Youth and the environmental movement –
symbolic inclusions and exclusions

Åse Strandbu and Olve Krange

Abstract

The present study set out to use qualitative interviews in an effort to understand why young people from highly educated groups, especially from ‘non-productive’ sectors of the economy (public services, teaching, etc.), are found to have a relatively strong affinity to the environmental movement. Young people aged 15–20, who were members of organizations associated with the protection of or use of nature, were interviewed. In conclusion, we suggest that to some extent the class differences can be interpreted in the light of forms of symbolic inclusions and exclusions. There are a number of ‘symbolic fences’ that working-class youngsters have to cross in order to become members of an environmental organization. These fences are related to: the style and cultural identity of the members, expectations of a sort of self-enclosure as part of participation in the organization, the somewhat androgynous gender-identity of the members, the perceptions of nature that are dominant among the members and the organization’s intellectual image.

Introduction

Several studies have found young people’s willingness to participate in an environmental organization to be related to class background. Numerous studies have shown that young people from highly educated groups, especially from the ‘non-productive’ sectors of the economy (public services, teaching, etc.), feel a relatively strong affinity to the environmental movement and regard environmental problems as important (Kriesi, 1989; Eckerley, 1989; Dunlap and Mertig, 1994; Rose, 1997). A Norwegian national survey from 1992 demonstrated that young people with a background in the humanistic-social fraction of the middle-class (public services, teaching, aesthetic work etc.) had stronger pro-environmental attitudes and were more often members of environmental organizations than young people with a background in the working-class (Skogen, 1996). The ‘Youth in Oslo’ survey from 1996 showed the same pattern: Compared to young working-class people, the ones from the humanistic-social fraction of the middle-class were over-represented among the organizations’ members. Furthermore, members of an environmental organization scored higher on measures of cultural capital.
more books in their homes and their parents were more likely to like ‘intellectual television’ and were less interested in ‘commercial television’ (Strandbu and Skogen, 2000).

This paper can be considered to be a qualitative follow-up of the study of Strandbu and Skogen (2000) on the differences between the probability of having high environmental concern compared to the probability of participating in an environmental organization. As many of the previous studies who have used quantitative methods, Strandbu and Skogen concluded by suggesting some mechanisms related to class cultural differences that can explain the skewed recruitment to the movement. In order to explain how these mechanisms work, other types of data are required. In this study we concentrate on level of experience. Qualitative interviews are used in an attempt to understand how such class cultural differences operate in young people’s lives. We interviewed members of a Norwegian environmental youth organization that has predominantly middle-class members, and working-class youngsters who had an interest in nature without supporting the environmental movement. Based on the findings from the interviews, various aspects of participation in the environmental movement that are related to youth cultural orientation and class background are discussed.

The new middle class and the environmental movement

In the context of a growing middle class it has become rather common to distinguish between two fractions of the middle class – the early version being Gouldner’s (1979) distinction between the ‘humanistic intellectuals’ and the ‘technical intelligentsia’. The dominance of some particular middle-class segments in the environmental movement and environmental organizations highlights the need for a discussion of class that takes more than economic location into consideration (Eder, 1993, 1996; Skogen, 1998; Rose, 1997). Although not having a large amount of economic capital, the humanistic-social fraction of the middle class has symbolic and cultural assets that are of importance in many respects.

One obvious source for this discussion is Bourdieu’s contribution to the theory of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1984, 1997). Bourdieu uses the term symbolic capital to describe how certain people or institutions, certain forms of knowledge, and certain value orientations are ascribed respectability and prestige and command deference. Further, in this respect the concept of cultural capital encompasses familiarity with and access to the legitimate and dominating culture. Cultural capital is an ‘inherited’ social competence that is unequally distributed in the class structure. Further, the theory of habitus explains how people, through socialization and cultural reproduction, acquire some basic dispositions for action, perception, feelings and interpretation. Habitus is not only cognitive, but functions just as much on a habitual, non-reflexive level.
This is in line with research, where the distinction between abstraction-oriented cultures and production-oriented cultures originating from different class positions has been proposed to explain different attitudes towards nature and environmental problems (Skogen, 1996, 1999a, 1999b). The abstraction-oriented culture acclaims flexibility and strategic thinking and is developed in the sectors of society where symbols, rather than material objects, are manipulated. In the production-oriented culture, practical sense is preferred over remote speculations, and theory is only legitimate insofar as it is a generalization of practical experience. Practical use of nature and a feeling of affinity towards concrete activities in nature are assumed to be more typical of the production-oriented culture. Aesthetic fascination and philosophical reflections on nature are more characteristic of the abstraction-oriented culture. The abstraction-oriented culture is therefore presumed to be intrinsic to the middle-class based environmental movement (Skogen, 1996).

The over-representation of the new middle class in the new social movements has been explained in the light of its position as relatively separated from the productive sector and the market, which again leads to characteristic value orientations (cf. Scott, 1990, Eder, 1993). The new middle class’s relatively limited influence on important economic issues is fertile soil for a radical or critical view of the dominating social order. The distance to the power institutions shapes a critical stance. One background factor underlying this broader framework of social critique is increased educational level (and the resulting ‘inflation’ in middle-class positions, and more widespread insight into the dark sides of capitalism: social injustice and economic and environmental exploitation). Another background factor is the critique of ‘establishment’ and the counter-cultural changes from the late 1960s, in particular among students and intellectuals in Europe and America (Macnaghten and Urry, 1998).

