

How Do Ordinary Swiss People Represent and Engage with Environmental Issues? Grappling with Cultural Repertoires

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Abstract

This paper studies how ordinary people in Switzerland represent and engage with environmental issues in daily practices. Bringing together conceptual developments in cultural sociology and social practice theory, the paper argues that cultural repertoires strongly shape how representations and forms of engagement play out. It identifies two main repertoires of social and environmental change: adaptation and transformation. The adaptation repertoire is reformist and aligned with individualism and the capitalist growth-paradigm; the transformation repertoire consists of a critique of the market society and calls for systemic change. Using qualitative in-depth interviews and a random survey of residents of Western Switzerland, the analyses show that most people's representations and engagements with environmental issues relate to the dominant repertoire of adaptation, which appears to be very compatible with existing social practices. Although people hint at limits to the adaptation repertoire, only very few of our study participants relate to the transformative repertoire.

Keywords

sustainability, social practice theory, cultural repertoires, consumers and consumption, culture, climate change

Introduction

The question of what strategies to pursue in order to address the pressing issue of climate change is of great importance for our global society, with an urgent need for societal transformation as stipulated in the IPCC 1.5°C special report. When it comes to the role everyday people might play in such a transformation, research has found that sustainable energy consumption initiatives (SECIs) aimed at households focus either on changes in individual behavior (48.2 percent) or changes in technology (26.4 percent; Jensen, Genus, and Vadovics 2018). However, the reliance on efficient technology or behavioral change has been criticized by scholars in sustainable consumption studies (Cohen and Murphy 2001; Fahy and Rau 2013; Maniates 2001; Shove 2010).

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An emerging alternative narrative around transformative change challenges the growth paradigm and calls for systemic solutions; these involve questioning our growth addiction (van Griethuysen 2010), proposing upper and lower limits to consumption (Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014), challenging the “bad habits” of capitalism (Willhite 2016), aiming for sufficiency in its different interpretations (Shove 2017; Spengler 2016), or achieving sustainable wellbeing (Gough 2017), to name but a few approaches.

In both dominant and critical accounts, everyday people are often seen as key actors for environmental change, in their dual role as citizens and consumers. In this paper, we focus on their perspective and ask: how do ordinary people represent and engage with environmental issues in daily practices? Bringing together conceptual developments in cultural sociology and social practice theory, our main analytical tool is the concept of cultural repertoires. Our hypothesis is that cultural repertoires—or sets of available cultural accounts and representations people draw from to make sense of their actions (Swidler 2001)—strongly shape how representations and forms of engagement play out. We identify two main repertoires of social and environmental change: adaptation and transformation, which both contain prescriptions or guidelines for action at both the individual and collective level. The dominant repertoire is that of adaptation—adapting production and consumption without challenging the economic and political order—resulting in the main prescriptions of micro-gestures and technological fixes, along with collective regulations such as eco-labels. This repertoire is compatible with existing social practices, Western individualism, capitalist development, and people’s representations of the good life. The transformation repertoire is much less prominent and consists of a critique of the market society and the growth paradigm, along with prescriptions around sufficiency, reduction, and more generally, radical political and economic change.

Our empirical findings are based on a mixed-method design, involving data from a study of household energy consumption in Western Switzerland (2015–2017). We draw on the qualitative part of this study, which consisted of in-depth interviews with households ($n = 46$) around their energy consumption practices. Our analysis of these data allows us to show the repertoires and prescriptions people refer to when speaking about their representations of and engagements with environmental issues and how they relate to social practices. We then analyze a survey ($n = 538$) of Western Switzerland. Beyond generalization, the quantitative analysis based on this random sample gives us the opportunity to assess people self-identifying as voluntary simplifiers, and thus relate their discourses and practices to the transformative repertoire.

This study contributes to scholarship on sustainable consumption by taking up Evans’ (2018) call to reintegrate the role of culture into the study of consumption. Discussing people’s use of repertoires, and the incompatibilities and points of tension they reveal, we highlight the enabling and constraining role of culture for people’s representations and engagements toward sustainable consumption. We begin by introducing our conceptual framework by discussing the two repertoires of environmental change and the compatibility of this approach with social practices theories. We then introduce our methodology and the research site of Western Switzerland. The empirical results are presented in two parts, first a qualitative analysis followed by the quantitative study. We conclude with a discussion around the relevance of our approach and implications for social change.

Conceptual Framework: Representations of Social Change

How ordinary people understand social change can be related to cultural accounts and representations. In cultural sociology, the concept of cultural repertoires (Lamont and Thévenot 2000; Swidler 2001) offers a view of culture as a tool-kit (Swidler 1986), a contextually limited, yet varied set of available cultural accounts and representations people draw from to make sense of their actions or inactions, as well as to justify them (Johnston, Szabo, and Rodney 2011).

According to Ann Swidler (2001), the ways people engage with and refer to cultural repertoires are multiple; they may use them as justifications for what they do, but also for instance as clichés from which they want to distance themselves. People can quite easily switch from one cultural narrative to another, if the situation requires so, and notwithstanding any potential contradictions between the repertoires. In ad hoc fashion, people use the repertoires that are available, convenient, and adapted toward making sense of a situation. Which parts of the repertoire people will draw upon depends on the availability of discourses and on people's access to them. This relates to cultural repertoires in their discursive manifestation, as guidelines for action or what has been termed "prescriptions" (Godin and Sahakian 2018; Plessz et al. 2016). An example of a prescription might be a campaign to promote cycling to work, or an offer to compensate carbon emissions when purchasing a flight.

Although repertoires include prescriptions, the relation to what people actually do is far from evident. The cultural repertoires perspective sees only a loose coupling between culture and action. According to Swidler (2001:161), culture links to action by "structuring the external environment of meanings that surround actors," for instance, in the form of institutions. However, other approaches, such as Vaisey's (2009) dual process model, suggest that culture may also structure action from within actors, not as consciously available justification and accounts but rather as deeply embodied and largely unconscious schemes of values, perceptions, and dispositions, such as in Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*. Social practice theories can add to this discussion, as they have been conceptualized in recent years and with an analytical focus on the doings and sayings of everyday life, with extensive literature in the field of consumption studies. For Schatzki, Cetina, and von Savigny (2001), practices are "embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding" (p. 11). Studying what people do in everyday life—from routinized activities such as cycling to work, or habitual activities such as recycling a jar—can then reveal something about cultural meanings below a discursive level. Cultural repertoires can therefore have a discursive and nondiscursive manifestation.

