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Social habitus and climate change: Rethinking demand-side mitigation through Eliasian figurational sociology

Abstract

This article explores the analytical potential of Norbert Elias's notion of *social habitus* for understanding resistance and change in everyday practices relevant to demand-side climate mitigation. It unfolds in two steps. First, it revisits the concept of *social habitus*, emphasising its value for interpreting the emotional and figurational dimensions of social practices. Second, it applies this theoretical lens to focus group data collected in Italy to examine how emotions, identity, and social interdependencies sustain high-carbon habits despite widespread environmental awareness. By integrating theoretical and empirical analysis, the paper shows how the *habitus* can serve as a key interpretive tool for understanding the emotional foundations of resistance to behavioural change.

Keywords: Social habitus, emotions, demand-side climate mitigation, social action

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1. Introduction: Social habitus and the challenge of demand-side climate mitigation

In this article, we seek to explore the analytical potential of the concept of *social habitus*, as developed within the tradition of Eliasian figurational sociology, as an analytical tool for understanding both resistance and transformation in everyday practices and consumption patterns in the face of the threat posed by climate change driven by greenhouse gas emissions.

As is known, the concept of *social habitus* has resonated and spread primarily due to its conceptualisation and use made by Pierre Bourdieu (Wacquant, 2016). Although there are elements of convergence and contact between the theoretical proposals of the two authors (Déchaux, 1993; Bowen, van Heerikhuizen & Emirbayer, 2012; Dendasck & Lopes, 2016; Ernst et al., 2017), our focus here is on the Eliasian formulation and the role it plays within figurational sociology.

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The *habitus* undoubtedly constitutes one of the pivotal conceptual nodes of Elias's sociological framework; yet it may be argued that this remains a field in which critical elaboration has not yet achieved a degree of systematicity commensurate with its theoretical weight. The notion of *social habitus* points to a specific mode of constructing sociological discourse – one that assumes that social practices find their intelligibility in enduring dispositions, sedimented over the course of extensive historical processes.

This perspective has been productively tested at the level of the "survival units" of nation-states (Mennell, 2007; Feuerhahn, 2009; Kuzmic, 2013; Ernst et al., 2017; Kuzmic et al., 2020; Bucholc, 2024). Within this line of inquiry, theoretical attention has primarily focused on what can be attributed to such dispositions – namely, to what extent *habitus* can supplement or replace situational explanations – and on the ways in which these dispositions are reconfigured by shifts in power balances and intergroup conflicts.

Although the *social habitus* takes shape in a range of everyday practices that, as Elias insightfully demonstrated (Elias, 1939/2012), include dietary habits, hygiene practices, and, more generally, the relationship with the surrounding environment, its connection with practices of consumption – particularly with those individual practices oriented toward climate change mitigation – has been less thoroughly investigated. Our interest in this concept, read through an Eliasian lens, stems from its capacity to illuminate two aspects that we consider crucial for the sociological understanding of individual consumption practices. First, the *habitus* allows us to highlight how a portion of our practices is interwoven with sedimented affective dimensions that remain relatively impervious to discursive reflection. Second, it shows how these affective dimensions are themselves sensitive to the relational and power dynamics that individuals perceive as implicated in the practices themselves.

In recent years, as political attention has increasingly turned toward achieving a transition to climate neutrality, the social sciences have increasingly engaged with issues of demand-side mitigation. This shift in focus reflects a growing awareness of the impact that individual consumption behaviours and lifestyles exert on overall emissions. According to several estimates, private and household consumption accounts for a predominant share of global emissions – around 72 % – with particularly high contributions in the sectors of mobility, housing, food, and waste management (Dietz, 2014; Hertwich & Peters, 2009; IPCC, 2023). Fostering profound and lasting transformations in consumption patterns, especially in high-income countries, thus appears to be an essential condition for addressing the climate crisis in a credible manner.

From this perspective, one of the main challenges concerns the persistence of routine practices even when individuals are aware that – at least from a climatic standpoint – it would be preferable to act differently. A broad interdisciplinary literature has identified multiple social and psychological mechanisms that help account

for the persistence of unsustainable behaviours (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002; Abrahamse, 2019). Our starting point is that research on individual practices often tends to reduce actions and behaviours to the outcome of a decision-making process – a tendency that is particularly evident in approaches grounded in psychological and economic perspectives. Within this framework, the embeddedness – institutional, material, and relational – of all human action is often relegated to the status of an external factor influencing decision-making, rather than being recognised as a constitutive dimension of practices themselves (Shove, 2010; Hargraves, 2011).

Building on these critical insights, we wish to draw attention to the importance of recognising the constitutively social and emotional nature of consumption practices that affect carbon emissions. Both the social networks within which action acquires its meaning and the emotional charge that, inevitably, accompanies every action cannot be regarded as mere disturbances to individual calculation and intention. On the contrary, they constitute a generative dimension of practices, as they orient the perception of situations, the evaluation of what is appropriate and desirable, and even the very definition of what counts as comfort, security, status, or care. From this perspective, the *social habitus* emerges as a privileged analytical tool: not a simple repertoire of preferences, but a complex of embodied dispositions – cognitive, bodily, and affective – that make evident the historical nature of feeling and judgement, linking them to individual trajectories, class and generational belongings, gender divisions, and configurations of power.

