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Green clashes: cultural dynamics of scales in sustainability transitions in European peripheries

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ABSTRACT A multi-level perspective (MLP) in studying sustainability transitions has proved its relevance in explaining the institutionalisation of sustainability ideas. However, MLP does not offer tools to grasp the dynamics of culture between knowledge regimes that occur in different loci in global-local scales. The article introduces a framework for cultural analysis by creating a crossover conceptual approach to culture in different spatial scales combining elements of MLP logic with Thomas Eriksen's idea of the 'clashes of scales'. Scalar dynamics related to sustainability transitions are explored through the centre-periphery patterns by reanalysing empirical data from the authors' previous projects, which examine local responses to meet the ideas or assignments given by upscale actors. The article shows that culture is a factor that does not stick to one level of development but crosscuts through spatial scales, thus providing transitional corridors. Through various representations, culture anchors floating sustainability to a certain mentality of rule and constitutes an implicit element of the whole transition process, providing a challenge for the traditional grammar of pro-environmental diffusion. In this process, peripheral states of mind tend to mediate and integrate different ideological motivations into a local cultural reaction to sustainability transition.

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Introduction

Sustainability transition can be described as an ‘institutionalised change’ to ecologically more sustainable products, production methods and systems in different industrial fields and disciplines. According to Frank Geels et al. (2017, p. 466) the goal of this change is the emergence of ‘a new regime, which becomes institutionalised and increasingly taken for granted’. Sustainability transition is often perceived as a multi-layered process. As such, the change encompasses both macro and micro levels, and is accepted by various agents at different stages (see, e.g., Young, 2013; Markard et al. 2012). A multi-level perspective (MLP) understands transition dynamics as exchanges between macro-level socio-technological landscapes (digitalisation, urbanisation, ideological frameworks), socio-technological regimes (transportation, oil production) and grassroots sustainability transitions (niches, movements) (e.g., Geels, 2011).

The model has proved its relevance in catching the historical institutionalisation of new sustainable methods and ideas in different sectors. However, sustainability transitions do not occur only as concrete changes such as technological innovations or new practices, but as shifts in the collective but contested systems of meaning-making (STRN, 2019). They are processes that are interpreted and given meaning by site-specific actors/stakeholders representing different motivations and goals. Thus, transitions also entail changes between different knowledge regimes and contexts, that is, between cultures. For example, to explain the geographical or national logic behind counteractions or climate denialism, the research should also address scalar dynamics and how culture works between different agents at different levels.

It is commonplace to hear experts say that ‘cultural change’ is needed to achieve a shift to a more sustainable future (Stephenson, 2018, p. 245). Cultural change is regarded as shifts in the collective but contested systems of meaning, which can be both cognitive ‘models of’ and normative ‘models for’ action (STRN, 2019). This cultural dimension in sustainability transitions produces ‘unexpected curves’ in their development, as the process is understood according to various rationalities from business life to social movements (Geels et al. 2017). However, patterns to explicate unexpected curves caused by culture in responding to pro-environmental ideas are still rare or one-sided (Howell, 2014; Arnold, 2018, p. 3). Case studies on cultural change have largely explored either site-specific and personal experiences or macro-scalar phenomena (see Hards, 2012; Arnold, 2018). MLP research has also often focused on a limited range of actors such as firms involved in energy systems or policymakers (Geels et al. 2017). Less attention has been paid to how sustainability outcomes are inevitably shaped in multiple contexts and in interrelation, and even by conscious political regulation between different spatial scales (see also Stephenson, 2018).

In this study, sustainability transitions are understood as processes that are interpreted and given meaning by site-specific actors/stakeholders representing different motivations and goals. Culture is not restricted or even analytically divided into one scale as are, e.g., landscape-level narratives or locally specific cultural ecosystems. Culture is a cognitive scale or knowledge-regime including ideas of whom you can trust and, accordingly, whom you are expected to blame for environmental actions.

This study seeks to create a framework for cultural analysis by creating a crossover conceptual approach to culture in different scales by combining and modifying some elements of MLP logic with the idea of Eriksen (2017) of the ‘clashes of scales’. Ways of utilising the concept are explored more widely as a tool to understand locally bound ideas, strategies and motivations, as well as the socio-cultural environment from which they arise. The study emphasises that thoughts and emotions, as well as interpersonal relations and interactions, are always reordered through

their social environments. Hence, culture and its impact on environmental discourses is shaped by scalar dynamics: seemingly shared ideas are reinterpreted constantly within multi-level and multi-sited knowledge structures.

