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The Transformative Potential of Ecovillages as a Counter-Hegemonic Narrative to the Imperial Mode of Living

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Abstract

The hegemonic lifestyle in the Global North, which has been conceptualised as the imperial mode of living that is characterised by an unsustainable appropriation of resources at the expense of others, is a major cause of the intensifying global multiple crisis. This crisis is threating the earth and her people and thus induced an increasing awareness of the need for a social-ecological transformation. This master thesis contributes to the debate on strategies towards such a social-ecological transformation by proposing to challenge the imperial mode of living by establishing a counter-hegemonic narrative of a good life for all that is socially just and ecologically sustainable. Ecovillages strive for creating such a narrative by practicing this understanding of a good life and can thus be regarded as potential transformative actors. This master thesis aims at investigating what the transformative potential of ecovillages as drivers of a counter-hegemonic narrative is and revealing the mechanism that manifest this potential. To this end, a theoretical hypothesis is developed that argues for the transformative power of counter-hegemonic narratives. Then, ecovillages are conceptualised based on the existing literature and are set into context regarding the beforehand developed hypothesis. The core of this thesis constitutes then the empirical data collection and analysis in the case study on the ecovillage Schloss Tempelhof. Based on qualitative semi-structured interviews it is investigated in how far practices at Tempelhof establish a counter-hegemonic narrative and what the effects of those practices are. The findings suggest that ecovillage practices at Schloss Tempelhof indeed form a coherent narrative of a counter-hegemonic understanding of a good life for all. This induces to some extent a change in attitudes and perceptions of the local population of the region in which Tempelhof is situated. Tempelhof as an example of a functioning ecovillage thus has indeed a certain potential to contribute to a social-ecological transformation.

Keywords: ecovillages; counter-hegemony; narratives, social-ecological transformation; imperial mode of living

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List of Abbreviations

CSA	Community Supported Agriculture
EEA	European Environmental Agency
GEN	Global Ecovillage Network
HDI	Human Development Index
UN	United Nations Organisation

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1 Introduction

"You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete."

- R. Buckminster Fuller, quoted by Sieden (2011, p. 358) -

R. Buckminster Fuller, a pioneer of the concepts of sustainability and planetary boundaries and a proponent of the idea of ecovillages, put with this quote into a nutshell what he regarded as key for moving towards a desirable future: The destructive treatment of our planet and its people that has prevailed and accelerated over the past centuries can only be challenged by developing successful alternative practices (Sieden 2011). He emphasised the importance of creating a vision of such an alternative future-oriented model that people can sympathise with (Ibid.).

Nowadays, the recognition of a planetary crisis and the need for a "new model that makes the existing obsolete" is more present than ever before (Brand 2012, p. 118). In academia, this current crisis has by some been conceptualised as a "multiple crisis", referring to its various interrelated dimensions concerning – among others – political, economic and ecological challenges (cf. Brand (2016), Brand and Wissen (2012) (2013), and Novy (2014)). A pivotal aspect of analysing the multiple crisis is to investigate the dominant lifestyle that produces it, which has been conceptualised as an "imperial mode of living" (cf. Brand and

Wissen (2012) (2013)). The imperial mode of living is characterised by the "dominant patterns of production, distribution, and consumption that are deeply rooted in the everyday practices of the upper and middle classes" (Brand and Wissen 2012, p. 548) and that appropriate scarce resources at the expense of others (Ibid.). Throughout the course of this master thesis, the imperial mode of living will be used as a conceptualisation of the hegemonic mode of living that causes and intensifies the multiple crisis.

Under these considerations, a social-ecological transformation – that is, an intentional and self-reproducing process of a systemic and profound social change that aims at achieving socially just wellbeing and ecological sustainability (cf. Asara et al. (2015), Brand (2012) (2016), Görg et al. (2017), Novy (2014), Reißig (2014), and Stirling (2015)) – is required. The transformation towards a "good life for all" (cf. Novy (2014) (2017a) and Novy and Strickner (2017a)) is however a difficult endeavour. A successful strategy thus needs to consider the various blocks and challenges to a social-ecological transformation.

In this master thesis, the proposed hypothesis is that – in line with the initially stated quote by R. Buckminster Fuller – a key strategy for the desired transformation is to establish a counter-hegemonic narrative. This is conceptually based on the Neo-Gramscian theory of counter-hegemony (cf. Cox and Schilthuis (2012), D'Alisa and Kallis (2016), Gramsci (1992), Mayo (2015), and Thomas (2009)) and theories of narratives (cf. Nelson (2019a), Schneider (2019), Seibel (2009), and Wittmayer et al. (2015)). A counter-hegemonic narrative is a narration pattern that challenges the hegemonic narrative of the imperial mode of living. It shapes the practices of people and is thus decisive for a social-ecological transformation.

Ecovillages are a potentially transformative force that establishes such a counter-hegemonic narrative. They are intentional communities with the goal to offer the framework for collectively living a good life for all that is socially just and ecologically sustainable. The practices performed in ecovillages are thus intentionally oppositional to the hegemonic imperial

mode of living and consciously popularised throughout the wider public to induce their reproduction.

1.1 Research Approach, Questions and Design

1.1.1 A Critical Realist Metatheory and Its Methodological Implications

Before the research design of this master thesis is outlined, it is essential to first explicitly unfold the metatheoretical foundation – the ontological and epistemological paradigm – on which this work is based. Then, the methodological implications will be derived from those premises and the research design of this master thesis will be presented.

The way that a research study is conducted depends always on the metatheoretical assumptions of the researcher, whether these assumptions are conscious and explicit or not. Therefore, it is first crucial to clarify what the reality that the study is going to investigate is like (ontology) and how one can gain knowledge about it (epistemology). In the philosophy of science, various positions regarding ontological and epistemological questions exist. This master thesis is oriented towards a critical realist metatheoretical foundation.

Critical realism offers an alternative to an empiricist and positivist approach to science, the most dominant tradition in this regard, which holds that we can directly gain knowledge about our world – the external, mind-independent reality – by carefully observing the objects of study and deriving logically sound conclusions from it (Danermark et al. 2002, p. 7). Instead, critical realism states that it is necessary to distinguish between the "real objects" of science – the external reality – and the "thought objects" of science – our interpretation of this external reality – (Sayer 1992, p. 47). Our thought objects are always "conceptually mediated" (Danermark et al. 2002, p. 15), which means that our perception of the world is dependent on the concepts and

theories we have of it. This implies that thought objects can never fully capture the real objects and thus, "all knowledge is fallible" (Sayer 1992, p. 67).

This admission could lead to the conclusion that knowledge has nothing to tell about the external reality at all, or that there is not even something like an external reality but that instead the world is only constructed by the human mind, a claim that has been made by proponents of radical relativism and scepticisms (Danermark et al. 2002, pp. 8–10). Critical realism rejects this notion and claims that even though knowledge is theory-dependent, it is far from being theory-determined (Danermark et al. 2002, p. 15) and that an external reality exists which is independent of human consciousness of it. Danermark et al. (2002, p. 18) argue that this becomes very obvious when we experience that our expectations do not always match this mind-independent reality. For example, a person might very well believe that she could walk through a closed door but will quickly realise that she was wrong when feeling the pain of striking against that door. Therefore, even though knowledge is always fallible, not all knowledge is equally fallible (Sayer 1992, p. 67), as we can experience the repercussions from acting based on more or less fallible knowledge.

In order to obtain less fallible knowledge, science needs to reveal the generative mechanisms of the objects of study. According to Bashkar (2008, pp. 46–52), who can be regarded as the founding father of critical realism, reality consists of three ontological domains. The first domain is the empirical, which consists of the things we can observe and experience (for example: I see the rain falling on the street). The second domain is the actual, which consists of the things that happen, whether we observe them or not (the rain has fallen on the street, even though I was in my house and did not observe it). The third domain is the real, which includes in addition the structures and mechanism that can make something happen (it did not rain, but the mechanisms that make rain possible are still there, although not manifested). All objects of reality have a certain structure, which makes a particular object what it is (Danermark et al. 2002, pp. 45–51). This structure is relational, which means an object is what it is dependent on

its relation to other objects: For example, what makes a slave a slave depends – among other things – on the relation of the slave to her master. This relational structure then enables certain mechanisms which in turn cause events to happen. However, reality consists of a highly complex web of mechanisms that can reinforce but also neutralise each other, which means that mechanisms might be manifested or not – or manifest differently depending on the constellation of mechanism that are triggered. These mechanisms constitute the dimension that we cannot directly observe but that actually causally explain both social science and natural science phenomena.

The goal of science should therefore be to reveal those structures and mechanism of our objects of studies in order to produce relevant and useful knowledge, or, as Sayer (1992, pp. 69–71) calls it, "practically adequate" knowledge. The general approach to do this is by abstraction and generalisation. In order to gain knowledge about phenomena it is necessary to abstract from empirical observation to get to the "roots", that is, revealing the conditions that make the object what it is – the structure – and what causes it – the mechanism – (Danermark et al. 2002, p. 43). Thereby, knowledge about a concrete event is generalised (Danermark et al. 2002, p. 77).

Two crucial tools used in critical realism to do this are abduction and retroduction. Abduction means "[t]o interpret and recontextualize individual phenomena within a conceptual framework or a set of ideas" (Danermark et al. 2002, p. 80). Retroduction means to take a concrete phenomenon and abstract from this its constitutive structure – "what properties must exist for X to exist and to be what X is?" (Danermark et al. 2002, p. 97).

1.1.2 Research Questions and Design

This master thesis investigates the increasingly wide-spread phenomenon of ecovillages and their potentialities as well as limitations in making an important contribution to this

transformation, namely by establishing a counter-hegemonic narrative. The umbrella research question that follows from this scientific problem is thus: What is the transformative potential of ecovillages? This broad question is split-up into two sub-questions:

The first one is a descriptive and exploratory research question: What is the transformative potential of ecovillages as a counter-hegemonic narrative? This sub-question has four elements: It implies describing (a) what an ecovillage in actuality is and how it is conceptualised, (b) in how far an ecovillage is counter-hegemonic, (c) in how far ecovillages establish a counter-hegemonic narrative, and (d) what are the strengths of ecovillages as transformative forces. The purpose of this first sub-question is to specify in this rather vague and under-conceptualised field of ecovillages what the object of study is like. Thereby, the basis for a later investigation of the underlying generative mechanisms and structures is built. Furthermore, it structures the research according to the theoretical framework of a counter-hegemonic narrative. This first sub-question will mainly be dealt with in Chapter 3.

The second one is an explanatory research question: How can ecovillages manifest their transformative potential as a counter-hegemonic narrative? This question implies two elements: (a) Revealing the hidden structures and mechanisms that make ecovillages a potential transformative force, and (b) investigating how those mechanism can be manifested; that is, how this potential is activated and made effective. This second sub-question is the most important of the two, as it reveals the generative mechanisms that explain why and how the phenomenon under study comes into being – and why not. As Danermark et al. formulate it, "the explanation of social phenomena by revealing the causal mechanisms which produce them is the fundamental task of research" (2002, p. 1). The answer to this second sub-question will mainly be elaborated through the case study in Chapter 4.

For a research design based on critical realism, the careful use of theory in relation to empirical studies is crucial. According to Danermark et al. (2002, p. 121), theories are essential for conducting scientific research, because they are the language that researchers use to describe

and conceptualise structures and mechanisms. However, mere theory is not enough, meaningful scientific practice requires both theory and empirical studies, as an abstract theory without any reference to the concrete empirical phenomenon that is to be studied leads to "a reduction of the concrete to the abstract" (Danermark et al. 2002, p. 49). The art of science is thus to integrate both theory and empirical studies in a productive way. Theory should guide the empirical study, therefore the Neo-Gramscian concept of counter-hegemony as well as theories on social-ecological transformation and narratives are used to conceptualise how the ecovillages operate as a transformative force and to provide a structural guideline for the analysis of the empirical results. According to Dobson (1999, p. 264), in a critical realist research design, the choice of the theory needs to be made dependent on the specific object of study. In the case of ecovillages, the theories used are thus highly yielding and insightful, as one of the key merits of ecovillages is their potential of constituting a narrative that is radically opposed to the hegemonic lifestyle, namely the imperial mode of living (cf. Brand and Wissen (2012) (2013).

Regarding the research design of the approach to the first sub-question, the data collection is based on a qualitative literature review. Since very little quantitative data is available, reviewing the literature on ecovillages is the basis for conceptualising them. This also provides the argument for their potential as a transformative force through the establishment of a counter-hegemonic narrative.

The second sub-question, which deals with the relevant causal mechanisms and their tendencies to manifest, employs a qualitative design. In order to understand the justification for this choice, it is first crucial to understand the critical realist perspective on the divide between quantitative and qualitative methodology, which Sayer (1992, pp. 241–251) reframes as a divide between an intensive and extensive methodology. Accordingly, intensive research analyses a large number of complex qualities in a rather narrow case, which is close to a qualitative methodology, while extensive research analyses a small number of qualities of a large number of cases, which is similar to a quantitative methodology. In order to reveal the

generative mechanisms that explain causation, it is thus required to conduct an intensive study of the research object, and not just an observation of event regularities. Through an intensive research study, the structures and mechanisms can be abstracted and thus generalised.

Furthermore, the second sub-question is dealt with by conducting a qualitative case study – in line with what Creswell calls a "single instrumental case study" (2007, p. 74) – to abstract findings about a concrete case to a more general phenomenon. This approach fits well to the underlying object of study, an ecovillage, because Creswell (2007, pp. 69–74) regards it as useful for gathering information about a case with clear borders, but about which there is insufficient literature available for understanding the detailed constitution and functioning of the group under study. Furthermore, Yin (2003, pp. 3–6) proposes case studies as the accurate tool for answering explanatory "how" and "why" questions, in circumstances where little behavioural control is possible and the focus is set on contemporary events. Also Danermark et al. (2002, p. 75) argue that case studies are a very common tool for generalisation.

This reasoning is in line with the basic structure of every critical realist research design: The movement from the concrete to the general and back to the concrete, which Sayer has called the "double movement" (1992, p. 87). In this master thesis, the investigation of the second sub-questions follows – with some deviation – Danermark et al.'s (2002, pp. 109–112) proposal for structuring an explanatory research endeavour. The first step is the detailed description of the ecovillage Tempelhof, with an emphasis on the question in how far it matches the conceptualisation of an ecovillage developed in the context of the first sub-question. The next step is the analytical resolution, that is, to focus on a particular aspect of a phenomenon, as it is impossible to deal with the complexity of a phenomenon in an open system, such as society. In this case, five key aspects of practices at Tempelhof will be separately investigated. Two further crucial elements of Danermark's proposal for research designs are to use abduction and retroduction. Abduction will be employed to recontextualise Tempelhof from the perspective of counter-hegemonic narratives. The application of retroduction in this case implies asking

questions such as “what properties must exist for an ecovillage like Tempelhof to be a counter-hegemonic force?” and “under which conditions does this potential of an ecovillage like Tempelhof to be a counter-hegemonic force manifest itself?”.

A research design that aims at revealing the structures and causal mechanisms of the object of study enables the researcher to conceptualise, understand and explain why and how social phenomena come into being. Even though precise and reliable predictions are in an open system impossible, those insights can nevertheless provide information that inform practices (Danermark et al. 2002, p. 177). In this master thesis, the aim is to produce useful knowledge that can help ecovillages to activate their transformative potential and thereby contributes to the discussion on strategies for a social-ecological transformation.

1.2 Outline

The subsequent chapters are structured as follows: In chapter 2, the theoretical and conceptual framework of the master thesis is formed. The key concepts are outlined in greater length and the hypothesis that the establishment of counter-hegemonic narratives is a powerful transformative strategy is developed. In chapter 3, these theoretical considerations are applied to ecovillages. To this end, it is first conceptualised what an ecovillage is by presenting defining criteria and principles. Then, ecovillage practices and the narrative they create are contrasted to the narrative of the hegemonic imperial mode of living. Chapter 4 consists of the case study on the ecovillage Schloss Tempelhof. After a description of the case and its background, the establishment of a counter-hegemonic narrative through the practices at Tempelhof as well as its transformative potential are investigated. A pivotal part of this is the description of five key aspects of Tempelhof in which practices are oppositional to the hegemonic imperial mode of living. They are analysed in terms of their associated common senses and narratives and the underlying mechanisms that enable their transformative potential. Derived from that, the

constitutive structure of Schloss Tempelhof and thereby their strengths and deficiencies as transformative force will be discussed. In chapter 5, the findings of the case study are attempted to be generalised to ecovillages as such and their transformative potential.