It has been suggested that the new middle class’s relatively limited influence on important economic issues leads people in this class to stress the importance of alternative values, such as ethics and aesthetics. They seem driven towards developing alternative (ideologically anti-materialist) conceptions of ‘the good life’ (Eder, 1993: 181), something which is also appropriate to the value orientations and ideologies found within the environmental movement and other new social movements.

**From class culture to distinctions in operation**

The explanations above are based on rather vague mechanisms. Statistical analyses showing differences between classes provide few possibilities to explain why the suggested mechanisms work. In Bourdieu’s case, he uses qualitative data in *Distinction* to make sense of the statistical correlation’s which are the essential ground for his theory of class cultures. But much research applies Bourdieu’s theory on cultural differences without having data
at the level of individual experiences. And, as pointed out by Macnaghten and Urry (1998), this type of data is lacking in the field of the perception of nature. There are few qualitative studies on the social embeddedness of environmental concern. What is needed is contextualized data on the experience of and handling of class cultural differences. To get a grip of how symbolic and class cultural differences operate in young people’s lives, we need detailed close-up studies of value orientations and lifestyles.

Concepts like habitus and cultural capital are abstract and have to be filled with content to be reasonable. Following Bourdieu’s epistemology the conceptual framework should be adjusted when it is confronted with new empirical settings (Bourdieu, 1993: 81). Likewise the distinction between a practical and an abstract relationship to nature (Skogen, 1999) is suggestive, but has its weak points. As with other broad generalizing concepts, it lacks the level of experience and action. In other words, we need data on ‘distinctions in operation’. We need to know more about how young people experience and manage such cultural differences on the practical, individual and motivational levels.

We want to use experience-near data about values, symbols and cultural orientations among members of an environmental organization to develop a more detailed understanding of why the middle class dominates the environmental movement. The more specific questions addressed are:

- How do the values, symbols and cultural orientations of young members of an environmental organization differ from those of young working-class people?
- How do young working-class boys perceive the cultural features of environmental activists?
- If some distinguishing features of the environmental movement contribute to the asymmetric recruitment – how does this happen on the level of motivations and actions?

Two different groups of young people

In order to answer these questions, we needed to talk to members of an environmental organization. In addition we needed to talk to youngsters who have opinions about nature but who do not participate in the environmental movement. The interviews used in this paper are from members of NU (‘Natur og Ungdom’, Nature and Youth) and participants at Frigo (‘Friluftsivsenteret i Gamle Oslo’, the Centre for Outdoor Recreation in Gamle Oslo city ward). The interviews were carried out in a study of young people’s perception of and relationship to nature and environmental problems. The interviews focused on outdoor recreation, perception of the young people’s perception of and relationship to nature and environmental problems. The interviews were carried out in a study of young people’s perception of and relationship to nature and environmental problems. A more detailed presentation of the interview material is found in Strandbu (2000).
Nature and youth (NU-‘Natur og Ungdom’)

NU is the youth organization of the Norwegian Society for the Conservation of Nature (Norges Naturvernforbund, NNV). It is the completely dominant environmental organization among young people in Norway. It has approximately 4500 members and 100 local groups. NU is more radical than its parent organization, and pretty much independent of it. NU has frequently resorted to forms of direct action that NNV does not approve of, and emphasizes the necessity of understanding environmental problems in a global and political context. However, NU also works locally with a wide range of more specific issues. Quite a few members are prepared to take part in illegal protest actions and to risk criminal prosecution. Many of the members take part in protest actions that are arranged by others. For instance, many of those we interviewed were active in ‘Gasskraftaksjonen’, an ad hoc mobilization against building gas power plants in Norway that was highly debated at the time of the interviews.

NU fits the descriptions of the new social movements very well. Theories on new social movements often emphasize the fact that the movements work outside the formal political institutions insofar as they are located within civil society (Scott, 1990), and that they give priority to identity, lifestyle and aesthetic questions as much as to the politics of interests. At least this is the perspective of the so-called culturalist tradition in studies of social movements (Touraine, 1981, 1987; Melucci, 1989, 1991). Individual self-realization is often emphasized as being one of the core features of the social movements. Insofar as this is their way of getting support and increasing the number of participants, the production of symbols and communication are important. This is why Melucci claims that the most essential aspect of the social movements is not their goals, but their existence:

By what they do and the way they do it, movements announce that other avenues are open, that there is always another horn to the dilemma, that needs of individuals or of groups cannot be reduced to the definition power gives them. The action of movements as symbol and communication does away with the old distinction between the instrumental and the expressive meaning of action, for in contemporary movements, the results of actions and the individual experience of new codes tend to coincide. And also because action, over and above producing calculable outcomes, changes the rules of communication (Melucci, 1996: 12).

New social movements both promote and exemplify alternative lifestyles. In line with these ideas the environmental movement may be seen as an important arena for identity development (Melucci, 1991). These characteristics are suitable for NU, as has been revealed in other studies of local groups of the organization (Krange, 1996). Among young people, membership in NU means having a strong affiliation with the environmental movement. By selecting
young people who are working actively in NU to be interviewed, we focus on
the most active young people in the environmental movement in Norway.

