



## Quietly does it: Questioning assumptions about class, sustainability and consumption



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### ABSTRACT

This paper questions assumptions about the relationship between class formation, sustainability and patterns of consumption. The empirical elements of the research are based upon qualitative and quantitative time-series research into food self-provisioning and ‘quiet sustainability’ in post socialist Central and Eastern Europe (Poland and the Czech Republic). It considers sustainable practices that are often considered to be taking place ‘in the wrong place and the wrong time’, i.e. they appear anomalous in terms of western expectations of patterns of development. We offer evidence of comparatively very high levels of food self-provisioning and sharing of the resulting produce amongst middle class Poles and Czechs. This evidence questions widely held assumptions about class, development and consumption. This evidence may be of significance for consideration of a much wider set of household practices/behaviours that are associated with the middle classes. Our explorations of the reasons for food self-provisioning throw new light on discussions of ethical consumption: ethics is lightly worn, even unacknowledged, amongst practitioners, but the commitments are widespread and robust. Our empirical findings, and the theoretical arguments we seek to test on the basis of them, are of particular significance in the context of rapid processes of rural and urban change in emerging economies.

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### Introduction class, sustainability and consumption

This paper tests widely held assumptions about the relationships between class, sustainability and consumption that have become embedded in research and policy discourses around these themes. Taking the example of food systems in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) we will lay out evidence that permits a different kind of argument. Specifically we have studied food self-provisioning (FSP) amongst both rural and urban households by means of qualitative and quantitative research in both Poland and the Czech Republic. FSP is a term that describes the production and often sharing of food without economic benefit. Our exploration of what we frame as the practice of ‘quiet sustainability’ amongst middle classes in CEE is intended as more than a modest correction: we believe it helps to nurture a more accurate, and in some senses more optimistic, account of how progress can be achieved towards more sustainable societies. It poses an important question: need it be assumed that periods of rapid economic development, and the related expansion of middle classes, in emerging economies necessarily follow a Western pattern of development, with (attendant) high levels of consumption?

This first section outlines the paper and offers a discussion of the relationship between sustainability, class and consumption. The second summarises the state of knowledge about class in post-socialist CEE. The third outlines the key conclusions of our published empirical research to date on FSP in CEE as they relate to the argument of this paper. The fourth presents previously unpublished data that establishes FSP as a practice that is, if anything, practised more by middle classes than working classes in CEE. The fifth section offers a more conceptual discussion of quiet sustainability, drawing on four different influences.

There was a rapid erosion of class as an object of study in the social sciences from the late 1980s onwards, simultaneous with the emergence of global environmental change and sustainability as research themes. This has allowed discussions of the relationship between sustainability and class to proceed scaffolded by some under-explored assumptions about what people do as they become wealthier. There is evidence of entrenched views about the relations between class, development and consumption that inform policy directions, but also underpin pessimism about achieving more sustainable human inhabitation of Planet Earth. This framing in terms of a class–sustainability–consumption conundrum ensures that any discussion of economic development is tightly bundled with hazards that reach far across time and space. It is assumed that climate change, biodiversity loss and resource depletion are all intensified

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by economic development and the linked expansion of middle classes. Specifically, Chinese and Indian development, and the expansion of middle class consumer-societies are frequently figured as one of the most significant emerging sources of environmental jeopardy in popular media, policy and research. It is also quick to emerge in any discussion of environmentalism's ideological or strategic limitations. This tension has been evident throughout forty plus years of modern environmentalism. It was famously expressed in 1971 by the UK Labour politician Tony Crosland who denounced 'the elitist, protectionist and anti-growth view of the environment by those who want to kick down the ladder behind them' (Anderson and Mann, 1997, 166). This remains a current today in left of centre thinking: in 2010 the leading Brazilian Communist politician, and later Science Minister, suggested that the international environmental movement represented an 'imperial bulkhead' seeking to contain the aspirations of the poor in the Global South (New York Times, 2014).

