity means that price represents all of the aspects of production that went into making them. To consumers, both for Marx and in my interviews, this price is seen as a given, almost natural aspect of a product for sale. This “fetishism of commodities” (Marx 1978 [1867], 321), wherein the various relations among different workers and owners of the means of production are presented “as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labor” (Marx 1978 [1867], 320) in the form of a price or other notion of exchange value, not only masks the particular types of labor that went into a commodity, but also the fact that labor was involved in making it at all.

That exchange value “converts every product into a social hieroglyphic” (Marx 1978 [1867], 322) hides the fact that in comparing prices consumers are quantitatively comparing the qualitatively different labor processes necessary to create each product. Seeing the commodity as “congealed labour-time” (Marx 1978 [1867], 307), that is as the sum of all the labor put into it, is the first step in deciphering the hieroglyphic (Marx 1978 [1867], 322). The comparison is made possible in Marx’s model by reducing all of this qualitatively different, yet quantitatively measured, congealed labor to socially necessary labor time (Marx 1978 [1867], 306; Marx 1978 [1867], 315). This minimum, defined by abstraction from all the different comparable labor processes in a society (Marx 1978 [1867], 306), is at the core of the production process under capitalism. As the owners of the means of production hire workers to create commodities they are constantly trying to get the most possible value out of the least possible capital invested in production. Since the capitalist is only able to purchase raw materials and machines on the market, as commodities themselves, for the capitalist to profit they must be able to extract more value from their workers than they pay them in wages (Marx 1978 [1867], 336). Thus, socially



necessary labor time is the average rate at which labor is exploited (paid less than the value it produces) (Marx 1978 [1867], 354).

The fetishism of commodities shows that even the simplest commodity exchange involves “the (imaginary) relationship of individuals to the relations of production” (Althusser 1971, 165). Price, insofar as it preserves the commodity form, functions as an interpellation, making the subject position of consumer possible and coherent. The exploitation of labor, and thus the entire functioning of the capitalist mode of production, relies on the primacy of this ideological relation. That capitalist production relies on “material relations between persons and social relations between things” (Marx 1978 [1867], 321), on a domination of labor by the bourgeoisie that appears as a simple, objective relation between its alienated products, provides the context within which “sustainability” operates. Any interpellation by “sustainable” food or marketing thereof, and thus any discourse that arises from the formation of such a subject position, presupposes an interpellation of the subject as consumer. Such context is not “merely ideological” in the sense of “the Feuerbachian idea that men make themselves an alienated (= imaginary) representation *because* these conditions of existence are themselves alienating” (Althusser 1971, 164 emphasis added). Rather, it constitutes the practical attitudes toward the world that give rise to practices and, hence, the reproduction of the appearance of alienation and capitalist consumption (Althusser 1971, 165-168). “Sustainability,” even though it is a response to widespread concern within climate discourse, is thus discursively limited by capital accumulation to reproduce industrial food production not only coincidentally – as an unfortunate result, try as its producers might, of its placement as a better or less destructive alternative within the industrial food system – but necessarily: it can exist only insofar as its subjects are also always already consumers, active participants, and hence reproducers, of the capitalist system.

The ideological context of the subject position of consumer within which “sustainable” food gains meaning via its interpellation has material consequences because the exploitation of workers in food production requires and accelerates extraction from the environment. Marx frames labor at its most basic conceptual level as “a process in which both man and Nature participate” (Marx 1978 [1867], 344). Marx counts “the soil (and this, economically speaking, includes water)” as “the universal subject of human labour” (Marx 1978 [1867], 345). The proto-social status of natural resources leaves them without exchange value in their “virgin state”. Though one can make money from renting natural land or water (essentially claiming legal right to part of the real or potential value generated there, in whatever capacity), it is purely via its consumption as a “material factor” (Marx 1978 [1867], 349) that it is able to generate value for the capitalist class. Further, it is a necessary pre-condition for all commodity production, as the raw material of any industry is either the direct result of extractive labor or labor done upon something extracted from the earth (Marx 1978 [1867], 345). This leaves industries at the first stage of this chain, those that extract their objects of labor “from immediate connexion with their natural environment” (Marx 1978 [1867], 345), as both the lowest common denominator of capitalist production and with the unique ability to utilize a valueless resource to their advantage. Thus, as capitalists compete with each other they extract from the environment with a similar logic to that of labor exploitation, as both natural resources and labor-power, though for different reasons, have no value prior to the labor process (Marx 1978 [1867], 336).

That the interpellation of “sustainability” involves recourse to this inherently extractive nature of food production might seem a potential point of discursive challenge to the industrial food system, but, instead, this interpellation re-abstracts labor as a mere accessory of the commodity in question. As “sustainability” requires the subject position of the consumer, the

material sustainability of the labor congealed in each product only has meaning to consumers through a symbolic logic (Baudrillard 1994). It is possible that organic, local, or otherwise “sustainable” food is less environmentally deleterious than its conventional counterparts, but the meaning it can have for subjects is limited by their position as consumers<sup>2</sup>. “Sustainable” food is only sustainable insofar as it is profitable, and because of this it has recourse to sustainability only as a marketing tactic, as a qualitative differentiation among commodities. Again, this is not a coincidence of its position as an alternative form of commodity to those made by more environmentally destructive processes, but constitutive of “sustainable” food’s existence as a commodity in and of itself. Such allusion to production works first and foremost as interpellation and only secondarily as discourse; any information gleaned from packaging only serves to reinforce its existence as a commodity and, thus, cannot disrupt the abstraction of labor inherent in the commodity form. Like price, production processes become “an objective character stamped upon the product of that labor” (Marx 1978 [1867], 320). This is what is meant here by symbolic logic. Because of the ideology of consumption, the material aspect of the commodity is only legible once it is abstracted from the actual conditions of production as a quality of the commodity qua commodity. It is not primarily grounded in the use value (though, perhaps it can be if “sustainable” products are perceived to taste or nourish better) but rather in its distinction from other commodities. To the extent that my respondents hold the subject position of consumer, “sustainability,” no matter how seriously taken up by an individual, is confined to symbolic differentiation.