The members of NU selected to be interviewed had all been members for
at least two years, and had been taking an active part in the organization’s
work for at least one year. Contact was arranged by the leader of Oslo NU.
They were selected from two local groups. Helene, Pia and Svein were from
the group from the east and inner city. (In fact they lived, as most of the others
in this group, in the outer northern part of Oslo – an area where the middle
class is fairly large). Simen and Lisa were from the Vestre Aker group, in one
of the most affluent parts of the city. They were all 17–18 years old and
attended upper secondary school, in academic programmes in schools where
NU has school groups. They all had parents from the humanistic-social frac-
tion of the middle class, and their own future aspirations were either studies
in the arts or social sciences, travelling or ‘working with people’. Their inter-
est in nature was not merely theoretical or problem-oriented. All the young
people interviewed participated in outdoor recreation and derived great plea-
sure from such activities.

Frigo

According to the aims of this study, we needed to speak to some youngsters
who had a working-class background. Our informants could not be picked by
random. We had to ensure that the youngsters who were interviewed had at
least some experience with nature. On this background it was appropriate to
interview participants from Frigo.

Frigo is a municipally financed and state financed centre for the promotion
of outdoor recreation among children and young people in Gamle Oslo City
ward. This is an eastern, inner city area with a high proportion of labour immi-
grants and refugees from the third world developing countries. Parts of this
area are now gentrified. Today a significant proportion of inhabitants with
middle-class background takes up residence there. Frigo’s ambition is to serve
children and youngsters who have had little previous experience of outdoor
recreation, and who do not know much about the city’s surrounding areas.
Another ambition is to use activities in nature to promote ‘positive socializa-
tion and integration in a multicultural society’, as mentioned in a brochure.
Frigo lends skis, skates, life jackets, canoes, tents, sleeping bags, backpacks,
equipment for fishing, warm clothes and so on. Frigo also arranges trips and
it has separate groups for children and young people who attend meetings
once a week.

Frigo was established in 1995 with money from the state initiative to
develop more leisure activities in the largest cities in Norway (Isachsen et al.,
1999). But the history of Frigo goes back further. From the beginning of the
nineteen-nineties, two leaders at a youth club in the city ward had arranged
trips to Oslo’s surrounding areas for fishing and camping (activities which are
not uncommon in Norwegian youth clubs from time to time). The same
leaders later arranged similar activities from a municipal and state financed house for activities for kids and young people, until Frigo was established.

One group that has regular meetings at Frigo is the ‘wilderness group for young people’. We interviewed 13 youngsters who had participated in the wilderness group, or who had participated in trips arranged by Frigo (10 boys and 3 girls). Five of the boys were regular participants in the wilderness group: The interviews with these regular participants were used in this study. The Frigo boys we interviewed were 14–16 years old. Robert, Roy and Tom attended the last year in junior secondary school (some in classes with less theoretical education than in the regular school), and the oldest (Albert and Espen) attended the first year in upper secondary school, vocational programmes. They all planned a future with practical work, as craftsmen. Their parents had working-class jobs. At the time of the interviews no immigrants and no girls regularly participated in the group.

It should be mentioned that even though the two groups had an interest in nature in common, there were significant differences between them. Frigo is not a political organization, and participation in Frigo is not accompanied by ideological motivation. However, using these two groups has the advantage that young people with very different backgrounds were interviewed about the same issues. And the interviews with the boys from Frigo revealed interesting perceptions of young people in the environmental movement. Their views, together with the NU members’ views, provide the basis for our discussions about the symbolic borders between the environmental movements’ insiders and outsiders.

Symbolic fences

The interviews revealed some interesting symbolic differences between the two groups of young people. We will call them symbolic fences, since they both define the distinctive cultural features of the environmental organization and are obstacles for participation of working-class youngsters. They are distinctions the young people interviewed here experienced and acted in relation to. The symbolic fences should not be considered as concrete obstacles or barriers, but they make the process of becoming a member more difficult for working-class youngsters. The road to the organization is more straightforward for middle-class youngsters.

Style and youth cultural identity

To begin with, some tentative remarks about the youngsters’ youth cultural style are presented – a subject which is followed through in the empirical presentation. The boys from Frigo had a style of dressing which was fairly common among young people at the time of the interviews: loose jeans and expensive Fila-sweaters (which they had to work in grocery stores in the
evenings or delivering newspapers in order to afford). They all had a hairstyle that was first seen in Oslo among immigrant boys; short in the neck with a long forelock divided in the middle with grease – a forelock that they had to push away from their eyes all the time. The NU members’ outfits were more varied, from the ‘alternative’ look to the more ‘neutral’ look (or at least long-lasting fashion). Some of them were concerned about not fitting the ‘alternative’ image of NU, and they therefore dressed a bit more ‘snobbishly’ than they considered to be the ordinary stereotype of youngsters in the environmental movement.

They were asked about the cultural style of their own peer group and of other groups: We asked about the ways of acting, relating to each other, talking and dressing that were typical of their own group. They were also asked about what they regarded as typical characteristics of other groups. We specially mentioned the other groups of interest in this study: scouts, fishing and hunting organizations, environmental organizations and some outdoor recreation organizations. They had a tendency to perceive their own group as rather heterogeneous, while having more stereotyped images of other groups. In our opinion their perceptions of other groups reveal important cultural distinctions between young people.