Repertoires of Environmental Change

Scholars of sustainable consumption have noted two broad and clearly divergent cultural narratives of social change for environmental aims. The naming of these dichotomies differs in the literature: strong and weak sustainability (Fuchs and Lorek 2005); reformist, reconfiguration, and revolutionary approaches (Geels et al. 2015); a distinction between efficiency and sufficiency (Shove 2017; Spengler 2016); or "business as usual approaches," as opposed to social innovations (Seyfang 2008). These manifold dichotomies all have a common thread, distinguishing between more radical, systemic approaches that critique the market economy and growth paradigm, and reformative approaches that advocate adjustments within the existing economic and political order. Building on Romain Felli's (2016) analysis of the environmental movement, we suggest to call these repertoires "adaptation" and "transformation." The adaptation repertoire is reformist and aligned with individualism and the capitalist growth-paradigm; for Felli, "The great adaptation responds to the climate crisis by expanding the market, rather than restricting it" (p. 17; translation from French), exemplified by the promotion of more efficient technologies. What characterizes the transformative repertoire is systemic change or what Felli calls "a counter-movement towards the protection of society: against the extension of the market . . ." (p. 202), exemplified by absolute reductions in production and consumption. The degrowth movement is an example of how this cultural repertoire is being discussed and, in some cases, practiced. While this account is clearly more marginal, it is not absent from the public sphere.

In relating these repertoires to social change, they both include prescriptions, which we understand as guidelines for action. Prescriptions can either be about individual actions, or actions at

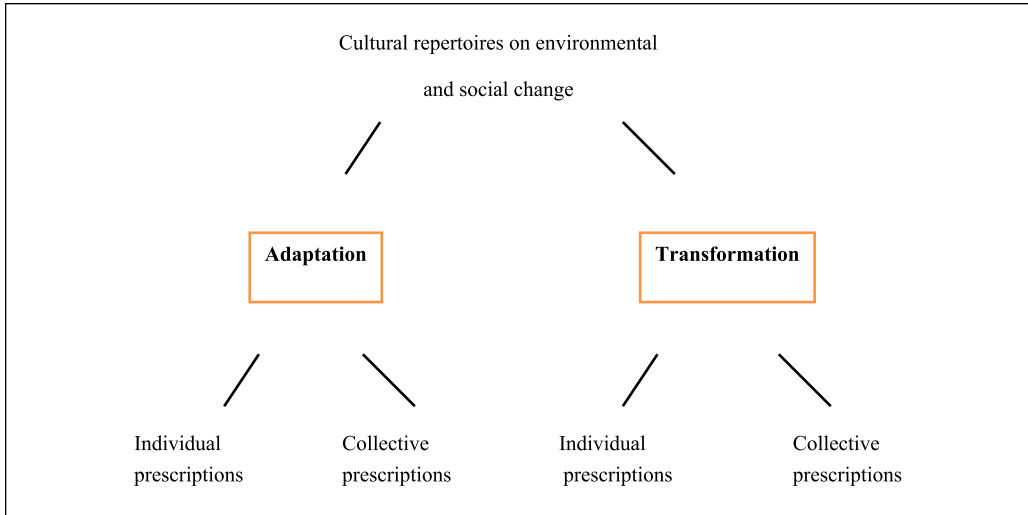


Figure 1. Cultural repertoires and associated prescriptions.

the collective level, as illustrated in Figure 1. In the case of the adaptation repertoire, individual prescriptions would include, for instance, calls for micro-gestures such as turning off the lights or the purchase of energy-efficient light bulbs. Prescriptions at the collective level emphasize the role of politics and regulation toward environmental aims and social change. They can take the form of energy labels that are a result of regulatory frameworks. In the case of the transformative repertoire, one example could be the prescriptions around voluntary simplicity lifestyles. When they focus on individual wellbeing, this may translate into actions such as reducing unsustainable consumption. A collective interpretation of transformation is contested: For some, it implies more radical actions challenging the economic and political order, thus transformative of society overall; for others, collective action toward changing systems of production and consumption are sufficient, in that they exemplify noncapitalist values and demonstrate the potential for change, albeit often on a small scale. The prescriptions around adaptation are clearly more dominant, as we will demonstrate in our discussion below on research results.

Methods and Research Site

In this paper, we use a mixed methods approach combining qualitative in-depth interviews, which took place in the Swiss (French-speaking) cities of Lausanne and Geneva between 2015 and 2017 ($N = 46$), followed by a random survey of the French-speaking part of Switzerland conducted in 2017 ($n = 538$). The qualitative research involved in-depth interviews and observations. The theoretical sampling strategy aimed for diversity, in considering different housing types, household composition, and socioeconomic profiles, all of which can have an influence on energy usage. Gender and age were also captured in our respondent matrix, with a bias toward female respondents (36 out of 46) who were more available in the daytime. This bias also reflects the unequal distribution of domestic chores in Switzerland, with more women than men responsible for laundry and cooking (Henchoz and Wernli 2010), the consumption domains of interest for this energy study. Middle-income households (19), along with lower income (13) and higher income (14) households, are represented; of the higher-income households, 11 self-identify as being part of the expatriate community, which resulted in a separate analysis on affluent and mobile households (see Sahakian 2017).

The research project focused on understanding social norms in relation to everyday practices. The semistructured interview guide began with discussions about the habits and routines of everyday life in relation to interrelated practices, such as preparing a meal and entertaining. The design of the study involved not asking questions specifically about energy or environmental sustainability until the end of the interview; the last discussions on how people represent energy and environmental change are the focus of this paper, including responses to a set of questions focused on the future. Using scenarios that implied resource constraints, people were asked to envision a desirable future, and how they might handle hypothetical reductions in access to energy (see Sahakian and Bertho 2018 for a discussion on the use of visual methods). All interviews were transcribed and coded using NVivo 11.4.3, with both an inductive and deductive approach. The two researchers responsible for coding conducted the interviews and crosschecked and discussed each other's coding. In a second phase, key findings from the qualitative study were translated into a series of questions for the survey.