Also in question are uneven power relations and the polarisations between global centres and local peripheries. Eriksen (2017, p. 152) has pointed out that ‘the increasing predominance of large-scale systems has created clashes of scale where the local level repeatedly conflicts with the uniformization and standardisation from above’. The more general sustainability solutions are, the more they erase patterns that are local and based on a specific ethos, and may cause resistance. Research needs to address the roots of cultural representations by following the flows of culture and thought through networks and in various spatial places. The following cultural traits present in local cultural ecosystems illuminate the circulation of ideas: how culture evolves, changes and is interpreted in various loci demarcated by different assets related to power, knowledge and opportunities for action (Marcus, 1995; Watson and Till 2014).

Yet, it is important to recognise how transitions occur simultaneously in various scalar positions. Centre–periphery patterns, as an elementary part of European mindscapes, are examined as a case for studying scalar dynamics. The relationship between the two seemingly opposite ends illuminates the various ways in which ‘commonly shared’ sustainability goals and ideas on local strengths given from above are adopted at the local level. This indicates that distances and matters of interpretation are culturally constructed, and that responses are also place-bound and represent particular local conditions/environments. The centre–periphery question highlights the clash of viewpoints, which emanate from different perspectives (knowledge regimes), and which are also given a different value in global and/or national discussions on the means and goals of sustainability transitions.

Methods

To illuminate the scalar and spatial differences in responding to sustainability goals, this study explores different ways of meaning-making, as well as ways of challenging hegemonic understandings of sustainability that do not match local interpretations. The articulation of path dependency and ideas for a new rationale show that cultural struggle is often parallel with political struggle (Jamison, 2001, p. 11). The study of the cultural aspects of sustainability transitions therefore requires both ethnographic and cultural political analyses. The study focuses on three cases that illuminate the cultural aspects of sustainability transitions by analysing local responses and interpretations as cultural representations. Local interpretations and statements can be observed as responses—both supportive and causing ‘unexpected curves’ in linear normality.

The cases are chosen from previous studies that have explored centre–periphery relations by utilising ethnography and cultural political analysis. These empirical examples are derived from previous studies of the regional adaptation and variation in human–nature relations of environmental concern. The studies explore various regions: North Karelia in Eastern Finland, sparsely populated areas in Central Finland and North Sweden, and Sardinia in Italy. The authors have based their research on the relations between identity politics and various aspects of resource exploitation, as well as stereotypical ideas about peripheral lifestyles. They have analysed various resource-based narratives and scenarios (collective mentalities around mining, forestry and ecotourism, as well as perceptions of the centre–periphery relation in the rural context) at different levels to find ways to

interpret the significance of culture for social transformation (e.g., Häyrynen, 2017; Hämeenaho, 2018). The studies were based on ethnographic methods and a comparative analysis of data collected from semi-structured interviews, participatory observations and public documents. The cases were brought together within the Academy of Finland-funded FST project (2016–2019).

Understanding the variation between different local responses requires a convergence of research from multiple field sites. The meta-analysis of qualitative research results does not primarily aim to provide generalisations about local reactions and responses, but to illuminate the variety of different ways in which locals may react and challenge (see Paterson et al. 2001; Noblit, 2018). The original studies' data and results are recognised as place-bound and have focused on certain study-specific questions. Accordingly, the results were analysed within the cultural contexts of the field sites. In this study the aforementioned case studies are brought together under the new joint research questions to indicate how different and sometimes even contradictory interpretations of sustainability are formed. The previous studies' results are analysed from the perspective of clashes of cognitive scales by exploring how locals challenge hegemonic narratives.

Culture for sustainability. The complex nature of culture attracts researchers to seek external definers to make a functional distinction between culture and the rest of the world. This is a typical method both for strategic creativity projects and when culture is integrated in environmental strategies. Analysis focuses on 'sustainability cultures', cultures that promote sustainability aims (Stephenson, 2018; Arnold, 2018; Bulkeley et al. 2016). This may limit the applicability of culture to those products (movies, Facebook campaigns, political speeches), narratives ('climate-change' communication) and groups (urban gardeners, local protection movements) that are attractive as transition intermediaries in the first place (see, e.g., Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Hards, 2012; Howell, 2014).

It is easy to reason that formal rules can do very little if the pro-environmental spirit is lacking or distorted. Yet, sustainability is a typical empty or floating signifier without a clear referent (cf. Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). It shows a cultural difference at different levels of implementation, even if the original goal is not questioned. People tend to add the elements to sustainability they themselves desire or fear. Spatial processes towards sustainability are thus open-ended and political. The processes involve a wide range of actors and interests, representing different perspectives and promoting different interpretations of what is eventually 'sustainable' (Smith and Sterling, 2007; Meadowcroft, 2011). The aforementioned functionality for research purposes is one tier of floating sustainability.