The *habitus,* focusing on what Elias referred to as "the drag effect" and which in the Bourdieuian lexicon appears as hysteresis or as the Don Quixote effect (Sieczka, 2025), makes it possible to understand why high-impact practices – such as private mobility, domestic heating, food consumption, and waste management – often resist change even in the presence of climate unsustainability awareness. They are sustained by sedimented and socially shared emotional "investments", by tacit rules of feeling and appropriateness that confer value and normality on certain ways of living, and by collective images and identifications still largely anchored in the national dimension (Sommer, 2011). At the same time, it can also clarify the dynamics that lead to their transformation when material contexts, symbolic hierarchies, and power configurations within which dispositions take shape undergo change. Understood in this way, emotions are not the private property of isolated individuals, but the outcome of communicative dynamics whose patterns are rooted in historical processes and in the tensions between individuals and groups. In this sense, exploring the features of the *social habitus* as conceived within the Eliasian corpus can provide an important contribution to the traditions concerned with how our societies might achieve a sustainable level of carbon emissions.

Our exploration of the concept of *social habitus* will proceed in three steps. First, we will reconstruct the theoretical functions it fulfils within the broader architecture of Elias's sociological framework. Second, we will selectively highlight some features

that are particularly fruitful for our purposes, with special attention to the emotional dimension. Finally, drawing on the analysis of several focus groups conducted as part of an ongoing research project, we will test its heuristic potential.

2. Social habitus between sociogenesis and psychogenesis

While the prominence of the concept of *habitus* among scholars in the social sciences is largely linked to the international diffusion of Bourdieu's thought, it is worth recalling that the notion has a long-standing tradition within Western intellectual history. The term entered philosophical reflection through Thomas Aquinas's Latin translation of Aristotle's *hexis* (Wacquant, 2016). From there, it re-emerged in contemporary philosophy and went on to play a significant role within the phenomenological tradition – particularly in Husserl, with whom Elias studied, albeit briefly.

Although in episodic forms and with varying degrees of systematic elaboration (Wacquant, 2016; Corchia, 2020), the concept also appears in classical sociology, where it plays a meaningful role both in Durkheim's reflections on pedagogy and in Weber's studies on the spirit of capitalism (Camic, 1986). In his analysis of the role of habit within pre-Parsonian classical sociology (ibid.), Camic argues that the term *habitus* was often employed in a broad sense, as

> *"the durable and generalised disposition that suffuses a person's action throughout an entire domain of life or, in the extreme instance, throughout all of life – in which case the term comes to mean the whole manner, turn, cast, or mold of the personality"* (ibid., 1046).

The term appears to have entered Elias's lexicon through this very tradition. The fact that it appears as part of a shared sociological heritage, together with the author's well-known reluctance to dwell on lengthy theoretical discussions of concepts outside the empirical problems he sought to address, may help explain the absence of a single, clear-cut definition of the concept in Elias's corpus. Most commentators emphasise that *habitus* designates a set of learned and internalised practices and dispositions, taken so much for granted as to appear self-evident – what is often referred to as a "second nature" (Mennell & Dunning, 1996). This expression underscores how the "socially acquired" character of such dispositions is coupled with their "automatic" and pre-conscious functioning, as if they were directly inscribed in the body. A few further specifications can be added to this initial feature. The concept of *habitus* serves to explore these dispositions and practices not as episodic or random occurrences, but as expressions of an "affective economy" encompassing the entire structure of individual personality. Finally, taken together, these actions constitute a *social habitus* inasmuch as they are expressed through individual codes of feeling and conduct, whose social parameters vary across generations and between social groups.

Despite their brevity, these remarks allow us to grasp how, even though Elias never devoted systematic discussions or operational definitions to it, the *social habitus*

nonetheless occupies a prominent place within process sociology. Before examining in detail, the dimensions of the concept that are central to our purposes, it is perhaps worth pausing to reflect explicitly on this key role. This, in turn, may help clarify why the concept under consideration can serve as an important analytical resource for strands of research – such as those on demand-side mitigation – that often rely on individualistic and cognitive assumptions. Two key points can usefully be highlighted from the outset in order to clarify the place this issue occupies within Elias's overall sociological project.