For the quantitative analyses, we use a random CATI (computer-assisted telephone interviewing) survey including questions about household energy use in relation to practices, as well as questions related to environmental responsibilities and sustainability. We use this random sample to construct a typology of three ecological profiles. We distinguish survey respondents according to their individual compliance with prescriptions of adaptive and transformative cultural repertoires of environmental change. We identify the voluntary simplifiers with a question asking about their engagement in degrowth (see Appendix A for exact question wording and recoding). We classify all those who respond affirmatively (“Totally” and “To some extent”) to this question as voluntary simplifiers. We identify the micro-gesturers using three questions about small everyday actions to limit the waste of resources—the questions asked about turning off the light to save energy, limiting the use of water, and turning appliances off. For each question, we recoded those who say they do so “Totally” or “To some extent” as yes. The micro-gesturers category includes all the respondents who answered positively to at least one of these three questions and who are not voluntary simplifiers. All the respondents who are neither voluntary simplifiers nor micro-gesturers constitute the non-engaged category—those who do not adopt pro-environmental practices in their everyday life.

For the analyses of everyday practices, we use questions about doing the laundry, preparing meals, buying food, and using different forms of mobility. For laundry and cooking practices, we build on questions about sharing appliances, possessing goods, and using them. For the consumption of food, we ask about the different venues of shopping (farmer's market or supermarket), the types of products (regional or organic), and consumption reduction. Last, for mobility, we ask about private car usage and flying for holidays. For all the answers that are not already dichotomous, we recoded the categories using the two positive answers as yes and the two negative ones as no.

For the analyses of responsibilities and political actions, we use two sets of question, one asking who is responsible for environmental change, and the other asking about engagements in civil society—donating either time or money to associations. For the question about responsibility to protect the environment, we recoded the four answers to have dichotomous variables. As respondents tend to agree that a varied set of actors are responsible for protecting the environment and reducing energy consumption, we discriminate answers using only the category “Totally agree” to construct the positive answers. For the two questions asking about involvement with civil society organizations, we also construct dichotomous variables. Here, we use “Not at all” and “Not really” to construct the negative category and the other two for the positive one. In Appendix B we present summary statistics for all variables used, and in Appendix C we compare the three ecological profiles on key sociodemographic variables (i.e., sex, nationality, age, education, and income). We do not observe any statistically significant differences, except that the voluntary simplifiers are more likely to be over 60 years old.

To contextualize the study, we provide a brief introduction to the research site. Switzerland is a wealthy country, it has high levels of consumption and human-originating carbon dioxide emissions per capita estimated at 5.9 tons for 2010, compared with a world average of 4.6 tons (similar to France and below the United Kingdom, at 8.5 tons). More than a fourth of total energy (28.2 percent) and a third of electricity (32.8 percent) are consumed by households (OFEN 2016). Switzerland has an historically and comparatively strong environmental movement (Kriesi et al. 1994) and more generally speaking, a vibrant civil society (Maloney and Rossteutscher 2007). Given the cultural differences in a country that boasts four national language, the focus of this paper on French-speaking Switzerland is warranted. The Western or French-speaking regions of the country represent approximately one fourth of the total population.

Research Results: Qualitative Findings

In our analysis of the qualitative results, we first underline the main repertoire that people draw from when explaining their representations of environmental issues. We then discuss how people represent change in relation to individual responsibility, and toward more collective forms of engagement. We conclude with the analysis of an interview which exemplified the voluntary simplicity lifestyle which is part of the sufficiency repertoire.

The Ubiquity of the Adaptation Repertoire

Although the words “sustainable” or “sustainability” were rarely used in the interviews, discussions around how people represent forms of engagement toward environmental change tend to follow well-established cultural narratives of sustainability. These normative discourses around energy and environmental issues involve three key aspects. First, the recognition that environmental concerns are significant, at the individual and societal level, but also for future generations. Second, an emphasis on individual responsibility for addressing the problem. Finally, a faith in technological solutions to “fix” environmental problems.¹

Overall, most of the research respondents agreed that ecological or environmental concerns are important in relation to energy usage. Or to put it another way, nobody claimed that such concerns are not significant at a personal and societal level. Contrary to what has been observed in the United States (Lorenzen 2014), the issue of environmental sustainability is thus not controversial in Western Switzerland. In discourse, caring about the environment is a normative prescription that people easily draw from when the question of energy usage, as a limited resource, is placed on the table. For instance, when asked whether she would consider reducing her energy usage and if this would influence her energy bills, Adrienne² (mother of two, affluent household) claims that any decision to reduce energy usage would be motivated by ecological reasons. Saving money on an electricity bill is not important to her, “because we have enough money, it’s more of an ecological concern, yes.” This also reflects the relative low cost of electricity in relation to overall household expenses in Switzerland, even among less affluent households. A concern for future generations is used as a main argument for justifying such a concern. As Pauline (mother of three, living in a co-ownership building) stated, “Yes, yes, I don’t want to leave my grand-children a planet that has been completely deteriorated, degraded . . . Yes, that’s for sure. We really must be careful. One must really pay attention and be careful.” The main idea being that what we do today will influence generations to come, and therefore it would be somehow selfish or blind sighted not to consider the repercussions of current modes of energy usage in the long term.

However, when it comes to expressing how environmental aims might be achieved, we witnessed a preference for technological fixes and individual micro-gestures—drawn from the adaptation repertoire. The prevalence of this repertoire is further illustrated by how people talked

about their actual or potential actions to reduce their energy consumption or engage with environmental issues. The responses primarily fell into three areas: first, privileging micro-gestures, which are relatively simple and demand little effort, such as turning off lights when leaving a room, or not allowing standby energy consumption by unplugging appliances. For example, Karen (student, low-income household) explains that she does not know the cost of energy bills, as her mother pays them, but that her mother is very careful in making sure lights are turned off when not in use. Second, there is an assumption that any new purchase of appliances should be energy efficient, particularly for larger appliances such as refrigerators or washing machines. Nathalia (mother of three, affluent household) explains her purchasing decisions for a new appliance in the home: “. . . obviously you look at the little grade A B C . . . when I buy a machine I’m expecting it to be energy efficient . . . So I’m not putting in the effort, I’m expecting that the society’s putting in the effort.” Third, structural and technological changes could be made to buildings, such as proper isolation or changing the heating system. In these cases, there is a notion that some financial investments must be made in order to consume less energy, but that environmental considerations must also be factored in. A mother of two, living in an affluent household outside of Lausanne, explains her decision to invest in a new heating system in this way:

And so, we looked at all the possibilities, and my husband who is a very financial person, he told me: There’s only one solution, to install a fuel-oil heating system, because for the other options, we would never get a return on the investment for the whole rest of our lives living here! But of course, that’s not the only thing that matters, and we said, and for me really, geopolitical and environmental reasons are key. I told myself: if in 2016 I install a fuel-based heating system, it’s really not 21st century. It’s really living in the past . . . because oil is responsible for so many problems in the world, here also in our country, problems that arrive at our doorstep, and for the environment, that’s for sure.