Instrumental use entails someone attempting to convert 'culture' into the capital of another field (Häyrynen, 2017), e.g., the fields of commerce, healthcare, or politics. Approaches often focus on purely eco-technological outcomes in which culture represents a kind of reform-based idea of the possible and desirable (Stevenson, 2005). Tàbara and Ilhan (2008) show that a change-triggering culture requires a particular kind of culturally bound coalition of sensitive agents, who may articulate new identities, integrate multiple sources of policy-relevant knowledge and develop new values for 'target groups'. To make cultural representations of future trends attractive, people need special cultural resources and skills, e.g., to creatively connect elements from the past to contemporary expectations. Such a resourceful coalition or social movement may therefore be quite exclusive and result in a 'green distinction', which, again, can be an unpredictable factor for more cross-cultural transitions, causing, e.g., populist backlashes (Jamison, 2001).

The cultural modification of reality for various purposes is rarely straightforward. It is often implemented by fine-tuning key concepts and their relations (Howell, 2014, p. 71). According to Reimer (2013) the 'reinvention' of spatial planning, postulating an all-encompassing and unproblematic shift towards new rationales, scopes, actors and instruments in planning practice with buzzwords like 'governance' and 'collaborative planning', exemplifies such a modification. To analyse the floatness of a floating signifier, the analytical separation between 'sustainability' as a neutral technical concept and a more culturally constructed symbol is crucial, though one should remember that in every concrete and practical form these dimensions are naturally inseparable from each other and their cultural contexts (Hards, 2012, p. 761). The separation only enables an analytical distinction between the rational and symbolic-emotional aspects of environmental concerns (e.g., King and Ilbery, 2010). In this sense, culture is not only a positive factor, providing climate-change communication 'transformative moments'; it may also prevent progress and question the negotiation of the contents and purposes of 'sustainability' (cf. Marshall et al. 2012). The changes represented by today's anti-ecological populist administrations epitomise such cultural change.

Culture in sustainability: analysis. Our cultural analysis relies on the idea of an asymmetry between discursive scales which causes positive and negative reactions to sustainability. The core idea of cultural analysis is that different knowledge regimes produce different filters for sustainability transition. The variation and inequality in the distribution of environmental risks have made global environmental justice more dependent on the context of its implementation than previously (cf. Schlosberg, 2004). This means the need for sustainability is situated and interpreted in a local context. It suggests a relationship between people and a particular local condition of human–nature relations, rather than what is understood as a 'purified' de-contextualised system of general/abstract formalities (Devine-Wright, 2013; Boillat and Berges, 2013). It also means that the cultural sustainability transition concerns not only chronological changes but how new directional perceptions or technologies are transferred between cultural spheres situated in different scalar and spatial locations.

Thus, cultures produce more or less receptive platforms for transition, both greener and browner reactions, depending on the nature of the culture and attitudes it encompasses. Furthermore, in a multicultural world different societies and groups are attracted by different cultural representations. To encounter and address this diversity and cultural distinctiveness between different actors, the analysis must focus on the kind of cultures, shaped by local histories, politics and spatial variation, which are written into site-specific representations.

Site-specific interpretations challenge hegemonic narratives and may therefore cause/explain 'unexpected curves' in sustainability transitions, because processes are understood according to various rationalities (Geels et al. 2017). This makes the relation between hegemony and its alternatives central for cultural analysis. The hegemony of normality is achieved through the popular knowledge (path-dependent assumptions) the main cultural institutions and rituals often maintain. According to Raymond Williams (Häyrynen, 2017, p. 56–62) hegemonic forces in society appropriate canonical and historically important descriptions of us, and utilise them in an attempt to validate or inscribe certain values in the cultural imaginary.

However, hegemony over ideas can never be total. Its inner dynamics appear in the gaps between official policy discourse and the popular response to it in a local community. A popular response can be either compliant or resistant in relation to

hegemonic aims. Responses also depend on the local environment. If daily needs and motivations do not equate to those of global political decision making, the hegemonic narrative lacks local power (see also Eriksen, 2017). With complex issues like climate-change mitigation, local understanding may strongly differ from hegemonic discourses. With no global consensus on solutions, let alone commonly shared ideas about what should be done, people in their daily local environments may feel a sense of helplessness that leads to fear, ignorance, or the denial of the hegemonic narrative's core ideas (Norgaard, 2011).