The NU members seemed to see themselves as being in direct opposition to the general cultural trends among young people. To a large extent, they felt different because of their political activism. For instance, Helene explained the loss of members in the environmental organizations during the nineties, by referring to changes in cultural trends among young people:

Helene: Environmental work in a way was something new during the barrel-digging period [Helen is referring to a period when NU received much attention in the media by digging in the yards of factory plants, exposing environmental crime.]. This was at the end of the eighties and at the beginning of the nineties. Why is it that people don’t show the same concern any longer? Well, lots of new things have entered the scene, new kinds of youth cultures, and the idols are not exactly environmentalists. If you look at the fashion industry for example, or other things that have appeal to youngsters, you will find that it has absolutely nothing to do with environmental concern. It is more house culture or urban . . . , that has a dominant influence in European youth culture these days.

Interviewer: How come you’re still concerned with environmental issues then?

Helene: That is because I want to make a protest against that youth culture, I want to prove that it is possible to do something else, that it is possible to do other than what is popular or considered cool. I want to stand for something different, I dare to stand for something different.
Her reflections were shared by many of the NU members. Opposition to the perceived mainstream culture could be said to constitute their identity as politically active young people. This illustrates Meluccis’ point that the identity aspects of participating in a new social movement are of considerable relevance. All the informants described the identity and image of the organization and the environmental movement as attractive. But when questioned directly about whether they had an identity as a NU member, they were more reserved. Some even refused to admit that they had an explicit identity as a NU member.

A leftist orientation dominated among the young people who were interviewed. Quite a few of them mentioned that they considered themselves as radicals. In a study of the ideological orientation of members of different environmental organizations in Norway, Jahn (1996) found that, compared to the other organizations, NU was among the three most radical leftist oriented ones. Helene described the distinction vis-à-vis some conservatives who participated in NU for a short period:

Helene: Some people from the Conservative Party participated in NU. It’s not that there is anything wrong with them, they just don’t fit in.

Interviewer: How come?

Helene: Well, we live in different worlds. They look upon things in a completely different way from us. They come from a party that looks upon things in a completely different way. This ends up in confrontations. Why would you join the Conservative Party if you were concerned about the environment? That is a contradiction. It is a combination of lots of things – the Conservative Party; dressing code, language – they talk very proper – they are ‘odd bods’ within NU.

In the survey from Oslo mentioned earlier (Strandbu and Skogen 2000), one of the most surprising results was the positive association between a conservative political orientation and pro-environmental attitudes. Our interpretation of this was that pro-environmental attitudes have become part of a mainstream stock of political ideas – at least if they are formulated without obligations. However, recruitment to NU revealed another picture. Membership was negatively associated with a conservative political orientation, and associated with a leftist political inclination. NU seems to be a reasonable alternative for young radicals. This radicalism is also suitable with their background from the humanistic social fraction of the middle class. They revealed a high consensus with their parents on important issues. However, some of them said that their parents were rather annoyed or bored by being reminded about the damage caused by cars or about the youngsters’ strict instructions about how to sort rubbish.

How do other young people perceive NU members? Albert, one of the Frigo boys, did not want to be a member of NU, although he was concerned...
about environmental problems. For example, he was concerned about the building of gas power plants in Norway. He expressed clear views about the members in such organizations:

Interviewer: Could you imagine yourself joining NU?
Albert: No, I am not that committed.
Interviewer: Do you know any NU members?
Albert: I probably know someone, but...I can imagine that a couple of my acquaintances are members. You know who people are by looking at them. By looking at a man you can tell if he is a pipe-smoker or not. That's not too hard. You see it in people.

Interviewer: What does a regular NU member look like?
Albert: They look a bit like hippies, a bit cultural and politically correct. That is obvious. Just from the way a person looks you can tell if he is aspiring to high society or if he is a 'city centre kid'. True isn't it? You do notice if a person is a real gangster or just a wannnabe-gangster. True isn't it? You notice their behaviour.

The boys from Frigo were not very concerned about distinguishing themselves from the mainstream youth cultural style. But they became upset about what they saw as ‘wrong’ impressions of themselves. They especially disliked some people confusing participation in Frigo with scouting. Their project was mainly to have fun and to be rowdy, but with a clear distinction from youngsters with criminal ‘aspirations’.

For the NU members, opposition to mainstream youth culture was of great importance. The participants in the organization seemed to share Melucci’s view of today’s youth population. According to Melucci (1996a: 129) an aesthetic concern has nearly wiped out collective political action in the youth population. Today ‘youth action seems to be in the process of transforming itself into exclusively expressive ‘countercultures’ (centred around music, dressing, creation of new languages as with rappers, for instance)’. Whether this is accurate is not the question here. The point is that this was this NU-members perception of other young people, and it had a significant influence on their identity as politically active.

For the boys from Frigo this was considered ‘political correctness’. They did not want to distinguish themselves from other young people. Albert’s description of a typical NU member revealed an identity that is far from what he considers applicable to himself. Analogous to the right-wing boy in Helen’s story, Albert would have to abandon his style and sense of self and become a different person in order to fit in as a NU member. The dominating style and youth cultural identities in NU, seems to be symbolic barriers for boys like Albert to join such organizations.
Perceptions of self-enclosure and intimacy

One consequence of new social movements emphasis on identity and self-development is that the activities in a movement organization have many aspects besides political ones. For example, NU meetings where people do not know each other start with a personal presentation. Pia described her experiences of such rounds at large seminars:

Pia: It is very amusing. 30 of us are sitting in a large circle, and we start by telling our names. Of course, it is impossible to remember them all, but that’s all right. You get a lot of self-esteem when you have to tell something about yourself to 30 people who you have never met before. The first time I had this experience it was like: ‘Help, God, do I dare to do this, it’s scary, no I won’t do it.’ But I just had to do it, and now it’s not scary at all any longer.