2 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The theoretical starting point for this master thesis is the need for strategies towards a social-ecological transformation, a term that increasingly appears in political and academic debates considering current pressing global challenges such as climate change and social inequality (Brand 2012, p. 118). This chapter has a twofold purpose: Firstly, it introduces the key concepts and theories that guide the empirical research. Secondly, it develops a theoretical hypothesis for a strategy for a social-ecological transformation that will in Chapter 3 and 4 be applied to investigate the transformative potential of ecovillages.

This hypothesis unfolds in the following way: First, the notion of a "social-ecological transformation", as well as the "multiple crisis" and the "imperial mode of living" that make such a transformation necessary, the "good life for all" that this transformation should strive for, and the challenges that transformative endeavours face will be presented. Then, as a response to those challenges, a strategy for a social-ecological transformation is hypothesised and developed. This hypothesis integrates insights from Gramsci's theory of hegemony and other theories of power, as well as theories of narratives and practice theory.

2.1 A Social-Ecological Transformation Towards the Good Life for All

2.1.1 The Imperial Mode of Living and the Multiple Crisis

The growing popularity of the term "transformation" is a consequence of the intensifying threats posed by a global multiple crisis, comprised of intertwining social, economic, ecological and geo-political crises that challenge politicians, academics, and civil society. Rising inequality between and within nations, the global financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath, a "shift to the right" in the political spectrum, violent conflicts for the control of energy sources around the globe and the overstepping of planetary boundaries are only some examples (cf.

Brand (2016), Brand and Wissen (2012) (2013), Fromm (2008), Joubert (2015) and Novy (2014)). In other words, "the three pillars of sustainability (environment, society and economy) are […] simultaneously threatened by an intertwined crisis" (Asara et al. 2015, p. 375).

Characteristic of this conceptualisation of the multiple crisis is that its particular crises are interrelated, making it highly complicated to tackle it as a whole. Solutions to one crisis might intensify another crisis. For example, a study by the European Environment Agency (EEA) has revealed that a high national Human Development Index (HDI) is strongly correlated with a high national ecological footprint (EEA 2015), which suggest that improving human living conditions empirically increases per capita ecological degradation. This immediately provokes the question: Is this correlation inevitable? It seems reasonable to assume that our way of living is decisive for the quest of comprehensively and holistically tackling the multiple crisis to create a society in which wellbeing and ecological sustainability are reconciled.

Fromm (2008) argued that the predominance of a capitalist lifestyle that is primarily based on the principle of "having" (as opposed to "being") constitutes the root cause of the crises humanity is facing today. He pointed out that "the character traits engendered by our socioeconomic system, i.e., by our way of living, are pathogenic and eventually produce a sick person and, thus, a sick society" (2008, p. 7).

Brand and Wissen (2012) (2013) conceptualise this destructive way of living as an "imperial mode of living". The concept "refers to dominant patterns of production, distribution, and consumption that are deeply rooted in the everyday practices of the upper and middle classes" (Brand and Wissen 2012, p. 548). The imperial mode of living is "imperial" in that it constitutes a way of living that intensively uses cheap labour capacity, natural resources, space, and sinks which are appropriated at the expense of less powerful people, future generations, and the environment through an externalisation of social and ecological costs (Ibid.). A mode of living that uses resources to an amount that exceeds per capita the planetary boundaries thus induces many of the above-mentioned crises, such as inequality, exploitation, environmental

degradation and resource conflicts. The imperial mode of living is closely linked to a capitalist organisation of society, which requires the dominant ideal of a "western lifestyle" that is based on core values of consumerism, individualism and hedonism (Brand and Wissen 2013) (Spash 2014). The "transnational consumer class" (Brand and Wissen 2013, p. 698) is a prerequisite for securing both the labour force and the demand to maintain the functioning of the socio-economic system and to achieve the primary macroeconomic goal of economic growth. This fosters not only "exploitative society-nature relations that depend on using ever more (fossil) resources" (Ibid.), but also establishes inner-societal relationships that are characterised by selfishness, isolation, stress, as well as alienation from nature, others and oneself (Fromm 2008).

Another pivotal aspect of the imperial mode of living, according to Brand and Wissen, is the role of governments in "securing and universalizing" (2012, p. 548) such a destructive mode of living. The above-mentioned underlying ideology of the imperial mode of living is deeply embedded in the institutional structure of the state apparatus and in the attitude of politicians. Brand and Wissen (2012) employ the Gramscian concept of hegemony to describe how the political elite aims at normalising the imperial mode of living in society in order to secure and stabilise the political status quo by fostering economic growth. This explains the paradox of increasing awareness of the multiple crisis on the one hand and a lack in effective counter-measures on the other hand. Instead of inducing a social-ecological transformation of the dominant mode of living, the political elite thus opts for strategies towards a so called "green economy" that aims at securing the current level of material wealth while solving ecological problems through expert-driven and technocratic approaches.

2.1.2 Characteristics of a Social-Ecological Transformation

The awareness of a global multiple crisis should not lead to a discussion around whether a transformation is going to happen or not, but rather around how it is going to proceed (cf. Sterling (2015) and Spash (2019)). A profound and comprehensive alteration of our lifestyles is inevitable. This is not only the case because of planetary boundaries, it is also a historical fact that societies always transformed as a response to deep crises. Polanyi (2001, 223ff.) explained this as a "double movement". He argues that the great transformation from an agricultural to an industrial society, characterised by the establishment of an unleashed self-regulating and all-encompassing market, led to a societal crisis. This threat to societal structure induced a counter-movement that resulted in the establishment of trade unions, social laws and protectionist trade policies. This illustrates how deep societal crises ultimately result in a transformation of the prevailing circumstances. The interesting questions in the current transformation debate are therefore: Will the current transformation happen by chaos or by design? If it can be steered, how? Which strategies should be employed? What are the desired outcomes of the transformation?

Before turning towards these questions, it is first reasonable to define what is understood by the term social-ecological transformation. The term transformation is very much *en vogue* and used in various contexts and with multiple, partly conflicting, meanings. In this master thesis, transformation is conceptualised as an intentional and self-reproducing process of a systemic and profound social change (Reißig 2014). Reißig (2014, pp. 50–57) understands a transformation as being both very deep and broad, encompassing multiple spatial scales, from the local to the global, and covering multiple fields, such as the economy, political structures and culture. Furthermore, transformational processes happen non-linearly and irreversibly (Ibid.). Similarly, Brand describes transformations as "a comprehensive socio-economic, political and socio-cultural process of change which incorporates controls and strategies, but is

not reducible to them" (2012, p. 121). The expression "social-ecological" refers to what needs to be transformed, but also to what the desired outcome of a transformation is, namely socially just wellbeing that is ecologically sustainable (cf. Nelson (2019a, p. 3)).

In order to get a better understanding of the concept of transformation, it is helpful to contrast it with the concept of transition, two terms that are often used interchangeably (Brand 2012, p. 120). Etymologically, transition is derived from the Latin verb *transire* which means "to cross over", while transformation stems from the word *transformare*, meaning "to reshape" (Brand 2012, p. 121). Transition refers to a narrower and less profound societal change, often used to depict improvements in a particular sector through innovation and technological efficiency increases. These improvements are, according to Stirling, "mediated mainly through technological innovation implemented under structured control" (2015, p. 13), thus being carried out in a top-down manner and with reference to strongly positivist scientific knowledge claims. In contrast, transformations take not only a deeper and broader scope, but also go beyond planned government decision-making as they involve various actors, for example social movements (Brand 2012, p. 121). Asara et al. point out that "the concept of transformation implies the need to […] actively constituting new meanings and practices. […] Transition discourses instead entail the persistence of pre-existing trajectories without changing the end goals (i.e. economic growth)" (2015, p. 379).

2.1.3 The Good Life for All as the Desired Principle of Future Society

Having acquired a sound understanding of the concept in the last section, it is now time to turn the attention to the desired outcomes of a social-ecological transformation. Generally speaking, it has already been indicated that a social-ecological transformation strives for socially just wellbeing that is ecologically sustainable. For example, Luks understands the essence of transformation being a "comprehensive societal change towards sustainability" (2019, p. 3,

translated by the author), even though sustainability is a fuzzy, contested and often misused concept and thus problematic as an analytical concept.

Being more concrete in outlining the desired outcomes of a transformation is, however, a difficult undertaking. Clearly defined visions and concrete utopias always entail the danger of being authoritarian in prescribing how our society ought to be, as Adorno has argued (cf. Schwandt (2010, 118ff.)). For proponents of the so-called "good life for all" (cf. Novy (2014) (2017a), Novy and Strickner (2017b)), a core feature of the social-ecological transformation should therefore be that the desired outcomes are negotiated in a democratic, pluralistic and participatory process. The good life for all is not a concrete concept, it "does not pretend to be a universally valid utopia" (Novy 2017a, p. 556), instead it is a rather broad and comprehensive notion that circumscribes the ends of the social-ecological transformation, while being clear that the concrete vision of what a "good life" ought to be is decided upon and shaped by the people (Novy and Strickner 2017a).

Because of its open character, the term good life for all will be used in this master thesis to depict the desirable outcomes of a transformation, as it can neither be prescribed nor generalised which concrete visions the inhabitants of ecovillages have for the society of the future. These visions are, just as the ecovillages and its inhabitants themselves, very heterogeneous and usually persist in form of a process rather than as a predefined end (Joubert 2015, 19ff.).

Despite having this open understanding of a good life for all, this notion is based on some essential principles that ensure its radical character and prevent it from becoming merely a fashionable buzzword. One of its key features is to radically re-define, in an emancipatory, pluralistic and democratic process, what a "good life" means. According to Spash, "the values of modern industrial growth society are instrumental, anthropocentric and hedonistic" (2014). These societal values are characteristic for the imperial mode of living, hence a good life in this sense can never be a good life "for all", because of bio-physical and socio-economic constraints

(cf. Dieter (2017) and Spash (2017)) on the one hand and its alienating and depressing social effects on the other hand, as described earlier. Therefore, more and more people appreciate non-material values such as spiritual self-realisation, social justice, sustainable virtues, the preservation of biodiversity and many others (Scott-Cato 2009, 35ff.) (Spash 2014). According to Novy, "there is ample evidence that the good life is about fulfilling relations to people and objects, being secure and healthy, having friends and being allowed to be creative" (Novy 2017a, p. 570). Further key principles of the good life for all are for example a reconciliation of the policy goals of equality and freedom, which are in a neo-liberal narrative regarded as antagonistic (Novy 2013, p. 86), a re-embedding of the economy in society within biophysical limits (Spash 2017) which entails an abolishment of the hegemonic narrative of economic growth as the greatest societal goal (cf. Asara et al. (2015), Demaria et al. (2013), and Schneider et al. (2010)), and a dialectical understanding of a cosmopolitan approach to deglobalisation and localisation ("*heimatverbundener Kosmopolitismus*") (Novy and Strickner 2017a, p. 15).

The principles and goals of the ecovillage movement are in line with this notion of a good life for all, as it will be elaborated at greater length in section 3.1. Therefore, the characteristics and principles of a good life for all are here only briefly sketched.

2.1.4 Strategies and Challenges

The notion of the good life for all has been established to create a framework for visions of a socially just and ecologically sustainable future. Also other visions and utopias that are based on similar assumptions have been developed, such as de-growth or the social solidarity economy. All these paradigms formulate answers to the question: WHAT are the desirable characteristics and principles of future societies? Yet, the challenging questions that all of them are struggling with is: HOW can a social-ecological transformation towards such an end be achieved? And: WHO would be the actors and driving forces of this process?

The quest of finding and implementing effective strategies is thus the most difficult and important challenge for achieving a social-ecological transformation. For example, at the international de-growth conference 2018 in Malmö, Herbert et al. attempted to induce a discussion on strategies by stating that "degrowth must also investigate how to achieve its desired transformation. This requires a shift from current strategic indeterminance towards a co-produced mix of context-sensitive strategies" (2018).

The debate around strategies towards a social-ecological transformation is usually centred around a conceptualisation of top-down and bottom-up approaches. According to Novy (2017a, pp. 569–571), developing the good life for all requires primarily action "from below", ranging from collectively re-defining what a "good life" is to actively participating in social-ecologically sustainable practices. At the same time, this requires that spaces for such grassroots actions are politically created and enabled at all politico-institutional levels (Novy 2014, p. 39) (Novy 2017b, pp. 22–23).

This attempt to outline how a social-ecological transformation can be achieved leaves many questions open and many challenges unsolved. A major challenge is the lack of democratic legitimacy. Even though the number of people that recognise the destructive character of the imperial mode of living and thus strive for a mode of living in line with the good life for all is increasing (Spash 2014), most people have still a rather consumerist, materialist and hedonistic understanding of a "good life". Most people simply do not want to reduce their material standard of living and live in a frugal de-growth society (Sekulova 2015). Transformative action induced "from below", such as the climate movement, should therefore not be misunderstood to represent "the 99%", as it was for example claimed by the occupy movement.

This relates closely to another challenge, namely that the power of potential transformative agents is restricted by an underlying power structure (Stör 2017, pp. 142–143). The fact that most people are unwilling to abandon an imperial mode of living is rooted in the

hegemonic structure of societal values and norms in capitalist societies (Spash 2016). For example, driving a car or going on exotic holidays is a status symbol that influences an individual's societal relationships and as such becomes a cultural necessity. Thereby, it hinders individuals from renouncing to drive or to fly and restricts their agency in contributing to a social-ecological transformation. This phenomenon constitutes an obstacle for change "from below" and "from above" alike, as the dominant value system influences discourses and practices in all societal spheres, such as in the media, science, politics and society. Therefore, individualistic approaches for achieving social-ecological change, for example sustainable consumption, cannot be successful, instead a radical and comprehensive alteration of the hegemonic system of norms, values and beliefs is required (Brunner 2019, pp. 176–178).

A third major challenge is therefore to make practices of the good life for all accessible and attractive for all. Many efforts that strive for a social-ecological transformation seem to remain niches that happen only within a bubble of a social-ecologically conscious *avant-garde*. The task is then to find a way to connect these fragmented initiatives and connect them with the broader society and thus make them accessible "for all". In other words, the good life for all developed by and for all people.

Following up on those three challenges, this master thesis proposes a strategy for a social-ecological transformation: The establishment of counter-hegemonic narratives. The next sections are devoted to outline the two main elements of this proposal.

2.2 The Gramscian Conception of Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony

2.2.1 The Integral State and Hegemony

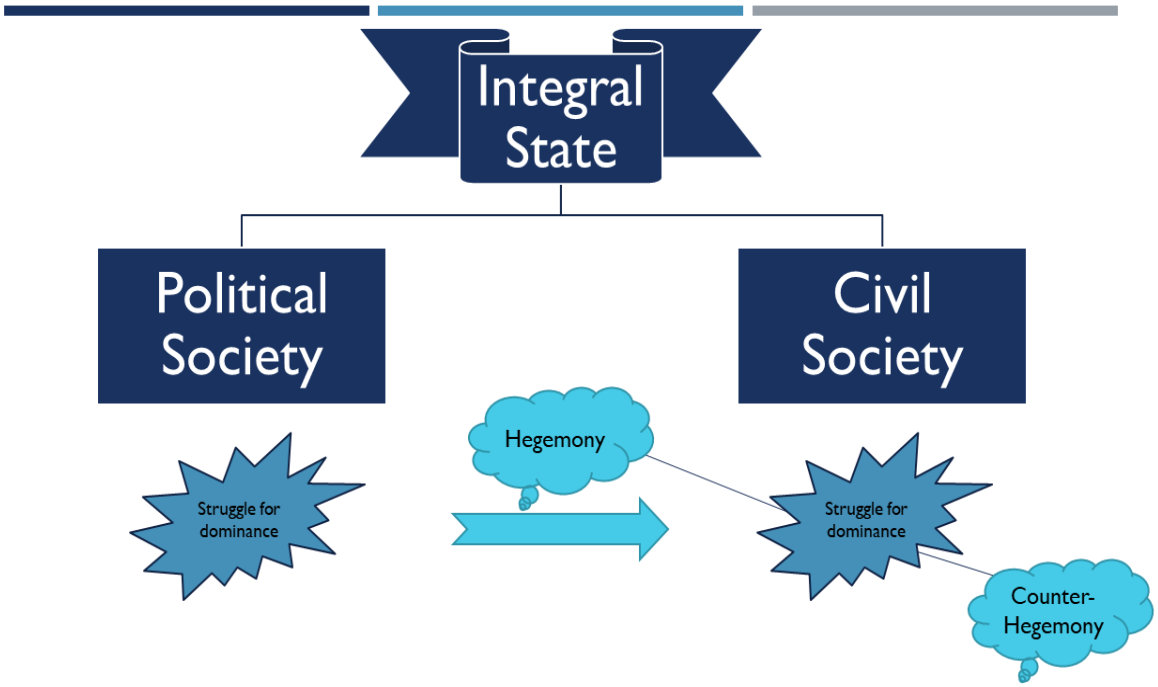
The hypothesis that is going to unfold in the following sections is based on the assumption that a counter-hegemonic effort is required for achieving a social-ecological transformation towards a good life for all.