Yet, addressing local responses may bridge the gaps between different scales. Thus, a hegemonic narrative evolves in constant interaction with alternative, resistant, regional and other sub-narratives, and the prevailing hegemony seeks to incorporate factors like environmental concern in its established modes of operation and discourse (cf. Dryzek, 2005). We should thus create an understanding of how different cultural spheres are articulated between different scales. In the following we describe how the centre-periphery frameworks shape the scalar dynamics of cultural sustainability transition.

The centre-periphery relation as an interpretive lens. Coenen and Truffer (2012) point out that spatial space is 'too often treated as a passive background variable—providing little causal explanation' (see also Shove et al. 2014, p. 1516). It should be remembered that analytical MLP levels do not conflate with specific territorial boundaries (Gibbs and O'Neill, 2014). As socio-ecological agents, territories vary, because they are unique combinations of all MLP levels at a particular moment. The explanatory power is therefore sought here from particular cultural tensions between global and local actors.

Local responses to new things (standards, recommendations, or sustainability policies) are particular identity actions shaped by local environmental capital (micro-level cultural ecosystems) and macro-scalar cultural-ideological landscapes. The centre-periphery relation is a specifically European way of constructing collective senses of spatial hierarchy. It describes not only knowledge gaps between different communities but specific in-group/out-group binaries. How does a centre-periphery mentality frame the construction of identity actions? A cultural-ideological landscape is not a top-down macro-scalar factor but an articulation of very different discursive chains. It provides different 'rationales' for industrial and local regimes, delineating the rationality of interpretations at the lower levels and offers different ideal types of the human-nature relation (cf. Lemke, 2001).

The analytical lines of empirical examples here are based on a regional division and spatial location (relatively peripheral areas). People's place attachment entails collective action and social mobilisation across disparate social and economic groups that are normally antagonistic but can be brought together in a common endeavour in the name of the region as a shared community. Place attachment is based on both practical and emotional bonds (Häyrynen, 2003). Practical bonds include political-economic institutions, climatic systems and natural habitation. Emotional bonds arise from familiarity—the sense of belonging that plays a role in motivating individuals to care for particular places (Devine-Wright, 2013). The centre-periphery mentality, as a perception of spatial hierarchy, can be traced to certain lifestyles (mobility, resource exploitation, consumption) that may or may not follow current ideals of sustainability (Wollin Elhouar, 2014). Such experience may be intensified by a region's remoteness or marginality. Thus, periphery is here considered a core cultural process, depending on ever-changing centre-periphery relations.

The cultural-ideological landscape through which locals interpret the ideas proposed or offered by centres contains

profound religious, ethnic, ideological, moral and aesthetic elements, which are mediated through general education and other societal institutions. It can mix single steps towards a more sustainable lifestyle (organic production, bottle recycling, the growing use of renewable energy) with geopolitical situations or religions that are thousands of years old.

This slightly simplistic diffusionism suggests that it is crucial for those who hold power to promote a decentred network of self-regulating social sub-worlds whose interests are integrated with those of the general order. Centres thus calculate the possible inputs/outputs of the periphery in relation to the national system. Is it worth building a bridge or road, or having a garrison in remote parts of the country? A community's objective position largely depends on whether the prevailing centre of power emphasises regionalism and decentralisation as a general ideology (Keating et al. 2004), or regards metropolitan areas as driving forces of society and supports centralisation—a highly topical debate in Finland with its need of public transport in sparsely populated areas. Peripheries are often defined statistically by how sparsely populated areas are or how far they are from identified centres. Thus, advocates and developers of general standards for various political or economic sectors may think that peripheral areas are underdeveloped, backward and distant (Göle, 2000, p. 40) and, as such, unable to meet the centres' economic, political or cultural standards (see also Knuuttila and Rannikko, 2009, p. 58).

Finke (2013) describes the various sections and sub-systems of society as 'cultural ecosystems' with their own processes of production, consumption and reduction of natural resources. Cultural ecosystems thus comprise the context-based accumulation of environmental capital (see also Wilson, 2013). The cultural ecosystem is originally a component of cultural ecology, which is the study of human adaptations to social and physical environments. Cultural ecology recognises that the ecological locale plays a significant role in shaping a region's cultural beliefs and institutions. Human adaptation refers to the biological and cultural processes that enable a population to survive and reproduce within a given environment.

