Envisioning Sustainable Futures of Localism: The Environmental Imagination of Local Currency Activists in Monnaie Léman and the Brixton Pound[1]

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Abstract: This article explores how local currency activists in Monnaie Léman and the Brixton Pound envision sustainable futures centered on localism. Based on 19 interviews and ethnographic fieldwork in Brixton and Geneva, it examines local currencies as payments limited to specific areas. In the short term, activists promote ethical consumption, short supply chains, environmental awareness, economic education, and strong local communities. Long-term visions focus on localized economies characterized by limited international trade, predominance of small businesses, and green, compact, community-oriented small towns with well-developed pedestrian and cycling infrastructure. Food is sourced from community gardens and nearby villages. These views stem from *eco-habitus* – mindset and practices of environmentally aware individuals with high cultural capital. Consumption through local currencies reflects the *hipster economy*, a term by Alessandro Gerosa describing consumption driven by nostalgia for local, family-like businesses. Since participation in local currency systems is linked to ethical consumption, this ecological strategy will be interpreted through Ulrich Beck's concept of *subpolitics* and Zygmunt Bauman's notion of *individual utopias*.

Keywords: localism, environmentalism, imagination, local currencies, ethical consumption, eco-habitus, hipster economy, class, individual utopia, subpolitics

1 Ecological Imagination – What Should a Sustainable World Look Like?

This article presents an ethnographic study of the ecological imagination of activists behind two local currencies – Brixton Pound (BP) in London and Monnaie

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Léman (ML) in Geneva. At the core of their environmental beliefs lies localism. Imagination is essential to envisioning a better future (Bauman 2017; Beckert 2019; Fisher 2009; Srnicek/Williams 2016; Wilder 2022; Žižek 2002), so this article explores how it takes shape within social movements that issue their own money, highlighting both its possibilities and limitations. Local currencies, as grassroots means of payment limited to specific geographic areas – usually cities, neighborhoods, or regions – embody the worldview of localism. This worldview holds that

> »when things grow too big, communities and collective values suffer. Concentrating economic and political power creates inequality. Owners of big factories who live far away don't care about workers and the environment« (Sharzer 2012: 8).

Local communities are marked by deep emotional value and a high level of engagement typical of informal, direct, and personal relationships (Wojciechowski 2008: 50), with the crux of localism being the enactment of these local communities.

This article therefore examines how localism is understood and imagined by the movements studied, which actively promote their values and seek to persuade broader social groups to embrace their ecological strategies. Since the form of ecological localism studied mostly manifests as ethical consumption supported by local currencies (though not exclusively), the article largely aims to understand localism through the lens of consumption changes and their imagined social impact. Ethical consumption appears here within the context of wider and more ambitious imaginaries, which the article also explores.

Among these movements, localism is inseparable from a particular interpretation of ecology. It must be strongly emphasized from the start that for both BP and ML, community – rather than direct pro-environmental attitudes – is the core aspect of localism. This stems partly from the belief that authentic interpersonal and civic bonds foster care for the natural environment, naturally arising from a sense of responsibility toward others. For these activists, the fight for the environment begins somewhat counterintuitively – with building a sense of belonging and the resulting meaning and solidarity. Thus, the struggle for short supply chains and localized economies, though vital elements of the localism described here, is not only about the environment but also about creating small-scale economies enabling direct human connections. While localism necessarily addresses not only environmental care but also the building of social networks, this article focuses narrowly on the ecological dimension, rather than on the broader, equally fascinating community philosophy among activists in London and Geneva.

2 Time of Imagination – Expectations and Imaginaries of Localism

The activists' imagination unfolds across various time horizons – both short and long – and encompasses different degrees of feasibility, ranging from pragmatic to fanciful and utopian. Drawing on the ideas of Giacomo Bazzani (2023), I distinguish between the short-term horizon, which concerns *expectations* – pragmatic plans aligned with institutional and cultural logic – and *imaginaries* – distant and radical visions of the future that differ from the current state[2]. Among the studied movements, *expectations* are rather present-minded; they are feasible and largely compatible with prevailing values. Nevertheless, as social movements oriented toward change, these initiatives strive to transcend the existing paradigm, albeit modestly and cautiously rather than through revolutionary or radical means. *Expectations* form the basis of the projects' communication with their audiences, as they can be adapted to existing social, organizational, and technological conditions. *Expectations* serve as a precursor and announcement of *imaginaries* – long-term visions resembling fantasies and idealized utopias. *Imaginaries* motivate action within the framework of *expectations*, setting a lofty goal whose time horizon often exceeds the activists' lifetimes but remains generally undefined. In the studied movements, *expectations* are tightly linked to present action and the realization of short-term imagination, whereas *imaginaries* – being utopian, impressionistic signposts and dreams – are less frequently communicated to the public due to their nebulous nature.

The local currencies examined rest upon several key *expectations*: building local identity and community, supporting short supply chains and ecological farming via ethical consumption, and promoting awareness of how the monetary system drives consumption and indirectly impacts environmental degradation (Kennedy 1995). The local currency is intended to support localism – through its geographically limited circulation, it acts as a voucher and behavioral incentive to consume from small local businesses. Using local currency largely involves ethical consumption – local and often ecological. Purchases are often accompanied by small talk about the local currency's idea. Additionally, currency users can participate in community-building events organized by activists.

The crucial question of the rationale for using local currency among those already practicing ethical consumption opens the door to activist education about money, the financial system, and its entanglement with oil extraction and the

2 The distinction between *expectations* and *imaginaries* is more nuanced than presented in this article – here, it is simplified for the purposes of a text centered on localism rather than theoretical reflection on future visions. I explore the topic of temporal horizons in more depth in a separate article addressing the *expectations* and *imaginaries* of the studied social movements concerning the future shaped by blockchain technology (Rycombel, forthcoming).

overconsumption embedded in the growth paradigm inseparable from credit and interest. The local currencies studied are available to anyone who exchanges national currency for local currency at a 1:1 rate at special exchange points[3] and, in the case of ML, through a blockchain app[4]. Deposited francs are held in Banque Alternative Genève, which invests in ecological projects, while pounds are held in the London Mutual Credit Union. Exchange through ML and BP opens awareness of alternative banking and the role of money. Hence, economic and environmental education is a significant aspect of these social movements; education that unfolds through the specific alternative exchange medium. It takes on the character of a performance art as the uniquely beautiful ML and BP banknotes circulate, disrupting established patterns of thinking about economic exchange and consumption. Since 2017, ML circulates not only physical banknotes but also virtual lemans, an innovative electronic record in a blockchain app. In 2023, BP tested a ready blockchain app for exchanges.