Of course, as ideology and discourse are material so too is the symbolic logic they impose on “sustainability”. It is only that this materiality is inherently curtailed. The limits on the kind of actions and behaviors licensed by neoliberal consumer ideology and its discourse around food are the object of my interview analysis. Taking Althusser’s insights about the way institutions produce subject positions and Foucault’s extension of such a structuralist model into the way subjects frame the world in and of themselves, informed by a Marxist understanding of the commodity form, allows for an analysis of discourse about grocery shopping and “sustainability” that can unearth the limits of meaning, and hence action, that “sustainability” imposes. Analyzing what my respondents declared as important about food allows an entry to the types of meanings “sustainability” is interrelated (and, at times, conflated) with, while highlighting instances where “sustainability” emerges as a structural concern traces the material limits of its symbolic logic. The first part of this analysis clarifies what is entailed in the interpellation of subjects as consumers, and the second part clarifies what is entailed by the symbolic logic of “sustainability” for those holding that subject position.

#### STUDY DESIGN

Studying the interpellation of subjects by “sustainable” marketing and the subsequent limits on discourse that such subjectivity elicits requires a model for understanding subject positions and a historical understanding of “sustainable” food that can fit into such a model. Once respondents are chosen using such a historically informed model of subject formation, understanding ideology and discourse requires a method that allows for the elicitation of

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<sup>2</sup> The material practices of all types of farming are, themselves, influenced by ideologies and discourses pertaining to scientific and economic understandings of agriculture. The reader interested in sustainability as a material practice of production is directed to the first chapter of Sandler (2015) for an overview of food systems, Fromartz (2006) for a discussion of the organic food industry, and McWilliams (2010) for a scientific discussion of localism.

understandings of “sustainability” that are both typical of respondents, that is, one that elicits similar meanings to those they might express in unexamined discourse, and analytically guided, still focused on food and “sustainability” as they are conceptualized here. These three analytical necessities – an understanding of *who* to study, *what* to examine in such a study, and *how* to undertake such a study – lead me to a methodology informed by Bourdieu (1984 [1979])’s model of subject formation. His model is taken up in Biltekoff (2013)’s historical argument about the way American food movements have solidified certain health-based and classed understandings of “sustainable” food. Such a general model and historically specific account allows respondents to be selected for their position in ideological structures. This selection is coupled with a method of semi-structured interviews, which allowed access to my respondents’ points of view toward grocery shopping and “sustainability” without confining their viewpoints to an entirely structured research instrument (Weiss 1995). The data gathered from such a method allow for an analysis of food and “sustainability” within the larger webs of meaning that my respondents hold them in based on their subject positions.

Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural capital and the *habitus* offer a model of the way subjects internalize ideology and discourse. This model, incredibly theoretically rich and sociologically popular in its own right, is used here as a bridge between the abstract notion of the subject offered by the above reading of Althusser and Foucault and actual, living subjects whose discourse can be brought into analysis. Cultural capital, an understanding of learned dispositions and tastes for cultural products as giving certain ways of understanding and acting in the world social value over others (Bourdieu 1986), provides a good schema for choosing what might be seen as an exemplary group for the type of interpellations by, and subsequent meanings of, “sustainable” food that this study examines. As college professors or those living in the households of professors, my respondents occupy a social position marked by a high amount of cultural capital and a relatively stable amount of economic capital compared to other members of the “dominated fraction of the dominant class” (Bourdieu 1984 [1979], 214), such as artists, primary and secondary school teachers, and others whose subject position is defined by a high amount cultural capital but relatively low amounts of economic capital (as opposed to the *dominant* fraction of the dominant class, such as business people and other capitalists, whose position is defined by high amounts of economic capital). For Bourdieu the subject position comprises an internalized structure that he refers to as the *habitus*. The *habitus* is both “structured,” shaped by the material, cultural, and ideological realities subjects are exposed to, and “structuring,” shaping the meanings, actions, and discourse that subjects engage in (Bourdieu 1984 [1979], 170). Thus, via the *habitus*, it is possible to investigate ideology as an internalized set of dispositions and discourse as an active framing of the world. Cultural and economic capital provide a comparative understanding of different kinds of *habitus*.

Biltekoff (2013)’s account of the history of food ideology in the United States shows that discourse around food has worked to associate “sustainable” food with idealized, middle class subjects<sup>3</sup>. She tracks food reform movements through texts such as books, cookbooks, and news reports, looking at prominent discourses about food that have arisen to frame “good” or “proper” eating (Biltekoff 2013, 1-12). Starting with the rise of domestic science and the scientific appraisal of food’s caloric and vitamin content in the late nineteenth century, Biltekoff shows

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<sup>3</sup> The concept of a “middle class” subject is not congruent with the Marxist framework deployed here. It is used as a short-hand for an idealized subject position, the class composition of which is, materially speaking, much more complicated.

that guidelines of proper eating have always been drawn along moral lines to distinguish the American middle class. Extending her analysis to the two dominant contemporary food reform movements, the “Alternative Food Movement” that has arisen in response to environmental worry and “the war against obesity” (Biltekoff 2013, 110), shows this class defining role of “proper eating” now plays out along lines of aesthetic and qualitative enjoyment. Biltekoff shows how the Alternative Food Movement has helped to associate “sustainable” food with upper and middle class consumers by commanding subjects to engage in a particular aesthetic enjoyment of food (Biltekoff 2013, 107). Though its authors eschew the “nutritionism” (Scrinis 2008) of nineteenth century scientific reformers’ class demarcating efforts, they “provided rules that were no less normalizing than those prescribed by nutrition” by making the moral duty to eat environmentally healthy food into a matter of aesthetic enjoyment (Biltekoff 2013, 107).