Cultural ecology has been criticised, because it ignores the connections between the local-scale systems it studies and the global political economy. Clearly, the current phases of globalisation and digitalisation have weakened the role of immediate cultural processes. Contemporary people living in complex societies have lost ecological insights taken for granted in small-scale societies whose members engaged with their environments more intensively and reciprocally (Eriksen, 2017, p. 148). Yet, this is no reason to underestimate individuals' own will to rely on local tradition and narratives when performing their identities. For example, this can be seen in the proudly presented local patriotism and popularity of the 'Heimat' ideology in European literature and television productions. From the perspective of cultural ecology both aspects studied here—peripheral location and nature connection—significantly influence a group's culture and therefore its response to concepts of sustainability. Finke (2013) maintains that while cultural ecology considers the sphere of human culture as interdependent with and transfused by ecological processes, it also recognises the relative independence and self-reflexive dynamics of cultural processes.

It is important to note that the periphery is determined by its relations not only with real physical centres but with imagined and illusory ones. From the peripheral perspective, the centre may represent any upscaling universalisation: the inability to meet assumed standards may result in an inherent lack of self-confident narratives (Keating et al. 2004, p. 27) and create a kind of emotional lock-in effect (Wilson, 2013). Thus, as well as being an actual empirical phenomenon, the periphery is an emotional

state of mind which, though realised in people's minds, is culturally modified. A bitter attitude to supposed or factual subordination may be reinforced if modern concepts—ecosystem services, biodiversity, renewable energies, landscape production—are difficult to understand in the context of the local environment and daily practices (Norgaard, 2011). For example, in some areas wind farms are attributed to a disjuncture between the global and the local, implying local costs and global benefits from technology projects (Devine-Wright, 2013, p. 64).

Given neoliberal economic trends, peripheries can no longer rely on the goodwill of centres. Thus, peripheral actors are generally driven by their attempts to get away from the margins. Resentment therefore often leads to the formulation of locally based alternatives (Eriksen, 2017, p. 137). Communities may emphasise the positive aspects of being outside the mainstream 'different strengths' (Gloersen, 2009) to attract foreign investments. This is based on the idea that peripheral communities can use the elements of their traditional ways of life, habits, and trade creatively and selectively in responding to modern challenges. The concept of different strengths has again reinforced the concept of cultural ecosystems as an economic agency. For example, NSPA areas are typically introduced as ideal landscapes for the bio- and green economies because of their close connection with nature (e.g., GRECO, 2013). Such a local ethos may reinforce the idea of having a better connection with local problems than 'outsiders' and implies that there is a moral element to the downscaling of environmental decision making from the centres that have lost their connection with nature (Eriksen, 2017, p. 148). However, it is commonplace for such attempts to impel regional actors to invoke stereotypical images of their region (traditional costumes, food, stories) as a form of rationalisation (Keating et al. 2004, p. 176). Such approaches may create the potential to attract investment, but they are highly vulnerable to the charge that they are merely reproducing stereotypes that are often learned and repeated (Keating et al. 2004, 28). The remaining question is how local these alternatives eventually are and who benefits from this utilising of cultural stereotypes (Barrère, 2018). Elements that are taken as genuinely local may also be derived from the 'global format of locality' (Häyrynen and Semi, 2019). From this perspective, different strengths are applications of globally dominant trends rather than actual alternatives to them. Upscaling in this sense entails the universalisation and standardisation of local identity by the rule of 'central' mentality to attach it to the predictable system and hyper objects of global capitalism.

The reproduction of old habits and ways of consumption may facilitate an attachment to old forms of energy. Oil, e.g., was one of the most crucial elements during the twentieth-century modernisation in the Western world. This has created an entire culture that has depended on fossil fuel for the welfare and progress of humankind. Hegemonic petroculture encourages the use of fossil fuel and opposes or ignores any counter-arguments. Petroculture produces a fantasy world in which 'ceaseless mobility' and 'smooth flows of people' are typical hegemonic expectations and standards of success. In this world, 'advertising images and cinematic narratives represent the largely uncritical socio-cultural acceptance of the automobile as a symbol of our own individual freedom' (Wilson et al. 2017, 10; Stephenson, 2018, p. 244). Petroculture upholds the status of oil as a hyper object of the modern world—something that sticks everywhere like money. Its centre-periphery trajectories and alternative projects can be followed through people's sometimes desperate attempts to imitate the standards of an ideal subject of the petroculture world.