The first concerns his very conception of sociology's object. In his persistent refusal to engage in any abstract discussion of what the human being is or what its essential characteristics might be, Elias conceives human experience above all as an experience of dependence – dependence on the surrounding environment, certainly (and thus on the tools and organisational arrangements through which human beings relate to that environment), but above all dependence on other human beings (Elias, 2010). The concept of *figuration* expresses Elias's intention to make sociology the study of these social formations – of varying scope and scale – in which human beings are bound to one another through specific forms of reciprocal interdependence, thereby generating a shifting balance of tensions. Within this framework, habitus captures the mark that this web of interdependencies leaves, over the course of historical processes, on human personality. It does not refer to a set of norms "possessed" by society and then "transmitted" to individuals, but rather to a process through which individuals acquire the capacity to act "successfully" within a structured network of interdependencies, and thereby become the peculiar persons they are. Through *habitus*, processes of individualisation and socialisation are thus inextricably intertwined:

> *"his 'individuality' and his 'social conditioning', are in fact nothing other than two different functions of people in their relations to each other, one of which cannot exist without the other"* (Elias, 2010, 59).

In short, the concept of *social habitus* – understood as the psychological level of mediation of social interdependence as historically and situationally determined – constitutes the key instrument through which Elias seeks to reformulate the long-standing sociological problem of the relationship between "system" and "action" (Van Krieken, 2000). There is no need for a set of concepts to explain how the *system* transmits its purposes to *individuals*, for this transmission is already inscribed in their interdependence, in their mutual need. What is required, rather, is a concept capable of grasping how the organisation of interdependence is reflected in personality in a durable form.

The second key issue also concerns one of the classical dichotomies of sociological thought – one that is even more central to the argument we develop here: the opposition between "rationality" and "passion," between "cognition" and "emotionality." Every social bond, in Elias's framework, is emotionally charged. Precisely because it is built upon dependence – and therefore constitutes both a resource

and a constraint – it necessarily involves the organic-psychic dimension that is part of the human condition. To capture this dimension, Elias later resorts to the concept of *valencies* (Elias, 2010) to identify the emotionally charged character of the structured relations of interdependence in which individuals are embedded. The processes of change that affect human figurations, therefore, are not primarily reflected in "culture" or in "ways of thinking," but in the person as a whole; they must be understood in terms of their capacity to mould affectivity within interpersonal relations.

It is at this level that *habitus* operates – as a conceptual level that allows us to think of intersubjective relations not through psychological categories taken as constants of an immutable human nature, but as variables always dependent on the demands of each social formation, and on each individual's movement within such formations, on their own "figurational destiny." Along this path, Elias can revisit Weber's notion of rationalisation – interpreting it as an effect of the civilising process – and root it directly in the emotional constraints that human beings impose upon one another in historical change, producing a succession of distinct and historically specific rationalities (for instance, the *höfische Rationalität* to which *The Court Society* [Elias, 1969/2006] is devoted). In this way, the emotional and cognitive dimensions no longer appear as opposites but as two ever-present – albeit historically variable – sides of all action, which need not be abstracted at the analytical level. Against a sociological tradition that has persistently privileged the cognitive side of human action, *habitus* provides a tool for linking cognition and emotion within a single conceptual framework – one that encompasses both emotional impulses and more detached orientations, and that pervades every form of action in a "balance" to be assessed empirically each time.

The *habitus* – or, so to speak, the "hinge" function it performs between nature and culture, between the individual and society – thus constitutes a central element of Elias's theoretical construction and of his broader attempt to develop a sociology capable of dispensing with a series of problems rooted in a profoundly dichotomous epistemological tradition (Perulli, 2011). It does so through an instrument that aims to be "realistic" in capturing the nexus between "structural dynamics and the identity dynamics of social life" (Buccarelli, 2011, 75, *our translation*).

3. Habitus and emotions: The historicity of our relation to the world

Having highlighted the theoretical functions that the *social habitus* performs within Elias's thought, we would now like to emphasise some of its main features that are particularly relevant for understanding the specifically social and emotional dimensions that we seek to bring into focus in domestic consumption practices.

The first concerns the level at which these dispositions should be grasped. Although the expression "second nature" immediately evokes the unreflective or "blind" dimension of these general dispositions, we should not make the mistake of restrict-

ing the field in which a *social habitus* manifests itself (Kuzmic et al., 2020). Especially in his most well-known work, *The Civilising Process*, Elias refers primarily to a psychic *habitus*, interpreted through the categories of Freud's second topography (Freud, 1923), whose transformations are expressed mainly through the analysis of manners, and thus in the rising thresholds of repugnance and shame (Elias, 1939/2012, 129ff.). In this sense, it might seem sufficient to conceive of the *habitus* merely as a "sensibility" automatically inscribed within our psychic mediations. Yet, while it is certainly true that a psychic *habitus* expressed through a "code of feeling" (Fletcher, 1997, 17) manifests itself in a particular sensitivity, a much broader interpretation of the concept is possible – one whose significance becomes increasingly evident in Elias's later works.