Gramsci's (1992) theory of hegemony, which he developed in his "Prison Notebooks" during his imprisonment by the Mussolini regime, is first and foremost a theory of power and struggles for societal and political control. Its starting point is the composition of the integral state. This can be illustrated with figure 2.1. According to Gramsci, the modern Western democratic state is a compound of two analytically distinct but interdependent realms: The political society and the civil society (Thomas 2009, 137-141). These realms are characterised by constant struggles for dominance. D'Alisa's and Kallis' explain this as follows: "The political society […] is the social arena where the actors of different classes struggle for the seizure of coercive power. [..] The civil society is the social space where the actors from different classes try to gain consent around their idea of what a good society is, i.e. around their ideology" (2016, p. 232). Both are closely interlinked in that the ruling political elite that dominates the political society also needs to control the consent in the civil society to maintain its power, as in the long-run, political rule requires not only coercive power but also ideological legitimacy (Ibid.).

At this point, Gramsci developed the concept of hegemony to show how the political elite produces a hegemonic consent in the civil society to achieve its goals, instead of enforcing them by coercion (Thomas 2009, p. 160). This ideological hegemony is established through "common senses", which are "uncritical and largely unconscious way(s) of perceiving and understanding the world that has become "common" in any given epoch" (Gramsci 1992,

p. 322). Common senses are thus not objectively true but are socially constructed and constantly in transition (Gramsci 1992, p. 326). Nevertheless, they are commonly accepted and widely unquestioned. In the civil society, a large variety of common senses exists which might contradict each other and have varying degrees of significance in the social fabric (Rehmann 2013, pp. 127–128). Establishing hegemony means to order these common senses and institutionalising a hierarchy among them – emphasising some and marginalising or even eliminating others – in a way that is conducive to the goals of the political elite (D'Alisa and Kallis 2016, pp. 232–233). This ideological hegemony and its effects on attitudes and behaviours are largely imposed on the population without being noticed (Stör 2017, p. 145).

Figure 2.1: The Gramscian Conception of the Integral State and Hegemony



Source: Author's compilation.

The hegemony in contemporary capitalist societies is one that promotes economic growth and the imperial mode of living. According to Brand and Wissen (2012, p. 548), the political elite fosters stable national growth rates and consumerism in order to stabilise the fragile economic system to secure their political power, as it has already been discussed in section 2.1.1.

2.2.2 Counter-Hegemonic Endeavours

A social-ecological transformation needs to challenge this hegemonic order of common senses that favours the imperial mode of living. In the Gramscian theory, the concept of counter-hegemony is here decisive. The term counter-hegemony has never been used by Gramsci himself but was posthumously developed by Neo-Gramscian thinkers (Mayo 2015, p. 5). For example, Cox and Schilthuis describe counter-hegemony as a concept "to define the way people develop ideas and discourse to challenge dominant assumptions, beliefs and established patterns of behavior" (2012, p. 1022).

Gramsci argued that the key strategy for challenging hegemony in the civil society is what he called a "war of position", his terminology being strongly influenced by the first world war. A "war of position", refers to the practice of attacking the hegemonic worldview in the media, education, and other public institutions (Cox and Schilthuis 2012, p. 1023). Compared to strategies of a "war of manœuvre", which refers to the use of direct force and coercion and which yields, if successful, short-term victories, a "war of position" leads to long-term control of the public consent and constitutes therefore the more decisive "battlefield" on which the fate of society is determined (Gramsci 1992, pp. 238–239). The cultural hegemons are "skilled manipulators" (Cox and Schilthuis 2012, p. 1023) and highly effective in using their power to control those institutions that shape public opinion. Therefore, counter-hegemonic endeavours require the support by intellectuals and reputable personalities (Schwandt 2010, p. 209), because they have a powerful impact on public discourses. According to D'Alisa and Kallis, the counter-hegemonic arrangement of common senses – the "good senses" (2016, p. 239) – is in most cases latent and not powerful enough to directly challenge the hegemonic order, but it is almost always existent and can be activated "to build a counter-hegemonic narrative" (2016, p. 233) that potentially impacts the attitudes and behaviours in the civil society.

2.3 Narratives as a Powerful Transformative Tool and Strategy

2.3.1 Characteristics and Functioning of Narratives

The second main element of the proposed strategy of creating counter-hegemonic narratives is centred around the claim that dominant narratives are shaping the practices of people and are thus decisive for a social-ecological transformation. A narrative, following a definition by Schneider, "gives a pattern and causal logic to events; such stories tend to fit within world views and values" (2019, p. 14). Furthermore, a narrative should be understood as more than merely a story, in Seidel's words it constitutes "a narration pattern that is in its own right established and has a certain degree of legitimation" (2009, translated by the author). A narrative is thus very similar to a particular arrangement of what Gramsci referred to as "common senses".

To further illustrate the functioning of narratives, one can employ a famous quote by Bertolt Brecht: "*Was ist ein Einbruch in eine Bank gegen die Gründung einer Bank?*" ("What is a bank raid compared to founding a bank?", translated by the author). Brecht thereby created with a single sentence a counter-narrative: Founding a bank, which is commonly regarded as a necessary and desirable institution for the functioning of a modern economy and society, is a more serious and harmful crime than robbing a bank, which is usually associated with the image that robbery is malicious and damaging. One can imagine that a bank robber making this point in court would not have reached the same persuasiveness as Brecht, a famous writer with a talent for brilliant anti-capitalist rhetoric. This shows that the effectiveness of (counter-)narratives depends more on how skilfully they are formulated and how well they are communicated to the public and less on how far they reflect reality (Seibel 2009). To determine the truth content of a narrative is thus often a difficult task, especially for people that are not well educated in the subject of the narrative.

Gramsci (1992) elaborated how this can be exploited by the political elite to establish consent in society and thereby allow them to pursue their political goals. Also in the literature on narratives the importance of an analysis of power for understanding the functioning of narratives has been highlighted, for example by Nylund and Nylund (2003, p. 388). This implies raising questions such as: Who has the power to establish and institutionalise narratives? Who benefits from hegemonic narratives? Can narratives be created by the conscious action of individual agents? How do narratives affect, namely restrict or enable, the agency of potential transformative actors? The two former questions have been discussed in the section dealing with Gramscian theory. The two latter questions concern the alleged dualism of agency and structure, that has in this context already been discussed in section 2.1.4. In the next section, practice theory will be presented as a solution to bridge this dualism and at the same time provide valuable insights to inform consideration on narratives.

2.3.2 Establishing Narratives through Practices

Narratives are not only verbally conveyed but are also established and popularised through practices. At the same time, people's participation in practices is shaped by dominant narratives. Narratives and their associated practices are thus mutually reinforcing.

An example is what Nelson calls the "housing for growth" narrative (2019a, p. 3): "Save, buy your haven […] and, as you pay it off, it becomes your 'nest egg', your asset" (2019a, p. 4). Buying and owning the dwelling one lives in is postulated as economically rational, an essential element of the "good life" and a status symbol for "the hard-working man". Nelson (2019a, p. 8) further elaborates that this narrative has over the past decades become a self-fulfilling prophecy, as people adopt their housing-related practices accordingly: Taking up mortgages, having children at a later point to be able to afford a house first, and even renouncing the practice of going on strike, as losing one's job is unacceptable when one has to repay a

mortgage loan. At the same time, those practices reinforce the "housing for growth" narratives, as the ideal of buying a house is more widespread than ever before (Nelson 2019a, p. 5).

According to practice theory, practices are more than mere individual behaviour. They are a routinised, institutionalised and collectively shared types of behaviour (Reckwitz 2002, p. 249). As such, they are analysed as a social phenomenon embedded in the societal fabric and thereby also closely interwoven with narratives. Therefore, practice theory departs from an individualist and agency based perspective on behaviour, such as employed by rational choice theory, and takes a structural and societal analysis into account (Spash and Dobernig 2017, pp. 206–210) (Brunner 2019, pp. 178–181). Groves et al. (2016, 309ff.) argue that the societal norms, material environment and individual psychosocial biography of an individual strongly influence in which practices she participates. Despite this structuralist approach, practice theory also acknowledges a role for agency and thereby overcomes the structure-agency dualism (Röpke 2009, p. 2491). Individuals can develop new practices that did not exist before or were socially unexcepted. These practices can potentially "recruit" new practitioners and thus become widespread (Groves et al. 2016, p. 310) (Strengers and Maller 2015, p. 3). According to Schatzki (2015, p. 17), those new practices can emerge virtually everywhere at any time. He argues that even the action of an "ordinary" single person can have the power to lead to the emergence of a new practice that becomes shared by many peoples: "every activity is […] potentially a beginning" (Ibid.). The potential initiators of those practices that can induce a social-ecological transformation are thus all individuals that share a conscious and critical understanding of the current multiple crisis and the benefits of a good life for all, even if they are not situated in the conventional power centres. Examples for such actors are producers and consumers of community supported agricultural (CSA) food supply, practitioners of alternative forms of sustainable work and inhabitants of ecovillages.

Practice theory has drawn increasing attention in sustainability studies, as it offers an analytical lens for investigating how sustainable practices can be popularised. This makes it

also a valuable theory for transformation studies, because it contributes to a better understanding of how a transformation towards a good life for all can be achieved by establishing practices that create counter-narratives and thus recruit other practitioners.

2.3.3 The Transformative Potential of Counter-Narratives

In the last two sections, it has been demonstrated how powerful narratives can be. In fact, narratives can be a strong force that prevents social change. Examples for such narratives are well known as one is confronted with them every day: "People living in rural areas NEED a car to participate in social life and the labour market" or "researchers NEED to fly in order to pursue a successful academic career". If these narratives are hegemonic, they cause the perpetuation of unsustainable practices. Nelson (2019a) argues that many hegemonic narratives foster economic growth and thus produce unsustainable practices that are characterised by an imperial mode of living. Her example of the "housing for growth" narrative provides a telling case of this phenomenon.

Schneider (2019, p. 15), who contributed as a counter-part to Nelson's "housing for growth" narrative a proposal for a "housing for degrowth" narrative, argues that a major obstacle to a transformation is the hegemonic narration that, at the latest since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a capitalist growth society is the only feasible socio-economic system, famously expressed by Margaret Thatcher's TINA-argument: There-is-no-alternative! Asara et al. (2015, p. 375) criticise this notion for causing a de-politicisation of society and thus preventing people from questioning the imperial mode of living. Therefore, they argue that "counter-hegemonic discourses and praxis are needed to re-politicize the debate about what kind of society we want [and for] building a counter-hegemonic narrative" (2015, p. 376). Therefore, only if a counter-hegemonic narrative exists and thus an image of an alternative to

the status quo is conveyed, this can subsequently enable alternative policies and practices (Schneider 2019, p. 15).

The hereinbefore proposed strategy has the potential to overcome the challenges to a social-ecological transformation that were discussed in section 2.1.4. The lack of democratic legitimacy for a transformation towards a good life for all can be explained with hegemonic narratives that stabilise practices which are associated with an imperial mode of living. In order to counter those narratives for economic growth, individuals and groups of individuals who practice a good life for all can establish practices, and in turn a narrative of a good life for all, that inspires other people to participate in these practices as well and thereby increase democratic legitimacy for a transformation (Schneider 2019, p. 16). Practice theory claims that performing sustainable practices and thereby creating images and role models of a good life for all can be a powerful stimulator for a social-ecological transformation. This approach overcomes the structure-agency dualism, as it employs a structuralist analysis of society, acknowledging the enabling and disabling effects of a dominant system of values, norms and narratives on individuals' practices, but at the same time allows for the agency of transformative actors to initiate new practices of a good life for all. The challenge is then to establish a counter-hegemonic narrative that reaches a major part of the population and creates an image of a good life that is appealing to a great number and variety of people.

2.4 Conclusion

Considering the challenges for a successful transformation towards a good life for all, the strategy of establishing counter-hegemonic narratives has in the previous sections been outlined, based on various theories and concepts. The core argument is that the best way to encourage people to perform sustainable practices associated with a good life for all is to provide them with a counter-hegemonic narrative that offers an appealing alternative to the

imperial mode of living and convinces them of an understanding of a good life that goes beyond materialism, consumerism and hedonism. This hypothesis thus acknowledges that power is exercised through social structures, as it identifies the capitalist structure of norms and values as the root cause of the imperial mode of living. The political elite, which is itself shaped by this capitalist growth logic, re-produces the consent around this status quo. At the same time, transformative actors have a certain agency to potentially induce change through establishing new practices and in turn counter-hegemonic narratives.

3 Ecovillages as a Counter-Hegemonic Force

In the previous chapter, it has been argued that the creation of a counter-hegemonic narrative established through practices of a good life for all is a necessary strategy for a social-ecological transformation. In this chapter, ecovillage inhabitants are analysed as a potentially transformative set of actors that might establish a counter-hegemonic narrative. The hereinbefore developed hypothesis will thus be applied to investigate the potential of ecovillages as transformative force. In doing so, the first necessary step in this under-researched field is to conceptualise what an ecovillage is in actuality. Building on this conceptualisation, it will be outlined how ecovillages create a counter-hegemonic narrative that challenges the hegemonic imperial mode of living. Finally, the strengths of ecovillage that make them a transformative force with the potential to appeal to a large share of society will be indicated.

3.1 An Introduction to and Conceptualisation of Ecovillages

3.1.1 Ecovillages as a Form of Eco-Collaborative Living

Ecovillages are a very heterogeneous phenomenon. Some of them have existed for hundreds of years and are deeply rooted in the indigenous culture while others have been recently established as a societal niche. The number of inhabitants might vary from 20 to several thousand inhabitants. Some rural ecovillages put an emphasis on CSA and soil regeneration while others regard themselves primarily as political activists in an urban environment. They might also be either explicitly secular or highly spiritually and religiously oriented.

This diverse character makes it necessary to conceptualise what an ecovillage in actuality is in order to use it as an analytical lense. In this master thesis, mainly ecovillages in a Central European context are dealt with; nevertheless, ecovillages should be regarded as a global

phenomenon and the conceptualisation that will be developed throughout the following pages is in principle valid for all ecovillages around the globe.

Ecovillages are a form of what Nelson (2019b) calls "eco-collaborative" living. This is an umbrella term that "refers to a range of 'alternative' housing and households whose members live in intentional, collectively governed, residential communities sharing resources, skills and spaces" (2019b, p. 244). Ecovillages are thus essentially a way of communally and collectively living a good life for all that is socially just and ecologically sustainable.

The explicit notion of an "ecovillage" as a concept emerged in the early 1990's in the context of the newly created Gaia Trust (Henfrey and Ford 2018, p. 106). This trust was founded to develop and implement the idea of a good life in harmony with nature (Jackson and Jackson 2015, pp. 174–175). It was the main driver for connecting ecovillages around the globe under the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN), established in 1995 at the "Ecovillages and Sustainable Communities – Models for 21st Century Living" conference in Findhorn, a Scottish ecovillage (Jackson 1998, p. 3). GEN is today the central institution that connects approximately 10,000 communities from more than 100 countries, it organises international meetings and conferences, it coordinates research on ecovillages and provides a common vision and guideline for the global ecovillage movement (GEN 2019a).