This class-sustainability-consumption conundrum is often resolved in mainstream policy discourses and much of the research literature by suggesting that substantial efficiencies can balance growth in the numbers of consumers. Eco-efficiency, Factor Ten, the triple bottom line, the circular economy and green growth are phrases that are traded when the challenge is raised. These arguments tend to propose that the only way to reverse humanity's unsustainable course is through technological innovations introduced at scale, applying the pace and efficiency of market tools and structures to do so, often with acknowledgement of the need for goal setting via state or supra-state measures. Such a combination would result in a 'technotopia' in the words of one prominent commentator (Porritt, 2011, 12). In household settings this points to, for example, appliance, car and building product advances, again likely to be guided by standards-setting. In mobility it is assumed that (multiple) car use is a given for any middle class household. Hence efficiency in production, use and disposal, and the ways in which the vehicle is powered, provide the only 'realistic' routes to addressing the conundrum. In the case of food the mainstream discourses of sustainability might allow FSP a role in personal health and wellbeing, but it has been dismissed by prominent policy figures as insignificant in terms of providing a contribution to sustainable food systems. For example the UK Government Office of Science's report on the future of food and farming globally made no reference to FSP (Government Office for Science, 2011) and focuses attention on 'sustainable intensification'. In presentations of the report the Government's Chief Scientific Officer John Beddington dismissed the potential of FSP as a contribution to a more sustainable food system, pointing to the very small contribution it makes to food provisioning.

Counter narratives question the mainstream economic growth model and put the case for alternatives, proposing a 'deep economy' (McKibben, 2007) 'prosperity without growth' (Jackson, 2011) or promote a 'new economics' (Boyle and Simms, 2009). Although the arguments we present sit comfortably within these authors' propositions we have been struck by the fact that the phenomena we have worked with are difficult to lodge within talk of transitions or alternatives because they are already in place, have been sustained across many decades, and have survived the most blunt and far reaching expressions of the two dominant political-economic forms of the twentieth century.

We don't seek to present an alternative to 'eco-efficient capitalism' or to be offering a foundation stone for 'new economics' but rather we want to suggest that FSP in CEE calls for reconsideration of certain assumptions about economic development and its consequences. We call for acknowledgement of what is being delivered quietly by practices that do not set out to 'achieve sustainability' but are nonetheless widely practised and have positive environmental and social impacts. Crucially, these practices are

being sustained many years after people join what outwardly appears to be a globalised and homogenised middle class. We share a sense that 'a highly particular pattern of consumption and type of (western) consumer (has come) to stand for a universal consumer and consumption' (Gregson et al., 2010, 848), and want to show more complex relations between consumption, identity and relationships than these patterns permit. Our intention is not to valorise a particular class in a particular place, or its 'anomalous' behaviour. Rather we want to note that the simple pleasures and virtues of food self-provisioning and sharing beyond any reference to market techniques or logics have gone on under the noses of one of the most assertive and fast paced insertions of a market economy, and attendant development of a middle class, that the world has ever seen.

### **Class, lifestyle and sustainability: Central and Eastern Europe as a 'laboratory of consumption'**

Class has been neglected in the literature on sustainability and social change. Concepts of class, class formation and their relationship with consumption of energy and materials have rarely received attention. One of the only discussions of class within current academic debates around sustainability centres on the pre-dominance of middle classes within the transition movement and alternative food networks (AFNs) (Goodman et al. (2013) gather the relevant literature). Those debates centre on the inequitable nature of AFNs as a path to sustainability given the higher costs associated, and tend to centre on a concern with price and buying power rather than class. A critical exploration of the significance of class status, mobility and its relation to environmental impacts is markedly absent. Furthermore our own research suggests that the extension of assumptions based on Western patterns of class and consumption into other contexts can ignore some important features of everyday life that quietly support a more sustainable society.