In contrast, very few people consider changing their everyday patterns of consumption in a way that might be interpreted as more aligned with the transformation repertoire. While mobility and space heating are two of the highest impact categories when it comes to household energy usage, only two people out of the 46 interviewed suggested replacing car transport by bicycle or reducing indoor heating (Tukker et al. 2006). Similarly, the idea of sharing appliances did not come up spontaneously in interviews—people only talked about it when prompted. The notion of engaging politically in voting for renewable energies or supporting associations that promote renewables also did not come up. Overall, for most of our interviewees, the adaptation repertoire seemed to be the only available repertoire with which to think about sustainability; transformative prescriptions were not mentioned unless prompted. And if, as we will see, the question of responsibility and potential political action did come up when people started questioning the dominant prescriptions of individual actions and technological efficiency, people largely remained within the repertoire of adaptation.

Adaptation Achieved through Individual Action

When it comes to change being presented first as an individual responsibility—in that people can individually contribute to environmental change as consumers in a marketplace and through micro-gestures—people easily engage with a series of actions that require little effort as a contribution to environmental change. In the interviews, we observed that people first engage in actions that represent “low hanging fruit”—easily accessible actions that are associated to minor changes and costs. This is not surprising, since many of the micro-gestures suggested in public campaigns are of this nature—turning the lights off when leaving a room, recycling, and so on. As observed by Charlotte Louise Jensen et al. (2018), this reflects the vast majority of SECIs aimed at

households in Europe. Consider the examples given by Pauline (mother of three), in relation to their engagement to reduce energy consumption:

Yup! We try . . . Well, we didn't install a bathtub and we recycle a maximum of things . . . We don't throw away . . . really. I take the larger things to the recycling center, clothes go in the container there. Batteries, things . . . well, everything that is . . . All appliances, I take them back to the store that sells appliances. I try not to pollute too much, I don't use fabric softener in my laundry for example . . . I have not yet passed onto using organic detergent but well, I try to buy organic fruits and vegetables, to use few, very few pre-prepared meals, things like that . . . I put in less than half the doses that are suggested by the different products, like washing liquid and all that. I use household products that are all eco-something . . . I use lots of vinegar for example, in the home . . . Well, certainly I could do more but . . . well.

She goes on to explain that when her second car broke down, they bought a new one—petrol, rather than diesel, as a more ecological choice; the car in itself is not questioned, as a high impact consumer good. The household has two cars and organizes family holidays that involve flying long-distance, an example of the contradictions resulting from the focus on individual responsibility. People readily list actions taken toward caring for the environment, such as small individual changes (not using softener, buying organic), and faith in technology (buying petrol over diesel), or the dominant adaptation repertoire interpreted through individual change and technological efficiency. However, they stop short of challenging their living standards and expectations (“Certainly I could do more but . . . well”). This listing of different individual actions was a common theme in several interviews.

Even more so, while this is very much in line with the type of actions that the dominant repertoire suggests, it seems that this repertoire can also constitute a convenient way of framing certain practices done for other reasons in environmental terms. For instance, the use of vinegar for cleaning is a habit in many Swiss families, but not something that is necessarily motivated by a concern for the environment. Nevertheless, it can become another proof of one's dedication by putting it in terms of ecological micro-gestures. Another case in point might be her example that they did not install a bathtub; environmental reasons might be behind this decision. but so could cost considerations or personal taste. This interviewee or others are not deliberately deceitful. The repertoire allows for reinterpreting certain common practices in new terms. This is akin to what Josee Johnston et al. (2011) call creative uses of the dominant repertoire of ethical eating, for instance, by people who go shopping by bus because they cannot afford a car, but can present this practice as one of the ways they pursue ethical food practices. Knowledge of the repertoire is enough to be able to present practices done for various reasons in a different and socially desirable light.

The individualisation of environmental responsibility is so thoroughly embedded in people's representations and practices that it is difficult for them to conceive of societal change without relating this to their own need to engage individually in such a process. But doing so, the goal of environmental change can appear as incompatible with other life goals and aspirations, such as wanting to maintain certain standards when it comes to possessions and lifestyles (cars, holidays, homes). To be sure, in many instances, the co-existence of these opposing aspirations can be a happy one. Through the individual responsibility prescription, the burden of environmental responsibility is on consumption actions and behavior changes that represent low significance and costs (not using softener when doing laundry), and can thus be used as a sort of compensation for not engaging with more significant changes in lifestyles that go beyond micro-gestures. While this is seldom explicit, people clearly draw boundaries between spheres that they submit to micro-gestures and others that are not touched by them. In many instances, interviewees explained their environmentally friendly actions in one part of the interview, then go on and explain how the family also enjoys flying for family vacations.

Tensions Leading to More Collective Interpretations of How Change Could Occur

Ordinary people, who are aware that micro-gestures may not suffice given the scope of environmental and energy-related issues, express frustration about feeling pressure they cannot live up to. They might feel guilty or even angry. This can also be related to a lack of personal resources to engage in change, including financial resources but also time and personal competencies—"if I could, I would do more." Even within the same households, different members could have different standards and expectations when it comes to "saving energy," with sentiments of frustration expressed, in this case, by the mother, Daphné (mother of three, middle income), the person who is taking most of the actions:

. . . I realize now, at home, there are multi-sockets for plugs with a switch on a certain number of things, but it's me who has to take care of that, no one else . . . And then, after a while, one feels: "it's always me who has to do it, and so, it's annoying!"

The gendered dimension of environmental change was a constant theme throughout the in-depth interviews, as many of the solutions proposed toward reducing energy usage were seen as creating more work for women—in an already unequal distribution of domestic chores. Some frustration might also be emerging from misunderstanding of energy or environmental issues, or what the main priorities are when it comes to environmental impacts. Take Sylvie (mother of one child, middle-income household):

I am not sure yet, for energy consumption, what is best: to do the dishes by hand or not, because there are sort of two theories—some say dishwashers are better because they wash all at once. So I have no clue in fact.