This creation of an idealized subject through discourse, someone who not only eats but enjoys food the right way, makes any interpellation by “sustainability” at once associated with white, middle class *habitus*. Simultaneous to this idealization of a subject position, the alternative food movement, in allying itself with the history of grassroots movements among farmers, those going “back to the earth”, and intellectuals of the urban countercultural milieu of the 1970’s (Fromartz 2006, 21), positions itself as the inheritor of the practical and political history of opposition to industrial food production. Thus, as the hailing of “sustainable” food is internalized differently based on the wide variety of social positions its potential subjects occupy, it also holds the discursive position of the primary challenge to industrial food production available to all consumers. Such a framing of “sustainable” food, as both universally political and subject specific, fits firmly into neoliberal logic. (Biltekoff 2013, 92). The entrepreneur of the self is responsible for eating properly; eating properly involves responding to environmental concern through “sustainable” food; this response has been discursively tied to an idealized, white middle class subject position. Biltekoff’s work shows how this stilted neoliberal ideology has developed within popular expert food discourse, this study is designed to see how such ideology shapes the viewpoints of type of neoliberal subjects such discourse holds, intentionally or not, as the ideal sustainable consumer.

Bourdieu (1984)’s model of the way that taste comes to define consumers to both themselves and others through the *habitus* points toward a group holding the social position that my respondents do as the very sort that institutions marketing “sustainability” hope to interpellate. Not only do college professors occupy a position in the dominated fraction of the dominant class, their interactions with younger people also lend them proximity to a group that is much more concerned about the climate than other adults in a similarly economically, or at least occupationally, stable position (Nielsen 2017). They hold this general social position within the geographic area of Montgomery county, a suburban county of Philadelphia wherein an estimated 77% of the population believes in climate change, approximately 70% are worried about its effects on the earth, and approximately 60% of people believe it is a human caused phenomenon (Marlon, Howe, Mildenerger, Leiserowitz, and Wang 2018). My respondents fit neatly into the group most likely to be “sustainable” consumers based on Bourdieu’s model of subject positions and Biltekoff’s history of food ideology and discourse.

Still, within their shared social and geographic position there is considerable diversity among my interviewees, as their *habitus* is comprised of an array of positions in social

hierarchies and groups. My four respondents – Jill, Karen, Tim, and John<sup>4</sup> – are all married white, gender conforming members of the dominated portion of the dominant class, but differ among themselves with respect to their age, family composition, and individual history. Tim and Karen both have three children under the age of five years old, while Jill has two college-aged sons who live in her home during school breaks and one ten-year-old daughter. John, the oldest member of my sample, has several adult children that have not been part of his household for several years. Beyond children, Jill and Karen work as current professors, one at a liberal arts college and the other at a four year Catholic university. John is a professor emeritus from a liberal arts college, and Tim is a freelance writer and the spouse of a professor at a liberal arts college. My respondents’ ages range from their late 30’s to their 70’s. In our discussions of food, aspects of my respondents’ (and their spouses’) faiths, upbringings, and ethnic identities arose, and are discussed in the findings section as they are pertinent to the current discussion.

Respondents were chosen by personal connection, either through a mutual connection or, in John’s case, through prior acquaintance. This convenience sampling method was followed toward investigating certain subject positions. Since climate concern is related so strongly with youth, both in their own worldviews (Nielsen 2017) and in media discourses about the subject (Schreur, Peltier, and Schuetze 2019), and food knowledge and habits have been shown to be established early in life (Lytle 1994) respondents with children were sought out as a particularly important set of viewpoints to consider. As a qualitative study of the type of understandings possible within the subject positions created by dominant ideologies and discourses around food and the environment, the small sample size can be seen as a limitation but not a crucial one. While analysis can always benefit from more research, there can be no such thing as a “representative” set of *habitus* or “saturation” in regard to viewpoints around food (Small 2009). Rather, this small group of interviews should be taken at face value – a guiding set of understandings and subject positions to draw out a theory that might be applied to all eaters about the limits “sustainable” marketing imposes on all of us.

Semi-structured interviews provided a way to gather data about my respondents’ grocery shopping habits and understandings of “sustainability”. They give access to the elements of social life necessary for this study, “what people perceived and how they interpreted their perceptions” (Weiss 1995, 1), while allowing me as a researcher and my respondents to extrapolate, clarify, and expound upon interesting or important subjects of conversation. This ability to move away from a script was incredibly important in discussing “sustainability.” Understanding the discursive limits of a construct such as “sustainability” benefits greatly from allowing respondents to offer whatever aspects of social action they see as falling under its umbrella. Further, as “sustainability” has been associated with middle class subject positions along moral and aesthetic lines and “sustainable” consumption is politicized within neoliberal logic, it has become a socially desirable label and set of practices for the very group whose structurings of the world I am trying to understand. Thus, semi-structured interviews allowed a way of providing space for respondents’ own framing of food and the environment while keeping them from idealizing their actions and considerations in an unexamined, or at least elaborated upon, way.

My questions followed two prominent lines of inquiry: grocery shopping generally and “sustainability”. Beginning by asking questions such as “What is a typical shopping trip for

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<sup>4</sup> These are pseudonyms, and at times information about my interviewees is withheld or kept vague to maintain their privacy.

you?” or “Do your children influence your grocery buying?” elicited answers about food consumption as a practical and more or less personally meaningful activity. Theoretically motivated by the Althusserian reading of the fetishism of commodities outlined above, understanding my respondents as food consumers more generally provided the context to understand what understandings surround their interpellation by “sustainable” food. It also allowed entry into subsequent discussion of “sustainability” without immediately clouding the water, so to speak, by eliciting its morally classed or neoliberal political aspects. Neutral questions such as “What do you usually look for when deciding between comparable products?” and “Do you ever buy organic food?” allowed for a transition into more pointed questions such as “What comes to mind when you see the words ‘sustainable’ on packaging?” through a frame of individual consumer choice. I thus recreated a neoliberal understanding of the consumer subject position within my questioning to examine one aspect of its formation. Framing my inquiry this way to my respondents gave rise to the conversations investigated below within an analytically useful, yet not determined, set of discursive limits.