These *expectations* serve as a starting point to approach imaginaries in an undefined future. In the studied movements, *imaginaries* depict a world where international trade is maximally limited, small family businesses thrive, cities are green, community-oriented, small, with well-developed walking and cycling infrastructures, and food comes from community gardens and nearby villages. Distinguishing *expectations* from *imaginaries* in these movements helps grasp their paradoxical nature: dreams of an ideal future world clash with attempts to tame the material reality, which is limitedly malleable, unpredictable, and highly complex. The *expectations/imaginaries* divide also acts as a measure of the quality and creativity of our social imagination – it shows how far we can think about a better world, transcend our lifespans, and consider intergenerational solidarity (Urry 2016).

Hence, localism described here has two faces, two time horizons – today's localism mainly as ethical consumption, education, or even artistic performance involving local currency, and imaginative localism as fantasies of a world where local communities, not global power systems, play the central role.

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3 In Geneva, a mutual credit system exclusively for businesses has been additionally introduced, which does not require currency conversion. This system operates on the principle that every transaction is a bookkeeping entry, with the sum of all operations in the system equal to zero. For example, when entity A buys a bicycle from entity B for 300 lemans, A's account balance decreases by that amount while B's balance increases by 300 lemans. The value of the leman within the mutual credit system is pegged 1:1 to the national currency.

4 Green blockchain technology is intended to support ecological localism by enabling autonomous management of currency and voting. Activists have ensured that the blockchain they use fosters ecological innovations within the technology itself. Blockchain technology is integral to their vision: adapting to the digital age, they seek sustainable solutions that consume less energy. Thanks to ecological innovations in data validation and the growing trust in local currencies secured by this technology, blockchain is understood as a catalyst accelerating the realization of localism.

This article predominantly interprets local and ecological ethical consumption as the leading localist strategy of action among local currencies. After all, using a local currency ultimately relies on spending money – albeit a unique form of it. Analyzing ethical consumption is an important task in the face of its growing popularity (Gerosa 2024) and climate change. The activists' *imaginaries* of localism provide context and complement reflections on this distinctive form of ethical consumption supported by local currency.

The text begins by outlining the cultural context of the emergence of localism ideology, which acts as a counter-ideology to global industrial capitalism. Next, it introduces categories that illuminate localism in a specific way – through its entanglement with the nostalgic *hipster economy* based on post-Fordist consumption models and class distinction in the form of *eco-habitus* (Carfagna et al. 2014). Since local ethical consumption is the principal strategy of local currencies, the article largely attempts to understand this aspect of localism. The article then moves to identifying general premises that define the studied social movements as ecological movements and explores how the activists understand the relationship between environmentalism and localism. The next section critically examines one of the pillars of local currency movements and localism: concern for short supply chains. Following that, it presents the *imaginaries* of local currencies – distant visions where local and ecological consumption is the norm, not just the choice of especially motivated social groups. In conclusion, using the work of Ulrich Beck (1996) and Zygmunt Bauman (2017), the article examines the paradoxes of the studied visions, primarily concerning the tension between the individual and the collective in the promoted ecological strategies. The article aspires to contribute to and encourage exploration not only of the possibilities of ecological imagination but also its conditions, entanglements, and limitations.

3 Empirical research – Data collection

The research is based on 19 semi-structured in-depth interviews and ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Brixton, London (March–June 2022), and Geneva (April–May 2023).

My primary method involved lingering in the field – almost daily visits to the activists' office where I observed their work, meetings, and events, and engaged in informal conversations in the office, cafés, and during walks. This approach combined a sustained, informal presence with careful observation of social interactions without full participant immersion. Moreover, at least twice a week during the fieldwork, I held one-on-one informal conversations lasting between one and one and a half hours with each activist from the movement, without audio recording. Additionally, I analyzed materials provided by activists, mostly presentations and reports, and immersed myself in literature they regarded as key sources of in-

spiration for their activism. During my post-pandemic research in London, when the currency was not in circulation, I conducted small talks with businesses that had previously used the Brixton Pound. In Geneva, I used participant observation by spending 325 lemans and conversing with vendors about the currency.

Sampling Criteria

In my analysis, I included European movements from affluent countries that remain outside the eurozone. I was interested in examining the specificity of local currencies in economically stable states that have chosen not to join supranational monetary arrangements. I sought to understand whether such contexts foster particular forms of economic self-reliance, national pride, or a strong sense of distinct identity. By contrast, local currencies in countries such as Brazil or Argentina operate in a very different setting, where they continue to function as instruments of support during economic crises (Gómez 2019). In these cases, local currencies are used by communities with limited financial means and are sometimes promoted by local governments as part of anti-poverty measures. A notable example is the mumbuca, a currency used in Maricá, in the state of Rio de Janeiro, distributed as part of a basic income policy (Gonzales et al. 2020).

In the initiatives I analyze, the idea of ethical consumption is clearly articulated – an idea generally absent in contexts where consumption remains existential, oriented toward survival rather than shaped by health, moral, or aesthetic preferences (Bylok 2017). Another topic that drew my attention was blockchain technology. It is particularly noteworthy that, according to current knowledge, the first local currency in the world to employ blockchain as a transactional platform emerged in Geneva.

4 Local Social Economy versus Global Industrial Capitalism

Since its very inception – which, following Karl Polanyi (2001), we may locate in the nineteenth century, when land, money and labor became subject to commodification – capitalism has been haunted by a particular anxiety. This anxiety concerns the possibility that the expansion of large firms and competitive global corporations would drive small, local and family-run micro-enterprises off the streets. Not only they, but also the social formations that have grown around them would vanish – formations marked by business attachment to place and by engagement in the vicissitudes of their clients. Or rather, of the local community, which is treated not merely as clientele or a laboratory source of profit, but as a specific community. From this perspective, its flourishing, prosperity, and peace also depend on the careful conscientiousness of those who guarantee its material goods

and services – comfort, satisfaction, and security. In this vision, companies operating under the watchful eye of neighbors strive for quality, assured by proximity, trust, and care for their good name.

Max Weber identified a distinctive feature of modernity and capitalism as the separation of the household from business, which gave rise to an economy conceived as a distinct realm of human activity – both institutionally and conceptually (Weber 2011). A similar transformation was described by Marx in the *Communist Manifesto*, portraying how the bourgeois mode of production dominates the landscape: ›The lower strata of the middle class – the small tradespeople, shopkeepers, and retired tradesmen generally, the handicraftsmen and peasants – all these sink gradually into the proletariat, partly because their diminutive capital does not suffice for the scale on which Modern Industry is carried on, and is swamped in the competition with the large capitalists, partly because their specialised skill is rendered worthless by new methods of production‹ (Marx / Engels 1848).