People are confused about priorities related to micro-gestures, and they do not see how to change more fundamentally their living standards. Persons willing to change their environmental practices face difficulties in understanding what to do.

However, while the sense that micro-gestures might not suffice leads to the expression of frustration, it can also make people point at possible ways out. This plays out in two ways. First, interviewees express the idea that each person could be doing more, and that more individuals doing their bit could lead to change. In other words, pointing out the limits of individual responsibility for change may lead people to insist even more on its importance, if only everyone did her part. For example, Myriam, a nurse from a lower income household explains,

I tell myself that, in the end, maybe we are only a small droplet in the universe but if everyone do their small share, well maybe we can manage to reverse this ecological catastrophe. But I think it's already important that our children do and that they understand why they do it, if we ask them to turn off the light or not to stay for half an hour under the shower.

Here, the individual prescription of the adaptation repertoire is thus exacerbated: Real change will come about when everybody starts doing their part. In a second scenario, the sense of limitation of the dominant repertoire can lead people to switch to prescriptions at the collective level. This means that they will not only point at the limits or difficulties they experience with the adaptation repertoire's prescriptions of individual change, but they will suggest collective paths of environmental change, bringing in the responsibility of other actors such as the state or private companies.

For example, Nathalia (mother of three, affluent household) explains in regard to new appliances that are available in the Swiss marketplace:

The government with the manufacturer should say if you're bringing a product into our country this is how it's gotta be so that my, our consumers don't have to each of, on their own make decisions . . . Where it should be more a society thing.

In several discussions and across socioeconomic groups, the responsibility of private companies was put forward in relation to outdoor lighting. The message that individuals should turn off lights when not in use has been well understood, and the use of energy efficient light bulbs was widespread in the households we visited. Yet around this dominant narrative on the need to save on energy for lighting, there seems to be incomprehension at the fact that commercial spaces and outdoor advertising would be allowed to benefit from lighting that serves no useful purpose, at least in the view of the respondents. As Christine, a 75-year-old retired nurse stated, "I find that it's really a huge waste to leave shops lit up. But well, I guess it's against theft? But I find it just incredible that lights are on all night." Without going further in attributing responsibility, this respondent pointed at the fact that the rules for light use seem to be different for certain actors, and this inconsistency leads her to expand the notion of individual responsibility and bring in companies, a sentiment that was echoed by other participants.

An Example of Voluntary Simplicity—The Case of Robert

By fortuitous chance, our qualitative research sample included a person engaged in a voluntary simplicity lifestyle. Robert is in his 20s, lives alone, and has a very low annual energy bill. He has a master's in development studies, deep knowledge of energy issues, and is currently employed as a train conductor. He gets around the city by bicycle and aspires to live in a cooperative housing development and to reduce his work time.

Robert takes up and follows prescriptions pertaining to the adaptation repertoire, such as micro-gestures and technological efficiency, when it comes to engagement toward environmental issues and in relation to his own consumption practices. When asked whether he leaves on standby lights and appliances when he's not home, he responds with an adamant: "Never!" save for the highly energy efficient refrigerator which runs continuously. He explains that it was the first A+++ model that was available at the time of purchase, referring to the European energy label ratings. When asked whether he turns off the lights when he leaves the apartment, he had an equally resounding "Always!" However, his consumption practices aim more toward sufficiency than efficiency, in that he is not seeking to accumulate more and more products, and clearly prefers to borrow, share, and purchase second-hand, rather than buy new. The appliances in his household are quite minimal: a water boiler, a radio, two heating plates for cooking, a vacuum cleaner, and a shared laundry room in the basement of the building. He also subscribes to a community-supported agriculture service, for a bimonthly provisioning of vegetables.

His representations and forms of engagement are both individual and collective. He has a sense that he must do his part but at the same time feels that others should do the same. "Me, I don't want to be the only one to be making any efforts . . . I think I'm going to wait for others to do their part before (I do more)," while going on to explain that he could still become a vegetarian or avoid exotic fruits to further minimize his environmental impact. Later in the interview, when we discuss energy reductions that might be necessary in the future, he states as follows:

Me, if everyone is involved, I'm completely for it. Completely. I think that power outages should be implemented, because we talk about transitioning out of nuclear but we will never achieve, at least not in the long-term, a replacement of 40 percent of our energy . . . that means 40 percent *less* energy usage.

Or again later in the interview:

Table 1. Ecological Profiles among French-speaking Swiss Residents.

	Voluntary simplifiers	Micro-gesturers	Non-engaged
%	8.4	49.3	42.4
<i>n</i>	45	228	265

And me, all I ask is that we place limits on me, because I'm a *homo oeconomicus* true and true, right, I look after my own interests, and so I do want constraints imposed on me but I don't want to be had, to be the only one who . . . Because if I reduce my energy consumption and know that someone else is increasing elsewhere, it would not have any effect overall, on the contrary, and I would have allowed for someone to consume more, so, me, I'm completely for reducing but then, we have to do it all together, and a rationing of energy would be an excellent solution for that, it's a real topic of importance.

Here, Robert refers to prescriptions that are in line with the transformative repertoire—collectively imposed consumption limits. He also advocates for transformation through collective action as an activist in the *Réseau Objection de Croissance*—ROC Geneva (a network that contests the growth paradigm), and as an active member of two housing cooperatives in Geneva seeking to transform the housing sector toward socio-ecological forms of living, through participatory forms of engagement.

Overall, Robert seems to be more aligned with the repertoire of transformation, tied to political economy approaches and deep ecology movements. This relates to his educational background and political socialization in activism, which means that he is familiar with the transformative repertoire, such as when he states that ecological problems are fundamentally incompatible with capitalist objectives. He discusses at length the prescriptions of a pamphlet called “*Redémarrer la Suisse*” (Kickstarting Switzerland) inspired by the 2000-Watt society initiative.³ He also discusses how development and ecological issues have both lead to “solutions” based on individual wealth accumulation and private interests, leading to what he calls “. . . extremely wealthy lifestyles that are completely contradictory with the possibilities that others might also improve their quality of life,” toward a sense of distributional justice.