#### FINDINGS

My interviewees respond to the massive scale of environmental and climate issues within limits set by their differential internalization of the ideology of “sustainability”. Because the common aspects of their *habitus* align with the middle class, white subject position venerated by established discourses around “sustainability,” they are interpellated, to varying degrees, as “sustainable” consumers even as they engage in widely different shopping practices. The symbolic logic imposed by consumer ideology, the fact that “sustainability” can only be seen as a quality of a product rather than the labor that went into it, sets limits on the understandings possible in environmental discourse about food. The symbolic nature of the understandings of “sustainability” permitted within the subject position of the consumer allows for a break between a relatively unified notion of “sustainability” and a disparate set of material practices that result from the relative internalization of such a unified notion. My respondents were interpellated as consumers and then, based on their different *habitus*, interpellated by “sustainable” food. In discussing both grocery shopping and “sustainability” our interviews bring this aspect of *habitus* into discourse. Analyzing this discourse shows the way environmentalism interrelates with other, individualized meanings (children’s wants and needs and nutrition) bound up with the subject position of the consumer. The structural responses my interviewees did formulate (‘locavorism’, concerns about access, and abstention from red meat consumption) show the discursive limits imposed by their resulting subject position on the possible meanings of “sustainability” and environmental action more generally. Examining my respondents’ conception of themselves as consumers (the structured part of their *habitus*) and their understanding of structural realities (the structuring part of their *habitus*) shows the way “sustainability” interrelates with other aspects of their subject positions and the subsequent discursive limits that arise from this interrelation. Consumption is a material action and these ideological and discursive structures work through the commodity form to uphold and reproduce the systems of production that uphold class rule and threaten the environment.

The primacy of price in my respondents’ grocery store considerations shows the primacy of the interpellation of the consumer in the ideological and discursive creation of “sustainability”. “Sustainability,” and what it means to be “sustainable,” rest on the limits to shopping behaviors and understandings set by this neoliberal subject position. All of my respondents attested to price being the most important factor in their shopping decisions. In Karen’s case, price is so important to her husband that they buy everything except for milk and

eggs from a produce wholesaler and order shipments along with a local grocery store to get flour, oat meal, and other staple grains. The abstraction of labor from commodities makes them available to consumers as pure use values at the same time as, in presenting them with a price, it interpellates them as consumers. Thus, qualities related to use value are also entailed in the interpellation of the consumer. Karen and John, two respondents who continually brought up the importance of price in their decision making process, related economic decisions with the quality and quantity of product types available. These economic understandings represent an aspect of the consumer subject position. All of my respondents said they made their decision to buy “sustainable” food primarily based on price. The possible alignment of the hailing of “sustainable” food with one’s material actions, and thus the internalization of the “sustainable” subject position within one’s *habitus*, is completely inscribed within one’s position as a consumer.

Neoliberal consumerist understandings undergird the rigid routines my respondents had at the grocery store. Jill went so far as to say that she and her daughter once completed a shopping trip without saying a word to each other, and the rest of my interviewees also commented on the majority of their purchasing being the rebuying of the same ingredients. Tim and Karen both said they did not look at any labelling on their food for this reason, as, in Karen’s reference to milk buying, “it’s just what we always get”. Such accounts reveal grocery shopping to be a routine, unquestioned process relying on continuity of the store’s physical layout and product offerings. Such hyper-specific reliance is framed as a personal, ritual encounter with the store as a taken for granted institutions. Tim and Jill both remarked that they have set paths through their grocery stores of choice, both noting that one might be able to “trace their steps” on any given shopping trip. John and Karen, too, stuck to lists, though didn’t frame their shopping habits spatially. The rigidity of this routine might be seen as a neoliberal ritual, reconfirming and constructing my respondents’ type of consumer position through material action. Such ritual is ideological, involving interpellation by the store and its products, but not discursive, unremarked upon and uninterrogated as an incredibly specific, historically created set of practices.

Non-routine purchases were made frequently by all of my respondents, but not seen as comprising grocery shopping in the same way as unquestioned routine purchases. Even when, as in Jill’s case, this entailed buying items seen as remarkable for a grocery store, like her purchases of a churro maker or a pool float, or, as in John’s case, it occurred nearly every time he bought groceries. All of my respondents also ventured out of their usual stores to buy specialty items (such as nuts and coffee), brands particular to a store (such as Trader Joe’s), or for emergency or supplemental purposes. Even if these shopping trips occurred relatively frequently, as often as once a week for Karen and Jill, they, like non-routine purchases within the store itself, were seen as separate from the core of “grocery shopping”. These purchases comprise part of the ritual of grocery shopping, but unlike routine purchases, they are both ideological and discursive, interpellating them as consumers and commented on and interrogated as particular practices. Non-routine purchases and store visits, thus, create the appearance of routine and vice versa simply by their differentiability.

This perhaps abstract point, that grocery shopping can be defined as a mostly routine, unexamined process only because some parts of it are not routine and are examined, holds incredible importance for the current discussion. It creates the borders of understanding within the neoliberal subject position that make consumption more than a practical securing of resources. The entrepreneur of the self only arises within a rigid market construction expedient to class rule. Prices serve as an initial hailing into this rigid construction, but a variety of

considerations tied to other aspects of their social position shape decisions within it. My respondents’ routines represent a framing of action within that rigid structure that marks some choices while confining others to the realm of the unexamined, of the “just what we always get”. This divide recreates the rigidity of the market in my respondents’ worldview, as any marked action serves to leave intact aspects of consumption that are not marked but still ideologically constructed. What one buys can either reflect an individual decision or a general pattern of decisions; either way it reflects one’s subject position and reifies the market as the field within which action might occur. “Sustainability,” and any other symbolic distinction arising within that construct, can thus only be seen as a departure from or aspect of the routine. Talking about consumption outright as we did in our interviews brings the understandings that guide individual decisions and undergird ideological structures into discourse. Examining what is important to my respondents as consumers, then, shows consumption as a meaning making process, within which “sustainability” gains coherence alongside familial and health concerns.