To apprehend this aspect, it is useful to broaden our view and consider how the *social habitus* is constructed across Elias's works. What becomes sedimented in a *habitus* are the long-term evolutions of relations among groups, institutions, rituals, and – above all – of the symbols and "means of orientation" through which human beings navigate the world. It is, in effect, the embodied outcome of the historical development of these processes. A shared *habitus* is shaped, for instance, by the changing power balances within institutions such as the monarchical court (Elias, 1969/2006), by the forms assumed by rituals through which violent impulses are expressed (Elias, 2006; Elias, 2007, 130ff.), as well as by variations in the vocabulary through which experience is articulated, or in the social experience of time itself (Elias, 1939/2012: 115; Elias, 2007). Each of these developments leaves a mark on the personality of individuals belonging to those social groups, forming a *social structure of personality* that acts either as an enabling condition or as a constraint on action. In Bourdieu's terminology, one could say that the *habitus* constitutes a form of "practical reason" through which human beings move, shaping the image that individuals construct of themselves and of others. In essence, the *social habitus* concerns the subject's relationship with self and world as inscribed within psychophysiological dynamics. In fact, it assumes some of the functions that, in other sociological traditions, are attributed to "common sense." The *habitus* simultaneously constrains and enables action; it assigns meaning to things and phenomena; it appears natural, self-evident, obvious. Yet – unlike "common sense" – it does not refer merely to "representations of the world," that is, to something purely cognitive, but to a mode of *feeling* itself.

It is precisely this *feeling* that leads us to the second point we wish to emphasise. This point has already emerged in our discussion, but it deserves to be explored more fully in its implications. As we have seen, it identifies a particular relationship with the self and with the world – one that operates through emotional dynamics. Once again, this does not mean identifying "emotional actions" as opposed to "rational" ones. In Elias, emotions do not constitute a separate sentimental sphere; rather, they represent a mode of relating to the world and to other human beings, one that is interwoven with the cognitive dimension (Elias, 2009). In this sense,

Elias invites us to recognise that every discursive dimension is always traversed by a variable degree of emotional charge. As he clearly shows in his studies on national *habitus* (Elias, 2013), this set of dispositions also carries within it the history of defeats, hopes, and specificities of a given human group. It thus finds expression in an internalised image of the group itself – what Elias calls the "we-image" and "we-ideals" – as well as in the images of the groups from which one distinguishes oneself ("they-images"), reflecting mechanisms of identification rooted in representations that are deeply imbued with emotion.

From an analytical standpoint, we can thus distinguish three levels that the *social habitus* allows us to identify in relation to emotions. On the one hand, there is a more immediate dimension, manifesting itself in a range of deeply ingrained reactions – such as disgust, embarrassment, or the sense of an invasion of personal space – that operate as genuine *emotional barriers* to action. On the other hand, there is a dimension that refers to cognitive schemata objectified in practices and symbols: the sense of time, representations of natural forces, or conceptions of honour that together form an interpretive and evaluative grid through which we relate to the world. Finally, this second dimension in turn shapes the *valencies* of our relations with people and groups, intensifying some while weakening others, and delineating spaces of exuberance alongside demands for self-control or restraint, according to figurational balance.

We have seen, then, that the *social habitus* makes it possible to investigate a range of emotional dimensions of action, shaped by the sedimentation of long-term social processes. Before proceeding further, a few final remarks are in order regarding two possible critical issues that may arise when approaching empirical investigation through this conceptual instrument. These two issues, closely intertwined, concern the potential limited flexibility of a tool such as the *habitus* – conceived as a set of "resistant" dispositions that extend beyond particular social situations and that "suffuse every aspect of a person's action."

The *social habitus* links our experience to that of a specific reference group within which processes of personal growth and experience have unfolded. This means that, since an individual belongs to multiple social circles, it is possible at the analytical level to examine multiple *habitus* – that is, to consider that a person's personality structure may not form a single unified layer but rather the outcome of different *strata* (Elias, 2013; Kuzmic et al., 2020). This, in turn, opens up several interesting possibilities: for example, that different *habitus* may come into conflict, and that such conflict may itself generate internal psychic tensions within the subject. More generally, the *habitus* is therefore neither necessarily coherent nor does it exclusively reflect adaptation to the structure of social relations (Ernst et al., 2017).

Finally, and consequently, it is also neither fixed nor static over time (on these qualities of the *habitus*, see also Wacquant 2013, albeit in reference to Bourdieu's work). This is not only because, as a historical product, it naturally changes with

the historical vicissitudes of the reference group, but also because it is always, at least in part, influenced by the "situation" (Elias, 1939/2012; Kuzmic, 2000). In other words, it is affected by the tensions between groups within figurations: for example, a specific threat experienced by one layer of the *habitus* may prompt its mobilisation, bringing it to the foreground; or, in cases of intergroup conflict, certain aspects of the *habitus* may be activated as resources, becoming salient for the purposes of social distinction and acquiring a particular emotional charge (Elias & Scotson, 2008; see also the essays collected in Bucholc, 2024). In this sense, the *habitus* should not be understood as a "constant and immobile foundation" of action, but rather as a "basic perceptual schema" that reacts to and is modulated by changing circumstances.