GEN defines ecovillages on its webpage as "[a] rural or urban community that is consciously designed through locally owned, participatory processes in all four dimensions of sustainability (social, culture, ecology and economy) to regenerate their social and natural environments" (GEN 2019d). The prefix "eco" in the term "ecovillage" refers to the ancient Greek word "oikos" – meaning house, household or family – and as such includes the dimensions of both ecology and economy as understanding and carefully dealing with the bio-physical and social surrounding (Ibid.). In this sense, the purpose of ecovillages is to improve the quality of life of people while not only protecting their natural environment, but even regenerating it on a local scale (Joubert 2015, p. 22). Thus, Svensson regards ecovillages as

“grounded in the deep understanding that all things and all creatures are interconnected, and that our thoughts and actions have an impact on the environment […]. The deep motivation […] is to reverse the gradual disintegration of supportive socio-cultural structures and the upsurge of destructive environmental practices on our planet” (2002, p. 10). Historically, ecovillages have been theoretically inspired by concepts such as bioregionalism, libertarian communitarianism and permaculture (Henfrey and Ford 2018, p. 105).

Even though these definitions and descriptions give an initial impression of what an ecovillage is, they remain quite blurry and abstract. In order to better understand and conceptualise them, the defining principles and characteristics of an ecovillage will be investigated in the following section to depict what makes an ecovillage an ecovillage and not something else.

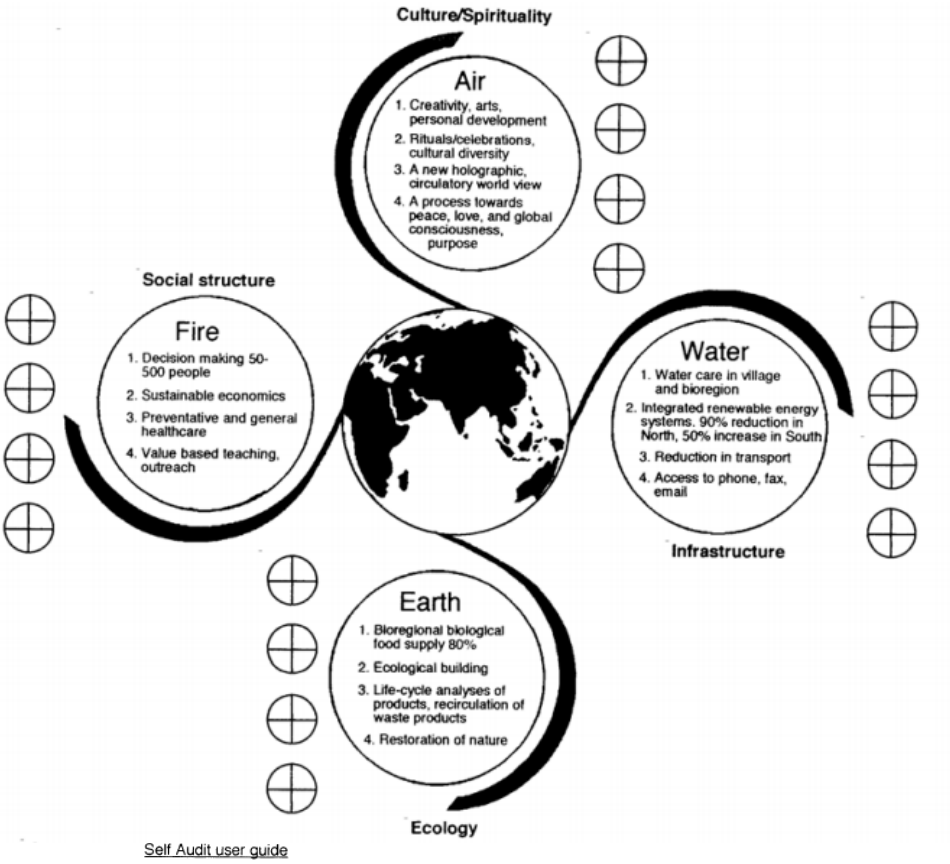
3.1.2 Defining Principles of Ecovillages

When GEN was established in 1995, the founding members had to set up a definition or concrete defining criteria to demarcate what an eco-collaborative community needs to be like in order to be considered an ecovillage. According to Jackson (1998, p. 3), agreeing on such defining criteria has from the outset been one of the most controversial issues within GEN, because it represents a balancing act between being open to diverse understandings of eco-collaborative living on the one hand and preventing that core principles and ideals are watered down on the other hand.

The founding group eventually developed a self-audit form (see figure 3.1) that allowed representatives of potential ecovillages to evaluate themselves as to the degree to which they are in line with the key principles. This self-audit was designed as a four-element definition, representing the dimensions of culture/spirituality, infrastructure, ecology and social structures. This model was shortly after the conference abandoned, because a self-audit was no longer

regarded as suitable for defining ecovillages and because it was not possible to gain a consensus on the details of the form (Jackson 1998, pp. 4–5).

Figure 3.1: The Self-Audit Four-Element Definition for Ecovillages



Self Audit user guide

1. Colour 0-4 quarters in the circles above according to the following scheme:

- No colour means: No interest in this topic in the eco-village.
- One quarter coloured: Interest in the topic, but have done very little.
- Two quarters: Quite interested. Have come half way.
- Three quarters: Very interested. Almost there - but still room for improvement.
- Four quarters: Main area of concern. No room for improvement.

2. Add up your scores. Number of quarters that it is possible to colour ranges from 0 - 64. Notice where you can still improve. Scores above a certain level, which will have to be agreed upon eg. 48 points and higher would be a qualified eco-village, with at least 2 of the points in each element.

This is the self audit of:

.....**points**.....

Name of eco-village here

Source: Jackson (1998, p. 4)

The four-element definition was then developed into a simpler "whole system design framework" (see figure 3.2) that is still used by GEN today. This indicates the four key dimensions of an ecovillage (GEN 2019c). GEN declares that it "recognizes ecovillages as such

if they […] are already implementing solutions in at least one of the Dimensions of Regeneration, with an intention to spread implementation to all four dimensions (whole systems design).

Figure 3.2: The Four Dimensions of the Whole System Design Framework by GEN

Source: GEN (2019a)

The social dimension refers to relationship building and social cohesion within the community. An ecovillage is a place where people do not live isolated and alienated from others but in close contact with their neighbours (Joubert and Dregger 2015). This involves shared goals, common projects, communal work and collective decision-making processes (GEN 2019c). Within the community, it should be ensured that "everyone feels empowered, seen and heard" (Jackson 1998, p. 9). The well-being that is derived from strong social relationships and a life in harmony with nature aims to make obsolete the conventional conception of happiness in terms of materialism, hedonism and consumerism.

The cultural dimension describes the creation of a cultural identity within the ecovillage that establishes a sense of belonging and "higher purpose in life" (GEN 2019b). This is regarded as an act of "celebrat[ing] life" and "reconnect[ing] with nature" (Ibid.). Such a cultural expression is articulated through practices such as rituals, art, dance, and spirituality (GEN 2019c) (Jackson 1998). Even though a vast cultural diversity exists within and among ecovillages, their cultural identity is united in the core value of the respect and love for life (Joubert and Dregger 2015, p. 9). Especially in rural contexts, the provision of cultural offerings can make an ecovillage a cultural centre within its region that attracts people from the surrounding area and thus communicates the values of eco-collaborative living.

The ecological dimension refers to an integration of human activities into the natural environment in a manner that protects and regenerates it (GEN 2019c). Ecovillages thus should be designed in ways that comply with what – in the context of the good life for all – Novy and Strickner called an "ecological imperative: Act in accordance with a lifestyle that could become generalisable" (2017a, p. 18, translated by the author). An important aspect of the ecological dimension is the use – and development – of ecologically friendly technologies to acquire energy, shelter (green construction technologies and low-impact housing (cf. Dale et al. (2019)), food, water, and material resources (GEN 2019c). Such green technologies do not need to be high-tech but could also be developed through experimenting with easily applicable low-cost techniques. For example, Trainer (2019) developed a method to construct dwellings that can be learned by laypersons in a few days, based on local material that can be collected from the direct surrounding.

The economic dimension relates to the establishment of alternative forms of economic activity. A central ideal is to organise economic cycles as locally as possible (GEN 2019c) in order to reduce the dependency on a global economic system that is regarded as socially exploitative and unjust and ecologically destructive as well as inherently instable. Alternative economic practices and institutions such as local currencies, collaborative ownership and

sustainable work are thus widespread among ecovillages, even though they are not a necessary condition (Joubert and Dregger 2015, p. 10). Strong economic inequality within an ecovillage should be avoided. The purpose of economic organisation within all ecovillages is to serve the good of its inhabitants within its bio-physical constraints (GEN 2019c).

These four dimensions are integrated in the whole system design framework and as such provide the conceptualisation of an ecovillage. Beyond this official characterisation by GEN in form of the four dimensions, at least 5 further defining principles can be identified from the literature as inherent to all ecovillages:

1) A stable and permanent community:

The first principle refers to the necessary condition of an ecovillage to be more than a loose gathering of people but a lasting community with permanent residents, facilities and institutions. In order to be considered an ecovillage by GEN, such a community needs to have at least 20 inhabitants and needs to have been in existence for at least 2 years (GEN 2019d). Furthermore, an ecovillage is designed and organised in a way that allows it "to continue indefinitely into the future" (Henfrey and Ford 2018, p. 106). That is, it needs to be sustainable in social, economic and ecological terms. Dregger (2015) states that while most ecovillages to a large extent achieve economic and ecological sustainability, the most common reason that ecovillages "fail" is due to internal disputes, such as "infighting, sneakiness and jealousy" (2015, p. 27, translated by the author). Important characteristics of ecovillages that persist are thus a culture of openness and communication, effective conflict-resolution competences, a strong sense of social cohesion and attachment, and mechanisms through which the inhabitants can express their concerns and desires (Dregger 2015) (Verco 2019, 102ff.).

2) A holistic orientation and design:

Another defining principle that has already been indicated by the formulation of a "whole system design" is the holistic orientation of ecovillages. Besides the integration of the four dimensions of sustainability, ecovillages are also active in various domains, such as housing, agriculture, manufacture, consumption, education, culture, politics, construction, spirituality, and art. Thus, the aim is to holistically combine all aspects of life (Henfrey and Ford 2018, p. 106) (Schneider 2019, 20ff.) (GEN 2019f) (Kunze and Avelino 2015, p. 2). To be considered an ecovillage, a community needs to be involved in most of these domains.

3) Autonomous self-regulation, open localism and direct democracy:

Ecovillages strive for self-sufficiency and autonomy in terms of energy and resource supply, a local economic organisation outside the global market, food sovereignty, and political autonomy as far as possible (Trainer 2019, pp. 122–123). This is regarded as necessary in order to pursue a good life for all that goes beyond the logic of a globalised capitalism. Localism is thus a key feature of ecovillages (Jackson 1998, p. 1). Latouche has elaborated on the advantages of localisation for communities and society in general: "Less transport, transparent production lines, incentivizing sustainable production and consumption, reducing dependency upon capital flow and multinationals, and greater security in every sense of the world. […] Regionalization facilitates a more democratic approach to the economy, reduces unemployment, increases participation (and therefore integration), encourages solidarity, opens up new perspectives for the developing countries, and finally, improves the health of citizens in the rich countries by encouraging sobriety and reducing stress" (2009, p. 50). This understanding of autonomy and localism is however strictly differentiated from a localism of exclusion, isolation and discrimination. Instead, it constitutes an "open localism" that embraces

diversity and cosmopolitanism (Schneider and Nelson 2019, p. 227). As Jackson has formulated it: “[E]verything is organized first in terms of relevance to a local and regional area, but always with a consciousness of a planetary "eco-vision"” (1998, p. 10). The aspiration for self-sufficiency and autonomy requires internal decision-making processes that are based on sophisticated democratic governance procedures. A model that is often employed in ecovillages is sociocracy, which is a mode of governance that attempts to make decision-making both harmonious and effective by focusing on discussion and cohesion of its practitioners (GEN 2019e).

4) Pluralism and the rejection of dogmatism:

Even though several defining principles demarcate what an ecovillage is, the concept is still open to a pluralistic understanding of how eco-collaborative living can be organised within the ecovillage framework. Many different visions have been developed that all fall under the conceptualisation of ecovillages. For example, Megre’s (2018) Anastasia communities are based on naturalistic spirituality while Otterpohl’s (2017) conception of “*Das Neue Dorf*” (“The New Village”, translated by the author) puts a strong emphasis on ecological aspects such as sustainable agriculture, soil regeneration and water management. The openness for diverse lifestyles is crucial not only among but also within ecovillages, as long as they are in line with the other key principles that have been outlined before. According to Dregger, “there is no functioning community without individuality” (2015, p. 30, translated by the author). Political, cultural or spiritual dogmatism is rejected in the ecovillage movement.

5) Ecovillages as a site of learning and teaching:

The fifth defining principle is that ecovillages are one the one hand "laboratories of the future" (Joubert 2015, p. 22) where visions of a good life for all are developed and put into practice, on the other hand they are crucial centres for spreading these models both as a general vision of an alternative lifestyle as well as in form of concrete tools and techniques for facilitating eco-collaborative living. According to Henfrey and Ford, ecovillages are not the fully-developed realisation of an ideal community, but should rather be regarded as a process towards such an end with "ongoing exploration and learning" (2018, p. 107) procedures where the goals can change on the go. Thereby, GEN claims that they "are creating a pool of wisdom for sustainable living on a global scale" (2019b) that informs the broader public of how a good life for all can be organised. GEN promotes so-called "showcase ecovillages" which are "are open to visits from government representatives, school classes, etc. They participate in the Ecovillage Impact Assessment and are specifically represented in GEN publications" (2019d). Another indicator for the importance of education in GEN was the establishment of "Gaia Education" in 2006, an international organisation that promotes knowledge for sustainable development in line with the ecovillage principles for example by offering online seminars, school programmes and academic publications (Jackson and Jackson 2015, pp. 179–180) (Gaia Education 2019).

The hereinbefore provided conceptualisation outlines the features that all ecovillages have in common and thus demarcates which communities can be regarded as ecovillages. At the same time, it illustrates which forms of communities and eco-social living are NOT ecovillages. For example, most co-housing projects are not considered as ecovillages because they are usually not holistically oriented and not autonomous and self-sufficient but depend largely on cash inflows from outside through employment of inhabitants in the external economic system (cf. Lafond and Tsvetkova (2017)). Another example are "tiny houses" which are not permanently

established and usually not communal, but rather an individualistic way of frugal and eco-friendly living (cf. Anson (2019)).

3.2 The Counter-Hegemonic Narrative of Ecovillages

3.2.1 Ecovillages vs. the Imperial Mode of Living: 7 Categories of Ordering Common Senses

Ecovillages are for their inhabitants a place that allows for self-realisation and a life in harmony with themselves, others and nature. Nevertheless, one of the core aspects of ecovillages is their mission to contribute to a bigger social-ecological transformation. GEN therefore emphasises that "ecovillages cannot be 'islands' but need to facilitate change" (Wittmayer et al. 2015, 10) and that to this end "the creation of 'a new story' for alternative community living is at the heart of [GEN's] core mission" (Wittmayer et al. 2015, p. 13).

This "new story" is in many regards radically different to the hegemonic mode of living. Ecovillages thus appear to create a counter-hegemonic narrative that challenges the hegemonic narrative of an imperial mode of living. Hegemony – from a Gramscian point of view – is established by setting up a hierarchical order among common senses, which involves also creating, emphasising, marginalising or even eliminating them. The question then arises as to how the hegemonic narrative of an imperial mode of living is postulated through a certain arrangement of common senses and how this is contrasted by a counter-hegemonic arrangement of ecovillages. Seven categories are identified from the literature that cover the most important fields of action in which ecovillages unfold as a counter-hegemonic force.

1) Conception of a "good life":

The imperial mode of living is based on and a prerequisite for a capitalist growth society. Such a societal organisation requires a large labour force and a high level of demand which is guaranteed by a hegemonic lifestyle that postulates hedonism and consumerism. Common senses are thus that a good life involves the means to have a high material standard of living and that one needs to work and earn as much as possible in order to allow for such a high consumption level. Life is thus essentially divided into working and consuming. In ecovillages, these common senses are questioned by demonstrating how the inhabitants' well-being increases though the benefits of less work, voluntary simplicity and more time to spend with family and community.