As all of my respondents are married, their subject position as consumers is tied to that of their spouse and their household more generally. Families are tied together as financial entities through legal and ideological frameworks; price, an economic “stamp” upon use values, interpellates a complex subject. From this shared subject position, interpersonal differences lead to decisions. Unprompted, and often incorporated into stories of environmental changes, were stories about spouses’ and children’s wants, desires, and concerns. Spouse’s influence often broke up patterns, either by buying groceries themselves or influencing occasional trips to specialty stores or purchases. John, for instance, went out of his way to get his wife’s favorite nuts from a local bulk buying store, Jill’s husband often went to Aldi, or, in the most extreme case, Karen’s husband handled all negotiations to buy bulk staples such as flour and oatmeal; the changes inspired by spouses did not register as drastic, long term, or, in many cases, even external to my respondents’ own considerations of the grocery store. Though they might eat or prepare food separately once it’s purchased, as Jill, for example, reported cooking dinner for herself when her husband was busy, families consume, in the economic sense, as a single unit. As spouses were seen as equal decision makers for all of my respondents, their wants and needs were very often incorporated into my respondents understanding as undifferentiated from their own. John and his wife, for instance, both contributed to their regular shopping list, and decisions were made in the store with an understanding of both of their wants. Such shared decision making was common across all of my respondents.

My respondents saw their consumption decisions in relation to their children’s wants and needs and a common notion of health. These legible understandings of food, emerging within their complex consumer subject position, interrelate with “sustainability” in their accounts of buying and eating. Their subject positions as parents and discourses around proper eating shape the meanings available to the structuring part of their *habitus*. This relatively food specific ideological structure (health) and broadly defined social role (parenthood) defined grocery shopping within their consumer subject positions. Analysis shows these understandings to establish routines and guide individual decisions, constantly reproducing the market structure within their common sense understandings and, therefore, class rule through material relations. “Sustainability” as an ideology, as a discursive category that institutions certify and lend coherence through continual interpellation of subjects, emerges in this context. As these institutions must make a profit to continue to exist, they deploy this category along with the categories of health and parental responsibility. This multiple interpellation, calling out to many aspects of my respondents’ social position in a myriad of combinations, renders “sustainability”



a coherent yet not totally differentiated ideological structure. It was identifiable to my respondents, but it was also connected to, and even conflated with, types of meaning pertaining to health and parenting.

Health was the most overarching ideological construct that emerged within this multifaceted hailing. Its food-specific aspect, nutrition, is an ideological construction that Biltekoff cites as a recurring component of American food reform movements and mainstream food discourse and is, thus, an expected understanding for my respondents to prioritize, especially given their middle class *habitus*. My respondents were interpellated as health-conscious consumers in the grocery store by looking at the nutrition facts on processed foods and accounting for unprocessed foods through nutritionist frameworks. Jill and John, the two respondents who actively look at the nutrition facts on their food, reflected health-conscious motives related to calorie and sugar intake for doing so. Even respondents who didn't usually look at nutrition facts counted them as having played important roles in their consumption decisions. Tim, for instance, refrains from buying Honey Nut Cheerios, or their comparable Trader Joe's brand cereal, because reading the nutrition facts made him realize their sugar content was high enough for him to consider them “absolute garbage”. Even reasons for not looking at nutrition facts were framed nutritionally, such as Karen's claim that “I know the calories in milk and eggs, and it's always the same”. This overarching nutritionism shows its ideological structure to interpellate subjects even outside of the grocery store, such as Tim's account of articles on the internet showing him “the impact of food on health”.

Co-instantiated along with nutritionism was my respondents role as parents. This social role is a huge component of my interviewee's identities, a recognized yet taken for granted aspect of their *habitus*. Tim and Karen especially, who each have three very young children, reported spending the vast majority of their time taking care of them, and Jill reflected a similar, yet more hands off, priority toward her older children's needs. Even John recounted several important moments of his life as a younger father and the relationships he still maintains with his children. This over-arching subject position is reproduced by family structure itself (counted among Althusser's list of ISAs (1971, 143)), and so enters the current discussion through the interpellation of the complex neoliberal consumer. As nutritionism is a guiding ideological framing of food consumption, nutritionist understandings of children's needs were thus a crucial aspect of purchasing decisions. Karen, for instance, often made separate trips to buy milk and eggs for her children because of their nutritional benefit. This concern with the components of children's food was reflected in perhaps the most extreme sense by Tim's reverting to meat eating from his previous vegetarianism for the benefit of his children, “since, you know, they're growing and they probably want more protein and [meat is] easier to cook”.

Nutritionist understandings of children's needs often contrasted with what my respondents' children wanted, making my respondents make aesthetic or even, as in the case of Tim's resumed carnism, ethical compromises with them. Children, to use Tim's words, “changed everything” in regard to consumption habits, demonstrating, in contrast with my respondents' accounts of their spouses, a conception of children as subjects in their own right. While respected in its own right, this subject position was defined as in formation, lending my respondents, as parents, the role of guides and authorities in regard to consumption. Jill, Karen, and Tim all talked about the need to make compromises with children regarding snack foods. Jill in particular described negotiations with her daughter, described as a picky ten-year-old, about lunch box items:

Jill: She’s always the wild card... You know ‘I need this for my lunch’ like a Cheeto thing or something and then we have to have a conversation about ‘no you don’t need that for your lunch’ or you know ‘you can have one sort of you know really terrible thing in this store. But you have to cede any decision making for the rest of the other items... no you don’t need to have a bag of this like orange processed thing that you’re gonna’ you know maybe eat about a half of and then decide it’s gross’

Despite seeing some of her daughter’s desires as “really terrible” foods, and framing their negotiations about them as the granting of a singular exception from parental authority, Jill’s daughter influences her to buy things that go against Jill’s own considerations of health, value, “sustainability”, and even her daughters’ own wants. My other respondents detailed similar negotiations, though varied in their strategies for responding to children’s contrary desires. Such disagreements can be seen as a recognition of children as agents in their own right while still acting within the complex neoliberal consumer subject position enforced by their financial dependency on parents. Such dual recognition was expressed positively also, as all of my respondents expressed a responsibility to provide their children with adequate food and to teach them proper dietary habits. Thus, normative assumptions about children’s needs at different ages and recognition of their own subjectivity brought change to my respondents’ shopping patterns through a relationship of discipline and care toward them.