Counteractions or finding novel solutions for mobility, e.g., are made difficult by a system that is constructed according to petroculture's ideals (see Urry, 2004). Yet, emergent cultures

create very specific modes of resistance. The dominant petroculture is challenged today by growing environmentalism. Contemporary climate-change communication seeks to replace the freedom to run private cars with the freedom to live in a noiseless and unpolluted environment (Howell, 2014; Newman et al. 2018). The previously mentioned debate on transport in sparsely populated areas belongs to the larger discussion of the ecological sustainability of different living environments. According to a well-established belief of pro-environmental discourse the densification of communities reduces the coal print as a whole, questioning the lifestyles of more sparsely populated areas (Mokka, 2018). Hegemony over the environmental agenda is achieved through tempting 3D photos of modern urban areas with a clean, green and light environment populated only by people with straight postures (see, e.g., Karppi et al. 2015). This serves as a sign of social distinction in accordance with a green code (or green distinction) (Horton 2003, p. 63, 67–69) in which 'the other' is labelled as environmentally uncivilised. It shows how hegemonic prototypes of successful people can set criteria that are difficult to match in peripheral areas.

The most advanced politics of compliance exploits cultural socialisation that is deeply rooted in regional and national traditions (Häyrynen, 2003; Harvey, 2006). Thus, the diffusion of sustainability ideas forms countless more or less open discursive chains or transitional corridors (Wilson, 2013, p. 54) connecting different spatial, temporal, socioeconomic, technological and other levels of interpretation. Eventually, it is not the scales that clash in spatial sustainability transitions but principles of organisations or formal and informal procedures that respond to hegemonic ideas and policies (Eriksen, 2017, p. 149–150). Clashes between centres and peripheries are thus culturally constructed. When studied from the perspective of scalar dynamics, it becomes clear that to institutionalise 'the new regime' of sustainability the (discursive) chain from the production of fossil fuels to their consumption must be unbroken—and not only in the economic and technological senses but, symbolically, at the level of organisations, policymaking and the human mind.

In what follows this is clarified with examples from our previous studies of how people's emotional attachment and practical knowledge of the local environment relates to the perceptions of sustainability, and how hegemonic projects assimilate the exploitation of nature.

Representations. The symbolic governance of sustainability transition derives from various scalar interpretations of how 'human progress'—the material and spiritual requirements of a good life—should be measured. In the following, we analyse centre-periphery dynamics from three perspectives: how local living is interpreted from outside; how ideas provided by centres are interpreted and contested at the local level; and how local interpretations vary in relation to each other. The cases show how the local level challenges hegemonic discourses by denying or reinterpreting the stereotypes attached to peripheries. These cultural responses utilise local and/or hegemonic narratives to show the local in a different light or provide a different, locally oriented, view. The tactics used include comparisons and analogies, reinterpretations and challenging hegemonic discourses and stereotypes. They shed light on localities' capacities to adopt and adjust to hegemonic ideas related to green development in a culturally and socially sustainable way.

In general, the (anti-elitist) brown reaction exploits collective disaffection against unpopular environmental control. It is often coupled with other elements detested by the mistreated: farmers and EU directives; blue-collar workers and the China syndrome; entrepreneurs and taxes. As a cultural articulation, a local brown reaction traditionally entails rhetorical exaggeration to illustrate

the people of the peripheries as poor and defenceless victims of global environmentalism. Military metaphors and simplistic humour are frequently used to pursue a memory politics that undermines sustainability aims. In 1990, in responding to the establishment of the Koli National Park (a key heritage site in the Finnish national culture), local landowners repeatedly sought analogies with the 1939–40 Winter War and Stalin's 'decision' to conquer the fatherland, to which 'patriotic Finns' refused to submit: 'The establishment of a national park ... will awaken Antti Rokka [a mythical warrior in Väinö Linna's novel *The Unknown Soldier* (1954)] inside every Finnish man' (Karjalainen, 1990). Such a thin line between gravity and playfulness is a crucial moment in the spread of environmental attitudes, as it makes the backgrounds of interpretations visible.

The green reaction, drawing on a 'correct ecological code', is presented as an ecological alternative that resists the global fossil-fuel hegemony. It may therefore be a local version of the global green hegemony and divide people into winners and losers according to their environmental dispositions. The 'different strengths' of the sparsely populated areas mentioned above are often translated into an ecological innovation discourse that is connected with the close and allegedly smoother interplay with nature in the peripheries. It promotes job creation and economic activity in such areas, thus serving as an instrument to overcome culturally maintained senses of marginality and as an argument for political regionalism. In the study by Devine-Wright (2013, p. 64–65) some local people were proud of living near wind farms, because it gave them a sense of being part of the global environmental movement. The pro-environmental green distinction is not necessarily based on rational consideration but on the adoption of the correct symbolic code. For example, buying an organic or fair-trade product from a supermarket instead of a local craft shop may not accord with the code (see Horton 2003, p. 70).