To summarise, the *social habitus* makes it possible to keep the emotional dimension of action consistently within the analytical framework. It does so without the need to posit a motivation that is alternative to rationality; rather, it enables us to consider the emotional dimension in a properly sociological way. Understood as a "social structure of personality" and as the product of long-term processes, the *habitus* shows that what we perceive as our most "inner" being – and therefore as seemingly separate from sociality – is in fact shaped by human interdependencies and their continuous interplay. At the same time, it keeps both sides of the question open: on the one hand, it allows us to analyse how emotional dispositions are formed and transformed; on the other, it shows how they contribute to processes of collective affiliation and disaffiliation, as well as to the drawing of boundaries between groups. The *habitus* thus stands as a tool capable of offering an original contribution to the sociology of emotions as a whole, going beyond both an approach centred on social norms and the emotional compliance of subjects with those norms, and a perspective reducible to a mere cultural history of emotions.

4. The habitus in action: Insights from the Italian case

As we have seen, adopting the perspective of *habitus* makes it possible to broaden our understanding of the resistances and continuities underlying behaviours that may appear irrational. That the nature of the practices enacted by social actors is deeply rooted in emotional and collective dimensions can perhaps be illustrated – albeit only partially – through insights emerging from twelve focus groups. During the extended discussions that took place in these groups, a widespread environmental awareness was generally observed, although it did not always translate into consistent everyday practices. The focus groups were conducted during 2024 in four Italian regions (Lombardy, Tuscany, Lazio, and Campania) and involved participants from diverse social and territorial backgrounds as well as different age cohorts (young adults 18–30, adults 40–55, older adults 60–70).

The aim of the analysis that follows is to test the analytical usefulness of the category of *social habitus* by examining the participants' narratives in order to

identify whether, and to what extent, elements attributable to the concept of *habitus* can be discerned in their accounts of consumption practices. We seek to determine whether employing the *habitus* lens can help us to better understand the phenomenon of environmental inertia (Marasco & Perulli, *forthcoming*), which seems to characterise Italian society as well. Among the many cues that may be interpreted as manifestations of *habitus*, we will focus on those that are most evident and that directly contribute to articulating the persistence of resistance toward the adoption of "rationally" desirable behaviours – those that are, in principle, more ecologically sustainable. While our broader research also addresses mobility and energy savings, this paper focuses on food practices to better illustrate our argument.

Before delving into the narratives themselves, two methodological clarifications are in order. First, what we analyse here are accounts *about* consumption practices rather than the practices as actually performed. In this sense, our discussion concerns references to the "second nature" as they emerge in the justificatory discourses through which individuals explain their actions and their willingness – or reluctance – to change. We proceed from the assumption that these narratives inevitably reflect what, at a deeper level – namely within the *habitus* – is perceived as desirable and socially acceptable. The underlying hypothesis is that even in imagining and recounting one's doing (and not-doing), what has become sedimented and crystallised within the *habitus* plays a crucial role. For our purposes, this is significant in itself and, in a certain sense, reinforces our argument, as it represents what "instinctively" (i. e. pre-conscious functioning) stands in contrast to reasoning grounded in rational considerations. Through the analysis of the evidences at our disposal, we can observe how different *habitus* – and the distinct configurations of their internal layers – operate in varying ways depending on the local society, that is, on the figurational flow in which they are embedded (municipalities of large, medium, and small size located in different Italian regions), as well as across generations (young, adult, older). These variations emerge in participants' perceptions and narratives, in the socially perceived expectations, and in the ways in which the sedimentation of *habitus* becomes manifest – more or less consciously – in their statements.

The second premise concerns the distinctive nature of the focus group as a technique specifically designed to elicit oppositional dynamics around particularly controversial issues. From our perspective, this makes it possible to reflect on the subjective and intersubjective variability associated with the different interpretations that actors give to shared elements of a common *habitus*. In other words, the exchanges that take place within the focus groups allow us to observe the non-static and non-univocal character of that "second nature" embodied in the *habitus*. Through these interactions, one can discern the peculiar intertwining that arises from processes of sociogenesis and psychogenesis and from their individual-level "interpretation." The diversity of such interpretations – and the tensions they entail – may, however subtly, open up fissures through which change in the *habitus*

itself can begin to emerge, even if such transformations are not easily visible or observable.

4.1 Social habitus as emotional barrier

The first element to be emphasised is the recurrent presence of the emotional dimension in the arguments that emerged during the participants' conversations. Without any specific prompting from the focus group facilitator, explicit references to emotional experience surfaced in the descriptions of everyday practices and aspirations related to daily behaviours such as diet, mobility, and energy consumption. This does not mean that reasoned considerations or explanations of one's behaviour in terms of rational action were absent; rather, these were often accompanied by qualifications and arguments that can be traced back to what we have identified as the emotional component of the *habitus* – above all in the form of an actual emotional barrier that hinders change toward the acceptance of consumption practices different from those habitually enacted.