Our own conclusions, derived from our empirical research across the last decade (see 'Class, lifestyle and sustainability: Central and Eastern Europe as a 'laboratory of consumption''), align with Shove (2010) who finds that policy discourses around sustainability '(revolve) around a strikingly limited understanding of the social world and how it changes' (1273). Shove's target was specifically the dominance of the ABC model in the UK policy context whereby 'social change is thought to depend upon values and attitudes (the A), which are believed to drive the kinds of behaviour (the B) that individuals choose (the C) to adopt. The ABC model [...] resonates with widely shared, commonsense ideas about media influence and individual agency' (1274). Post-socialist states, with their ideological and institutional past 'wiped clean', appeared to offer lab conditions within which such atomised notions of action and change might be exercised. Crucially for our study 'the ABC is a political and not just a theoretical position in that it obscures the extent to which governments sustain unsustainable economic institutions and ways of life, and the extent to which they have a hand in structuring options and possibilities' (1274).

Post-socialist states, and the varied western institutions and advisory bodies that did so much to shape their perspectives on post-socialist 'transition', were very purposefully looking to take advantage of conditions that might generate an ideal-typical consumer capitalist democracy, and to do so at considerable pace. The reasons for this, and the absence of any substantial consideration of a 'third way' at the political level are not difficult to identify. Despite their membership of the European Union, the OECD and other 'western world' organizations, post-socialist societies of CEE found themselves in an ambiguous position. Viewed from

**Table 1**  
Comparing Western perceptions of 'rising middle class' in the Global South and CEE.

Issue area	Rising middle class in 2000–2010s Global South	Rising middle class in 1990s post-socialist Central and Eastern Europe
Geopolitics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Threat to western interests</li> <li>• Geopolitical power shift</li> <li>• South: West's rival</li> <li>• Competition for resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Western gain</li> <li>• Expansion of western sphere of influence</li> <li>• CEE: West's ally and learner</li> </ul>
Domestic politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Growing inequality generating instability</li> <li>• Link between middle class and democratisation not considered</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Middle class redressing ills left behind by the old regime</li> <li>• Social and political stability</li> <li>• Democratisation</li> <li>• Civil society</li> </ul>
Growing consumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New markets for western goods and expanding domestic markets for goods produced in the Global South</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sign of prosperity and stability of CEE societies</li> <li>• New markets for western goods</li> </ul>
Environment	<p>Current and future problem:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drain on resources</li> <li>• Increased pollution due to increased consumption</li> </ul>	<p>Solution to problem created in the past:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Environmental reform</li> <li>• Solution to problems in the production side of economy</li> </ul>

the western perspective, they had occupied up until the end of the 1980s a recognised and autonomous place in the world system hierarchy: they were part of the Second World. However old certainties changed dramatically with the collapse of the Soviet-dominated socialist bloc:

In the early 1990s, East-Central Europe was indeed not upgraded but “downgraded” in the scale of development. It was no longer treated as a second world – antagonistic but capable of industrial innovations – but as a variant of third world – and hence a space under Western tutelage.

[Kuus (2004): 475]

Following the disintegration of the Soviet bloc CEE assumed a similar position to the one it held before the arrival of socialist regimes as a 'backward' other in need of western advice (Wolff, 1994) and 'a learner, an experiment and testing ground' [of western ideas] (Kuus, 2004, 474). Such othering of Eastern Europe has long influenced the construction of European identity and is not only held outside the region, but also widely felt within CEE societies. The collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe in 1989 served to dramatically reinforce the region's latent status, and its role as a needy recipient of western advice. Using the specific case of FSP, one part of the agenda of this paper is to highlight the potential benefits of reversing the direction of this flow of ideas and show that CEE can be a source of inspiring insights both for the 'West' and the Global South.

Table 1 summarises the contrasting representations in Western media and commentary on class and development in the Global South and CEE. The rise of middle classes in emerging economies such as China and India attract significant western media attention and political concern. After decades of largely unsuccessful attempts to 'catch up' with the West (or previously the First World) in terms of affluence and development, significant sections of these societies are now enjoying comparable levels of well-being and consumption as a result of economic globalisation. Paradoxically, this is often perceived as an implicit or explicit threat to the West. The economic growth underpinning the rise of the middle class in the South epitomises a threat to the established international order and is seen as potentially undermining the developed world's longstanding global economic dominance. Western anxieties are likely deepened by the fact that while globally the middle class is growing, in the West it is shrinking (Večerník, 2010). At the same time many commentators in the West view the fact that millions of people in the South have been lifted from poverty and been able to adopt western consumerist lifestyles to be a consumption-driven threat to the environment and a major source of increased pollution (Lange and Meier, 2009).