A different strength often entails the capitalisation of something that is common in the peripheral area (space, clean air, darkness). HiKuMa, a regional development project, affords an example of such a green strength. It aimed to exploit 'silence' as a tourism asset in sparsely populated North Karelia (Häyrynen 2013). Silence is usually understood as a sense with no absolute normative connotations. As a phenomenon it can be positive (a sense of calm in a hectic world) or negative (waiting for an explosion in a bomb shelter) (Ampuja, 2016). As a natural resource silence is understood as the (anti-)resource of a fossil fuel-driven world. This means some people lack silence and are expected to come from a distance to experience it. However, the local response was not supportive. In North Karelia, silence was easily contextualised by out-migration, closed factories and 'silenced villages'. When researchers mentioned their task in the HiKuMa project, they received reactions like, 'Oh yes, we've had enough of silence' or 'Why not hopelessness?' The local newspaper Karjalainen, in evaluating a similar project on its completion, stated deliberately, 'Only silence remained after the EU project' (Karjalainen, 2013). In peripheral regions silence and its associated features are easily labelled a ridiculous refinement.

However, the project framed silence as part of a dominant but flexible new resource development, marketing environmental integrity. The marketisation of silence creates an appropriate way to listen to the sounds of nature. At the design stage the HiKuMa project's conception of silence was accompanied by elements of *The Kalevala*, Finland's national epic, and the Karelian culinary tradition (Häyrynen 2013). Attaching silence to classical culture or folklore has provided a path to cultural differentiation (Ampuja, 2016). The green distinction was exploited by creating a new consumer category for tourism called modern humanists. This prototype silence traveller is youngish, educated, relatively wealthy and looking for unique natural experiences and cultural

authenticity (Visit Finland). With the right discursive connotations silence consumers would be at the forefront of the new ideal of civilisation and human progress. Yet, despite its distinctive power, it is difficult for silence as an asset to penetrate the popular mindset mentioned above and thus gain the support of locals.

When politically sensitive and biased issues are at stake, people tend to adhere to the most stereotypical cultural traditions (Kahan, 2006). Ethnographic studies conducted in the sparsely populated rural areas of Finland and Sweden show that rural residents employ the stereotypes of rurality when defining their living environment. They often refer to the idea that living in the countryside provides a peaceful lifestyle close to nature and emphasise that the local environment leads to a sustainable lifestyle characterised by low consumption (Hämeenaho, 2013; Wollin Elhouar, 2014). In both countries, there is a common discourse that emphasises the unsustainability of living in sparsely populated areas, because private driving is a daily necessity due to the lack of public transport. This is considered problematic, given the distances driven and the public transport opportunities in densely populated areas. However, rural dwellers contest these negative stereotypes. Those interviewed for the studies underlined how little their families consumed, and that urban life lures people into a consumerism that is but a distant prospect for those engaged in a rural lifestyle (e.g., Hämeenaho, 2018). They emphasised that their driving was more carefully considered than in urban areas and limited to essential journeys. City driving, with its idling at traffic lights, e.g., was considered worse for carbon emissions than long drives on empty rural roads (Wollin Elhouar, 2014). The idea of rural living being greener than life in urban areas was strengthened by emphasising the connection with the agrarian past and its place-bound and self-sufficient (anti-consumerist) way of life.

It is noteworthy that despite many similarities in cultural orientation, the collective mentalities of peripheral people also differ. Cultures differ in their capacity to adopt modern ideas or external impulses; they vary according to how inward-looking or open to new ideas they are, how moderately/fundamentally norms are exercised, or the extent to which the future is described as predestined. It is often said that Northern European cultures are more secular and prone to seek rational arguments than their more traditional Southern European counterparts (e.g., Inglehart 2000, p. 82). However, although societies where structures of trust based chiefly on face-to-face contact, kinship and personal familiarity exist, large-scale, experience-distant religion often decisively enters into the mode of trust. Likewise, in societies where the inhabitants learn to trust institutions and principles rather than individuals, people remain socially embedded in interpersonal relationships (Eriksen, 2017, p. 144).