Research Results: Quantitative Findings

While the qualitative research demonstrates that people are only vaguely aware of an alternative cultural repertoire of transformation, save for the case study example presented above, there is a need to further explore the extent to which people represent and engage with this alternative. In the quantitative survey, we asked people explicitly if they practice degrowth and forms of voluntary simplicity (in French, *Je pratique la décroissance*, “*simplicité volontaire*”). We consider three ecological profiles: ordinary people who engage with voluntary simplicity, those who adopt ecological micro-gestures, and those who do not engage with any of these.

A first assessment of the prevalence of these three groups in Table 1 shows that voluntary simplifiers represent a minority among ordinary people: only 8.4 percent of French-speaking Swiss identify as voluntary simplifiers. The micro-gesturers who featured prominently in the qualitative interviews represent 49.3 percent of our sample, more surprisingly those who are not engaged—they do not practice voluntary simplicity and they do not adopt pro-environmental micro-gestures—represent 42.4 percent of our sample. It is important to note here that we construct mutually exclusive categories for our analyses but that many voluntary simplifiers also adopt micro-gestures to reduce their ecological footprint—a majority turns off the light (77.8 percent), avoids letting the water run (88.9 percent), and turns off appliances when not in use (65.5 percent).

Table 2. Everyday Practices across Ecological Profiles.

	Voluntary simplifier	Micro-gesturers	Non-engaged	<i>n</i>
Laundry practices				
Uses shared laundry	73.3	60.0	60.1	538
Does not have a tumble dryer	47.4	48.0	55.1	469
Does not use tumble dryer to save energy	18.4	11.9	7.4	469
Preparing meals				
Would agree to share appliances	31.8	35.3	<u>26.1</u>	528
Has useless appliances	50.0	60.8	<u>66.4</u>	535
Likes to have latest models of appliances	8.9	16.3	20.2	532
Buying food				
Shop at the market	88.9	70.6	<u>57.5</u>	538
Buy regional products	60.0	47.5	<u>38.2</u>	538
Buy organic	51.3	29.6	33.2	538
Shop less	55.6	18.9	18.0	
Getting around—mobility				
Moves around by car	<u>6.7</u>	80.4	76.8	538
Reduce flights for holidays	97.8	<u>25.3</u>	<u>25.8</u>	538

Note. Differences across groups are calculated using chi-square and adjusted residuals. We highlight using bold percentages that are higher than expected (adjusted residuals $>+1.96$), and we underscore those that are smaller than expected (adjusted residuals <-1.96).

The quantitative data can complement and add new elements to the finding that individual responsibility discourses are generally related to low-cost and easily accessible practices. In Table 2, we present specific practices in different life spheres and compare the answers of the different ecological profiles. Most importantly, this analysis shows that people with a more engaged ecological profile (voluntary simplifiers) are ready to change their lifestyle with regard to the most publicly debated issues such as food consumption and mobility—potentially a form of “sustainable” conspicuous consumption. Yet, when we look at possessions and practices in domains that are less publicized, issues related to how to do laundry and how to cook, we see that even the most committed to pro-environmental change are not very likely to limit consumption.

Looking in details at the empirical evidence that support this claim, Table 2 shows that there are only minor differences among the ecological profiles with regard to possessing goods. Respondents corresponding to the three profiles have very similar practices when it comes to doing their laundry—no statistically significant differences appear in this part of Table 2. Between 60.0 and 73.3 percent of respondents share their laundry appliances—a common practice in Switzerland with shared laundries in buildings, although the privatization of individual laundry machines and dryers is increasingly normalized (Sahakian and Bertho 2018). While around half of the respondents do not have a tumble dryer, between 7.4 and 18.4 percent do not use it to save energy. This number is slightly higher for the voluntary simplifiers, but the difference does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Turning to the kitchen, the micro-gesturers are more motivated to share appliances with 35.3 percent who say so compared with the 26.1 percent of non-engaged and the 31.8 percent of voluntary simplifiers. Nevertheless, a majority of micro-gesturers admits having many useless appliances (60.8 percent). With this regard, they are similar to the non-engaged. The share is lower for voluntary simplifiers but still very high with half of the respondent saying they have useless appliances. Regarding new appliances, 8.9 percent of voluntary simplifiers enjoy having the latest models. Although this number is lower than that of micro-gesturers (16.3) and non-engaged (20.2), the differences are not

statistically significant. The rather high percentage of micro-gesturers who have useless appliances (60.8) and who like to buy the latest models (16.3) corresponds to the idea that engaging in the small changes gives credit to engage in practices that are more damageable for the environment (Akenji 2014). The voluntary simplifiers—who said they engage in limiting their consumption—are equally likely to share or to possess goods than other respondents. Contrary to the idea of limiting consumption, many are not reducing their appliance acquisition, nor engaging in sharing practices.

When we turn to practices related to food consumption and mobility, which are more commonly debated in the public sphere, we notice considerable variations across ecological profiles. All differences are statistically significant in this case. In particular, the voluntary simplifiers are more likely to mention that they shop at the market (88.9 percent) and buy local (60.0 percent) and organic food (51.3 percent). Furthermore, 55.6 percent say they buy less. Table 2 shows that these food- and shopping-related practices are less diffused among the micro-gesturers and the non-engaged. The voluntary simplifiers are also more likely to change the way they move around, only 6.7 percent use private cars compared with 80.4 percent of micro-gesturers and 76.8 percent of non-engaged. Furthermore, a large majority of voluntary simplifiers do not fly for leisure (97.8 percent) while only 25.3 percent of micro-gesturers and 25.8 percent of non-engaged curtail flights.

Voluntary simplifiers thus reduce their consumption of specific products that are widely viewed as problematic for the environment—commuting by car, buying food shipped around the world, or taking cheap flights. It is interesting to note that voluntary simplifiers and micro-gesturers share some of their daily practices, shopping at the market or buying regional products. Yet they differ importantly with regard to their mobility practices. The micro-gesturers display the highest percentage of respondents who commute by car (83.6 percent) and are among the least likely to reduce flights for their holidays (18.9 percent).

Possibly, the different results we find between practices related to laundry/food preparation and practices related to mobility/food shopping reflect how the central value of material belongings is not often depicted as problematic. Our findings show that ordinary citizens question the ecological footprint of frequent flights, commuting in a private car, or shipping food across the planet, yet they seldom reconsider the accumulation of material possessions.