The response of the western media, politics and academia to the emergence of the middle class in former socialist countries some 20–25 years earlier could hardly be more different. The emerging

CEE middle class was viewed as an integral part – and precondition – of the package of modernisation and democratisation of these societies. These processes were not framed as posing threats to western interests, resources and dominance. Quite the opposite, they were actively encouraged by the West as they were seen as opportunities for former socialist countries to 'return to the fold'. In accordance with transition theory, CEE societies were deemed to be following the path of western societies and hence western theoretical models and concepts were thought to be transferable. As Geciene (2004), Buchowski (2006) and Thelen (2011) have shown, western social science conceptual and analytical tools developed to analyse western societies such as middle class, civil society, social networks and property were often applied to CEE societies in an uncritical and unreflective manner. Various contributions to Hann's (2002) collection of essays on Postsocialism engage with these limitations, including in the handling by researchers and analysts of concepts of class formation and economic destinies (e.g. Verdery, 2002; Kideckel, 2002; Sampson, 2002; Kalb, 2002 in Hann, 2002).

Western and CEE domestic support for the development of middle classes in CEE was motivated by the effort to undo the legacy of communist regimes. These had for ideological reasons prioritised the working class and oppressed the middle class, most ruthlessly in relation to that segment referred to within the region as the 'old middle class', that is, property owners and entrepreneurs. The commitment to expanding the middle classes in the years post 1989 grew out of the idea that the establishment of a stable democracy critically depended on the expansion of a social group with pro-democratic leanings. Because of the specific condition in which the rise of the middle class was fostered – the near eradication of the 'old' middle class<sup>1</sup> during the socialist era – the emergence of the middle class was closely linked with market reforms:

After the collapse of communism, it became a cliché to argue that democracy rests on the shoulders of the middle class and... the best way to produce such a middle class is to unleash market reform.

[Rutland, 1997, in Geciene (2004), 237]

The promotion of particular 'middle class' properties helped to foster the privatisation programme and other neoliberal reforms. In the 1990s these moves in practice had the effect of further undermining (and in some cases such as Lithuania pauperising)

<sup>1</sup> The use of the term 'new middle class' in this paper invites clarification. Here it means new in that it describes the whole middle class (both entrepreneurs and professionals) that did not exist during the state socialist period on the same scale. This contrasts with references to the new middle class (meaning professionals) as one of the two main components of the middle class in the sociological literature (e.g. Kriesi, 1989) that defines class in relation to the global North (the other component being the old middle class, that is, bourgeoisie/entrepreneurs). We have referred to the 'emerging middle class' within this paper to clarify this.

professionals and other white collar workers (Geciene, 2004). The prioritisation of the entrepreneurial elements of the middle class in these processes had important consequences for another part of the transitional package generated by the West – the development of civil society. In terms of environmental improvement this class of change-makers was promoted as a solution to the environmental problems generated by state socialist economies. The thinking was that the ‘emerging middle class’ (i.e. entrepreneurs) would help to clean up the region environmentally simply through their more efficient (capitalist) practices. However one of the things lost in this (amongst other things, rhetorical) move was a curiosity about everyday practices common to all social classes in CEE that had environmental benefits that capitalist, western environmental, health and social policy communities were at that time seeking to promote. FSP was one prominent example of this.