Capitalism has not ceased its expansion and keeps finding new areas for growth. The language of resistance to it still reproduces 19th-century models, which can also be seen among the social movements I studied. The motivation behind these local currency movements was to create neighborhoods, support local entrepreneurs struggling under pressure from global brands, and build an economy where care for the natural environment is a given, and where the logic of reciprocity dominates over the logic of service – resembling contemporary gift culture (Rycombel 2022). In the perspective of the studied local currency movements, the answer to capitalism dominated by the profit principle, opaque economic networks, and resource extraction are: the principle of reciprocity, local and thus transparent economic networks, and small-scale ecological and community farming.

5 Ecological and Social Consumption – From Counterculture to Hipster Economy

The source of local and ecological consumption practices, as well as the manual do-it-yourself culture important to the studied movements, remains counterculture (Turner 2006). Davina Cooper, a scholar of utopias and the Local Exchange Trading System, argues that local currencies are »cohered around an explicitly countercultural vision of the ›good society,‹ in which pro-ecological practice was linked to egalitarian, trust-based, and communal forms of work and trade‹ (2014: 133). The celebration of eco and organic food, strongly present in ML and BP, is a reformulation of the hippie *back-to-the-land/earth movement*. A vivid example is Nicholas Saunders, an aristocrat raised in a castle and one of the most famous hippies, who created the iconic British brand Neal's Yard Dairy. Their cheeses en-

joy great popularity in both France and the United States. Saunders began selling homemade yogurt in what today is trendy Covent Garden, then just an ordinary fruit and vegetable market. In industrialized England, this was a novelty. The business peaked when Saunders' colleague Hodgson decided to offer a nostalgia for pre-industrial times by marketing traditionally made cheeses:

> »[Hodgson] set off round the country in a van, seeking out his own freaks: farmers who were committed to making their own cheeses with traditional methods that their grandparents might recognise. Like Saunders and his back-to-earthers before him, the search was demoralising. The number of farms that made cheese themselves had declined from more than 1,000 in 1939 to just 62 by 1974. But Hodgson found them, and created a new market by connecting these producers with consumers who had an appetite for weirdness« (Nunn 2024).

Contemporary *hipster economy*, to which the local currency markets in Geneva and London undoubtedly belong, finds its roots in counterculture. In a neoliberal manner, hipster economy has commercialized the ›hip‹ values important to hippies – autonomy, authenticity, alternative lifestyles, nonconformism, creativity, and coolness (Gerosa 2024: 12–15). The question remains whether neoliberalism co-opted these values or counterculture was from the start entangled in hedonistic capitalism. Fred Turner, who traced the significant influence of flower children on Silicon Valley culture (2006), would likely agree with the second view, while Alessandro Gerosa, the creator of the hipster economy concept, supports the first.

The lexeme ›hip‹ originates from African American vernacular language and the hipster subculture of 1940s America – African Americans distinguished by an eccentric musical and fashion style emphasizing their distinct and rich identity. In the 1960s, hippies adopted the term expressing distance from white Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture (Gerosa 2024: 6–7).

Contemporary hipsterism is a global and popular consumption style characteristic of post-Fordist society. It is steeped in progressive nostalgia for a mythical pre-industrial society (Gerosa 2024: 11) based on craftsmanship, manual labor, and traditional trades like bakers, tailors, shopkeepers, potters, etc. Simultaneously, it is filled with nostalgia for an idealized countryside (Gerosa 2024: 52), motivated by rebellion against urban atomization. This nostalgia manifests itself in urban markets that are designed to evoke an idealized village marketplace and are often even branded as »villages«, such as Brixton Village. It is also expressed through a longing for food imagined as having been grown on unspoiled rural farms – organic, »bio«, and untouched by industrial processes.

Post-Fordism is closely intertwined with the neoliberal turn: it denotes not only a transformation of labour markets, but also a profound reconfiguration of everyday norms and subjectivities. Under Fordism, the key reference points were

industrial mass production, discipline, stable, predictable and routinised career trajectories, strong trade unions and comprehensive welfare arrangements, as well as clear hierarchies in the workplace. By contrast, post-Fordism is marked by the expansion of the service sector, the rise of consumption and mobility, and the growing centrality of values such as lifestyle, individual fulfilment, play, hedonism and self-expression (Binkley 2004). Sam Binkley argues that post-Fordism is inseparable from the popularisation of countercultural ideals associated with the 1960s and 1970s hippie movement. Michael Scott introduces the notion of *hipster capitalism* to describe a class formation of the new petite bourgeoisie operating under post-Fordist, neoliberal conditions (Scott 2017). This concept highlights how projects of self-realisation often take the form of precarious micro-entrepreneurship, while economic insecurity is reframed as non-conformist freedom, artistic vocation and bohemian autonomy. Scott outlines two ideal-typical trajectories within hipster capitalism: careers oriented towards cultural capital (for instance in the creative industries), and careers oriented towards economic capital, in which »old« petty-bourgeois occupations – barbering, craft production, tattooing – are restyled as fashionable, autonomous and ostensibly independent professions. While Scott foregrounds neoliberalism and austerity as the context within which such strategies emerge, Gerosa emphasises that this dimension of scarcity and insecurity coexists with the fact that some hipster actors become beneficiaries of a new regime of accumulation, in which authenticity and taste function as highly valued market resources, enabling participation in an ostensibly precarious yet potentially highly profitable logic of accumulation. Thus, as I argue, the hipster economy encompasses not only segments of the new petty bourgeoisie but also fractions of the creative class and the professional-managerial class, as will be demonstrated in the subsequent sections of this article.

One of the slogans of May 1968 was: »Talk to your neighbors!« (Gerosa 2024: 97). Critique of mass, assembly-line consumption and calls for authenticity by philosophers Henri Lefebvre, Herbert Marcuse, and David Riesman (Gerosa 2024: 28–32) inspired countercultural resistance to Fordism – a system of industrial production creating alienated individuals, mass unreflective consumption, standardization, and commodification. In the hipster economy, this rebellion takes the form of reflective consumption, running small family- or friend-based meaningful ethical businesses in a neighborhood atmosphere. This responds to urban and professional alienation and corporate work culture (Gerosa 2024: 77–78). The response to alienation from representative democracy is support for direct democracy, and to alienation from production and consumption – a drive toward localized economies.

A way to emphasize distinctiveness is to update identity through ethical shopping, while political engagement in this framework takes place in the market through creating responsible enterprises and making conscious consumer

choices. Hipster economy assumes small local firms are the drivers of change, and consumption is political – Marx's separation of production and consumption spheres is seen as unjustified and patronizing toward individuals (Gerosa 2024: 48–49). Hipster entrepreneurs often identify their businesses with activism: creating community cafés, vegan restaurants, food trucks with freegan leanings (Gerosa 2024: 83). Notably, one activist closely linked to BP created an ecological cycling clothing brand, and the Brixton Pound café, a shabby chic club-café, was operated on a pay-what-you-can basis (in local currency) and offered vegan, often freegan food. Besides food and organic coffee, it served as a vibrant cultural animation space. BP activists took pride in this eatery as an atypical place in Brixton – its crowd was diverse rather than socially segregated, which is unfortunately a problem in Brixton's gentrification (Jackson/Butler 2015).