In a study of the Plowshares movement, a part of the peace movement, Peterson and Thörn (1994: 28) found a strong ‘conscious reflection upon the affective social relations in the group’. They call this the ‘intimacy of resistance’. Many meetings started with a ‘personal sharing’. The members are expected to talk about how they feel today, whether they are depressed, upset and so on. Each meeting is evaluated at the end, with a new round. We did not find this to the same extent in NU, but there are similarities, for instance in the focus on individual development among the members. Peterson and Thörn interpret this intimacy in the light of the deepened individualization process of late modernity. It seems reasonable that this agrees with an individualized identity norm, but it is far from likely that every 16-year-old would, like Pia, enjoy giving a presentation of herself in such a situation. The question might be, as pointed out by May and Cooper (1995) whether this identity norm is as widespread among working-class, as among middle-class young people.

The NU members regarded the self-presentations as an important kind of participation in the organization. It gives self-confidence, a self-confidence that is transmittable to other situations. The boys from Frigo also felt that their activities gave them self-confidence. To be able to ‘survive in the wilderness’ without the comforts of city life, is an example of an activity that they themselves presented as self-confidence building. Yet their activities did not have any element of ‘organized’ self-presentation.

Girls are often considered to be better at discussing personal and emotional issues. On this background the emphasis on self-enclosure in the environmental movement could be associated with femininity. In other respects as well, the climate in NU could be considered to be feminine. Svein from NU exaggerated a bit and explained it like this:

Svein: NU members are young people who in a way should have been young in the seventies.
Interviewer: Why?
Svein: It’s a bit self-ironic. But, you know, ‘the thirsty youngsters’ commercial is not entirely wrong. We are kind of good friends, hugging each other, lovers of flowers, and . . .

This was a far cry from the rough attitudes of the Frigo-boys. Even though they appreciated their friendships with the others, there was more wrestling than hugging when they met. Espen put it like this: ‘We behave roughly. But it’s nothing serious. It’s only friendly’. Their way of socializing was in some ways exaggeratedly masculine, and had an element of male boding.

There were of course gender differences among the youngsters from NU. But the NU boys were, as many older middle-class men, less sceptical about showing feminine sides. Svein (from NU) explained how, in his opinion, there are differences in the way boys and girls use nature. The girls:

. . . put more weight on the social dimension. For example, they can take a book with them and read it out loud when we’re in the woods. I would never have done that, even though it is really nice to lay down by a lake in the heat of summer and listen to someone reading. But I myself would never have done that.

Svein would not have suggested such an activity, but he could enjoy it when the girls arranged it. It is hard to imagine a Frigo-boy being comfortable in the same situation. The andrognity of the NU youngsters would be a threat to the Frigo-boys’ identities as tough guys. The different perceptions of masculinity and femininity following class background are fences for these working-class boys fitting in to NU. Research on gender and class has revealed that the working class has more traditional and clear-cut gender roles (Connell, 1995: Bourdieu, 1984). In the Norwegian middle class, the ideology of gender equality is more widespread (Haavind, 1985). This has been documented among young people as well. Bjerrum Nielsen and Rudberg (1989: 193) show in a study of young people in two schools in Oslo, that gender roles were more traditional among the working-class dominated schoolmates from the eastern school, than in the more middle-class dominated western part school. For our discussion here differences between the two fractions of the middle class are of interest as well. As Prieur (1998: 140) suggests, it is the pole of the social space where cultural capital is higher than economic capital (in Bourdieu’s language) that tolerance for changes and opposition to traditional masculinity is highest. A more traditional masculinity, as is the dominating form of masculinity among the Frigo-boys, would be strange in NU.

The androgynous gender identities and the importance of self-enclosure in NU is strange for the Frigo boys. If Peterson and Thörn are right, claiming that self-enclosure and reflexivity converge with the ideological basis of the environmental movement and other new social movements, then it seems right to highlight this as another symbolic fence for working-class participation.
Perception of nature: the romantic gaze

It is well-documented in the ethnologic and historical literature that the romantic critique of the negative impacts of industrialization in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries has had an important influence on the modern perception of nature (Macnaghten and Urry, 1998: 12). Influenced by this romantic critique, a specific attitude towards outdoor recreation emphasizing contemplation has emerged. Macnaghten and Urry (1998: 187) have called this ‘the romantic gaze’. They consider this as an upper-class and middle-class perception of nature, expressing a distinction vis-à-vis the utilitarian relationship to nature found among manual workers and farmers, and vis-à-vis the non-aesthetic consequences of industrialism. The romantic vision of nature was not the first thing that sprang into their minds when the youngsters were asked about their relationship to nature. Still, it seemed to influence most of them to a varying degree. For example, Helene described cross country skiing in the following way:

Helene: ... as something floating, a very nice outdoor experience, to be joined with nature and to experience something completely different from the city. Maybe experiencing something totally new, something you had forgotten in your busy everyday life. It can for instance be sounds, like birdsong, snow falling from the trees or it could be the trickling of a stream. What I talk about is sounds and sense impressions that you don’t consider while you live your everyday life in the busy city. Just to remember the fact that such forests exist is quite a striking experience for me sometimes.