2) Social behaviour and inter-personal relationships:

An imperial mode of living prioritises the common sense that one needs to be selfish in order to achieve a good life. This creates inter-personal relationships that are characterised by a "me-against-the-rest" attitude. Similarly, individualism is idealised and inherent to the imperial mode of living. Ecovillages foster the common sense that social cohesion and belonging are essential for human well-being. Such a communal environment is regarded as highly conducive to human development as happy, peaceful and socially competent persons, especially for children (cf. Duhm (2006)). Nevertheless, the importance of individuality is not denied but regarded as mutually dependent with communality (Dregger 2015, p. 30).

3) Care taking and health:

In the imperial mode of living, the common sense that it is rational and necessary for a successful career that care taking is outsourced to the market is derived from the premises of individualism and materialism. In order to compete in a liberal and flexible labour market, full-time day-care for children and elderly care in retirement homes are normalised. Ecovillage practices prioritise opposing common senses, for example that the best social environment for care-receivers is their family and that they can in such a functioning environment all contribute to the community (Dregger 2002, p. 83).

4) Ethics and spirituality:

Ethics and spirituality are marginalised in the imperial mode of living. One of its defining principles is production, distribution and consumption at the expense of others. The common senses in a neoliberal ideology – which is closely related to the imperial mode of living (Brand and Wissen 2012, p. 551) – postulate that selfishness is beneficial for society. Ecovillages instead formulate an ethical imperative of a good life for all in which social and economic activities happen on a human scale so that social and ecological impacts can be overseen and considered. Spirituality, especially as a reconnection to "mother earth" or "Gaia", plays a role in many ecovillages and is a response to the feeling of isolation, loneliness and a lack in higher meaning of life that is felt by many people in a secularised world (Jackson 2002a).

5) Society-nature relationships:

The imperial mode of living requires an appropriation and exploitation of natural resources and sinks at the expense of the environment. Environmental degradation, climate change and loss

in biodiversity are indeed problematised, however the common sense that technocratic approaches and transnational environmental policy in terms of a "green economy" can solve the environmental crisis is favoured. In contrast to that, ecovillages postulate a relationship to nature that is based on a harmonious and conscious interaction with the immediate natural environment that overcomes the widespread alienation from nature (Snyder 2002, p. 123).

6) Energy provision:

Similarly to environmental policy, energy provision in the imperial mode of living is conceptualised as something distant and expert-driven. Providing energy resources and energy security is a matter of national and transnational policy making and often associated to power struggles involving wars and geopolitical conflicts. The primary common sense is that policy makers should guarantee cheap and steady energy supply (Brand and Wissen 2013, p. 700). How the required resources are extracted and if this happens at the expense of other nations or the environment does matter but is secondary to securing an imperial mode of living. In contrast, ecovillages take a local and human scale perspective by striving for autarky in energy provision. They foster the common sense that an energy transition is a major challenge for the future and that it can best be tackled by a local provision of renewable energy (Jackson 2002b, p. 54).

7) Work, employment and business:

Paid work is an important aspect of perpetuating the imperial mode of living. The associated common sense states that having a regular well-paid full-time job is essential for participating in society and being able to live a good life. Being unemployed is regarded as social exclusion and implies living at the expense of others. Ecovillages offer a critical reflection on the

drawbacks of full-time paid work, such as stress, unhealthy working conditions and meaninglessness (cf. Scott-Cato (2009, p. 62)). It postulates the common sense that work can be much more joyful if it is collaboratively organised, if it serves the immediate community and if it involves a mixture of manual and intellectual work (Otterpohl 2017, pp. 18–20). Another common sense articulated by ecovillages is the need for a re-orientation of business practices, shifting the focus from mere profit interests towards aspects such as participatory decision-making, environmental compatibility and social inclusion (Utting 2015).

Through a re-arrangement of common senses in those seven categories, ecovillages offer a potential counter-hegemonic narrative that challenges the hegemony of the imperial mode of living. This narrative can be summarised as the claim that a happy and good life must be a good life for all in terms of a harmonious relationship with oneself, others and nature. This can be achieved through human scale and collaborative social and economic organisation.

3.2.2 Establishing the Ecovillage Narrative through Practices and a "War of Position"

The predominance of the imperial mode of living is a structural and systemic phenomenon. It is inherent to the capitalist system and a prerequisite for its persistence (Brand and Wissen 2013). In that sense, it can be argued that its dissemination is not a steered process. Nevertheless, the political and economic elite is reproducing the hegemonic narrative that institutionalises and normalises the imperial mode of living, which consolidates their profitable dominant position (Brand and Wissen 2012, p. 548). This reproduction is for instance conducted through a conducive strategic orientation of legislation, media and education. How this unfolds in detail is an interesting topic in itself and has been extensively elaborated on by Brand and Wissen (2012) (2013), but is not subject of this research endeavour.

Instead, it is at this point more relevant to highlight how ecovillages could establish a counter-hegemonic narrative through re-arranging and re-ordering dominant common senses by practicing their perception of a good life for all. Most people in contemporary society are so deeply embedded in the structure of values, norms and practices that is characteristic to the imperial mode of living that it appears almost impossible for them to live alternatively. The inhabitants of ecovillages deliberately reject such a lifestyle. Their conscious practices challenge the common senses in the seven categories that have been presented before. According to Wittmayer et al., "change starts [for GEN] with personal change by the individual within a supporting community. There is a strong focus on 'being the change you want to see in the world', starting with oneself and one's community, including daily lifestyle and spiritual growth" (2015, p. 9). Thereby, new practices emerge which in turn can "recruit" new practitioners, making ecovillages and their inhabitants agents of change and transformation.

The creation and dissemination of a counter-hegemonic narrative through ecovillage practices happens on two spatial scales. The first is the local scale in which the immediate social environment is affected. The second is the supra-regional scale in which the broader public is addressed.

On the local scale, the neighbour-communities of ecovillages are directly exposed to ecovillage practices. Most ecovillages have close contact with their neighbours and attempt to involve them in their activities as well as explain what they are doing and why they are doing it (cf. Huber and Schuster (2015, p. 60)). This relationship is often very personal and close; therefore, the ecovillage narrative is directly and strongly conveyed. An exemplary case of the effects of an ecovillage on the local scale will be presented in Chapter 4 with the case study of Schloss Tempelhof.

On the supra-regional scale, ecovillages need to articulate their practices to the broader public by means of public relations. Conveying a counter-hegemonic narrative to a large share of the population and making it appealing is a difficult undertaking. To this end, networking is

crucial and as such the foundation of GEN as an organisation that synthesises the transformative attempts of ecovillages worldwide was a decisive step (Joubert 2015, p. 23) (Kunze and Avelino 2015, p. 4). As discussed in section 3.1.2, education, outreach and public perception regarding the message that ecovillages want to convey are high on the agenda of GEN. This relates to what Gramsci has called a "war of position" as a counter-hegemonic strategy. An important element of this are publications of books, online presence, video documentaries, and appearances in the press (Wittmayer et al. 2015, p. 13). Furthermore, hosting seminars, conferences, cultural events and providing visiting opportunities can "enable citizens from across the world to experience ecovillage life and to witness first-hand that an alternative community life is possible" (Wittmayer et al. 2015, p. 10). GEN and individual ecovillages have also formed alliances with other like-minded movements, for example "transition towns" and permaculture (Joubert 2015, p. 24), as well as with "mainstream" institutions like the UN (East 2002).

3.2.3 Strengths of Ecovillages as a Counter-Hegemonic Force

According to Joubert (2015: p. 24), many ecovillages have developed from being rather self-focused and introverted towards acknowledging the benefit of connecting with their surrounding communities and the broader public. Especially at the local scale, these ties are often very fruitful and intense. The persuasiveness and attractiveness of ecovillages for their immediate neighbour communities can be explained by the benefits they bring to the area. In the central European context, ecovillages are often located in rather poor and remote areas, mostly because land prices are comparatively cheap. When new ecovillages are established in such regions, they might first be confronted with doubt and prejudices by the local population. Nevertheless, they quickly gain appreciation and popularity because they have the potential to address local problems and demands. For example, a re-vitalisation of shrinking villages, an

integration of old people in inclusive communities, the creation of new jobs and economic activities in rural areas, and the appreciation and protection of local culture, products and the natural environment (Otterpohl 2017, 18ff.). The idea of ecovillages, if they are reasonably adapted to and embedded in the local context, is thus highly appealing to a wide range of people, not only those with an eco-social attitude, but also more conservative ones. Considering the recent political "shift to the right", ecovillage narratives could thus constitute a powerful force. It appears to be that a major reason for the growing popularity of right-wing politics is – especially in poorer rural areas – the frustration of many people with hyper-globalisation and its effects: Insecurity, communal impoverishment, migration flows, loss of cultural identity and others. Ecovillages could help to convey the message that a globalisation-critical alternative to xenophobia, exclusion and hate exists, namely what has earlier been introduced as "open localism". While dismissive political strategies of left-wing, centre-left and green politicians that condemn the political right would seem unable to reach right-wing voters, the alternative offered by ecovillages is local and graspable, embedded in the individual context of the area, and therefore more likely to bridge the gap between various societal groups.

Ecovillages can also offer benefits to cities in their immediate surrounding. From an economic perspective, ecovillages located around a city can provide the urban population with locally produced high-quality food and other products, thus offering a higher degree of food sovereignty and strengthening local economies (Otterpohl 2017, p. 38). Furthermore, they can be sites for local tourism as they provide recreational areas and cultural hotspots that are attractive for day trips from the city (Verco 2019, p. 106). Besides that, a growing trend among young European urban people is to reduce formal working ours in office jobs and compensate this with a part-time handcraft job which may be offered in ecovillages (cf. Stadt-Land-Flow (2019)).

Beyond the local scale, ecovillages have also a large potential to establish a persuasive counter-hegemonic narrative on the supra-regional scale. A key factor in this respect is that

ecovillages have been able to provide practical examples of good practice. For example, Siracusa et al. (2008) have evaluated the ecological sustainability of ecovillages by measuring and summing up their required energy input flows with an "emergy analysis" method. A case study in an Italian ecovillage has revealed that its sustainability index, which is derived from the emergy analysis, is with an index value of 6.68 much better than the Italian average with a value of 0.17. They found that this favourable index value can mainly be explained with the high degree of locally produced renewable energy, the ecological construction method used for the buildings, the large amount of shared facilities and the local production and consumption of agricultural and other products. Furthermore, Kunze and Avelino argue that "[s]patial and regional transformation has happened in many cases of local ecovillages by transforming deserts into forests, military ruins into seminar centres and permacultural gardens, and abandoned rural villages into vibrating full-featured ecovillages with local enterprises" (2015, p. 5). Regarding perceived life satisfaction, ecovillage living seems to be conducive to a high level of wellbeing (cf. Lockyer (2017, 535ff.), Trainer (2019, p. 127) and Grinde et al. (2018)). Those apparently successful cases underpin the credibility of ecovillages in establishing a narrative that depicts the potential for alternative societies.

3.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, it has been argued that ecovillages – a holistically oriented kind of eco-collaborative living – indeed have a large transformative potential, because they could challenge the hegemonic order of common senses in numerous ways. This counter-narrative is effectively established through practices of a good life for all, with the potential to spread and appeal to a large number and great variety of people.

4 Case Study: The Ecovillage Schloss Tempelhof

So far in this master thesis, the hypothesis that ecovillages contribute to a social-ecological transformation by establishing a counter-hegemonic narrative through their practices of a good life for all has only been formulated on a theoretical and abstract basis. However, mere theory without any empirical content – as it was argued earlier – leads to "a reduction of the concrete to the abstract" (Danermark et al. 2002, p. 49); therefore, abstract theory needs to be integrated with concrete empirical studies in order to identify relevant structures and mechanisms. This is the main purpose of the following chapter on the case study of Schloss Tempelhof.

To this end, the case study will first be introduced by providing the background of the development and constitution of Schloss Tempelhof as well as by recontextualising it from the hereinbefore developed theoretical perspective of counter-hegemonic narratives. Then, – drawing on the empirical results from an eight-day field study – five exemplary aspects of the transformative impact of Tempelhof will be separately investigated regarding their respective practices, the rearrangement of common senses, the effects on the external population and the structures and mechanisms that explain those effects. In the following, these findings will be synthesised to identify the effects and the underlying constitutive structure of Tempelhof as a whole. Lastly, some deficiencies and constraints of Tempelhof as a transformative force will be elaborated.

4.1 A Brief Introduction to the Ecovillage Schloss Tempelhof

4.1.1 Background

The ecovillage Schloss Tempelhof was initiated by a group of around twenty people from diverse backgrounds that met in 2007 in Munich to set up a community (Gemeinschaft Tempelhof 2019e). For three years, this group worked out a common understanding of the

organisation of such a community, based on the fundamental goal "to share their life together in a community founded on the meaningful principles of ecological sustainability, social justice and a new human consciousness" (Ibid.). In 2010, they bought the vacant building complex Schloss Tempelhof in southern Germany together with the associated four hectare building land and 27 hectare agrarian land and living space for up to 200 people (Huber and Schuster 2015, p. 60). The founders strived from the outset for a close communication and cooperation with the local community. Before the acquisition of the area was finalised, they invited the local population to an event in which they communicated the vision and values of their project and responded to questions and concerns. Without disguising or palliating anything, potential conflicts and prejudices – people were for instance concerned that the founders are a religious sect – have thereby been cleared out from the beginning (Ibid.). Furthermore, the founders sought dialogue with the mayor, who is until today a crucial supporter of Schloss Tempelhof (Ibid.).

Nowadays, after 8 years of existence, Tempelhof has established itself both internally and in the region. Approximately 80 adults and 30 children live permanently in the ecovillage (Gemeinschaft Tempelhof 2019e). Tempelhof is organisationally and legally based on a three-pillar framework (Ibid.): The "Schloss Tempelhof Foundation" owns the land and the building complex, the "Cooperative Tempelhof eG" builds and administrates the buildings and the "Association Tempelhof e.V." carries social projects and initiatives. New inhabitants first need to become cooperative members and deposit 30.000€, while families have to pay a lower amount per person (Huber and Schuster 2015, p. 61). Furthermore, residents need to pay a rent for their flat and a usage fee for community facilities, communal meals, etc. All inhabitants additionally need to render four hours per week a community task, such as cleaning, maintaining the garden or administrating the library. What is more, several enterprises and institutions are associated to Schloss Tempelhof: An agricultural enterprise, a seminar house, a café, a guest house, an IT company, a hairdresser, and a metal and joiner's workshop (Otterpohl

2017, p. 79). Furthermore, a small school – the "School for Free Development" – with a radically alternative pedagogical concept and a forest kindergarten were established (Gemeinschaft Tempelhof 2019d). Tempelhof also has a large community kitchen, in which professional cooks prepare breakfast, lunch and dinner for the community with vegetables from the agricultural enterprise.

Schloss Tempelhof is thus a rather large ecovillage with multiple facets. According to Huber and Schuster, it was necessary to create a project at this magnitude and complexity "in order to include all aspects of a holistic socio-economic experiment" (Huber and Schuster 2015, p. 59, translated by the author).

4.1.2 Schloss Tempelhof Viewed through the Lens of Counter-Hegemonic Narratives

In the context of this master thesis, Schloss Tempelhof serves as an illustrative case of an ecovillage that functions as a transformative force in establishing a counter-hegemonic narrative through its practices.