Nostalgic hipster consumption is more expensive than mundane consumption and often takes place in specially arranged post-industrial spaces, markets, or so-called urban villages[5], which frequently undergo gentrification due to hipsters. Paradoxically, this post-Fordist lifestyle partly connects to pauperization of a highly educated middle class – the element of distinction is no longer a fancy house or car, but an expensive eco-kebab in a stylish bar in a gentrified yet still relatively affordable neighborhood (Gerosa 2024: 65). Ethical consumption is thus linked to class relations in society (Carfagna et al. 2014; Domański 2015). But as I stated earlier, there is still room for affluence within the hipster economy: It encompasses not only actors undergoing processes of precarisation, but also affluent fractions of the new petty bourgeoisie, the creative class and the professional-managerial class, who are able to convert their cultural capital, networks and financial buffers into profitable participation in this ostensibly bohemian, yet highly marketable, lifestyle.

6 Eco-habitus – Ecology and Lifestyle

The concept of *eco-habitus* was coined by American consumption researchers (Carfagna et al. 2014), who observed that conscious and ecological consumption is primarily characteristic of Americans with high cultural capital. *Habitus* refers to acquired ways of thinking and acting typical for a given social class, which allow one to interpret a person's position within the social hierarchy (Bourdieu 1984). Eco-habitus is the habitus of an individual with ecological awareness. It functions as an element of social distinction – that is, practices that emphasize class differences through aesthetic and symbolic display of social position, often legitimizing hierarchy and solidifying one's dominance (Bourdieu 1984). Con-

5 Most of the businesses involved in the BP operated in Brixton Village.

sumption patterns, including food choices, are among the main indicators of class belonging, and the concept of class refers to socio-occupational categories (Domański et al. 2015).

The originators of the eco-habitus concept point out that contemporary ecological consumption relies on values of locality, manual work, and materiality – traditionally associated with persons of lower cultural capital. However, these values are appropriated and embedded in a new context. Locality appears cosmopolitan rather than provincial – just consider the international social networks of localists studied (including those I researched myself, which are truly impressive). Manual labor becomes an expression of autonomy, creativity, and care for the environment. Materiality, in turn, is connected with the earth and its sensuality.

The study noted an interesting difference between the eco-habitus of individuals with high versus low economic capital. The former embraced hybrid cars and organic product consumption, whereas the latter considered cycling and minimizing all consumption as ecological practices. Among four case studies, one group consisted of participants in a time bank – an activity related to local currencies – all members had high cultural capital and engaged in gardening, composting, and manual labor practices.

7 Socioeconomic Status of the Studied Eco-Activists

Undoubtedly, the activists I studied possess an eco-habitus. They are exceptionally erudite, often, though not always, with high economic capital. In Monnaie Léman (ML), all activists impress with their education. Two ML social activists hold doctorates in social sciences (sociology, economics), and another with a master's degree in agronomy lectures at a university. The activist leading the blockchain transformation professionally works as an ethical hacker. Graduates include those in social economy, sociology, management, accounting, and geography.

In London, the activist profile differed slightly toward artistic and humanities education. Two London activists were friends with David Graeber. One activist completed both mathematics and art studies. Among Brixton activists, only one individual lacked higher education but was charismatic with a philosophical bent, musical passion, and blockchain expertise.

Diana Finch, creator of the Bristol Pound, the most dynamic British currency within the Transition Towns movement, recalled in our conversation results of a 2014 survey among its users. The overwhelming majority, about 70 %, self-identified as members of the professional-managerial class, i. e., individuals with high expert or managerial positions. Even more people indicated that they have higher education, including 44 % with at least a doctoral degree. One BP user admitted in a recorded interview to belong to the world's richest 3 %.

When asked in English interviews to describe currency users, references were usually to the middle class. Three ML currency leaders acknowledged that the system is dominated by *les bobos*, members of a progressive social group with abundant cultural but generally less economic capital. The challenge is developing the initiative to attract diverse entrepreneurs and consumers across social strata (Ripess Europe 2023).[6] *Bobos* is a media label coined by American journalist David Brooks (2000), widely adopted in the Francophone world (Watrin / Legrand 2014; Authier et al. 2018) and often employed by conservatives in political struggles, describing progressive privileged professionals who blend contradictory bourgeois and bohemian ethics – monetary, individualistic, and bourgeois values with artistically idealistic, avant-garde social change aspirations and aesthetic sensitivity. Attributes of bobos include ecological shopping, cycling, and trendy cafés in gentrified neighborhoods. This description fits local currency users quite well, though the bobo category is broad and includes multiple social layers.

The class dimension of local currencies calls for separate in-depth systematic research as, until now, apart from Raphaël Didier's doctoral work (2022), this topic remains unexplored among local currency scholars. Didier studied the French Florain currency, inaugurated during the Alternatiba festival in Nancy in 2015, akin to ML. He identified four personas among users based on 57 valid surveys and 15 interviews:

- Politically engaged users – active in multiple social movements, highly committed to ecological and local causes.
- Gentrifiers – highly educated managerial staff; they spend the most Florains but perceive themselves as the least active members.
- Ordinary users – without special system belonging, ideological, or moral identification; do not consider themselves active users.
- Cultural users – spend little Florains but feel strong system belonging; individuals with high cultural but low economic capital, usually employees and technical class.

My observations and interviews suggest that the studied local currency movements unite three social classes – the creative class in the sense of Richard Florida (including artists, activists, IT specialists, and programmers; 2019), the petit bourgeoisie – small entrepreneurs with a distinct individualistic professional ethic – and the professional managerial class (PMC), recently excellently described by Catherine Liu (2021).[7]

6 Available on Youtube, see Ripess Europe 2023.

7 Liu defines PMC after John and Barbara Ehrenreich: »As a class, the PMC loves to talk about bias rather than inequity, racism rather than capitalism, visibility rather than exploitation […]. The Right is well aware of liberal preening, and it has weaponized popular resentment against this class of alleged hypocrisies« (Liu 2021: 8); »The PMC as a proxy for today's ruling class is shame-

8 BP and ML – Ecological Movements?

Both ML and BP can be regarded as ecological movements, as indicated not only by their self-identification as environmental movements and the pronounced ecological concern evident in field interviews, but also by their embeddedness within broader social movement networks. Generally, there is an affinity between local currency movements and pro-environmental attitudes (Blanc et al. 2023; Blanc et al. 2025; Michel/Hudon 2015; Larue 2020; Larue et al. 2022). BP is strongly linked both personally and ideologically to ecological movements such as Extinction Rebellion, Community Energy England, and Brixton Energy. Furthermore, ML and BP are associated with the Transition Town movement, founded in 2006. Its primary aim was to address peak oil by initiating five local currencies across five UK towns: Bristol, Totnes, Lewes, Stroud, and Brixton in London (Ryan-Collins et al. 2011). Central to the Transition movement is Rob Hopkins's book The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience (2008), which, after its French translation in 2010, inspired the creation of ML. Rob Hopkins personally supported and advised the launch of ML. Additionally, ML is part of the Après network, advocating for a shift in the economic model as a response to the environmental crisis. The creation of the Geneva currency was also announced at the first Alternatiba Genève festival – a social movement countering climate change. The festival was a direct reaction to the 2015 UN Climate Change Conference COP 29 in Paris, where the Paris Agreement was signed, committing 195 countries to achieve climate neutrality.