Among the boys from Frigo such expressions were totally absent. The distinguishing mark of the middle-class romantic perception of nature was revealed when Albert talked about the relationship a (middle-class) girl in his class has to nature:

Interviewer: Perhaps you have had some discussions in school. There are some radical pupils there I would guess.

Albert: Quite right. I had a couple of them in my class. Once I was sailing with one of them. She got hit by the boom and blamed me for it. Then she started to talk about how she used to go into the woods alone, to bathe naked in a small forest lake, when she was depressed. HELLO, there I sat with my hair blown back and pretty bowled out. When I get depressed I usually rent a cool video, watch it or just stay in, or take it out on others or something. I don’t go out in the forest and bathe naked in a small lake. Well, everyone handles it in their own way, but she was very adult, sort of precocious and really ‘responsible’.

© The Editorial Board of The Sociological Review 2003
The ‘romantic gaze’ along with a ‘romantic ethic’ (Campbell, 1987) may provide a useful background for understanding this girl’s relationship to nature: Nature is a place for withdrawal, and for recovering when things get tough. The boys from Frigo found this sort of expression rather ridiculous and pathetic. Still, the romantic gaze lurked behind Albert’s perception of nature. He agreed that the beauty of nature had some relevance for his perception of nature, but the concession was hesitant:

**Interviewer:** Is it important to you that nature is beautiful?

**Albert:** I must admit that much of it is nice. I’ll admit to that. But it’s no use coming to me and saying ‘aah, look at the lovely sunset’. I’ll admit that much of it is nice. When a soft mist is lying over the woods and you see the sun rising above a hill and... it’s quite beautiful. When there is a shimmering on the water, or when the water is completely still, just like a giant bathtub, and the water’s so clean, so very clean. And then the sun shines on the water in the twilight. That’s the most beautiful moment in nature.

Albert ‘admitted’ that nature is beautiful, but at the same time he did not want to be associated with this romantic perception. An obvious explanation for his dilemma is that his appreciation of the aesthetic/romantic aspects of nature is incompatible with his masculine working-class identity.

‘The romantic gaze’ seemed to be rather widespread among the interviewees, but the eagerness to express this perception of nature differed, and seemed more compatible with middle-class values. This makes the distinction between a practical and an abstract perception of nature more understandable. ‘The romantic gaze’ fits well with an abstract perception of nature, but less with a practical one. Similar differences were also evident in preferred activities in nature. The preferred types of outdoor recreation for the boys from Frigo were activities associated with sensation seeking, or less dangerous activities such as playing and fun fighting. Some of the boys from NU, (but none of the girls), liked these sorts of activities – though they admitted that they were childish interests. And in contrast to the boys from Frigo, the NU boys openly enjoyed more contemplative kinds of outdoor recreation as well.

**Environmental concern**

With respect to perception of environmental problems, the distinction between a practical and an abstract perception of nature is again relevant. Many of the NU members were concerned about global environmental problems, a concern that to a large extent requires an interest in abstract and theoretical knowledge. The very nature of many environmental problems as complex and not directly observable makes such an interest reasonable. Macnaghten and Urry (1998) put it like this:
As risks transcend the boundaries of sensory perception, and as the contours of risk extend to the very distant and the extraordinary long term, we become dependent on national and increasingly global systems for information, knowledge, images and icons to enable such processes to be ‘interpreted’ (Macnaghten and Urry, 1998: 97–8).

This dependency on experts’ abstract presentations in order to be able to make sense of global threats might be more familiar for young people with well educated parents. But it should also be mentioned that not all the NU members shared this interest in more complex issues. Some preferred to work with local issues, and some even admitted that it was difficult to be enthusiastic about complex global problems.

The boys from Frigo had a rather narrow and practical perspective on environmental problems. For example, Espen’s answer to whether he was concerned about environmental problems was: ‘Well I don’t like to find tin cans and caps someone has left exactly where I want to stay, but – you know – if I find some paper and stuff like that in the middle of the woods, I don’t mind’. Roy’s comment to the same question was: ‘If I am affected by it, I care. If not, I just don’t give a damn.’

When it came to the question of involvement and possible influence, they were rather fatalistic and did not see how they themselves could make a difference. Albert stated this clearly:

Interviewer: Are you concerned about environmental issues?
Albert: Yes, I am against gas power plants. I am. I am a strong opponent, but I don’t participate in campaigns and I don’t carry posters around the parliament building with ‘Save Norway’ on them. I don’t feel that kind of commitment. But I do have opinions, you know. Anyway, I don’t believe it matters what people say. It’s as if they don’t listen to you anyway, the MPs. They don’t listen to you. So anyway: They don’t give a damn about me, so [conclusively] I don’t give a damn about them. I don’t get it, you know. They have to take people’s opinion into account, but . . . If you had carried out a poll on people’s attitudes towards building new gas power plants, 70% of Norwegians would have said NO. ‘What about the economy?’ Well, we do have electricity don’t we, hydro power. Oh definitely, but they want to build power plants that run on gas anyhow, and bla bla bla . . .