The recourse to the emotional component in describing one's everyday actions sometimes appears as a general reference to what makes one feel good; at other times, it takes the form of an explicit expression of a clearly identified feeling – such as disgust (as in the words of Maria: "I haven't eaten meat for three years, not by choice but by necessity. After the coronavirus, I just can't eat it anymore – it smells bad to me, I don't like the taste or even the smell." – adult woman, Pistoia), reassurance (as Leonardo conveyed: "Eating meat is a habit I just can't give up. It's so ingrained in my life that it gives me a sense of normality." – young man, Rome), or frustration stemming from the dissonance between what one feels to be a "dutiful action" and what one actually does (as Riccardo expressed: "I know I should eat less meat, but it's hard. I've always eaten this way, and changing feels strange and difficult to face." – young man, Rome). The sense of estrangement mentioned by Riccardo, the normality referred to by Leonardo, and echoed in the words of other participants, reveal the difficulty of letting go of sedimented and internalised habits that emotionally anchor lived experience – contrary to what would be required by the adoption of a behaviour not yet experienced, not part of one's familial or local tradition, which in turn elicits emotions of fear, uncertainty, risk, and a sense of identity dislocation.

As we have seen, the *habitus* is powerful also because it provides a sense of security and identity. This clearly emerges among our participants, who emphasise the link between habits and resistance to change, as in the words of Giuseppe: "Reflecting on what we eat is essential, but we often feel trapped by our habits." (adult man, Pistoia) Others draw attention to how consumption habits play a reassuring role, grounded in their "naturalisation": "Eating meat is a tradition; it's what we've always done. It's hard to imagine changing it." (young man, Rome) "In the end, eating is a way to feel at home, even though I know there are more sustainable alternatives."

(young man, Milan). This sense of reassurance persists even when such habits are recognised as harmful: "Meat is part of our culture. It's hard to think about changing that, even if we know it's bad for us." (adult woman, Pistoia).

The social *habitus*, in its expression as traditional action and as consolidated habits naturalised through emotional forms of expression, thus appears as a potential component inhibiting change, even when anchored in logics of rational action. This inhibition of change is visible both on the level of personal convenience (health) and on that of broader collective interest (environmental sustainability). In both cases, what seems to manifest is a genuine *emotional barrier* capable of restraining any impulse toward change – especially when such change requires distancing oneself from what is experienced as "normal."

The emotional barrier becomes even more evident when behavioural change would require a shift in what Elias identified as the "threshold of repugnance": a sensibility deeply connected to the most ingrained layers of the *habitus*, perceived by individuals as natural and manifesting itself in an immediate, unreflective, bodily response. A significant example of this emerges from the discussions in the focus groups about alternative foods that are nutritionally, economically, and environmentally sound but rejected because they evoke disgust – such as the repeated references to the use of insects for human consumption. Even in this case, participants display a certain degree of awareness, observable across the national territory and within different local figurations. As Mattia put it:

> *"Insects instead of meat – it's something we should really start considering!"* [young man, Milan]

Riccardo expressed a similar view:

> *"There are proposals, like using insects as a source of protein, that we should seriously explore."* [young man, Rome].

And Franca, from a small town in Lombardy, stated:

> *There are also innovative solutions such as the consumption of insects, which in other cultures is already a common practice and could be a path to follow* [older woman, Sant'Angelo Lodigiano]

However, this awareness often struggles to translate into concrete action that would put alternative courses of behaviour into practice, as is clearly illustrated in the following dialogue among participants from Naples:

> *M.: It took me a while to find a certain balance [in my diet…]. For now, I'm not changing – I'm just not willing to.*
>
> *R.: Also because this whole topic often comes with the idea of a "new kind of food," you know, like insects that are supposed to replace meat.*
>
> *M.: Everyone's gone crazy with this cricket flour thing!*
>
> *R.: Yeah, and that, let's say, kind of works as a deterrent. Because you think you have to deal with something that doesn't belong to you, so it sort of puts you off. Even though I've thought about cutting down on meat… But then you're like, 'Well, if that's the alternative…'* [adults, Naples]

This alternative, however, is actually practiced by one participant, who highlights how processing methods can obscure the origin of the food, thereby allowing one to bypass the reaction of disgust, as recounted by a participant from Florence:

> *I lived in Milan during the Expo years, and I ate insect-based flours… fantastic! Because cricket flour is black, you don't actually see the insects – you're just eating flour. I have to say, it's really high in protein and gives you energy, just like eating meat. They're not available yet, though.* [adult man, Florence]

When the threshold of repugnance cannot be overcome – that is, when maintaining certain standards of living and consumption would require a deep detachment from the emotional strata sedimented within the *habitus* – the alternative that tends to emerge is a modification of consumption in quantitative rather than qualitative terms:

> *The conclusion we've come to is that it's not so much about what you use to heat your home or to get around, but that, fundamentally, you must choose to do less – heat less, buy less, eat less.* [adult woman, Pistoia]

4.2 Emotional rigidity, burden of responsibility, and defensive mechanisms

In the passages examined so far, the weight of the emotional dimension takes the form of emotional reassurance, which also translates into rigidity – resistance manifests itself, in other words, as a denial of all those possibilities which, though perceived, would require a significant emotional readjustment. One participant, for instance, made a particularly revealing statement, declaring that he was not willing to change his eating habits despite being aware of environmental issues, while also emphasising an emotional distance from potential alternative choices and practices.