It is important to clarify that in the ML movement, environmentalism is associated with localism. In the case of BP, the relationship is more complex but nonetheless present. During the development of the London movement, the limitations of local currency as a pragmatic tool for shortening supply chains became apparent. Yet, this never diminished the environmental convictions of its leaders nor the belief that currencies can still evoke ecological sensitivity and imagination, even if they do not immediately reduce carbon footprints.

BP was managed by two distinct leadership groups – the first operated from 2008 to 2013, the second in subsequent years. Initially, leadership was held by a fraction of academic economists associated with the Transition Town initiative, who viewed the movement as a project to build a new sustainable economic model. These economists grew disillusioned when the project failed to achieve tangible economic outcomes, particularly regarding localization of production and consumption intended to support local businesses. This failure led to management being transferred to a group with artistic inclinations, who saw the

less about hoarding all forms of secularized virtue […]. PMC reworks political struggles for policy change and redistribution into individual passion plays, focusing its efforts on individual acts of giving back or reified forms of self-transformation« (Liu 2021: 1–2).

local currency not only as a payment instrument or supply chain tool but also as a space for imaginative performance. This latter faction launched the ecological and vegan BP café, where the menu was limited to a single phrase: ›Pay what you can.‹ This venture became the quintessence of the movement's transformation – reconfiguring it from a social enterprise into a place of community bonds, neighborliness, conversations, free workshops, and naturally, payment in BP.

9 Ecological Localism

Let us examine the foundations of the relationship between environmentalism and localism. Several assumptions underpin the belief that local currencies contribute to building an environmentally friendly future. Since these currencies can only be used within a defined geographic area, such as a city, they are assumed to encourage shortening supply chains and promote local consumption. Short supply chains are considered more sustainable than global ones because, according to activists, they leave a smaller carbon footprint. Another assumption holds that local currencies promote and stimulate the consumption of ecological, bio, and organic products, which are regarded as sustainable. In ML, for example, most offers are labeled as ecological: mainly restaurants and bars serving seasonal, local, and organic dishes; an ecological optician; an ecological doctor; eco-renovation services; a thing library; an ethical boutique; and two food cooperatives offering costly local ecological and bio products. Also notable is the presence of bicycle shops and repair services, related to promoting low-emission transport.

For most activists, localism is synonymous with environmentalism, and this connection is taken for granted without critical reflection. The underlying assumption is that globalization has not only created global supply chains but also replicated homogenized patterns of high-emission consumption and mass tourism, as well as practices of concealing waste dumps, refuse, and other pollution. In sum, globalization is equated with environmental crisis. This reasoning, however, contains a logical fallacy of reversed implication – if the problem is A, the solution is anti-A. Since global, opaque production is the main source of ecological problems and social alienation, the solution is to create local transparent production that, in the long run, fosters deep neighborhood ties and ecological economies. In other words, if the source of the problem is the socioeconomic relations of globalization, the answer is to create a counterbalance of local resources. The solution cannot be a mere reform of the global system and its flows but localism itself – a counterpoint to globalization. According to this vision, globalization inevitably involves creating hard-to-trace financial flows, tax havens, and outsourcing that undermine labor rights.

10 The Strength of Ecology Lies in a Caring Community

It is worth emphasizing once again: for activists, the idea of localism takes precedence over environmentalism – the primary goal becomes building close, enduring communal bonds, which constitute the foundation of any authentic ethic. Local relationships effectively counter moral indifference, which grows with geographic distance and leads to exploitation of anonymous, distant groups and their natural environments, to which one has no community ties. The best remedy for this growing indifference is a realistic focus on developing local resources and a civil society based on direct relationships and mutual responsibility.

In this perspective, the use of resources outside one's own community is acceptable only if it builds social proximity beyond the local or establishes institutions that effectively control the humanity and sustainability of production – topics I will elaborate on when discussing Audrey's[8] imaginaries of sustainable universities or international agricultural exchanges.

The primacy of the communal aspect of localism over its ecological aspect is well illustrated by the Swiss approach to local agricultural production. A conversation with Flora, an advocate of the Léman currency, a labor law lawyer, and promoter of ecological knowledge, reveals how much the localist approach emphasizes knowledge of realities and social responsibility. When asked about choosing between Geneva tomatoes and those imported from Spain (even if cheaper, tastier, and often less energy-intensive to produce[9]), Flora unhesitatingly said that a Swiss person should buy only Swiss tomatoes, regardless of their higher price or comparatively lower ecological status than Spanish tomatoes. As a Swiss citizen, she is confident that people growing and harvesting tomatoes in Geneva receive fair wages and are treated according to Geneva labor law[10]. During the interview, Flora spoke with great certainty and visible pride that Switzerland offers a fair minimum wage and has a small black market, whereas she is unfamiliar with the Spanish market, where exploitative employment of undocumented migrants for low pay and their poor treatment can be more frequent. This example excellently demonstrates how localism provides a sense of control, knowledge of realities, and cognitive transparency, becoming not an economic but an ethical choice.

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8 All participants are anonymized.

9 A larger carbon footprint may be attributable to production methods rather than transportation (Neira et al. 2018, Ritchie 2024).

10 Switzerland ranks as the country with the smallest shadow economy in the world at 6.94 %: see The Global Economy 2015.

11 The Myth of Short Supply Chains

Short supply chains or ethical consumption are important slogans of many local currency movements, though they are rarely subjected to verification (Larue et al. 2022). Assumptions about the »greenness« of short supply chains or the ecological superiority of organic products can be questioned (Michel/Hudon 2015; Sharzer 2012). For example, a study of 428 short and long supply chains across six European countries indicates that, on average, long supply chains are better for the environment (Majewski et al. 2020). An example from another part of the world shows that rice production in California is 15 to 25 times more energy-intensive than in Bangladesh, including transport to California (Ferguson/Thompson 2021). Ecologists debate whether it is more justified to transition to organic farming, which generally yields 23 % less than intensive agriculture but supports biodiversity, or rather to improve intensive farming and allocate parts of farmland to forests, meadows, and other areas restored to nature (Gong et al. 2022). A meta-analysis shows no evidence of significant differences in nutrient content between organic and non-organic food, and if any, it may concern only meat favoring organic farming (Smith-Spangler et al. 2012). Overall, this is an extremely complex topic, dependent on context, type of crop and livestock, climatic and social conditions, and asserting a universal thesis that organic or conventional farming is inherently better disregards these factors and simplifies the problem.