Similar historical layers were found in our research material, comparing the responses of farmers in Southern Italy (Sardinia) and Eastern Finland (Kainuu) to EU organic farming standards (Häyrynen et al. unpublished). The interviews clearly confirmed that Finnish farmers are more likely to rely on formal rules and institutional definitions of organic production, meaning that they are also more likely to accept and adopt ideas and regulations provided by external authorities than their colleagues in Sardinia (cf. Inglehart 2000, p. 82). Sardinian farmers often perceived the EU and central government as colonial oppressors whom it was permissible to exploit. Concerning the concept of sustainability, Sardinian farmers appeared to think that what they do—and have been doing for centuries—is already organic or based on the laws of biology. Hence, for them formal regulation merely destroys the possibility of being genuinely organic. They therefore suggest that the definition of sustainability should yield in their direction. Meanwhile, the farmers of Kainuu adhere to the criteria and even abandon organic farming if they find they are incapable of meeting them. It is regulation that makes a product organic for them.

Local variation in responses and local strategies reveals that the hegemonic culture is fragmented and unshared, and often challenged at the level of local culture. At the same time these local responses are made within and in relation to hegemony. Individuals have hybrid identities whose different parts are largely networked within different scales. Cultures that are situated only at one level cannot exist in the future and this interaction/relation should be taken as the core of a culturally sensitive framework.

Discussion and conclusion

In this study, we have aimed to design a new and culturally sensitive lens for evaluating spatial sustainability transitions and their justification. From the clashes of scales, and the differences between and within them, it follows that achieving a mutual understanding of pro-environmental development, let alone the new practices and ways forward, will be very challenging. Culture anchors floating sustainability through various artistic, ideological, or everyday life representations. As such, it constitutes an implicit element of sustainability transition as a whole. Interest groups can use and exploit these articulations regardless of the facts, thus providing a new grammar for pro-environmental diffusion. Cultural analysis provides us with an opportunity to break down the effects of stereotypes on the interpretations of sustainability and find new ways to understand responses that do not follow the normative/hegemonic ideas about green development/sustainability.

The obvious symbolic struggle between brown and green reaction is a conflict between cultural-ideological landscapes and the global hegemony. Whether a reaction conforms or is resistant depends on the hegemonic rule at stake. Concerning local scales, hegemony employs ambivalence between familiarity (the path-dependent tradition) and unfamiliarity (a new and politically rationalised method) to create the confusion which is the basic material for spatial hegemonic dominance. Analyses of the centre-periphery mentality reveal that both green and brown reactions are exploited for various scalar purposes and may steer the adoption of sustainability goals. Furthermore, both micro- and macro-level narratives, as well as the discourses and visions articulated via media, e.g., should be analysed as representing the level and the scale within which they are produced. Because of the diversity of purposes and motivations, and the differing interpretations of sustainability, it would be deceptive to focus only on those 'cultural forms' that seem to promote a low-carbon future or climate-change prevention in accordance with current hegemonic discourses.

By focusing on peripheral regions, the research frame offers an opportunity to recognise how geographical distances and cultural categories—both spatial remoteness and cultural marginality—are integrated in sustainability transition and its discursive chains at a relatively small scale. Besides, in the case of peripheries, local cultures are in general framed by close connections with nature in everyday life and resource production. The two extreme views of the periphery—the alternative strengths and the vicious circle—produce a wide range of potential interpretations of floating sustainability and a variety of discursive coalitions creating channels for these interpretations. However, the peripheral state of mind may also reinforce a community's suspicion of directional concepts that are too ill-defined (as with Sardinian farmers). It may also reinforce ideas that moral choices cannot be ordered outside community. This means centre-periphery dynamics may be addressed as two-sided and challenged in regional transition studies.

We therefore propose the application of a culturally sensitive approach to a multi-level analysis which recognises that transition is contested and reinterpreted by various agents. This holistic/contextualised approach will enable researchers to map the local cultural-ideological landscapes and the environments that frame everyday life, and to shape people's perception and response to

global issues. Exploring culture in transitions begins by mapping the perspectives of individual people, but it aims to explore/illuminate the more or less shared cultural dimension behind the particularities. Understanding cultural interpretations in various interrelated loci serves as a tool to overcome the challenge of the clashing of scales. When different responses—locally bound representations that manifest as either micro- or macro-scale agents' views—are understood in the context of the environment from which they emerge, they may be analysed in relation to other levels. Such an analysis will help to avoid surprises in end users' responses, e.g., or the wider unintended consequences that may change the course of action in undesired ways. Explorations of socio-technical landscapes and/or regimes, and studies of certain niche innovations are thus accompanied by an analysis of local cultures that frames the ideas and practices of people acting locally within the global. Cultural resilience to a pro-environmental concept surely reinforces the flexibility of the concept. However, it may be a prerequisite of 'just transition'.

Data availability

The datasets used in this study are available from the corresponding authors on reasonable request.

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Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Additional information

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