> *I can't imagine a meal without meat. It's so deeply rooted in me that the idea of becoming a vegetarian feels strange and distant.* [adult man, Pistoia]

When faced with the need to contribute to addressing broader issues such as those related to the climate crisis, participants seem to activate reaction mechanisms that, in various ways, interrupt the flow from rational awareness and reflection to a genuine willingness to modify their habits – especially when such change is perceived as disruptive to the sense of identity sustained by remaining within the "natural" boundaries of the *habitus*.

As Barbara put it:

> *Eating pasta is a ritual for us. It's like coming home. Even though I know I should eat differently, it's hard to give up something that's part of my life.* [adult woman, Pistoia]

Anna echoed this sentiment:

> *Changing my eating habits is like being asked to change a part of myself.* [young woman, Milan]

Nor does rational awareness of the health risks appear, in itself, sufficient to undermine this rigidity. This suggests that the obstacle lies not only in the unwillingness

to make sacrifices for a collective good, but also in the difficulty of detaching oneself from what is experienced as a "second nature." As Riccardo put it:

> *Meat is carcinogenic, but I can't imagine a meal without it. It's an inner struggle…* [young man, Rome]

a struggle that, as we would put it, is often fought by resorting to considerations that appear rationally grounded:

> *Meat is carcinogenic, sure, but there's also the question of quantity – what's the actual risk if I eat a steak once a week? […] Meat is carcinogenic, but my consumption is just a tiny part of the problem, like smoking or air pollution.* [young man, Rome]

In other words, within a cost–benefit calculation, the perceived health risks are not sufficient to prompt individuals to move beyond their reassuring habits. Or rather, potential risks are minimised so as to avoid the need to change one's behaviour.

When minimisation is no longer possible – when the level of awareness of the need for change is such that adopting different consumption practices would appear as the logical consequence – the *emotional barrier* proves capable of activating new defensive mechanisms. The first of these is a feeling of powerlessness. Statements such as "What can I do?" or "It's too big a problem" recur frequently, and can be read as expressions of a weak positioning within social figurations: subjects who perceive themselves as having little control over the interdependencies in which they are embedded, and who view their capacity for action as too limited or ineffective to justify a change in their habitual behaviours.

> *Sure, all those intensive farms, the animals and everything, they definitely contribute to pollution – we know that. But right now, I'm not willing […] to make sacrifices or change my habits […]. I mean, no, I'm not willing [to do it] just to reduce pollution – you know, for something that feels bigger than me.* [adult woman, Naples]

This is not only a cognitive issue but also an emotional and identity-related one: recognising one's own impact often means coming to terms with a sense of responsibility experienced as unbearable or guilt-inducing – regarding something perceived as beyond one's control and as positioning oneself in opposition to other groups.

> *But the feeling of discouragement is like being in a rowing race where – out of thirty people in the boat – I'm told, 'You need to row harder, we're losing!' and then I see the person in front of me rowing in the opposite direction… it's kind of disheartening.* [young man, Rome]

The emotional weight of the divergence between what one knows should be done and the persistence of behaviours that contradict it is often lightened by identifying other culprits. In the focus group narratives, we frequently find a tendency to shift the responsibility for change onto other groups – and particularly onto those perceived as emotionally distant, such as developing countries, which often become full-fledged scapegoats:

> *"If all countries did their part, then we could do it too. But as long as there are countries polluting without any control, there's no point in me changing."* [young man, Rome]

Among the countries most often accused of being impermeable to environmental concerns, China occupies a special place, despite what is actually being done there to reduce CO_2 emissions:

> *Sure, I do my part, but then I see countries like China that pollute much more. Why should I make sacrifices if others don't?* [adult woman, Pistoia]

> *I can take shorter showers, brush my teeth, turn off the tap – but then I look at China's example and I just have to smile. Yes, I do it, I do my part, I try to do my best*. [young man, Milan]

4.3 Emotional sustainability, external control, and intergenerational conflict

Alongside the scapegoating mechanism, another form of responsibility-lightening emerges in the demand for external direction. When assuming responsibility seems to trigger a deep friction between the cognitive and emotional dimensions, higher-level collective bodies (primarily political ones) are invoked as points of reference to ease the emotional burden connected to inaction in the face of one's own awareness of responsibility:

> "*I feel that change has to start with those who have more power, not with us."* [young man, Milan]

The weakness – or even absence – of institutions capable of supporting and guiding change in behaviours and consumption practices is often experienced as a sense of powerlessness, particularly among younger participants:

> *What I feel is that we have no real power to do anything… we're many voices, a kind of chorus, all saying the same things, but we still feel we have no power in our hands.* [young woman, Rome]

The sense of powerlessness, combined with the emotional barrier that inhibits the adoption of behaviours different from established ones, often translates into explicit demands for greater regulation by the state. This reveals a willingness to submit to external control rather than to initiate changes in behaviour and consumption patterns that would require trust in other generations and in other people. From this perspective, the words of Aurora, spoken during the Rome focus group, are particularly revealing:

> *I think we need stricter laws. If the government imposes taxes on emissions, we'd probably think twice before using the car. […] The solution would be for the government to put a 40 % VAT on meat – people would drastically reduce their consumption.* [young woman, Rome]

To this, Simone added:

> *Without laws and regulations, we can't expect people to change their habits.* [young man, Rome]

Among younger participants, the perceived weakness of institutions – as the source of their unwillingness to take responsibility for low-emission behaviours – is accompanied by a generational claim. The irresponsibility of previous generations toward a crisis perceived as irreversible, and as the result of long-standing irresponsible

practices, becomes a motivation to resist the adoption of environmentally sustainable behaviours, revealing a profound and significant intra-generational conflict.