In-depth interview respondents indicated that they would be ready to change if others do so as well, as discussed above. In Table 3, we analyze perceived responsibilities for environmental protection across the three ecological profiles. We use a question asking who is responsible for actions related to environment protection and energy consumption. Over the whole population, the results indicate that most people see the education system as responsible (62.3), followed by private companies (38.3), individuals in general (34.5), and more specifically themselves (33.7) and, far behind, the state (13.4). We do not observe any statistically significant differences between the three groups. Similarly, in the qualitative interviews, many interviewees saw a key role for education as the primary impetus for environmental change; most did not see parents as being solely responsible for instilling a sense of environmental awareness and respect for energy resources among younger generations, but rather pointed to the responsibility of the state-led education system. Going back to Table 3, it thus seems surprising that the state takes such a back seat in survey results, but speaks to an overall finding of this study: the dominant repertoire that sees environmental change as the responsibility of individuals and technology. If education is seen as a public institution, however, then survey results also value the role of the state, albeit not in its role as a regulator but in its role as a transmitter of (eco-friendly) learning opportunities.

When it comes to collective action, our findings show that the collective prescriptions of the transformative repertoire do not appear to result in civil society engagements. In Table 4, we present two measures of civic engagement—giving time or money to associations. These

Table 3. Perceived Responsibility to Protect the Environment According to Ecological Profiles.

	Voluntary simplifier	Micro-gesturers	Non-engaged	Average	<i>n</i>
Education	68.9	63.3	59.7	62.3	525
Private business	41.9	38.0	37.9	38.3	496
Individuals	40.9	32.5	33.6	34.5	522
Myself	35.6	32.4	36.7	33.7	507
The state	15.9	12.4	13.9	13.4	494

Note. Differences across groups are calculated using chi-square and adjusted residuals. We do not find any statistically significant difference with regard to perceived responsibility across the three groups.

Table 4. Associational Engagement across Ecological Profiles.

	Voluntary simplifier	Micro-gesturers	Non-engaged	<i>n</i>
Donate money	2.2	3.8	4.4	538
Give time	2.2	8.7	7.0	538

Note. Differences across groups are calculated using chi-square and adjusted residuals. We do not find any statistically significant difference across the three groups with regard to donating money or time to associations.

questions were part of a battery of question asking about daily practices, and most items in the battery asked about environmental-related questions.⁴ Hence, it is quite possible that the respondents had in mind not giving money or time to just any associations but to pro-environmental associations. This would explain the low percentages of respondents who declare having done these activities—less than 5 percent declare having donated money (respectively 2.2, 3.8, and 4.4 percent of the voluntary simplifiers, micro-gesturers, and non-engaged) and less than 10 percent declared having donated time (2.2, 8.7, and 7.0 percent). These percentages are rather low for Switzerland where citizens tend to be highly involved in a number of civil society organizations with numbers closer to 40 percent of citizens engaged in associations (Freitag et al. 2016). The voluntary simplifiers are not involved in associations more than any other group. It is surprising that people who engage in a lifestyle that requires a strong commitment and important changes in their daily practices are not active in associations—in groups of like-minded citizens (Lorenzen 2012). Perhaps voluntary simplifiers meet in other circles that do not take the form of associations.

Conclusion

Conceptual developments in cultural sociology and social practice theory were brought together to answer the main question: How do ordinary people represent and engage with environmental issues in the case of Western Switzerland? Ecological and environmental concerns are seen as important, in relation to energy usage, and at both an individual and societal level. When it comes to understanding how social change might be achieved to address these concerns and as expected, the adaptation repertoire is ubiquitous: the main solutions represented by people and reflected in their practices fall into the realm of technological fixes or individual actions—adhering to prescriptions that have been dominant in relation to environmental issues. The more significant areas of environmental impact in relation to energy usage were not discussed nor contested, such as air travel, for example, or the heating of ever-larger homes. In the quantitative research and typologies, the micro-gesturers display the highest percentage of respondents who commute by car and are among the least likely to reduce

flights for their holidays; only the voluntary simplifiers seem to have a more comprehensive understanding of the scope of actions needed to reduce energy usage. When there are tensions between their representations and forms of engagement, this leads either to an emphasis on the “low hanging fruit” of what people can easily resolve, or a call for more collective action without a clear picture of what form this might take. Small actions seem to crowd out opportunities for more transformative forms of change.

People can simultaneously engage with the individual and collective prescriptions of both the adaptation and transformative repertoire. Being a citizen that turns off the lights when not in use and engages in community work is compatible with ambitions to live in cooperative housing toward the aims of the 2000-Watt society. Our empirical results show that ordinary people become aware of the limitations of the individual prescriptions of adaptation as they engage with it in practice, and they are capable of engaging critically with the dominant repertoire. Beyond expressing frustration, we observe that the perception of limitations of eco-gesture prescriptions and individual responsibility leads to two themes: that of everyone needing to do more, collectively; and that of other actors needing to take on more responsibility for change, including the public and private sector. The educational system is held to account, and different actors—from the private and public sector, to individuals—are mentioned as being responsible for addressing environmental issues.

Yet even where people perceive the limitations of individual responsibility, they have difficulty in developing more collective views of social change. Their political imaginary is limited; individual responsibility seems to be so ingrained in the cultural repertoire of individualist political culture, that there is little conception of the collective as an actor of change, or how collective change might play out. The challenge would be to open up the collective imagination and develop other cultural repertoires that move beyond individual action. This finding is aligned with a recent study in Switzerland that invited everyday people to debate future energy policies; the study found that there is a difference between people thinking in their role as consumers and people thinking in their role as citizens. Only when they were explicitly addressed as citizens did people develop political imaginaries leading to measures that account for collective well-being (Defila, Giulio, and Schweizer 2018). The fact that in our qualitative study, we addressed people as energy users and consumers and not as citizens, might explain the lack of references to collective modalities of change.

The few instances when people did express a sense of distributional justice—across society today, and toward future generations—or mentioned the need for a collective and fair approach to reducing energy usage and related carbon emissions could be the most promising path toward a more transformative view of change. Yet a sense of urgency was clearly lacking in all of our research findings—an urgency that has since become instituted in the IPCC special report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above preindustrial levels, and vocalized by students around the world through climate strikes. What remains to be seen is how the prescriptions of a transformative repertoire could translate into concrete measures—whether through moral pressure or regulatory frameworks—that would rapidly change the current systems of consumption and production. A recent study in Europe has confirmed that individual, voluntary actions will not suffice to reach climate targets; strong and effective public policies will be necessary (Dubois et al. 2019). Felli (2016) has called for “an important transformation in power, politics, economic and social relations” (p. 198, our translation), yet how such countermovement might develop remains to be seen, even in a direct democracy such as Switzerland. Individual prescriptions must be bolstered by collective prescriptions, or new imaginaries of how social change can lead to such transformations.