Hannah Ritchie emphasizes that feeding 8 billion people using early and organic farming methods would require 8 to 80 million square kilometers of farmland, assuming the entire humanity adopted a vegan diet and cleared large forest areas for agriculture. In contrast, modern agriculture needs 4 to 8 million square kilometers of farmland, demonstrating its much greater spatial efficiency and productivity (Ritchie 2024). She also notes that organic farming might contribute more to river and lake pollution due to manure use – its excess nutrients, unusable by plants, flow into water bodies. She cites the example of Sri Lankan government banning synthetic fertilizers in 2021, leading to a five-fold increase in vegetable prices in the country. The author does not discourage organic farming at all and sees a place for it, but certainly not on a global scale. After all, pesticides, though responsible for crop yields (Cooper/Dobson 2007), negatively affect insects and bees, crucial for biological balance (Nicholson et al. 2024), albeit to a small degree affecting human diet[11]. The researcher simply highlights how the topic is trivialized in discussions. Ultimately, the problem is complicated, multifaceted, and cannot be reduced to promoting a single solution in all situations. This heated debate is largely a struggle over grand symbols – between those who revere closeness

11 The study by the European Food Safety Authority, conducted on 87,863 food samples, found that 96.1 % were below the maximum residue level of pesticides. 3.9 % exceeded this threshold, of which 2.5 % may be due to possible statistical error (Carrasco et al. 2023).

to nature and those who embrace progress; between what is natural and what is synthetic.

Ritchie also argues that a positive stance toward short supply chains only makes sense from the perspective of supporting the local community, but certainly not from the standpoint of protecting the natural environment. Most international food transport happens via water transport, which is relatively low-emission. Road transport accounts for a mere 4–5 % of emissions related to food (Ferguson/Thompson 2021; Ritchie 2024). Ritchie also debunks the myth that food packaging is highly emission-intensive – plastic allows longer food storage, thus reducing waste. She further points out that the slogan »eat local« can have disastrous ecological consequences – especially if one considers a Brazilian using this slogan to eat local beef bred on Amazon rainforest pastures or a Swiss frequently consuming alpine lamb and beef, which impose a much heavier environmental burden than imported poultry.

Limits of localism also concern regional differences and geographical-cultural inequalities – some world regions are poor in natural resources and would face food or technological insecurity without imports (Ferguson/Thompson 2021). Furthermore, individual countries or regions specialize in certain industries, thus possessing the corresponding know-how and intellectual-productive conditions, which are hard to achieve for others (Ricardo 2004; Szczepaniak 2018). Moreover, spending larger sums on organic or local food means that part of the budget cannot be spent on other local goods, or jobs are lost by people from poorer countries, for whom low-paid and difficult work is decidedly better than none (Ferguson/Thompson 2021; Larue et al. 2022).

However, in the studied movements, environmentalism is not considered solely from the perspective of short supply chains or ethical consumption, though these arguments certainly played a role – primarily in Geneva and more strongly in the first BP faction. The aim was also to build attitudes and educate in practice: promote pro-environmental values, create circles of people for whom ecology is important, cultivate new priorities in the form of mental and shopping habits, a kind of social contagion and mimicry. As Steve Westlake points out, the example comes from above and from others. His research found that among people who stopped flying for a year due to climate change, 74 % admitted being inspired by someone else who acted similarly. This percentage rose to 85 % if the example was a recognizable or highly respected person (2022).

12 Imaginaries of Localism

What else does localism mean beyond strong small-scale entrepreneurship, short supply chains, local currency, and neighborhood community? What will the localism of the future look like? In other words, what are the *imaginaries* of localism? To

what dreamed-of future localism does today's modest localism aim? What better future is the local currency meant to herald and preview?

For Arthur (ML), the inspirations are two prominent concepts: the 15-minute city (Moreno 2024) and the doughnut post-growth economy considering planetary limits (Raworth 2018). He envisions a future where most daily-life matters can be handled quickly and efficiently – within 15 minutes on foot or by bike, one can reach the store, work, school, gym, library, or repair services. This implies a city full of greenery with minimal car traffic, instead attractive and inviting to pedestrians and cyclists. For Arthur, a city should have at most 4,000 to 10,000 inhabitants – not only for time savings but also to foster community, daily interactions, mutual responsibility, and support. In the future, production proximity would be obvious; for instance, food for city residents would be delivered directly by farmers practicing ecological permaculture on farms adjacent to the city. Its pillars include small farms, composting, soil covering with mulch, water storage in ponds or rain barrels, growing many plant species simultaneously, avoiding digging and plowing that cause soil erosion, and eschewing chemical plant protection (Kossakowska 2024). Every city would offer a *library of things* where equipment can be borrowed. According to Arthur, almost nobody needs to own a car, drill, tent, waffle iron, vacuum cleaner, or DSLR camera. Moreover, the city would feature a repair center for all kinds of items, since in the future very few new clothes, smartphones, cars, bicycles, washing machines, and refrigerators would be purchased – production has reached sufficient levels. Cities would have abundant shared spaces such as parks, cultural centers, coworking spaces, cafés, and fewer private areas. This spatial concept draws on Codha housing – a Geneva cooperative designing apartments with largen shared spaces (kitchen, living room, garden, internal courtyard) alongside minuscule individual rooms. This reduces overall usable floor area, saves building materials, and leaves more space for social squares and alleys. Aware that not everything can be decentralized, Arthur also considers regional hospitals and universities. Olivier would likely second his view: »What sense would there be in having a CT scanner in every village?«

Localization of production with ecological farmer-neighbors playing a leading role is a recurring vision in nearly every conversation about the future. Wren from BP even says:

> »Farmers should be celebrated like footballers, and maybe we should organize farming championships? (laughs) And there should be a TV show about farmers competing to have the best ideas and innovations? (laughs)«

While Wren acknowledges an important future role for local currencies, she believes staple food should not be subject to market exchange. Farmers should be compensated through social funds or sponsorships. This implies a revaluation of

professions – a farmer would hold a special place in the new occupational hierarchy as the guarantor of survival and healthy, ecological, delicious food.

In a somewhat different future vision, almost everyone becomes a farmer, and community gardens intertwine through the city – this is the view of Audrey and Olivier:

> »In the future, everyone will have to become a farmer. What is wrong with growing your own garden, your own vegetables and food? We are so disconnected from nature, even from knowing what real food actually looks like!«

As someone from a small farming family background, I instinctively grimaced at this vision, saying it sounded dystopian and I would never want to return to strawberry picking, digging in the soil, and wormy plums. My confession was met with surprise, subtle disbelief, a long pause, and careful observation of my face.