> *Us – meaning the 20 % of the population who are young people. Because if we're the only ones who have to do something, it doesn't make sense… I'll just enjoy life, do what I want, and go with the flow of those who came before me. After all, there'll be no one after me anyway… so I might as well make the most of it.* [young man, Rome]

Young participants express frustration toward previous generations, feeling the weight of responsibility for the planet's future while at the same time experiencing anxiety over their inability to plan for it – or even to imagine it. This theme pervades the narratives of the younger participants, though with differing nuances and emphases.

> *No one talked about eco-anxiety, which is becoming more and more common – especially among younger generations who ask themselves, 'Why should I bring children into a world that's basically disappearing?* [young man, Rome]

> *I think it's a problem for everyone. It's a challenge for today, and even more so for tomorrow – and it's only going to get worse in the days to come.* [young man, Rome]

In conclusion, many participants stated that they "know what should be done," yet still find themselves unable to change their habits: "I know I should use the car less, but without it I can't get to work"; "I'd like to eat less meat, but in my family that's unthinkable." These statements highlight emotional and symbolic barriers that do not stem from ideological refusal, but from a configuration of practices that are deeply rooted, embodied, and experienced as "natural." It is the *habitus* at work – unseen yet effective – imposing shared schemes of action and perception that are difficult to dismantle through simple moral appeals, as these are embedded in ways of acting and feeling perceived as integral parts of the self, of personal and group identity.

5. Conclusive remarks

The figurational approach proves particularly fruitful for analysing ecological inertia. This perspective invites us to interpret pro-environmental action as the product of historical, social, and emotional interdependencies, in which individuals move within dynamic and not always visible configurations. The brief passages analysed suggest that the *social habitus* operates as a "second nature" that structures the field of what is possible and acceptable, activating emotional dynamics that "confer meaning" upon individual choices.

By foregrounding this aspect, the *habitus* as an analytical tool enables us to grasp dimensions of action that often remain marginal in the literature on the contribution of everyday practices to climate change. First, by rejecting the tendency to individualise ecological responsibility, it situates individual practices within the meanings they acquire in broader frameworks that encompass dominant socio-cultural models, power relations, and the identity configurations that sustain and reproduce

them. Second, it recognises emotions as a structural component of social action and, as such, as a decisive factor in forms of resistance or openness to change – an approach that transcends the rigid dichotomy between rationality and emotionality. Third, it opens up a possible path for investigating the historical processes in which our behaviour is rooted, thereby avoiding certain cognitive shortcuts that lead to moralistic interpretations of climate change.

The analysis conducted through the lens of habitus reveals that to facilitate the adoption of practices capable of disrupting, if not reversing, the trajectory toward environmental catastrophe, it is essential to engage not only with economic incentives and cost structures but also to activate the emotional dimensions of social action. This includes fostering a collective identity, reinforcing social affiliations, and leveraging the strength of social ties. Moreover, it is crucial to promote trust and solidarity within communities, encourage shared responsibility, and facilitate participation in collective "sacrifices", i.e. change habits and practices. Addressing the emotional barriers requires the proposal of acceptable alternatives while being mindful of various social positions and interdependencies that shape individual and collective behaviours.

Through our analysis, we have sought to show how a *habitus*-based perspective helps to reveal the strength of the emotional dimension in shaping and giving meaning to everyday practices, and how this emotional force intertwines with figurational, identity-related, and group dynamics. Further efforts aimed at adapting this framework to the study of *demand-side mitigation* could help to uncover the historical formation of the *habitus* in relation to various practices (Shove et al., 2012) and their entanglement with figurational processes, as well as to explore how it – or parts of it – may be activated in the conflicts between groups surrounding the climate transition. In our view, such developments could contribute to the refinement of a crucial analytical tool for illuminating an as yet insufficiently understood dimension of attitudes and resistances toward carbon-related behaviours.

Through this lens, emotions emerge as repositories of the historical traces of power relations and collective identifications, while everyday practices appear as the terrain on which these sedimentations are reproduced or disrupted. Viewing the ecological transition through this lens means recognising that it can neither be entrusted solely to information nor conceived as the sum of virtuous individual behaviours. Understanding and addressing this process requires questioning the transformations of the collective *habitus* – that is, the ways in which societies feel, evaluate, and desire. Only from this level can a genuine capacity for sustainable change arise.

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