Our engagement with these issues started with conversations based on the experiences of family and friends in Poland and Czechia who were steady in their commitment to growing their own food. Such commitments clearly defied the behaviours expected of newly-minted members of the middle class, but also appeared to represent pointedly successful and stable contributions to a more sustainable food system. This was at a time when, from a comparatively very low base, FSP was being promoted by the sustainability policy and research community in Western countries. In the Western context FSP is increasingly being recognised as a specific example of alternative food networks (see, for example, Barthel et al., 2013; McClintock, 2014; McEntee, 2010; Veen et al., 2012). However, with only a few exceptions (Round et al., 2010; Schupp and Sharp, 2012) the recent literature on FSP in CEE makes no attempt to relate the phenomenon conceptually to AFNs and their attendant environmental and social benefits. This is despite the fact that the practice has been consistently shown to be considerably more widespread than in the West (Alber and Kohler, 2008). The anomalous behaviour of our friends in the East struck us as more than interesting and in some ways much more important than the sparse but increasingly high-profile self-provisioning in the West.

#### **The ‘wrong’ time, the ‘wrong’ people and the ‘wrong’ place: findings to date on food self-provisioning in Central and Eastern Europe**

The research project that provides the empirical basis for the arguments presented in this paper grew out of our fascination with the very distinctive relations between environment, culture and politics in post-socialist CEE. Environmental degradation had been a prominent element in the popular protests that brought an end to state socialism (Fisher, 1992; Manser, 1993). We wanted to contribute to the academic conversation about ‘what would happen next’. One of the team has been writing on the environmental politics of CEE since 1989. Since the mid-2000s we have worked together to explore what we framed as ‘laboratories of consumption’. The region has experienced two severe trend breaks in both consumption patterns and relationships between state and citizen within living memory. We found food to be a particularly potent means of exploring the condition of post-socialism, and specifically the changing nature and experience of consumption by households. One of the first findings was that

(m)ainstream political discourses both within these countries and the EU have tended to see the trajectory of CEE countries as fixed – locked into a linear temporal and developmental trajectory towards a Western neo-liberal modernity. This modernity rests on comforting assumptions about the symbiotic relationship between democracy, economic development and

the expansion of a prosperous electorate (figured as middle class).

[Smith and Jehlička (2007) 395]

Our tracing of biographies of food consumption served to qualify this set of assumptions, pointing to ‘the tending and growth of hybrids of modernity and tradition, and of pre- and post-transition economic practices’. Through food stories we sought to overcome some prominent ‘ideological artefacts’ (Mokrzycki, 1994), above all the deployment of the concept of the middle class in depicting post-socialist futures. Mokrzycki had observed how reference to the middle classes was consistently and positively associated with democratization. Our approach was intended to overcome some of the ‘risk(s) of overlooking the particularities and diverse cultural patterns found across Western and Eastern European contexts’ (Geciene, 2004, 235). We concluded that

(t)hese biographies demonstrate self-determination that is beyond the reach of a narrow account of a transition to a prefigured Western economic and cultural form. These everyday food practices either revise, or are independent of, Western-style corporatized food systems. They... assert a food culture, politics and hence economy that is more than purely capitalist-economic, other than ‘transitional’; one that is diverse and open to change’.

[Smith and Jehlička (2007), 408]

There are a number of ways in which we identify ourselves in this work as ‘scholars who are making the choice to bring marginalized, hidden and alternative economic activities to light in order to make them more real and more credible as objects of policy and activism’ (Gibson-Graham, 2008, 613). However it is important in our view to stress that the ‘hidden’ practices we seek to draw the research and policy communities’ attention to are not ‘marginalized’ but mainstream and widespread. The relative invisibility of the practices we have been researching to Western scholars, and to national or European policy elites, is not derived from their alterity, but rather their pervasive but modest – and non-economic – nature. Hence we intend this work to extend and at certain points question Gibson-Graham’s project of identifying and championing ‘diverse economies’. We propose that attending to FSP in CEE is of political and policy significance precisely because it has long persisted beyond or outside politics, state and market.