Appendix A

Question Wording and Possible Answers.

	Question wording	Possible answers
Efficiency vs. sufficiency		
Voluntary simplicity	I practice degrowth (“voluntary simplicity”)	Not at all/Not really/To some extent/Totally
Electricity consumption reduction	I make sure I reduce my energy consumption, e.g., turning off the light	Not at all/Not really/To some extent/Totally
Water consumption reduction	I make sure I reduce my water consumption	Not at all/Not really/To some extent/Totally
Turning off appliances	To save energy, I avoid leaving appliances on stand by	Totally disagree/Totally agree
Everyday practices		
Uses a shared laundry	I use the shared laundry room in my building	Yes/No
No tumble dryer	I will ask about different appliances that you may have. Which ones do you have at home . . . tumble dryer	Yes/No
Does not use tumble dryer to save energy	I do not use the tumble dryer because it uses a lot of energy	Totally disagree/Totally agree
Would agree to share appliances	I would agree to share my household appliances with my neighbors/through a network or apps	Totally disagree/Totally agree
Has useless appliances	We have appliances that we do not use . . . or not very frequently	Totally disagree/Totally agree
Likes to have latest models of appliances	I like to have household appliances, in particular the latest models	Totally disagree/Totally agree
Shop at the market	I go to the market to support small producers	Not at all/Not really/To some extent/Totally
Buy regional products	When I have a choice, I buy regional products	Not at all/Not really/To some extent/Totally
Buy organic products	I favor organic products	Not at all/Not really/To some extent/Totally
Buy less	In general, I try not to consume too much	Not at all/Not really/To some extent/Totally
Moves around by car	I mainly use the car to move around	Not at all/Not really/To some extent/Totally
Fly less for holidays	I reduce the number of flights that I take for leisure	Totally disagree/Disagree/Agree/Totally agree
Responsibility for environmental change		
. . . The state	“I would like to ask you, in your view, actions to protect the environment and energy consumption are the main responsibility of . . .”	Totally disagree/Disagree/Agree/Totally agree
. . . Myself		
. . . Individuals		
. . . Private businesses		
. . . Education		
Civil society organizations		
Give money to associations	I make donations at least once a year to organizations and associations	Not at all/Not really/To some extent/Totally
Give time to associations	I voluntarily give time to associations	Not at all/Not really/To some extent/Totally

Appendix B

Summary Statistics.

	%/M	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Efficiency vs. sufficiency				
Voluntary simplicity	11.8		0	1
Electricity consumption reduction	59.5		0	1
Water consumption reduction	69.3		0	1
Turning off appliances	55.1		0	1
Everyday practices				
Uses a shared laundry	61.2		0	1
No tumble dryer	51.4		0	1
Does not use tumble dryer to save energy	10.5		0	1
Would agree to share appliances	31.1		0	1
Has useless appliances	62.2		0	1
Likes to have latest models of appliances	17.3		0	1
Shop at the market	66.5		0	1
Buy regional products	44.6		0	1
Buy organic products	32.9		0	1
Buy less	21.6		0	1
Moves around by car	72.7		0	1
Flying for holidays	31.6			
Responsibility for environmental change				
The state	13.4		0	1
Myself	34.5		0	1
Individuals	33.7		0	1
Private businesses	38.3		0	1
Education	62.3		0	1
Civil society organizations				
Give money to associations	3.9		0	1
Give time to associations	7.4		0	1
Sociodemographic variables				
Female ^a	65.2		0	1
Age categories	3.28	1.47	1	5
Income	2.82	1.51	1	6
Education level	2.27	0.55	1	3

^aWomen represent more than half of the sample due to higher nonresponse rate among men.

Appendix C

Socioeconomic Characteristics of the Ecological Profiles.

	Voluntary simplifier	Micro-gesturers	Non-engaged	<i>n</i>
Sex				
Female	64.4	64.1	66.7	351
Nationality				
Swiss ^a	90.9	87.9	92.8	473
Age categories				
Less than 30	13.3	20.7	18.4	103

(continued)

Appendix C (continued)

	Voluntary simplifier	Micro-gesturers	Non-engaged	<i>n</i>
30-39	6.7	12.8	15.3	72
40-49	13.3	17.0	11.8	78
50-59	20.0	26.0	27.2	140
More than 60	46.7	24.4	27.2	145
Education				
Primary	6.7	4.5	6.1	29
Secondary	55.6	60.7	66.2	337
Tertiary	37.8	34.7	27.6	172
Income ^b				
Less 3500	23.8	23.3	28.6	123
3500-5500	26.2	21.7	22.6	108
5500-7000	16.7	19.2	14.6	82
7000-10000	21.4	17.1	18.6	87
10,000-15,000	9.5	15.0	11.1	62
More 15,000	2.4	3.7	4.5	19

Note. Differences across groups are calculated using chi-square and adjusted residuals. We highlight using bold percentages that are higher than expected (adjusted residuals $> +1.96$), and we did not find any that are smaller than expected (adjusted residuals < -1.96).

^aWomen represent more than half of the sample due to higher nonresponse rate among men.

^bThis measures household monthly income in Swiss Francs (CHF), the median monthly income in Switzerland is 6,500 CHF.

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Notes

1. These repertoires seem to echo the Brundtland Report’s (World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED] 1987) definition of sustainable development, which provided a “prescription” for sustainability that involves a recognition of environmental issues being a global concern, scientific and technological optimism toward resolving such issues, and an emphasis on intergenerational responsibility (i.e., “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”).
2. All names have been changed.
3. Robert agrees that the idea of a 2000-Watt society is a comprise, as does the author of the pamphlet. He supports instead a 1000-Watt society with new ways of organizing the cities, living

space limited to 20 square-meters per person, 18 kg of meat per person per year, and no air or car travel.

4. Among others the items included the following: I reduce oil consumption, I use public transportation, I use a car to commute, I reduce water consumption, and so on.

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