Since 2013, Tempelhof has been recognised as an ecovillage by GEN (Kunze 2015, p. 2) and, moreover, fits into the conceptualisation made in section 3.1. First of all, they strive for a transformation in all four dimensions of the whole system design framework. Concerning the social dimension, the desire for communal living was the main motivation for its founders and innovative methods for community building and participative decision-making are applied (Gemeinschaft Tempelhof 2019g). The community of Schloss Tempelhof furthermore tries to establish an own cultural identity, for instance regarding a culture of conflict resolution, communal living, spirituality and celebrating (Ibid.). In the ecological dimension, efforts are made to reduce the environmental footprint and to regenerate the natural environment, for example through sharing tools and facilities, employing ecological construction methods for new buildings, installing photovoltaic plants and fostering humus formation on their

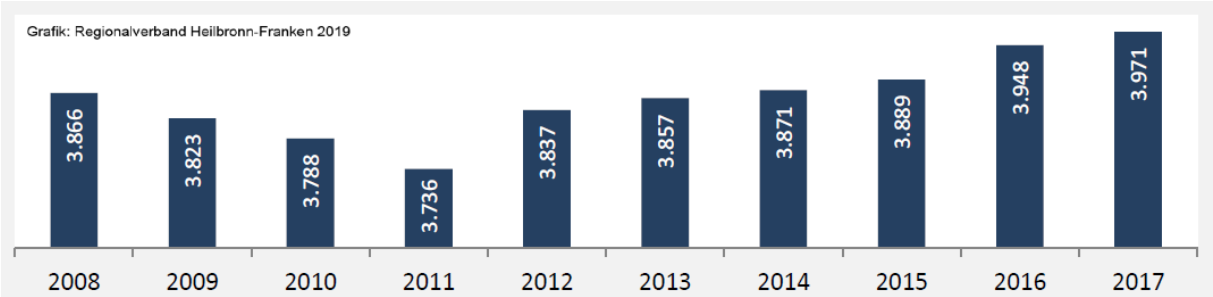
agricultural land (cf. Kunze (2015, pp. 3–4) and Gemeinschaft Tempelhof (2019c)). In terms of economic transformation, Tempelhof implemented some alternative practices such as gift economy, a need-based salary for employees – more than half of the adults living in Tempelhof do also work there – and a cooperative organisational structure of production (cf. Huber and Schuster (2015, p. 61) and Gemeinschaft Tempelhof (2019a)). Besides the four dimensions, Tempelhof is in line with the five further defining principles identified in section 3.1.2, as it constitutes a stable and permanent community, it is committed to a holistic understanding of a good life for all (Gemeinschaft Tempelhof 2019g), it strives in many aspects for autonomous self-regulation and uses decision-making methods that foster direct democracy (Ibid.), it rejects any kind of dogmatism (Ibid.), and it is a site of learning and teaching where experimental and innovative techniques and methods are applied and made available to the interested public (Gemeinschaft Tempelhof 2019b).

The latter aspect – making the practices of Tempelhof inhabitants visible and accessible to the broader public – is an especially important concern of the community (Huber and Schuster 2015, p. 59). Using the terminology of this master thesis, it can thus be stated that Tempelhof actively strives for creating and spreading a counter-hegemonic narrative, both on the local and the supra-regional scale. Tempelhof had during the first years of existence a strong focus on outreach to an audience of the supra-regional dimension. At the initial stage, it was crucial to have this focus in order to attract many people for seminar courses, for volunteering and as new members of the community. Once the community was built and financially secure, Tempelhof started to put a stronger emphasis on spreading their vision to the outside. They offer a great variety of opportunities to get to know their values and practices, for example by organising public events such as the *1. Mai Fest*, hosting "helping guests" that can for one week help in the various enterprises of Tempelhof, offering information events, publishing newsletters and being present on the internet and in the press. Due to these efforts, Tempelhof attracts several hundred visitors every year (Kunze 2015, p. 3). Thereby, it makes its practices

in the fields of action that were discussed in section 3.2.1 visible and thus questions and re-shapes the associated hegemonic order of common senses. Examples are the radically alternative organisation of agriculture, the communal living and the cooperative structure of its enterprises that target not only for profit maximisation but also the benefit of the entire community.

Tempelhof furthermore brings many of the benefits that were mentioned in section 3.2.3 to the region. It re-vitalised the economically and demographically shrinking municipality Kreßberg significantly in many regards. The previously declining population size is on the rise again since the foundation of the ecovillage, as Figure 4.1 indicates, with many young families and highly educated people moving to the region (Regionalverband Heilbronn-Franken 2019). Furthermore, the newly established enterprises, as well as the school, generate tax income and offer employment. Tempelhof also constitutes a cultural hotspot and serves as a destination for local tourist groups like the "*Landfrauen*", school excursions and environmental associations.

Figure 4.1: Population Development in Kreßberg



Source: Regionalverband Heilbronn-Franken (2019): Kreßberg - Bevölkerung. Available online at www.regionalverband-heilbronn-franken.org/datenblaetter.html%3Ffile%3Dfiles/Download/Gemeindedatenblatt/Liste%2520B_2019/Kre%25C3%259Fberg%25202019.pdf+&cd=1&hl=de&ct=clnk&gl=at, checked on 4/25/2019.

Tempelhof can thus be considered a case well-suited for investigating the structures and mechanisms associated with the functioning of ecovillages and the counter-hegemonic narratives they establish. However, the fact that Tempelhof is an already well-established and

large ecovillage that is comprehensively performing transformative practices, has a large outreach and a close and friendly relationship with its neighbour-villages makes it a rather special case that is not directly generalisable to all ecovillages. Many small and newly created ecovillages are forced to devote a lot of energy to their internal struggles which comes at the expense of their external impact. Nevertheless, the success of Tempelhof makes it particularly suitable for investigating the mechanisms that enable ecovillages to be a transformative force, because it reveals the potentiality that can be actualised once the initial struggles are overcome. The purpose of the case study is therefore not to directly generalise the findings to all ecovillages, but rather to identify, characterise and explain the transformative potential that has been manifested in this particular case.

4.2 Methods and Procedure

The conduct of the case study in the ecovillage Tempelhof constitutes the empirical element of this master thesis. This section deals with the procedure during the field study, the choice of empirical research methods, their implementation and the data processing.

The assessment of the case study is mainly based on data collected during an eight-day visit in the framework of the "helping guests" program offered by Tempelhof. In this program, visitors get the opportunity to stay for one week with the community, participate in plenums and working groups, share communal meals and take part in leisure activities. In exchange, they are required to work for six hours per day in several cooperative enterprises and help with other community task, which is considered an additional learning experience. As such, the "helping guests" program was an excellent opportunity get in touch with the inhabitants of Tempelhof and their daily practices and thus to gain valuable information for this research project through participant observation.

Besides that, the most crucial source for the data collection were ten in-depth interviews. These were conducted as semi-structured interviews in accordance with Barriball and While (1994). Semi-structured interviews guide the interview in a particular desired direction while allowing for some spontaneity to adopt the course of the interview and the wording to particular circumstances and give room for extensive probing (Barriball and While 1994, p. 331). This method was thus considered as suitable because the very specific aim of the case study required the interviews to be structured and focused; at the same time, the outcomes and responses from the interviewees were largely unanticipated. The ten interviews all have a length of 30 to 60 minutes, with some of them being auditorily recorded. All interviews were conducted and transcribed in German language.

The sampling for the interviews was done according to the following pattern: Regarded through the theoretical lens of counter-hegemonic narratives, the people involved in the activities of Tempelhof can be divided into two groups. The first group consists of persons that are directly involved in public relation projects and the exchange between Tempelhof and the outside. From this first group, interview partners were selected in a manner that most key domains of Tempelhof's activities as counter-hegemonic force – such as agriculture, school and local politics – were covered by choosing the respective protagonists of those domains as interview partners. The second group comprises people that are rather indirectly and unconsciously involved in the exchange and thus in the process of spreading the values and practices of Tempelhof. Out of this larger group, people with various backgrounds, functions, gender and age were selected to attempt a high representativeness of the population. Five interviews were conducted with people from each group; four interviewees were inhabitants of Schloss Tempelhof while six were outsiders.

An informative name is given to each interviewee for better understanding. The first interviewee is called the "public relations representative", who is a Tempelhof inhabitant, member of the "public relations" working group and head facilitator of the exchange project

with the village Hülen. The second interviewee is the "founding member"; she was decisively involved in the founding process of Tempelhof and is since then an inhabitant. Furthermore, she is responsible for organising several information events. The third interviewee is the "mayor" of the municipality of Kreßberg, who is generally in favour of the ecovillage Tempelhof and has supported it since its foundation (Huber and Schuster 2015, p. 60). Interviewee four is a "municipal council member" of Kreßberg and as well inhabitant of Tempelhof. The fifth interviewee is the "school board chairwoman" of the "School for Free Development" and as well a Tempelhof inhabitant. The sixth interviewee is a "local pensioner", who has been living in Kreßberg for his entire life. Interviewee seven is called the "family father", who moved with his family from Hamburg into a house near Tempelhof in order to be able to send his children to the "School for Free Development". The eighth interviewee is an "employee" at Schloss Tempelhof; he works at the community kitchen but lives outside of the ecovillage. Interviewee nine is a conventional "farmer" and local of Kreßberg. Interviewee ten is the "shop owner" of the only remaining tiny village shop in Kreßberg.

Additionally to those semi-structured interviews, countless unstructured and informal conversations were conducted with inhabitants of Tempelhof and the surrounding villages throughout the eight days. They were conducive to acquiring a better general understanding of the practices and processes at Schloss Tempelhof and crucial for structuring the empirical research during the field study.

In order to investigate the transformative potential of Tempelhof, it was useful to isolate several exemplary components of the effects that practices at Tempelhof exert on the external population; Danermark et al. call this step the "analytical resolution" (2002, p. 109). In this section, five aspects of Tempelhof that are particularly relevant in the context of this study will be investigated in greater depth. These are 1) the agricultural enterprise, 2) the political practices of direct democracy, 3) points of contact with the local population, 4) the exchange project with the village Hülen, and 5) the "School for Free Development". These aspects were identified as

pivotal for Tempelhof's transformative potential during the process of the field study. They represent key fields of action in which the effects of the counter-hegemonic narrative established by Tempelhof become apparent; nevertheless, they only constitute exemplary domains which could be supplemented by further activities.

4.3 Empirical Results of the Field Study

4.3.1 Mechanisms in the Key Aspects of Tempelhof

In the following, the empirical results derived during the eight-day field trip to Tempelhof will be presented. The purpose of this field study is to investigate the structures and mechanisms that make ecovillages a potential transformative force and to explain how those mechanism manifest. In that sense, it will now be thoroughly described for each of the five key aspects of Schloss Tempelhof how exactly counter-hegemonic narratives are created and spread, how various common senses have changed since the arrival of the Tempelhof community and which effects are exerted on the external population.

1) <u>The agricultural enterprise:</u>

The agricultural enterprise associated with Schloss Tempelhof is a radical vegetable farming project that experiments with alternative agricultural practices such as permaculture, market gardening and CSA on 26 hectare land. Its main goals are the provision of the community with fresh and high-quality vegetables, herbs and grains, the regeneration of the soil via an increased hummus content and the establishment of a solidarity-based economic organisation of food retailing.

Tempelhof creates through these alternative practices a counter-hegemonic narrative with regard to agricultural habits by challenging the hegemonic order of common senses. The global agricultural industry – driven by profit interests – is a powerful conglomerate that managed to establish the image that food primarily needs to be cheap as well as perennially available in a great variety and a standardised shape and colour (Otterpohl 2017, p. 50). Furthermore, the belief that the agro-chemical industry is necessary to feed the growing global population is widespread (Ibid.). In Tempelhof, local agricultural provision is a key aspect and the common sense that high-quality and fresh food is crucial for mental and physical health is promoted ("municipal council member" interviewee). Another emphasised common sense is that consuming food from the other end of the world is environmentally, economically and socially harmful and unnecessary. The practice of CSA establishes solidarity and inter-personal relationships between producers and consumers and involves integrating consumers into the harvest and thereby re-connects them to their daily nutrition (Norberg-Hodge 2002, p. 39). Furthermore, the application of agricultural methods such as permaculture and market gardening alters existing common senses by demonstrating that alternatives to large-scale mono-culture cultivation exist and are necessary to regenerate the soil which is a pivotal aspect for counteracting environmental degradation and climate change (cf. Otterpohl (2017, p. 44)).

The establishment of an agricultural counter-narrative through a modification of common senses led to several effects among the local population. When the agricultural enterprise at Tempelhof was newly established it was by most people from Kreßberg – especially by the old-established farmers – mocked as naïve and a romantic-utopian ideal of self-sufficiently growing vegetables ("farmer" interviewee). However, the initiators of the agricultural enterprise managed to achieve, within a short period of time, the production of a great variety and quantity of high-quality food while significantly improving the soil quality. This has led to a rethinking of attitudes towards their practices; nowadays, many people – curious laypersons as well as farmers – visit the enterprise because they are interested in the

practices and simply like the beautiful permaculture garden as a "destination for having a walk" ("shop owner" interviewee, translated by the author). External people are invited for seminars, guided tours and internships where they learn more about where their food comes from, the effects of growing food for the ecosystem and the crucial role of the soil for climate change, diversity of species and the local weather and rainfall frequency. A retired local of Kreßberg reported that he has attended several seminars and now started permaculture practices in his private garden ("local pensioner" interviewee). A conventional farmer from the region expressed his astonishment and great respect for the achievements of this small group of young people that experiments with crop cultivation ("farmer" interviewee). Furthermore, several people from the surrounding villages ("mayor" interviewee) as well as two regional restaurants ("founding member" interviewee) receive their vegetables from Tempelhof. Also the mayor of Kreßberg stressed that "neither a farmer […] nor the municipality is interested in destroying their basis of existence, but want to sustain it" and that therefore "everyone here is principally interested in sustainability and ecologically friendly agriculture" ("mayor" interviewee, translated by the author). Many local people have thus apparently started to rethink the established assumptions about agricultural practices and food provision. However, a major effect in terms of a profound change in agricultural practices in the region is – according to the mayor – not visible. He argues that such an effect is in fact obviously not possible because the large-scale industrial farmers of the region and the market gardening CSA enterprise of Tempelhof are situated in two entirely different spheres: "There are no real influences, because this are actually two completely different structures […] there is a strict boarder [between the two]" ("mayor" interviewee). This assessment seems to suggest that the agricultural enterprise at Tempelhof constitutes rather an aesthetic and idealist leisure activity of ecologically conscious gardeners, while the local commercial farmers are forced to be competitive on the agricultural market. According to the mayor, farmers are "exposed to this competition that exists in the agricultural sector; they need to align their practices with their economic situation,

[for example] regarding their workers" ("mayor" interviewee, translated by the author). Additionally, the vast majority of the harvest is used by the community of Schloss Tempelhof itself, while only a minor part is sold to external consumers. While many local people seem to sympathise with the agricultural enterprise at Tempelhof, they usually still prefer to buy the cheaper products from the supermarket. Increasing the quantity of agricultural products grown at Tempelhof is thus not a technical problem but essentially limited by the lack in demand.

Several mechanisms can be derived from this analysis of the agricultural enterprise at Tempelhof. For example, one aspect of the structure of the enterprise is that it successfully provides a good quantity and quality of food. This constitutes an essential condition of its structure that enables a change in the perception of agricultural practices by the local people, because they are impressed by the beautiful garden, the nutritious soil and the tasty products. The success makes the permaculture gardeners appear skilled and knowledgeable which increases the effect on the perception of the local people. Another crucial mechanism is enabled through the openness and visibility of the cultivation area. This element of the enterprises' structure is important as it allows external visitors to experience the alternative agricultural practices and thus learn a lot about social, ecological and economic aspects of agriculture. However, a mechanism – or a conglomeration of mechanism – that allows alternative agricultural practices to be employed by the majority of conventional farmers is either not existent or it does not manifest because it is neutralised by other mechanisms that are produced by the structure of the capitalist agricultural market.

2) Political practices of direct democracy:

The next investigated aspect takes up the basic democratic and experimental decision-making practices that are applied and developed at Schloss Tempelhof. Sophisticated techniques for community building and decision-making were from the outset a key concern for the founders

of Tempelhof and several founding members brought in a lot of experience and expertise in this field ("public relations representative" Interviewee). The basis for these techniques consists of the "*WIR-Prozess*" (we-process) and the "All-Leader" principle, which are tools for communication and collaboration that recognise that all members of a group possess certain skills and competences that are valuable for the entire group; therefore, the group needs to give each member sufficient space for expressing her feelings and her opinion (Gemeinschaft Tempelhof 2019g). All decisions that concern the community are then made in various plenums, in which each inhabitant has one vote; voting happens on the principle of consensus and is oriented towards sociocracy ("municipal council member" interviewee). Every member of Schloss Tempelhof has the right to comment on a decision, express doubts and to veto a motion and thereby prevent its implementation (Ibid.). This modus ensures that all members are given a voice and that decisions and compromises are not imposed but jointly negotiated. Clearly, this approach has also several disadvantages: Decisions-making can be very exhausting and slow; if no agreement is reached the status quo remains, which tends to thwart progress. Furthermore, there is a strong social barrier to vetoing a motion that has been filed by a fellow inhabitant, because a single veto leads to the rejection of the motion and thereby severely harms the personal relationship with that person (Ibid.). Tempelhof inhabitants therefore do not regard their approach as the ideal mode for decision-making but rather as "work in progress" which is constantly reflected upon and amended (Ibid.).