For these reasons, at the same time as researching FSP practices we have also explored national government and EU policies around sustainable food consumption. It was a clear and to us striking conclusion of our earliest desk research and interviews that the national environmental policy community (NGOs and civil servants) drew exclusively on models of ethical consumerism derived from western experiences. Government bodies had been working to meet the EU *acquis* (Jehlička and Tickle, 2004) and NGOs in post-socialist CEE countries were frequently in clientelist relationships with their western equivalents (in terms of project funding, structure, vocabulary and imagery) (Smith and Jehlička, 2007). These factors help to explain why ethical consumption in the form of the promotion of organic and fair trade products was so central to their work around sustainable food systems. However it only partly explains why, when ethical consumption represented a tiny percentage of the market, the same bodies not only ignored, but in some cases actively denied the value and significance of FSP.

In terms of the policy community, the explanation for this appeared to lie in a sense that such practices did not sit well with ideas about what modernity could and should mean for societies that had just passed through four decades of state socialism. As Diana Mincyte has argued, concepts such as ethical consumption and sustainable development ‘need to be understood as an outcome of a particular development trajectory deeply embedded in

the social, political and economic contexts of western European and North American histories, not a value neutral project or a universal good' (Mincyte, 2011, 112). Looking at post-socialist Lithuanian semi-subsistence farming, she showed how the operation of globalised sustainability and ethical consumption networks in the world's peripheries tends to exclude and devalue alternative local forms of food production, consumption and distribution rather than championing them. The implementation of EU agri-environmental policies had similarly detrimental, and from the sustainability point of view, contradictory, effects on biodiversity-oriented farmers and smallholders in Latvia (Aistara, 2009).

This situation is further entrenched by research that has failed to recognise the extent of food self-provisioning practices across all social classes in the region. A widely held assumption amongst West European and North American policy analysts and academics is that FSP in CEE has been practised as a coping strategy amongst low-income groups. One of the clearest expressions of this argument is Alber and Kohler's, 2008 paper on informal food production across Europe. It contrasted the affluent hobby growers of Western Europe with people in post-socialist CEE driven to self-provisioning by economic exclusion. However some of our early findings appeared to directly contradict this conclusion, and we undertook a second round of qualitative and quantitative research which, among other things, sought to investigate motivations for FSP more fully. We found that

far from being a coping strategy of the poor, food self-provisioning in the post-socialist context can be a multifaceted activity for which its practitioners (who are quite evenly spread across income groups with the poor slightly underrepresented) have a diversity of reasons for participating in this practice, with hobby/recreation being the most important one.

[Jehlička, Kostelecký and Smith (2012), 221]

A separate paper has extended our exploration of these motives (Smith and Jehlička, 2013). Our work does not seek to dismiss economic motivations for FSP amongst the poorest, which clearly play a part to varying degree across time and across the region. But rather we have sought to explore the wider range of motivations, and in particular to investigate its sustained cross-class appeal. It is worth noting that particularly in the Polish case the economy has been one of the most buoyant in the European Union, with some of the highest growth rates despite the wider economic recession since 2008, yet still we have found sustained practice of FSP across all social groups.

Some of the most widely applied terms used to discuss these practices in Western Europe and North America, drawing for example on temporal signals of quality and sustainability in food ('slow' and 'fast'), or presenting them as 'alternative food networks', fail to explain the evidence we had found. This has led us to coin the term 'quiet sustainability'. The concept summarises widespread practices that result in beneficial environmental or social outcomes and that do not relate directly or indirectly to market transactions, but are not understood by their practitioners as being driven by explicit environmental or sustainability goals. Quiet sustainability is found in everyday practices rather than generated by policies or communications campaigns. This case poses provocative questions regarding decision makers' focus on, for example, ethical consumption and behaviour change, and their neglect of other dimensions of social life and change in the development of environmental policies. We do acknowledge the hazards identified by Samers (2005) of romanticising FSP practices, and informal economies in general. Samers draws attention to the importance of investigating and recognising the significance of such factors as unwaged labour investments, the burden of uncertainty of provision and fast changing gender/labour relations.