Audrey referred to an even more radical vision by Alice Holloway, a Brixton artist who inspires her future thinking. Holloway designs ethical bespoke lingerie (£ 250 per bra with fitting), lectures on clothing design, and envisions a better future where everyone is not only a farmer with their own or shared vegetable garden but also a spinner:

> »Pre-industry, spinning wasn't very recognisable as work. The drop spindle is portable, goes with you, like knitting on the train, you can spin in groups whilst you all chat. You can spin with your baby crawling around nearby, you can spin at home in the evening by the fire. Industrial spinning is too loud to be heard over, it takes place in a designated factory where someone sees you clock in and clock out, it requires many less people to just one massive machine, and of course – it makes profit for the machine owner rather than clothes for the mill worker. Not to mention the fossil fuel power sources« (Holloway 2025).

Alice Holloway regards spinning as an excellent way to connect with care and relationship building. For her, fashion could finally become true fun – a manifestation of identity and creativity, as everyone would sew their own clothes. Nobody would wear cotton from faraway countries, but only local fabrics made from the wool of community-raised rabbits, sheep, goats, silkworms, flax, or hemp.

It is hard not to notice how ahistorical and idealized this vision of pre-industrial spinning is, disregarding how poor most of the largely self-sufficient society's wardrobes were – owning shoes was a challenge (Kuciel-Frydryszak 2023). Producing flax clothing was extremely time-consuming, mainly women's work. For example, a single peasant farm in Poland annually produced roughly four shirts, trousers, a coat, and a skirt (Janicki 2024).

However, Holloway's radical localism, wherein global economic exchange virtually does not exist, did not entirely appeal to Audrey. The BP leader emphasized

the role of trade, which has the potential to build community and cultural exchange and expressed the need for global centers of knowledge production. She said many Brixton residents deeply value contact with ancestors or distant family, their culture and cuisine. She imagined Brixtonians connected not only to farmers near Brixton but also, for example, to African farmers. Relationships would be built based not only on goods transfer but on close cultural exchange. Brixtonians would undertake special trips to help on African farms, gaining respect for farming labor and establishing intercultural relations. The quality, safety, and good working conditions of agriculture would be ensured by sustainable universities located alongside farms, optimizing environmental impact and experimenting with better cultivation methods. Of course, African farmers and residents could travel to English farms for exchanges, and vice versa.

Across all these future visions, the striking features are scale: small towns, small farms and shops, short geographic and social distances between production and consumption, archaic and pre-industrial methods of clothing production. Even the grand scale of intercontinental exchange among farmers is mitigated by social proximity between them. Small is beautiful but also susceptible to cognitive, empathetic, and organizational control. Visions of a world before the steam engine come to mind – when thousands, not billions of tons of goods traveled oceans:

> »By the late 16th century, the capacity of the British fleet was estimated to be around 68,000 tons and required 16,000 sailors. Containerships built in 2022 had a capacity of 236,000 tons and a crew of 22« (Rodrigue 2024).

13 Ethical Consumption – Individual or Collective?

It is hard not to notice that, in practice, the primary strategy of local currency movements is the promotion of ethical consumption, which involves rather individual practices. While psychologist Westlake criticizes what he sees as a false dichotomy between individual and collective action (2022), Rebecca Solnit explains in her famous essay in *The Guardian* that the carbon footprint metric was invented by British Petroleum (BP) marketers to shift responsibility onto consumers (Solnit 2021). The main obstacle is not middle-class consumption but rather the production or consumption of the richest (Sharzer 2012). As energy and environmental engineering professor Marcelle McManus writes, encouraging the use of the carbon footprint concept primarily by businesses and governments rather than consumers:

> »Here lies the problem: it may no longer be in anyone's personal capacity to make changes great enough to reverse the damage already done. In a world where just 100

companies are responsible for 71% of global emissions, we need a total overhaul of the carbon-intensive systems around us instead« (McManus 2022).

Moreover, contrary to the belief that education is a universal solution, Alice Brock, Ian Williams, and Simon Kemp, studying 381 participants, show that awareness that certain individual choices could benefit the environment does not mean those choices are made (2023). Participants were asked about their environmental awareness and willingness to implement specific changes, such as switching to energy-saving light bulbs or adopting a vegan diet. Regardless of declared ecological opinions and beliefs, most people chose the simplest but least effective actions. This contradicts the often-stated view that simply explaining the seriousness of the situation will change people's behavior. All age groups opted for the easiest option. Some nuances appeared: higher-income individuals were more reluctant to limit foreign air travel, whereas those with lower incomes considered it less of a priority (Brock et al. 2023).

14 Subpolitical Consumption

Ulrich Beck, for his part, would argue that consumption and production within local currency frameworks bear the marks of subpolitical actions. The sociologist contended that in contemporary societies, centers of power are shifting, and the nineteenth-century public sphere need not resemble its twentieth- or twenty-first-century successor. Today's subpolitics involve actors operating outside party, political, or union systems, and even outside established collective forms – they emerge both bottom-up (international social movements, public opinion) and top-down (for example, through international institutions such as the World Bank or the UN). Beck includes among subpolitical domains medicine, technology, corporations, and the sphere of ethical consumption.

Key decisions once made in parliamentary halls are increasingly shaped today in private laboratories by experts, during corporate board meetings, or even … during everyday shopping. Beck regarded the decreasing democratic role of the state in favor of corporations in decision-making as a hallmark of the risk society, though he looked for hope in civil society:

> »The activity of world corporations and national governments is becoming subject to the pressure of a world public sphere. In this process, individual-collective participation in global action network is striking and decisive; citizens are discovering that the act of purchase can be a direct ballot which they can always use in a political way. Through the boycott, an active consumer society thus combines and allies with direct democracy – at a world level« (Beck 1996: 21).

The space of the shop compared to a pharmaceutical laboratory or a corporate decision office appears modest. It is quite a low-risk and safe strategy for change, especially for those with stable incomes. Even if ethical consumption is endorsed, it does not change the fact that what activists call ecological actions raise doubts and are not self-evident. Particularly since the main ML leader opposes nuclear energy, mainly due to its top-down nature and massive scale. Thus, the issue of local and ecological consumption is by no means indisputable.