The ideological constructions of the neoliberal consumer, health, and parenthood intersected with meanings of “sustainability” for my respondents. All of my respondents brought up nutrition, health, or food safety issues within questions having solely to do with environmental concern. John went so far as to say “I don’t see organically grown things as any more beneficial to the environment than non organically grown things... I see it as primarily a health matter rather than an environmental matter.” This, the most outright rejection of organic food as “an environmental matter,” resonates with how all of my respondents saw this category of “sustainable” food. Tim saw organic labelling as often “a marketing tool,” but also a concern of health and environmental sustainability. Jill had a similarly triangulated view of organic food, somewhere between a gimmick, a health matter, and an environmentally friendly option. “Sustainability” thus emerges as part of nutritionist health concerns. This conflation is most succinctly visible in Tim’s account:

Tim: Will my body be a more healthy body if I eat more organic food? Is the science there like really strong? Eh. Or is it a marketing thing? Like why does organic stuff cost 20% more than the standard? And if that’s the case, then what is creating the standard and what applications are using- what chemicals are [they] using to make that standard healthy enough for all of us to eat a shit ton of it so we can all get fat.

Health, here seen as a contested matter of safety from pesticide and herbicide applications and a nutritionist understanding of weight gain, inscribes “sustainability” and vice versa within the neoliberal consumer subject position. Tim portrays himself as responsible for an understanding of scientific discourses about organic food, appraisal of producers’ claims about the food they make, and the balancing of economic concerns against those pertaining to health and the environment. Such a framing creates a notion of “sustainability” that is, at once, tied up with other ideological structures.

Similarly, my respondents’ relationships with their younger children elicited “sustainability” as part of the guiding role concomitant with good parenting. They were foci of environmental concern in their capacity as subjects whose understanding of the world must be actively guided by my respondents. Tim mentioned several times wanting to instill environmental lessons in his young children through preparing healthy and “sustainable” food and conversation. Jill reflected similar practices when talking about her older sons at a younger age and her ten-year-old daughter currently, stressing particularly having conversations with her daughter “all of the time”. Karen’s environmental concern for her children was not so explicit, eschewing discourse and concerned primarily with her current behaviors with them, such as buying them snacks in small packages (a contrast to her usual bulk shopping method) and taking them everywhere by foot using a stroller rather than driving. Through example, exposure, and active dialogue my respondents hoped to shape their younger children’s taste to be that of a healthful and “sustainable” consumer.

Older children, on the other hand, were often impetuses for “sustainable” thinking in their own right. Jill cited her eldest son’s change of mind from a semester and a half in a college co-op as a profound influence on her consumption habits. He was her family’s main inspiration for curtailing their meat consumption, and for a wider environmental consciousness. John’s daughter, an avid buyer of organic food, tried to have a similar effect on her father, yet her influence was not enough to change his buying of conventionally grown produce. Such deployment of discourse to change consumption habits only arose in my interviews in instances where children lived, at least for a time, outside of the house. Holding a parallel subject position as consumers in their own right lent children’s claims about consumption, and the potential merits of including “sustainable” products in their shopping carts, weight. Speaking from the subject position of child and independent consumer makes such discourse important to my respondents because of their ideological position as parents and neoliberal consumers aiming to consume (economically and biophysically) properly.

“Sustainability” was also understood as part of consumption for its own sake. Though it arose through interpellations and discourses based on my respondents’ positions as health conscious consumers and parents, it held its own discursive limits. In all of my interviews, after asking my first question about “sustainability” or mentioning it for the first time, my respondents would mention it in regard to further questions whether they pertained explicitly to “sustainability” or not. This recognition of an undefined concept, and eagerness to align one’s actions with it, brought a wide variety of consumer actions under the mantle of “sustainable” in our discussions. Though I never brought up farmers’ markets in our discussions, Jill and Tim both mentioned them as potentially sustainable ways to consume. John, when asked outright if he kept “sustainability” in mind when shopping replied simply “no. I can’t say I do.” Even still, in subsequent conversation he was eager to point out that the tofu and greens mix that he bought were organic. Though John didn’t see organic food as an environmental matter on his own account he was familiar with it being framed as such. Karen also didn’t identify her grocery shopping, routine or random, as “sustainable,” but, like John, was also quick to identify the lack of packaging involved in bulk buying as “kind of doing [her] part.” Such responses show a familiarity with larger environmental discourses, yet prove “sustainability” interpellates only through interaction with institutions that orient its meaning toward consumption.

“Sustainability” arises as a coherent appraisal of actions within the neoliberal consumer subject position through an interplay with ideologies of health and family structure. My respondents took their children’s happiness and well-being, their own and their family’s health,

and their budgeting decisions as their responsibility alone. The abstraction of the social nature of the commodity that commodity fetishism enables disallows any social understanding of food *per se*, and the political realities of neoliberal social order prevent any political or collective social understanding of food (Mirowski 2013, 58-60). The entrepreneur of the self is alone even as social forces shape every aspect of the world around them. This individualism runs so deep that only Jill mentioned even talking to anyone at the grocery store, and that was only at Trader Joe’s, a store with a specific policy of giving out free samples and allowing customers to try products before they purchase them. In this individualistic appraisal, despite the incredibly complex and involved social processes that bring food to the store shelf (and havoc to the environment), consumption is the activity of more or less informed individuals making decisions that add up predictably over one’s life (diachronically) but unknowably across individual household units (synchronously). Thus, as “sustainability” arose within the consumer subject position it went on to gird appraisals of social structures within the confines of a neoliberal understanding of the self.