Through these practices of direct democracy Schloss Tempelhof alters the hegemonic order of common senses regarding politics and decision-making. Politics is nowadays by most people perceived as something distant; ordinary citizens mostly participate in politics merely through voting for politicians that seem to represent their preferences. Even though many people are frustrated with this lack in opportunities to make their voice heard and actively shape political outcomes, there seems to be no favourable alternative to a system of representative democracy in order to govern such a complex entity as the modern nation state. This habit of

delegating power to politicians is however even transferred to the municipal scale; most people are therefore, even at the local level, unable to actively participate in decision-making. Tempelhof attempts to challenge this narrative by emphasising that it is indeed possible to have more direct democratic structures, at least for the organisation of smaller groups. They are thereby highlighting the common sense that effective political participation is a fundamental citizens' right. However, most of the decision-making techniques employed at Tempelhof are clearly not directly applicable to governing processes at the federal political level. Therefore, a derived common sense is that more political competences should be shifted to the municipal level in order to increase effective democratic participation ("municipal council member" interviewee).

Also with regard to this aspect of Tempelhof, the establishment of a counter-hegemonic narrative has induced several effects. On the supra-regional scale, curious people visit Tempelhof in order to learn from their experiences with theory and practice of direct democratic decision-making techniques and communal organisation ("founding member" interviewee). On the local scale, the citizens of Kreßberg – by being confronted with the practices at Tempelhof – increase their awareness of different approaches to democracy, governance and politics in general. Furthermore, one inhabitant of Tempelhof is a member of Kreßberg's municipal council and thus active in local politics. He communicates some of the democratic methods used in Tempelhof and the other members of the council as well as the mayor are aware of them. Even though these methods are not principally rejected by them, they are clearly not taken seriously as an alternative for their decision-making because rules for voting at the municipal level are determined by law and thus rigid ("municipal council member" interviewee). The decision-making methods developed at Tempelhof could however be transferred to other context such as associations, clubs, companies, schools and families (Ibid.); this is in fact happening to some degree in the region, for example in the case of the village Hülen, which will later be elaborated on. Nevertheless, a large-scale and profound spreading of decision-

making practices of Tempelhof has so far not materialised ("mayor" interviewee). As the council member from Tempelhof argues, this is hardly surprising, because the techniques they developed are far from being perfect: "So I would be reluctant to say 'as we do it here at Tempelhof it should be done all over the world'; to me, this is so far not an outcome that could be advertised and disseminated" ("municipal council member" interviewee, translated by the author).

Concerning the structures and mechanisms that underly this aspect of Tempelhof, several things can be observed. It has already been argued in the context of the first aspect – the agricultural enterprise – that if practices are successfully and fruitfully performed, they have a greater potential to convince external people and thus be multiplied. This mechanism applies here reversely: The political practices at Tempelhof are not yet fully developed and entail several disadvantages, therefore they do not widely appeal to the external population and are thus not meaningfully spread. Even if those techniques would receive greater acceptance, the mechanism that would make them succeed in political institutions such as the municipal council are neutralised by the legal structure that prohibits their implementation. Nonetheless, if the political practices in our society ought to be altered towards more direct democratic alternatives, developing and experimenting with alternative approaches is a necessary precondition. These decision-making techniques cannot be developed on the drawing board but require people that are committed to apply them, reflect upon them and develop them further. The structural constitution of the Tempelhof community enables mechanisms that let these techniques evolve and therefore constitutes a laboratory for democratic practices.

3) <u>Points of contact with the local population:</u>

The community of Schloss Tempelhof has from the outset made many attempts to get in touch with the local population. One element of this are the already-mentioned public information

events, such as the *Info-cafés* and the guided tours. For instance, visitor groups of the *Landfrauenverband* – an association of women living in the countryside and mostly working in agricultural enterprises – visit Tempelhof around ten times a year with groups of approximately 50 women ("founding member" interviewee). The most important event where inhabitants of Tempelhof get in touch with locals is the *1. Mai Fest*, according to the "founding member" interviewee. This traditional German feast day, at which the beginning of the warm season is celebrated, has for many decades been hosted at Schloss Tempelhof before the arrival of the ecovillage community. The founding group took up this tradition in order to establish a relationship to the local population and offer them an annual cultural highlight. Each year around 1500 visitors from the region join this event, which offers food, drinks, cultural activities, guided tours and information about Tempelhof and ecovillage living in general. Besides the *1. Mai Fest*, locals regularly use the Tempelhof Café and the organic grocery store – there are no other cafés and groceries in the surrounding villages – ("shop owner" interviewee) and visit workshops, courses and seminars covering a great variety of topics such as fruit tree cultivation, non-violent communication or pottery (Gemeinschaft Tempelhof 2019f). Furthermore, employees of Tempelhof that do not live in the ecovillage but commute from the surrounding villages are required to participate in seminars and plenums to get an understanding of the community philosophy ("employee" interviewee). Inhabitants of Schloss Tempelhof participate in various local sport clubs and the choir ("mayor" interviewee). These kind of interactions do partly happen out of personal interests – people living at Tempelhof simply want to sing in the choir – but are often also motivated by a conscious intention to integrate the ecovillage in the socio-cultural environment, to overcome prejudices and communicate the vision, values and practices of ecovillage living to the outside world.

Regarding the establishment of a counter-hegemonic narrative, this aspect of Schloss Tempelhof – points of contact with the local population – is different from other aspects such as the agricultural enterprise in that it does not establish its own common senses but rather

functions as a transmitter of all kind of Tempelhof practices for a social-ecological transformation. Nevertheless, it is to this purpose an indispensable element of Tempelhof's transformative potential. To provide an example, the numerous points of contact offer external visitors an insight into the communal living practices and thereby emphasise the common sense that communal, intergenerational and collaborative living increases the wellbeing of people ("founding member" interviewee). A further example is the habit at Tempelhof that financially wealthy inhabitants give cash gifts to inhabitants in financial distress, in some situations person have received several thousand euros through this mechanism ("public relations representative" interviewee). Visitors that learn about these gift economy practices at the various information events are usually highly surprised and impressed which alters the hegemonic order of common senses regarding money.

All these various points of contact exert effects on the local population. First of all, a crucial effect is that the external population gets to know people from Tempelhof personally and learn about their practices and the everyday life in an ecovillage. The locals realise that these people are "normal people" with values, goals and desires that are not so unusual from what they are used to ("public relations representative" interviewee). For example, one inhabitant of Tempelhof who is responsible for the guided tours explained that "they [the *Landfrauen*] are really all from the region, and they get really emotional [during the guided tour], how does an alternative agriculture work, an alternative co-living, also financially, regarding this "economy for the common good", that we build these dense social networks, that we take care of someone who is not feeling well, […] these are things that actually everyone on this planet desires" ("founding member" interviewee, translated by the author). These experiences make people sympathise with Tempelhof and they start to identify themselves with the ecovillage and regard it as part of their region. Especially at the *1. Mai Fest*, the locals are "really motivated and ask each time 'what's new this year at Tempelhof?', 'what happened since last year?'; I think this is really important for our integration that the people are able to

follow our progress and support it“ (“founding member” interviewee, translated by the author). Also the mayor is convinced that these personal contacts are crucial for the acceptance of Tempelhof by the local population: “Reservations and prejudices are thereby lifted; it is good that there are always these information opportunities, this creates a feeling of togetherness” (“mayor” interviewee, translated by the author). Once people that are in touch with Tempelhof inhabitants start to sympathise with the community and their practices, they also function as crucial multipliers by telling their friends, family members, neighbours about their positive experiences, which in turn visit Tempelhof events themselves (“public relations representative” interviewee).

The manifestation of these events can be explained by the structure of Schloss Tempelhof. A crucial mechanism relates to the constitution of Tempelhof as being an outwards-oriented community which enables the effect that it is easier for external people to learn about the ecovillage and sympathise with its practices. A further important mechanism that creates the positive and sympathetic attitude towards Tempelhof is enabled by the open and transparent atmosphere at events such as the *1. Mai Fest*, which encourages visitors to lift reservations, ask questions and discuss critical aspects.

4) <u>The exchange project with the village Hülen:</u>

In 2017, GEN Germany launched the pilot exchange programme “*Leben in zukunftsfähigen Dörfern*” (Living in Future-Oriented Villages) that aims at facilitating a cooperation between ecovillages and conventional villages (Veciana and Strünke 2018). Villages from across Germany that target a sustainable development and revitalisation of their communities but require external support and expertise applied to this programme. Schloss Tempelhof is one of the ecovillages that participates and since then advises and accompanies the village Hülen which is located 40 kilometres away from Kreßberg (Gemeinschaft Tempelhof 2018). Hülen -

a 600-inhabitants village – had a shrinking community and was suffering from the fact that it is located along a big road and therefore has no real local centre that serves as a meeting point ("public relations representative" interviewee). The tiny village shop was only opened on Saturdays and the sport and leisure club had few remaining members. Some inhabitants therefore came together in order to improve this situation; when they found out about the ecovillage exchange programme, they perceived it as a chance to set off a development process. A small group of Tempelhof inhabitants facilitated the exchange and communicated the expertise regarding sustainable community development, methods for effective and inclusive decision-making processes, ecological consultancy and others (Ibid.). Several projects, events and links were initiated through this project and helped to revitalise Hülen.

The exchange project with Hülen promotes a rearrangement of common senses with regard to perceptions of ecovillage living. While ecovillages are often viewed as extraordinary and radical projects that are driven by ecologically motivated activists, the idea of the "*Leben in zukunftsfähigen Dörfern*" programme emphasises that ecovillage living and its associated practices are applicable everywhere and by everyone. In fact, the ambition of conventional villages to collaborate with and learn from established ecovillages demonstrates that the goals and desires of people living in ecovillages are often shared by a lot of "ordinary" people. Another challenged common sense is the view that rural depopulation and the shrinkage of villages and their local culture is an inevitable and irreversible process. The case of Hülen shows that a small group of motivated villagers is able to induce a dynamic process of developing their village in a sustainable and revitalising manner.

This latter point is also one of the most powerful effects that the exchange project with Hülen exerts: People realise through the spreading of ecovillage practices on conventional villages that change is possible. The successes of Schloss Tempelhof serve here as inspiration for people who want to develop their own village: "Approximately 40 inhabitants of Hülen came to have a look at Tempelhof. They perceived this as a real highlight of this project […]

because they realised that here are normal people that achieved a lot in a short period of time from the organic grocery store to the school; they were totally inspired that change is actually possible and that normal people can realise something like this" ("public relations representative" interviewee, translated by the author). Another effect is that ecovillage practices are applied in new contexts and thus spread. Hülen has achieved some considerable successes with regard to establishing a more future-oriented village design: Decision-making processes are now designed much more transparent, inclusive and democratic, as communication tools have been applied that allow everyone to participate in discussions (Ibid.). Furthermore, social cohesion has been strengthened through establishing a "village action day", organising a car-pooling, founding an up-cycling working group, and installing an online platform where inhabitants can communicate and exchange tools and assistance (Ibid.). These practices turn Hülen into a new lighthouse project for the ideas of ecovillages in its region. As a result, several other villages and citizens' groups around Hülen have already communicated their intention to implement some of these "new" practices, especially with regard to communal communication and decision-making methods (Ibid.).

Some of the structures and mechanisms that have been identified for the previous aspects of Tempelhof are operating similarly in the context of the exchange project with Hülen, for example the conducive effect that a successful implementation of ecovillage practices has on the change in mentality of the local population. A mechanism that has not been discussed so far is that the effects on the locals are even stronger if conventional and long-established villages share and apply ecovillage practices. If a group of people from a village that is perceived as "normal" and native to the region is implementing such kind of projects, this appeals even more to the locals then a group of strangers from across Germany and abroad that comes to newly establish an ecovillage from scratch.

5) The “School for Free Development”:

Shortly after the ecovillage Schloss Tempelhof was founded, it became apparent that a fond wish of the numerous young families was to establish their own school with an alternative pedagogical concept that reflects the values of the community (“school board chairwoman” interviewee). After a lengthy and work-intensive process, this project was realised and the “School for Free Development” was founded. This school perceives itself as an “democratic school, in which children shape and decide upon the school activities together with their learning facilitators”, and it pursues the “goal to accompany children and adolescents on their path towards being mature, authentic, future-oriented and responsible citizens” (Gemeinschaft Tempelhof 2019d). The pupils can freely choose how they want to spend their day at school, their learning happens instinctively and spontaneously, and their learning facilitators do neither prescribe the structure nor the content of learning (Ibid.). The performance of pupils is also not graded or evaluated by the facilitators. The “School for Free Development” is, even among other democratic schools, special in that it is integrated into the ecovillage, thereby the pupils are encouraged to participate in several community activities such as the shared meals and the workshops (“school board chairwoman” interviewee). Today, the school comprises around 80 pupils, approximately 1/3 of them live in Tempelhof while 2/3 live in the surrounding villages. Most of these external pupils moved with their family to the region only to attend this unique school, whereas very few native families send their children to the Tempelhof school, “maybe one or two, but it is actually rather an exception” (“mayor” interviewee).

The hegemonic narrative regarding school education prioritises the common sense that the main purpose of school is to impart advanced knowledge to the pupils covering a wide range of subjects. This form of education is postulated as indispensable in order to prepare children for their entry into the workforce and to compete on the labour market, which is also a prerequisite for the national economy to remain competitive in the global economy (Hofmann

2019). The evaluation and categorisation of pupils in the form of grades and degrees is regarded as necessary, on the one hand to induce them to learn and on the other hand to make their performance and skills accessible to employers. The underlying common sense that justifies this reasoning is the assumption that children need a certain structural framework and pressure for focused learning, as they would without any pressure rather play games and do "more pleasant" things (Ibid.). The "School for Free Development" takes a completely different point of departure: It highlights the common sense that, rather than school performance and the acquisition of "hard skills" in specific subject areas, emancipatory personal development and happiness should be the ultimate goal of the development of our children ("school board chairwoman" interviewee). Their pedagogical concept is based on the critique that the performance pressure and coercion at conventional schools is psychologically harmful for the children and thwarts their development, which not only makes them less happy, but also prevents them from drawing on their full intellectual potential. A key assumption of the school is the common sense that children are usually inherently eager to learn and to be productive if only they are allowed to develop freely, while the extrinsic pressure of grades inhibits this intrinsic motivation.

The effects of the "School for Free Development" and their radical pedagogical practices are exerted on three groups of recipients. The first group consists of the pupils, while are affected as they develop very differently from pupils of conventional schools because they are not socialised in an environment of competition and performance pressure but of self-determination, collaboration with peers and an admiration for nature ("family father" interviewee). An important element of this learning environment is their connection to the Tempelhof community, whereby they also learn a lot about ecovillage living and its merits. The second recipients is the general school system. Teachers and other functionaries of the school sector frequently visit the school and seminars about its pedagogical concept; they are often impressed and inspired by these new practices because they are themselves frustrated with the

constitution of the conventional school system ("school board chairwoman" interviewee). For instance, the chairwoman of the school reported about a situation where she talked to one of those visiting teachers that stated: "If all pupils develop like the ones that I just saw then I will send my own kids to this school!" (Ibid.). Furthermore, the school is member of the "National Association of Free Alternative Schools", which advocates a re-organisation of the school system in Germany in line with their pedagogical concept (Hofmann 2019). The third group of recipients is the one that has been focused on throughout this chapter, namely the local population. For many locals, the "School for Free Development" is the first and only point of contact with radically alternative pedagogical concepts and as such a lighthouse project to promote future-oriented educational principles. The graduated pupils function as multipliers and "normalisers" of these principles if the local population realises that they leave this school as "normal people" and not as "wild animals" ("school board chairwoman" interviewee). Additionally, the school offers public information events where doubts and questions by the locals can be adressed; especially interesting is a new program that invites adults to attend the school for one week and participate as if they were pupils again (Ibid.). However, it is – despite all these efforts – apparent that the "School for Free Development" is the aspect of Schloss Tempelhof that faces the greatest scepticism and rejection by the local population. Many people – including the otherwise very supportive mayor – are highly critical of the very liberal pedagogical concept. The dominant common sense that children need some pressure and coercion to study things that are unpleasant or difficult to learn is so far not dissolved by the practices at Tempelhof. For instance, the mayor argues that "the majority of children will not learn the basics; I still need to decently learn writing and reading; the children will just push away these unpleasant exercises, for example foreign languages, learning vocabularies" ("mayor" interviewee). A local farmer stated that he is generally impressed by the achievements of Tempelhof, the only thing he completely rejects is their free schools and that its pupils can "come and go [to school] whenever they like" ("farmer" interviewee). Many local people

appear to have a very vague and prejudiced perception of the school and are not aware of the philosophy underlying its pedagogical concept. Concerning the effects of the "School for Free Development", it can thus be stated that it did not successfully change the practices of the local population, which so far do not send their children to the Tempelhof school. Furthermore, it did not have a profound effect on their attitudes, as most people remain highly sceptical of the pedagogical concept. However, the chairwoman of the school is convinced that such a change of mind will simply take more time as the school is quite new and successful graduates will be the key drivers to convince the locals and normalise the alternative practices at this school ("school board chairwoman" interviewee).