15 Individual Utopias – The Longing for Agency

The belief that an individual holds real power to influence global carbon emissions borders on a nostalgia for individual agency. Perhaps this explains activists' expressed need for simplicity, small scale, transparency, a certain familial spirit, and closeness – in such a perspective, the individual voice appears more audible, distinct, and strong. In the complex world of modernity, isn't the idea that a fleeting purchase of organic coffee effects change a rather narcissistic trait of our times (Byung-Chul 2015; Lachs 2015)? Isn't it a narrowing of perspective to what is small and convenient, a renunciation of challenges in favor of easy gestures? It is not about eradicating individual virtues but about knowing their limitations – moral, class-related, economic, systemic, cultural, or simply statistical. There is a reason that criticizing authority – even in private conversations – is prohibited in authoritarian countries – the question is how much power words have and how much is manic fear of losing control over minds. Excessive faith in individual agency may, though need not, lead to overinvestment in the ego – especially if accompanied by moralistic zeal – rather than to sensible collective action.

Inspired by psychoanalysis, Zygmunt Bauman metaphorically called this intoxication with individual agency a nostalgia for the womb (*back to the womb*). This is a conviction typical for the ego in the pre-Oedipal phase, that there is no difference between the external and internal world (caretaker and child). The subject feels omnipotent because this is the moment when caretakers instantly respond to and fulfill the child's needs. Simultaneously, it is a period of complete – albeit largely unconscious – dependency. It is governed by the pleasure principle – the child cannot yet delay needs but seeks immediate gratification of biological drives, and any delay causes immense frustration. Comfort is regarded as the highest value.

According to Bauman, this developmental phase of the subject is a metonymy of contemporary individual utopias – a phenomenon of privatization of utopias, egocentric utopias of the self, which regard one's own body as the main tool of agency. Bauman bitterly points out:

> »Some others, disenchanted and exasperated by hopes addicted to frustration, invest their aspirations in turning back to the past. But it seems that a large majority among us don't care one way or the other (either about the future or about the past), busying themselves instead in finding ways to disarm the unendurable prospects with gadgets likely to deliver small—but day in, day out—satisfactions: cutting down on ambitions and expectations, having first retreated into deceptively safe shelter of self-concern and self-reference« (2017: 120–121).

The presentism of individual utopias promises immediate gratification. Purchasing certain products and services, frequenting certain places, or impeccably caring for one's body are supposed to bring fulfillment. Today, one of the most popular utopian thought spaces is, for example, the wellness industry, which in France is the third-largest market after IT and tourism (Teste 2023), or, of course, social media aestheticizing life and portraying it as a source of unrelenting smiles. Combining Bauman's language with that of philosopher Byung-Chul Han, the individual utopian tools' task paradoxically seems not so much satisfaction as a perpetuum mobile of dissatisfaction to be quelled by chasing the next mirage. ›The gap between the real ego and the ego ideal then brings forth auto-aggression‹, writes the German thinker in *The Burnout Society* (Byung-Chul 2015: 46). Individual utopias brim with excess positivity. They obey an exhausting logic based on the regime of success, the imperative of happiness, the absolutization of health, and an optimization frenzy. These utopias are not portrayed as illusions but as something attainable and close to reality – as positive possibilities. Their flip side and dark face is depression born of disappointment in oneself and the world, as Han says.

To some extent, local currencies engage this logic of individual utopia by supporting ethical businesses and ecological consumption, promising that purchases hold a significant agency. This is all the more surprising given that these are social movements strongly engaging rhetoric of collective social change. James S. Ormrod in his book *Fantasies of Social Movements* observes:

> »[Social] movements are now less concerned with challenging the external social and political structures they inhabit and more concerned with the inner lives of their participants. This is no doubt a correlate of the emergence of a ›post material politics‹« (2014: 8).

Ormrod points out that contemporary social movements have clearly become aestheticized and increasingly employ strategies of identity expression, play, and even commodities – in the form of t-shirts, mugs, or other gadgets – to manifest their presence, sometimes creating actual enclaves of hedonistic ›better living‹ beyond the noise of mainstream concerns. The researcher uses the concept of fantasy, emphasizing that participation in social movements increasingly satis-

fies the emotional and social needs of their members, rather than serving deep, strategic social change.

In my imagination, the image of hippies – the metropolitan youth fascinated with self-sufficiency – immediately emerges. The hippies bought rural land, gentrified it, built temporary shelters, and proclaimed that real political change is impossible, and revolution is born in the psyche of the individual intertwined inseparably with the body (Turner 2006).[12]

16 Consuming Anti-Consumption: A Paradox

It is rather paradoxical that among activists for local currencies, *imaginaries* design a future of communal localism, while *expectations* promote individualistic ethical consumption. It must be conceded that although in practice belonging to the local currency community means participation in trade with local and ecological goods, the process inviting it is full of small talks, lectures, meetings, activist conceptual and promotional work. They open a field for questions about the nexus of the financial system with the environment, about the best production methods, the importance of biodiversity, the aim and meaning of running a business, and provoke alternative thinking. Increasingly seldom do we observe authorities having the courage to make unpopular decisions; society should thus acquire the courage to articulate problems usually ignored. This is not ordinary ethical consumption but consumption involving quite an unusual currency, questioning the established order. It sparks a lively discussion beyond the realm of shops – including financial and public institutions such as Banque Alternative Suisse, London Mutual Credit Union, the BP Pay What You Can social café, the Geneva city office, and the Lambeth borough office, to which Brixton belongs. Nevertheless, this article encourages further research into eco-habitus and how ecological imagination is grounded in class beliefs, as well as reflection on ecological agency actors.

The tension between individual and collective strategies of change remains intrinsic to the movements under study. Their dynamics oscillate between these two levels of action. At times, they resemble Bauman's notion of individual utopias, grounded in the belief in the ego's omnipotence and the pursuit of immediate gratification through a somewhat hedonistic sense of agency. At other moments, they evoke Beck's idea of subpolitics, which reminds us that the spaces of the pub-

12 Fred Turner identified two main groups within the counterculture as ideal types. Hippies belong to the New Communalists, an escapist faction turning away from politics in favor of individual consciousness change, understood as the main driver of social change. The other faction is the New Left, which fought against the Vietnam War, political prisoners, and discrimination.

lic sphere are fluid; that consumer boycotts can serve as effective tools of influence; and that reflexive consumption can become a site of embodied public debate.

A useful umbrella term that helps to link and interpret the different phenomena making up the localism examined here is that of hipster economy. This concept refers to a post-hippie, post-Fordist vision of economic life beyond alienation – one that values individual creativity expressed through running socially grounded local businesses and sees the market, together with conscious consumption, as instruments of social change. BP and ML can be seen as hipster money – nostalgic, utopian, yet deeply entangled in class complexities. The eco-habitus, in turn, constitutes a mode of distinction grounded in values of land, cosmopolitan localism, and environmental care aimed at minimizing carbon footprints.

The hipster economy thus offers a framework for interpreting localism as a utopia formed within particular social parameters – envisioned by highly educated, predominantly well-off and white urban dwellers, for whom rurality is more easily idealized. Yet, a persistent problem with utopias is that they are often imagined by those who possess the temporal and material resources to do so (Neima 2021). Imagination, after all, always operates within structural constraints.

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