Many of these appraisals of social structure were directly consumerist. The most common consumerist “sustainable” action, shared by all of my respondents but Karen, was relative abstention from beef and, in John and Jill’s cases, meat more generally. This response was often tied explicitly to health concerns as well. Additionally, Tim brought up the great distances food can often travel under current market conditions, connecting it to consumer behavior in a particularly adamant way:

Tim: I can get Trader Joe’s, say, berries that are organic, but they come from Chile.

Hayden: right

Tim: I mean (exhales) what? (exhales) (Hayden laughs) You know? That doesn’t help the environment at all! ‘cause, minus the organics- okay okay so I got an organic berry.

That’s great. But it was delivered to me from literally 5000 miles away

Hayden: right

Tim: So, the airplanes, the trucks, like all the people involved. I mean that’s like. It’s mind blowing how humans developed that but that’s there. You know, and that’s the way that that food has come to my plate. And I’m, I’m hyper aware of wasting food because you see food waste. Oh man, that makes me sad. That really makes me sad. I try to feed my children enough food that they’ll eat on their plate. And. This, pretty much every parent starts to learn is that when your kids don’t eat everything on their plate, you feel bad because you you created it and then also you’re just like “whatever” and you start eating their food.

Hayden: yeah yeah yeah

Tim: I always do that (laughing). And my wife does too. You know, and it’s just like a natural thing. It’s like there’s still food there and- I grew up in a pretty poor family and it’s like we never ever throw away food. Throwing away food to me is like (pause) like a no no. you know? Because my god why would you throw away food?! And again you know you talk about berries or something like that that costs hundreds of dollars all told to get to your plate, and then you decide not to eat it and you throw it away. All that is waste, and it’s like human caused waste. That makes me mad.

Hayden: (laughing) yeah

Tim: it makes me crazy. So anyway.

This exchange highlights the conclusion, arising from the undifferentiated conception of “sustainability” outlined above, that consumption done incorrectly is waste. This improper management of one’s neoliberal consumer position is morally stained in Tim’s account, eliciting complex supply chains involving incredibly specific infrastructures and occupational positions yet only pertaining to “sustainability” through a frame of individual action. His family’s consumption, and therefore its waste as well, falls on Tim’s shoulders in his account, along with all of the relations of production that brought it into his home. Similarly, meat consumption, also tied to a huge social web in its material formation, was abstained from for individualist reasons. As Jill put it, red meat is a food that “our bodies don’t need.” Consuming it, therefore, would be seen as a mismanagement, a lack of efficiency akin to waste.

My respondents also saw problems of social inequality related to consumption through the lens of “sustainability.” Tim framed his own consumption against that of residents of Fishtown and West Philadelphia, neighborhoods he had lived in previously, counting himself as “a lucky person in so many ways” for his access to different grocery stores and a sufficient amount of economic capital. Jill described buying food “labelled as organic” at Aldi. When I questioned her phrasing she replied:

Jill: Well that’s a really interesting question. Um and I think this is where you know it’s good to be trained as a sociologist and not as a historian (Hayden laughs). I think that part of the reason why I question that is because where I’m buying it. it’s sort of. It’s not it’s not sort of (laughing) it’s not overpriced [like] at Whole Foods...I don’t know any data on this but, you know, anecdotally, I would say we’ve got totally different groups of people shopping at those grocery stores... The Aldis I’ve been to seem to be located in places where um there’s not necessarily a lot of other competing grocery stores. They’re very accessible by public transportation. All good stuff! um but it also makes me wonder, because I’m not paying like you know 7 dollars for a pint of strawberries labeled ‘organic’, maybe they are. I mean they could be just as organic because I’m paying 5 dollars for them at Aldi. They could be just as organic as the ones at Whole Foods, but I’m sure part of it is just me sort of thinking I’m not paying enough.

Such a classed understanding of organic food is indicative not only of generally higher prices for food labeled “sustainable,” but also the type of subject for whom it is understood to be intended. In questioning the organic food at Aldi but leaving intact the veracity of the claims on the “overpriced” food at Whole Foods Jill demonstrates a mismatch between her understanding of her consumer subject position and that of other Aldi shoppers. The empirical validity of this understanding aside, Jill’s doubt is both structural and apolitical. Even as constructions of “sustainability” and the *habitus* of other Aldi shoppers lead her to distrust claims about the composition of her food she maintained both her purchasing habits, opting for organic labels whenever possible, and her position as an individualized neoliberal consumer, merely laughing off what, from another perspective, could be seen as a direct challenge to the assumed notion of an agential consumer.

The “sustainability” that arose from my interviewees’ subject position also shaped their impression of climate change and material reality *per se*. “Humans are already down the wrong rabbit hole,” in regard to the climate crisis according to Tim, a situation which he sees as created by “small groups of humans making billions of dollars off of doing things improperly.” Despite this expressly materialist and classed understanding of ecological destruction, Tim also held that,

“farming, full stop, is effecting the climate. Period. But that started, whatever. When did we start farming? Like 6000 years ago?” This framing of climate change as an inevitable result of human behavior resonates with the rest of my respondents’ unelaborated view of it. My mentioning of ecological destruction and the role of food systems in it was met with uncommented upon acceptance. Returning to John’s comment that organic food is not “an environmental matter” to him is particularly interesting given his own organic gardening practice leading him to “recognize there is an advantage to not raising things with fertilizers and so on.” Yet this disconnect, like Tim’s historical account, arises from the rigidity of the consumer subject position within which “sustainability” is formed. Though other understandings of the material world might exist outside of their consumer status, even ones having to do directly with the sustainability of historical and present agricultural practices, but these frameworks are pushed to the side by the dominance of consumer ideology in neoliberal subject formation.