However our argument that quiet sustainability 'valorises sustainable practices that... may derive from diverse development paths' (Smith and Jehlička, 2013, 148) seems particularly relevant to any consideration of non-western ethical consumption. The very fact that 'other ways of living' are intertwined with, rather than imagined, promised, or established in modest experimental forms in the face of the global capitalist economy, is precisely what interests us:

The quiet sustainability of Europe's food self-provisioners, and the extensive networks of sharing that spur from their work is not a programme to be implemented, a future ambition for society or an exceptional contrast to the norm. Rather it is a quiet but purposeful parallel to the market economy of food. It inhabits family and friendship, work and neighbourhood networks, rather than seeking to challenge or mimic economic institutions. This may go some way towards explaining why FSP in CEE has received so little attention from those scholars and activists who seek examples of sustainable food politics and ethics that do not 'contribute to the production of neoliberal subjectivities' (Guthman, 2008, 1181).

[Smith and Jehlička (2013), 155]

Our conclusion is that these practices matter not because they represent an alternative economic system, but rather a significant (in terms of both environmental and social sustainability) parallel system to whatever the political-economic frame of the time is – be it state socialism or market capitalism. As such it offers an interesting comment not just on discourses of sustainability, but also of resilience. Furthermore

(t)he value, power and reach of these practices seem to lie precisely in the fact that they allow parallel and overlapping narratives about families, networks, competencies and relations with nature. They are not a replacement or an alternative to the market economy of food, or a response to its environmental or social failings, but rather a vivid demonstration that that is only part of life.

[Smith and Jehlička (2013), 155]

### Analysis of data on class and self-provisioning

Our previous published work on FSP in CEE did not explore class, although relevant data were collected. To develop our argument about the value of attending to the concept of quiet sustainability in the context of the class-sustainability-consumption conundrum it is essential that we establish that middle class practices of FSP have been stable over time, and are comparable to FSP amongst the working class. Hence in this section we present an analysis of quantitative survey data<sup>2</sup> with the goal of exploring whether the middle and working classes in Czechia and Poland vary in terms of their food self-provisioning practices. We have shown in previous publications based on these surveys that levels of FSP are statistically independent of both education and income<sup>3</sup> of

<sup>2</sup> Surveys in both the Czech Republic and Poland were conducted as face-to-face interviews with representative samples of adult populations. In both cases, respondents were selected by quota sampling. Gender, age, education, size of settlement and region were used as pre-specified characteristics that have the same distribution in the sample as in the populations being studied.

<sup>3</sup> Analysis of the Polish data revealed that 57% of the poorest households (defined as households with a monthly income per capita lower than 501 Polish zloty) produced their own food, which was not statistically significantly different from the national average of 55%. In the Czech case, the analysis of the data even suggested that the percentage of FSP among the poorest households (defined as the lowest quartile households in accordance to their per capita income) was even slightly lower (41%) than the corresponding number for the whole population (42%). Again, this difference is not statistically significant.

respondents (Jehlička and Smith, 2011). We have not, however, previously explored social class in depth, and are not aware of any previous work that addresses these questions.

Our definition of middle class is based on so called EGP (Erikson, Goldthorpe, Portocarero) class scheme (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1993), in its modified version adjusted for use in the Czech (post-socialist) context (Machonin and Tuček, 1994; Tuček, 1996; Šafr, 2008). Generally, the EGP classes are based on the work situation (authority and autonomy at work) as well as market situation (including income, degree of income security, career prospects and source of income) of the respondents. Additional criteria used are distinctions between owners, employers and employees; between firms with more or less than 10 employees; and between manual and non-manual occupations' (Leiflufsrud et al., 2002, 7). It is important to note that professional farmers have been filtered off the data file on account of the fact that our research is focused on food self-provisioning rather than those who are producing food for a living.

It should also be noted that the EGP class scheme classifies only those who are economically active. Amongst our respondents, however, many are not economically active. Economically non-active respondents are comprised of retired people, students, unemployed, housekeepers, mothers on maternity leave and the permanently ill or disabled. While theoretically we could construct EGP class data for the retired based on their position before they retired, in practice we do not hold information about their pre-retirement status. Hence, given that our primary goal is to analyse potential relations between class and food self-provisioning, we have also filtered off pensioners from all analyses. The other economically non-active have to be filtered off the data file before analyses as their class position is based upon the class position of their parents/spouses and we do not hold information on these factors.