In an interview study, Macnaghten and Urry (1998) summed up working-class men’s perceptions of environmental problems in this way: trust in direct contact, in one’s own senses, as opposed to trust in experts. This could be an accurate description of the boys from Frigo as well. In such a worldview, complex and distant global problems become irrelevant. There is no doubt
that the practical orientation of working-class kids has relevance for their more moderate interest in the environmental movement. Even though it is possible, as mentioned earlier, to work with local issues (for example improved public transport, protection of (local) areas used for outdoor recreation and so on) in an organization like NU, most of the active members of NU were comfortable discussing rather abstract and philosophical issues. One example of such issues is the difference between an anthropocentric and an ecocentric perception of nature, and the accompanied distinction proposed by Arne Næss (1973) between shallow and deep ecology. And the majority of them seemed to be strongly influenced by the perception of the beauty of nature as summed up in the term ‘romantic gaze’, which could be considered to form part of an abstract perception of nature. Summing up then, there is a barrier between the abstract culture dominating the environmental movement where the romantic perception of nature is included, and the working-class boys’ perception of what fits into their world.

**Intellectual exclusiveness**

The NU members revealed a high intellectual level in the interviews and expressed themselves with ease when confronted with abstract questions. Svein, who preferred to work with issues related to climate and greenhouse effects, explained his interest like this: ‘I am a bit theoretical. I like to think abstractly and in big terms.’ He also had an understanding of his privileged position when it came to schoolwork: ‘I don’t do much homework. I am rather blunt, partly I do other things and partly I consider myself privileged, as I don’t have to work hard to understand things.’

The members of NU were also aware of this social exclusiveness, and saw it as an aspect of their organization that they did not want:

**Interviewer:** Recruitment to NU is rather skewed. Youngsters who are brought up in resourceful families are more likely to join. Why do you think that is so?

**Helene:** We have talked about that in Oslo NU. It’s a pity. I believe you have to have a certain amount of personal resources to attend NU meetings. When you get there you get the impression that you have to know certain things, that you have to be clever, have contacts, have skills, to achieve progress. For some people it might be difficult to adapt to that kind of milieu. The level can seem very high, and that is really a pity. NU should be open to everyone.

One of the youngsters referred to general socialization conditions when asked about the relevance of family background for participating in the environmental movement: ‘I come from the middle class, so I was imbued with nature and culture from infancy’.
Others expressed rather similar viewpoints as well. They seemed to be aware of certain barriers to joining the organization, and they also seemed to be aware of their own ‘privileged position’. The social exclusiveness was a recognized problem within the organization and was the subject of internal discussions.

This social exclusiveness of the organization is not a fence in the sense that ‘the underprivileged’ are eager to take part but are directly excluded. The ‘intellectual’ image, which is part of the organization, is something the Frigo boys did not approve of. They expressed disgust for ‘the school achievers’. For instance they expressed their dislike of scouts in this way: ‘Well, they don’t cope socially. They are kind of A-children, you know, prize pupils. To be a high achiever in school often means that you’re not as good socially as others are, you know. Well, some are of course’. (Albert).

Even if Albert modified his perception of school achievers, it is absolutely clear that neither he nor his friends in Frigo sought acceptance as school achievers. Success with schoolwork or related issues was not important to them. For the members of NU, the opposite was the case. For them the organization was another arena to show skills and competence that were also relevant in school. The organization was a suitable arena for their identity projects as clever youngsters who were successful at school.

Discussion

Our point of departure was the statistically observed asymmetric recruitment to the environmental movement. Our initial question was whether it was possible to find cultural differences between working-class and middle-class young people that could explain the class differences in affinity to the environmental movement. Our further ambition was to get closer to how the distinguishing cultural fences interact with people’s motivations and practice.

Symbolic fences – class-based youth culture and the environmental movement

We were especially interested in the distinguishing features of the environmental movements, how they resemble middle-class culture, and how middle-class culture prescribes actions and ways of being that are antagonistic to the actions and ways of being prescribed by working-class culture. Further we managed to get detailed information about how these differences create possible cultural fences for working-class kids who share an interest in nature and who thus could have become engaged in the environmental movement. We presented some symbolic fences for working-class participation, which became apparent in the course of the interviews. The fences that revealed as most important are: the style and cultural identity of the members, expectations of a sort of self-enclosure as part of participation in the organization,
the somewhat androgynous gender-identity of the members, the perceptions of nature that are dominant among the members and the organization’s intellectual image.

This is not a deterministic viewpoint. Cultural fences do not force people in any strong sense. The friction they create reduces the likelihood for working-class kids to engage in environmental work. As the statistics show, even if the middle-class is over-represented in the movements, working-class youngsters participate too. The symbolic fences outlined in this paper, as most other forms of symbolic borders, are not impermeable. The possibility of choosing to be an ‘odd bod’ is always there. But for many people to fit in is of great importance. This is a point most of the NU members made in the interviews. The aim here has been to show how the distinguishing features of the organization make some youngsters feel at home in the organization, others not.

It should be stressed that these are not fences in the sense that the people outside necessarily want to be part of the environmental movement, but are directly excluded. The fences are more subtle and take the form that the people outside the organization are not interested in participation (a conviction that of course is related to many other factors than the ones discussed here). The suggestion is that that some sub-cultural orientations among young people with a solid class anchor appear to converge with the ideological basis of the environmental movement and other new social movements.