The overarching hailing of my respondents as consumers inscribed their differential hailings by “sustainability.” Understandings of grocery shopping as a relatively fixed routine formed a context within which purchases and framings were made salient to my respondents within a rationalist neoliberal framework. This complex consumer subject, hailed as a financial entity and thus including my respondents’ whole households, gave rise to ideologies of “sustainability,” health, and parenthood (or family structure) as coconstituted, but relatively discursively distinct, social structures. This consumer “sustainability” effected how my respondents viewed potential responses to climate crisis, social inequality in access to food, and material practices in general, halting viewpoints that didn’t align with neoliberal logic from cohering with their dominant view of “sustainability.” “Sustainable” food, then, was not only “a marketing thing,” as Tim put it, but a marking thing, differentiating practices of production and consumption merely symbolically, and a marring thing, restraining responses to the climate crisis within a neoliberal logic that, in protecting production and distribution practices undergirding class rule, gave rise to it in the first place.

#### CONCLUSION – TOWARD A POLITICIZATION OF CONSUMPTION

This analysis has outlined the limits of “sustainability” as a concept proffered by capitalist institutions and internalized by social subjects. Using structuralist and poststructuralist conceptions of ideology and discourse, grounded in commodity fetishism but expanding to incorporate the unquestioned interactions with institutions and guiding frameworks of understanding that lend the world meaning to social subjects, it has shown how the neoliberal consumer is created as a rigid, multifaceted subject position. In inscribing multiple ideological constructs, and thus aspects of subjects’ *habitus*, this subject position reproduces capitalist class rule at the same time as it gives salience to constructs of health, family structure, and “sustainability.” “Sustainability” arises as a symbolic distinction between products, rather than an understanding of production *per se*, interrelated with other ideologies and normative discourses, and thus reproducing, rather than challenging, the very production practices it seems to bring to light via the information it presents consumers with and provide an alternative to as a purchasable commodity with similar use value.

Given the conclusion that dominant constructs of “sustainability,” even among the very educated, climate conscious population sampled here, primarily serve to restrain action in the face of the hyperobject looming over every aspect of our lives, it is easy to lose hope. It is impossible to escape the always already. One might fight to expand consciousness about food or the climate crisis more generally, but the rate at which discursive structures shift is much too slow to align with the eleven year benchmark set by the IPCC. Even such direct consciousness

raising seems doomed, as the celebritization of climate activist Greta Thunberg, despite her stated wishes (O’Malley 2019), or the sensationalized reception of the Green New Deal in political discourse show the adaptability of neoliberal logic to undermine even popular challenges to its hegemony. As our subject positions emerge through a constant reconfirming of power structures and reproduction of the relations of production, our fundamental understandings of the world and ourselves seem doomed to contribute to, or at the very least be unable to take from, the upkeep of the mode of production and the incredible pollution it currently creates.

Yet identifying the problem of climate inaction as a matter of the interpellation and discursive formation of one’s subject position outlines the possibility of a radical understanding of “sustainability.” We may not be able to escape the always already, but climate change exists outside of it. Even as our access to its material status is inscribed in the same power structures outlined above, it acts as a material constraint on human activity outside of the capitalist order. As this extra-social materiality comes more and more to enter into discourse it might act as a challenge to capital. The economism of the IPCC report, for instance, framing climate change as a matter of exchange between the input of pollutants into the earth and atmosphere and its subtraction by carbon sinks, might be seen as one instance of neoliberal logic proving its own futility. The worse the climate crisis gets the more consumption might appear consumptive (Williams 1976), a diseased social formation spread by capital at the expense of the material composition of the earth.

Food provides a path to understanding the social formation at the root of this issue before the planet coughs up too much blood. While a symbolic logic confines understandings of “sustainability” to a comparison between products rather than material production practices that create products, if the ritual encounter of the routine is expanded upon, if the taken for granted construction of food retailers and producers is placed as a particular material practice, the commodity fetish can be demystified. If, to return to the quote preceding this analysis, “eating is an agricultural act” (Berry 1989), then so too is grocery shopping. Taking this material arrangement seriously can turn the comparison between products that produces complacency into a realization of the active reproduction of labor practices that produces outrage. Food, as both a biophysical need and a culturally important set of signs, is a crucial nodal point between material forces and social ones. Ideology actively shapes meaning at this nodal point in favor of the capitalist institutions that certify and reproduce it, yet discourse, aimed at the commodity as this ideology’s point of departure, might actively reframe its hailings.

In fact, my interviews point toward ways discourse is already reframing consumption. The influence of Jill’s older son, Tim’s hatred of food waste, and even Karen’s family’s ecomic decision to buy in bulk represent a serious, material understanding of one’s individual consumption. What is required now is not a redoubling of this effort, as writers and thinkers in the Alternative Food Movement might attest, but a refocusing of it. The responses to structure that the neoliberal consumer position permits through “sustainable” food proves even the most straightforward of material responses to only have meaning discursively. Curtailing meat consumption can only be compared to a notion of previous or normal meat consumption; lack of access to food can only be compared to an ease of access. The formation of meaning makes any response to material symbolic insofar as it is meaningful. One needn’t buy “sustainable” food for its hailing to evoke a symbolic understanding of the world that addresses the material conditions of climate crisis. Rather, understanding the limits of one’s action and frame of reference as a neoliberal consumer subject can turn the insignificance of our material existence in relation to the hyperobject of climate change towards politicized notion of production. The grocery store

aisle, if seen as a historically specific creation, becomes a place where labor itself can call out to us. As the commodity loses its mystical aura the ideological apparatus it upholds might lose enough of its hold for “sustainability” to be inscribed in more aspects of the *habitus*. From this new subject position we might launch our discourse, and whatever other material means necessary, against the mode of production that threatens our health, families, and planet.

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