Again, various mechanisms of the functioning of Tempelhof as transformative force can be derived from its schooling aspect. A crucial element of the structure of the school is that it is not only open to children living in Schloss Tempelhof but also to outsiders. This enables the mechanism that lead to a spreading of information and awareness about the practices at free democratic schools and its effects on the development of the pupils beyond the borders of the ecovillage. The phenomenon that the vast majority of the local population is not convinced by the pedagogical concept can be explained by the structure of the "School for Free Development" and its associated mechanisms as well. For example, the unawareness of the locals about the actual content of the concept raises significant scepticism, which reflects a general feature of the sociological structure of human interactions that unawareness and ignorance tends to induce a rejection of the unknown. Furthermore, the structure of the economic system and the labour market reproduces mechanisms that cause the school system to be adapted to the requirement of this system, thereby neutralising mechanisms that can produce anti-capitalist and non-achievement-oriented school concepts. A further unconducive feature of the school structure is that it employs a pedagogical concept that is radically divergent and condemning conventional schools, which produces a strong divide between adherents of both camps. These mechanisms that produce the effects related to the "School for Free Development" have been nicely put in

a nutshell by an inhabitant of Schloss Tempelhof: “Concerning the school, it is like that: If in the middle of our society schools like this exist, and if one gets to know people that attended these schools, then this could lead to a change in mentality. In how far one should then communicate and advertise this to the outward world, this is a matter of the right balance: One should not hide it, but one should also certainly not impose this rejection of conventional schools on people, I think that is counter-productive” (“municipal council member” interviewee).

4.3.2 The Constitutive Structure of Tempelhof as Transformative Force

In the previous section, five main aspects of Schloss Tempelhof were investigated with regard to the effects that they exert on the external population as well as the structure and mechanisms that enable these effects. A synthesis of those aspect-specific findings is conducive to identify the constitutive structure of Schloss Tempelhof as a whole that made its functioning as a transformative force possible. To this end, it is – in line with what Danermark et al. (2002, p. 97) call “retroduction” – crucial to identify the properties and conditions of Tempelhof that induce a manifestation of its potential to exert an effect on outsiders via the establishment of a counter-hegemonic narrative.

The findings from section 4.2.1 provide evidence that the practices at Schloss Tempelhof led to several effects on the external population since the arrival of the ecovillage community. These effects manifest at various levels: First, they occur at different spatial scales, as it has already been outlined in section 4.1.2. For example, the various points of contact – such as the *1. Mai Fest* – lead among the locals to a significant change of mind regarding communal living, while the outcomes of the experimentation with political decision-making techniques informs also the wider public on the supra-regional scale. Second, externals are influenced by practices at Tempelhof to varying degrees: While some aspects led to a change

in practices – take for instance the village Hülen and its adaptation of ecovillage practices – other aspects induced a change in values and perceptions, for example the agricultural enterprise with regard to vegetable gardening and food retailing. Furthermore, some people aim for becoming a Tempelhof member themselves; others sympathise with the ecovillage ideals and move to the region to benefit from some aspects such as the school and the cultural offer, but do not want to move into the ecovillage ("public relations representative" interviewee).

The investigation of the five aspects of Tempelhof revealed that the impact of Tempelhof is largely situated at the level of values, beliefs and attitudes. The local population of Kreßberg mostly used to be sceptical of "alternative" practices for a "good life for all" that conflicts with the hegemonic mode of living; communal living, permaculture gardening and the radical pedagogical concept were thus rather eyed with suspicion. After the establishment of the ecovillage Tempelhof, most people from the region were for the first time in their lifes confronted with ecovillage ideals and practices. Nevertheless, the Tempelhof community successfully manages to connect with the people and to communicate and explain their vision. Thereby, many locals increase their critical awareness of the characteristics of the multiple crisis on the one hand and of feasible alternatives to the unsatisfactory status quo– for example regarding democratic participation and shrinking villages – on the other hand. Schloss Tempelhof thus gives hope and inspiration that "change is possible" and that ordinary citizens can make a vital contribution. Therefore, many locals are today more open to ecovillage practices; they realise that they are operated by "normal people" and value the numerous benefits they brought to the region. The awareness of the necessity and advantageousness of social-ecologically sustainable practices - such as permaculture gardening, communal living and direct democracy – for the natural environment and human wellbeing did thus multiply. Besides this change in attitudes, the establishment of Schloss Tempelhof also induces several changes in practices: Some locals started to cultivate a permaculture garden, buy vegetables

from the agricultural enterprise or revitalise their village through ecovillage practices. However, his change in practices remains, so far, at an individual and small-scale level.

Schloss Tempelhof can thus be considered as being a transformative force. In order to identify the conditions that enable Tempelhof to have this impact, it is crucial to identify its constitutive structure. A pivotal element of the structure of the Tempelhof community is that they presented themselves from the outset to the local population as "normal people": "We always tried to create a very 'down-to-earth' and, well, not conservative, but a very normal image of ourselves when communicating with the people from Kreßberg; we don't have a very spiritual community, but we have very normal values" ("public relations representative" interviewee, translated by the author). For example, the seminar house does not accept any courses with radical spiritual and esoteric contents, in order to prevent that Tempelhof gets an image of being a religious sect (Ibid.). According to a Tempelhof inhabitant, "for them (the local population) it was very important that Tempelhof is something solid, not something weird or crazy, something esoteric or so" (Ibid., translated by the author). This "down-to-earth" image distinguishes Tempelhof from other ecovillages in Germany which created a more radical image of themselves – for instance through practicing "free love and sexuality" – , which often affronts the local population and thus comes at the expense of their impact on outsiders ("founding member" interviewee).

An important part of this self-image is also that the Tempelhof community does not claim to be all-knowing and a perfect model for how a desirable future society should look like ("municipal council member" interviewee), as this is likewise not conducive to gain the support of the local population. The path that Tempelhof follows is to emphasise that they are normal people with goals and desires that are in fact shared by most people: Strong social cohesion, a healthy planet, and space for self-realisation.

Nevertheless, the Tempelhof community neither embellished nor hid its ecovillage practices: From the outset, they openly communicated their vision and asked the local

population if they could support such an unusual project ("public relations representative" interviewee). One of the founding members expressed that she "found that very important, that we do not just come here without asking" ("founding member" interviewee, translated by the author). This acceptance of the ecovillage by the local population and the open and friendly relationship constitutes the basis for the transformative effects they exerted. Especially crucial was the good relationship to the mayor, who they successfully convinced of the mutual benefits. His support was – and still is – pivotal to gaining the acceptance and support of the locals.

Another crucial feature of Schloss Tempelhof's constitutive structure that allowed for its impact on the surrounding communities is that they managed to bring numerous benefits to the region. Examples of such benefits are the economic gains through increased tax revenue, the cultural offerings and the growing publicity. They created an atmosphere of acceptance and benevolence and thereby enhanced the support of the local population for ecovillage practices.

Furthermore, Schloss Tempelhof is itself a stable and internally functioning ecovillage, which constitutes a fundamental aspect of its transformative potential as well. This successful organisation of the ecovillage can be mainly explained by a sophisticated initial financial planning, a lot of expertise among the founding members and strong concepts for community-building and decision-making ("public relations representative" interviewee). Such internal stability seems conducive for having a strong basis on which the establishment and spreading of a counter-hegemonic narrative can be build.

Similar to that, it appears to be a condition for the persuasiveness of a counter-hegemonic narrative that Tempelhof has in many regards achieved its proclaimed targets: A very high perceived life satisfaction among inhabitants, an achievement of "major ecological milestones in comparison to mainstream society in Germany" (Kunze 2015, p. 4), a productive and sustainably operating agricultural enterprise, excellent results in the "Common Good Balance Sheet", and the successful establishment of an alternative school ("public relations representative" interviewee) are only some examples. In that sense, the structure of Tempelhof

provides a framework that allows for experimentation with and development of new practices for a good life for all. These successful practices then need to be communicated to the outside in order to spread them. In this regard, Tempelhof seems to successfully strike the right balance by neither hiding them nor imposing them on others.

4.3.3 Deficiencies and Constraints to Tempelhof's Transformative Potential

Despite these apparent successes as a transformative force, the deficiencies of and constraints to the transformative potential of Schloss Tempelhof need to be assessed. As already indicated in the previous section, the practices of the local population in terms of a social-ecological transformation changed only occasionally and individually since the arrival of the ecovillage. A profound and large-scale change of crucial institutions and "big players" has not occurred: The vast majority of Kreßberg's parents do not consider sending their children to the "School for Free Development"; people mostly still buy vegetables in the supermarket; local farmers continue to employ conventional agricultural methods; political decision-making and at the municipal level remains unchanged.

Another shortcoming of Tempelhof's transformative potential is that the ecovillage is with regard to ecological sustainability unable to establish a strong counter-hegemonic narrative, as many inhabitants of Tempelhof have themselves significant potential for improvement. Even though the ecological footprint of the Tempelhof community is far below the German average (Kunze 2015, p. 4), still many residents use cars, frequently fly and have a high level of material consumption ("municipal council member" interviewee). Some Tempelhof inhabitants seem to have an advanced understanding of an ecological transformation – "well this green technology is simply not sufficient, by far not sufficient, what we need is a change in our values, and this means 'I have enough', but in a positive sense and not out of scarcity" ("municipal council member" interviewee, translated by the author) – while others'

sustainable practices are limited to electromobility, organic products and other forms of green consumption (Ibid.).

Again, these limits to the transformative potential of Tempelhof can be explained by investigating its constitutive structure. A first constraining element of its structure is that many aspects are not yet fully developed. An already-mentioned example is the decision-making mode at Tempelhof, which still has room for improvement. Furthermore, the lack of a strong ecological narrative due to the limited environmental consciousness of inhabitants can be explained by the fact that ecological sustainability was initially not a key focus of the Tempelhof community. Kunze argued in 2015 – despite acknowledging that Tempelhof has set "ecological milestones" (Kunze 2015, p. 4) – that "members do not perceive Schloss Tempelhof as a classical ecovillage, because it is rather focused on social and socio-economic aspects. It became a member of GEN in 2013 after GEN has broadened its criteria" (Kunze 2015, p. 2). Today, Tempelhof devotes greater emphasis to ecological sustainability; however, "these things that were not included and emphasised at the beginning [when Tempelhof was founded], it's not possible to implement them afterwards" ("municipal council member" interviewee, translated by the author) due to the consensus-based decision-making.

However, the main constraint to a profound change in practices inspired through Tempelhof goes beyond the internal constitution of the ecovillage. This concerns the structures and the resulting mechanisms of powerful external societal forces that neutralise those mechanisms which enable the transformative potential of Tempelhof. This has most strikingly been demonstrated in the context of the agricultural enterprise and the direct democratic decision-making techniques. The mechanisms inherent to the liberal market and the prevailing political institutions are rigid and prevent a dissemination of sustainable ecovillage practices.

A last factor that constraints Tempelhof's transformative impact is simply the short time of its existence. It will take some more time until the ecovillage practices at Tempelhof produce results that fully convince the external population, for example regarding the pedagogical

concept of the “School for Free Development”. Moreover, once a change of mind materialised, it is still a lengthy and complicated process to make this convert to a large-scale change in practices.

4.4 Conclusion

Schloss Tempelhof has since its foundation exerted numerous effects on the external population regarding various aspects of ecovillage living. These effects manifested mostly on the level of values, attitudes and awareness. The Tempelhof community successfully managed to establish a positive and conducive relationship to its neighbours, who generally have a very benevolent perception of the ecovillage and increased their awareness of the benefits of several ecovillage practices. Schloss Tempelhof thus contributes to a much-needed alteration of attitudes towards the necessity of a societal transformation among vast shares of the population.

Thereby, the case study – at least partly – provides empirical evidence to the hypothesis that ecovillages, through their practices of a good life for all, establish a counter-hegemonic narrative that seems conducive to a social-ecological transformation. However, certain limitations regarding the potential to lead to an immediate, profound and large-scale alterations of practices persist.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

In this master thesis, the theoretical hypothesis that the establishment of a counter-hegemonic narrative can be a powerful strategy towards a social-ecological transformation has been developed. Furthermore, it has been argued that ecovillages can be a key actor for establishing such a narrative. These suggestions were tested in a case study on the ecovillage Schloss Tempelhof. In this last chapter, the findings of the case study are abstracted to make claims about the transformative potential of ecovillages in general, thereby providing an answer to the research questions.

In section 4.3, the constitutive structure and underlying mechanisms of Schloss Tempelhof as a transformative force have been outlined. The enabling features of their structure, such as their openness and the benefits they bring to the region, as well their deficiencies, such as a weak ecological counter-hegemonic narrative, are significant for an abstraction to the transformative potential of ecovillages in general, because other ecovillages can learn from experiences made at Tempelhof. By adopting successful elements of the constitutive structure of Tempelhof and avoiding limiting elements, newly founded ecovillages can strive for a large transformative impact. At the same time, the abstraction of the constitutive structure and mechanisms of Schloss Tempelhof provides an answer to the second research question: How can ecovillages manifest their transformative potential as a counter-hegemonic narrative? The findings from section 4.3 provide insights regarding the circumstances under which the transformative potential of ecovillages has manifested in the case of Schloss Tempelhof.

The first research question - what is the transformative potential of ecovillages as a counter-hegemonic narrative? – has been addressed as well. Tempelhof has a significant impact regarding a change in perception and values and partly in practices in the region. Furthermore, Tempelhof as part of GEN facilitates the global establishment of a counter-hegemonic

transformative narrative. Also the limits of the transformative potential of ecovillages been identified, for instance that no large-scale alteration in practices has occurred due to institutional barriers. It is worth discussing whether such an impact that mainly succeeds in achieving a change in values can be regarded as transformative. Certainly, a change in practices in line with the good life for all needs to be the ultimate goal for a social-ecological transformation. Nevertheless, a change in attitudes and values is a precondition for such a change in practices. As it has been demonstrated in the case study, a large-scale and profound alteration of practices requires a change in the constitution of political, economic and societal institutions. A change in values and attitudes of a large and diverse share of the population is thus pivotal; if many people perceive and appreciate ecovillage living and practices this can induce a wider institutional change.

The finding that the establishment of a counter-hegemonic narrative by ecovillages can contribute to a social-ecological transformation is thus a key take-away with practical relevance. Practitioners in ecovillages should, in line with the outcomes of this study, put a greater emphasis on the conscious creation of such an ecovillage living narrative. In fact, as it has been outlined in section 3.1.2, a strong outwards orientation and a popularization of the visions and practices of ecovillages is already a core issue on the agenda of GEN. As it has been shown in the case study, these narratives are effectively created through practices and making these practices visible. Furthermore, also beyond the ecovillage movement, the results of this master thesis should encourage actors striving for a social-ecological transformation to give greater weight to the establishment of narratives of a good life for all that challenge the common values and beliefs associated to the imperial mode of living. The above-mentioned findings thereby strengthen the agency of transformative actors to redesign the current hegemonic order of society.

In conclusion, it can be stated that this master thesis not only contributes to the theoretical debate on strategies towards a social-ecological transformation, but also contains

practically relevant results that can inform practitioners. It provides evidence that ecovillages possess a certain transformative potential through the establishment of a counter-hegemonic narrative of a good life for all that is challenging the hegemonic imperial mode of living, while taking into account the limitations to this potential. Referring to the initially stated quote by R. Buckminster Fuller, it can be argued that – based on the findings of this master thesis – ecovillages indeed have the potential to contribute to "build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete".

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