In his famous study *Learning to labour*, Willis (1977) described lower working-class boys’ resistance to middle-class culture in school. The same line of thinking could be followed in order to understand the majority of middle-class activists in the environmental movement. It has a class cultural element, which is recognized inside the organization, but not consciously intended. We have suggested that this has to be explained in agreement with theories on socialization, or more specifically in the light of the theory of habitus; on the acquiring and incorporation of some basic dispositions for action, perception, feelings and interpretation through socialization and cultural reproduction. As is emphasized in this theory, habitus is not primarily cognitive, but functions just as much on a practical and partly non-reflexive level. It is in this respect that the symbolic fences work. As the differences between the two groups show, it costs more for working-class youngsters to join the environmental movement. In addition to being motivated to work with environmental problems, they have to overcome some symbolic barriers to join an organization like NU. For the youngsters from NU interviewed here, participation in the organization was more like coming home: They found a group of other young people who had similar ideas about many things.

This paper shows the importance of viewing participation in the environmental movement as socially situated. In line with recent contributions to the sociology of nature (Eder, 1996; Macnaghten and Urry, 1998) we suggest that notions of nature are socially embedded and are subject to cultural and social domination, as are other cultural forms. An ecological approach that does not
take this into account has limited relevance for understanding people’s willingness to join the environmental movement.

Embedded motivations

Our third ambition was to understand how the distinguishing cultural fences are embedded in people’s motivations and practice. So far we have focused on the perception of the symbolic fences from the outside. But the insiders are interesting as well. How do the insiders handle the symbolic fences, and how do the outsiders?

Bourdieu and his notion of a practical sense have inspired our interpretations. We agree with his theory that emphasizes how the embodied disposition both on a reflexive and a non-reflexive level guides our perception of the world and evaluations of different issues and practices. We have given some examples of how these embodied dispositions become visible in interviews related to the issues of middle-class domination in the environmental organization we studied. However, as a theory of action this is a highly disputed position. One influential critique is found in Elster’s book *Sour Grapes*. Elster (1983: 66) criticises Bourdieu’s notion of practical sense for relying on a sort of unconscious strategy. In Elster’s view, the consequences of an action have to be clear, consciously intended, or completely unintended. Further, if an action is unintended it cannot motivate action. Elster claims that Bourdieu needs to specify the mechanisms by which unintended consequences work to strengthen motives to behave in a certain way.

This is exactly what we have tried to do. We have seen how NU members – their practices embedded in class culture – contribute in forming distinguishing features that function as fences against working-class participation. Yet the members in the environmental movement want to expand by attracting new members. They also want to recruit new members who are not like themselves. ‘NU should be open to anyone’ as Helene stated. Thus, in spite of their ambitions to be open to everyone, they systematically produce distinguishing features which are reducing the probability for working class engagement.

How does this dilemma come about? Is it merely an unintended consequence of the NU members’ conscious actions? To conclude along that line of thought would give an insufficient understanding of how these mechanisms work. The excluding qualities of the NU-culture are not entirely intended by the NU-members. They want working-class recruitment. Neither are they completely uninformed of their own exclusiveness. Helene, for instance, stated that it was not enough to share NU’s environmental goals. Some people did simply not fit in. The NU-members want to be different and stand out from the common herd. They strive for exclusiveness. The dilemma is probably rooted in the very nature of the social movement. The new social movements are not only recognised by their political goals. Being preoccupied with iden-
tivities and lifestyles the NU’s activities evolve precisely on the level where people try to make sense of who they are and where they belong – activities that people engage in with feelings and senses. This calls for an understanding where individual cultural backgrounds play an active part in manifest practices. Being embedded in a middle-class culture, the NU organisation culture attract members who themselves are embodied in middle-class culture. Thus, the making of cultural fences are neither consciously intended nor are they totally unintended consequences.

As emphasized by Bourdieu (1990) the concept of habitus is devised in order to avoid the division between the intended and the unintended. The practical reason is a mastering of a situation that makes it possible to anticipate the future without having clear visions about the results of the action. In our case the young working-class boys ‘know’ that NU is not for them, and their interpretation of NU takes part in shaping their motivations. On the other hand the young NU members’ interpretation of the organisation motivates them to participate. In other words, actions are socially embedded in such a way that some ideas about what fits are part of the motivational background. Thus, Elster’s distinction between the intended and the unintended is too clear-cut in order to understand the production of cultural fences. In a similar way to how the bourgeois sense of distinction outlined by Bourdieu (1984) works without being intentional, the NU-members create cultural fences which work even if their outspoken goals contradicts such practises. This may point towards a general aspect of the new social movements. When identity, lifestyle and aesthetic issues are given high priority the possibility for consolidating of distinguishing features are higher than if a pure politics of interest is pursued.

NOVA (Norwegian Social Research) Received 22 February 2002 Finally accepted 18 December 2002

Notes

1 In addition many young people support Bellona, one of the most renowned groups of environmental activists in Norway. Bellona is a foundation (not a democratic organization) started by activists with a background in NU.

2 The commercial referred to presented a type of lemonade with fewer artificial ingredients using a stereotyped description of politically active young people. The commercial was discussed among the NU members at the time when I interviewed them. Some liked the irony of the very ambitious young people involved in saving the earth. Others disliked the presentation of radicals as naïve and foolish flower-power youngsters.

3 According to Næss, a belief in solving environmental problems without fundamental changes in lifestyles and in our economic system is a shallow ecological approach. On the other hand, deep ecology implies a view of sustainable production and consumption which requires fundamental changes in our relationship to nature, and thus necessarily also major societal changes.
References


This document is a scanned copy of a printed document. No warranty is given about the accuracy of the copy. Users should refer to the original published version of the material.