The EGP approach defines seven classes, applied to our CEE context, are labeled as:

- (1) Higher professionals (lawyers, doctors, scientists, bankers, managers).
- (2) Lower professionals (social workers, accountants, technicians).
- (3) Self-employed with and without employees.
- (4) Clerks.
- (5) Routine non-manual workers in services (fast food workers, sales persons, cashiers, security guards).
- (6) Skilled workers.
- (7) Non-skilled and agricultural workers.

Table 2 shows numbers of the Polish and Czech respondents falling into these seven categories as well as the numbers of retired and other economically non-active respondents in the sample.

To concentrate on our key question, that is, whether entry into the middle class leads to significant reduction in sustainable practices like FSP, we reduced all seven EGP classes into just two, labeled 'middle class' and 'working class'. It is worth noting that we did not distinguish a separate elite or 'upper class'. The new rich are known to be unwilling to participate in sociological surveys, and the number of those 'hidden wealthy' among respondents are in any case marginal. Our category 'middle class' does not distinguish between 'old middle class' (entrepreneurs/bourgeoisie) and 'new middle class' (professionals), but it would be theoretically possible. A methodological limitation is perhaps worth acknowledging: members of the 'old middle class' are not very numerous in our data file. We consider routine non-manual workers in services as part of the working class of the post-industrial era. We therefore included them in our working class category. Finally, the respective categories are defined as follows:

**Table 2**

Distribution of the seven EGP classes and the retired in the Czech (2010) and Polish (2011) samples.

EGP7 classes and retired	Czechia		Poland	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Higher professionals, managers	73	7.2	126	11.2
Lower professionals	134	13.2	48	4.2
Self-employed with and without employees	76	7.5	48	4.3
Clerks	55	5.4	69	6.1
Routine non-manual workers (in services)	94	9.2	70	6.2
Skilled workers	99	9.7	142	12.6
Non-skilled and agricultural workers	62	6.1	56	4.9
Retired	223	21.9	248	22.0
Other economically non-active	202	19.8	322	28.5
Total	1018	100.0	1129	100.0

Middle class = (1) Higher professionals, managers; (2) Lower professionals; (3) Self-employed with and without employees and (4) Clerks

Working class = (5) Routine non-manual workers in services; (6) Skilled workers and (7) Non-skilled and agricultural workers.

Table 3 shows these aggregations of the Polish and Czech middle and working classes in our samples (the rest of the respondents belong to retired or other economically non-active categories).

To analyse middle class behaviour regarding FSP, we looked at differences between the middle and working classes. We first used simple cross tabulation and then, after checking that basic assumptions are met (e.g. that cells of crosstabs do not have fewer than 5 counts), we applied statistical tests of association based on chi-square statistics (like contingency coefficients) to test whether differences between middle and working classes are statistically significant.

Before we pay attention to more detailed findings of our analyses some general conclusions can be offered. The results of the analyses of Czech and Polish data concerning class behaviour in relation to FSP are in general similar. This is very important, as it makes our findings generally more robust as well as applicable to more than just one specific national context. What is perhaps even more important for our main argument – that middle classes can continue being involved in FSP and continue 'quiet sustainability' practices despite becoming wealthier – is the empirical finding that there are just a few cases where the answers of middle and working class respondents differ statistically significantly. In most cases the differences between the middle and working classes are small or negligible. The relations between class, sustainability and food self-provisioning explored via the quantitative surveys is further discussed below.

**Table 3**

Aggregate middle and working class categories in the Czech (2010) and Polish (2011) samples.

Aggregate class categories (and retired and economically non-active)	Czechia		Poland	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Middle class	338	33.2	291	25.8
Working class	255	25.0	268	23.7
Retired	223	21.9	248	22.0
Other economically non-active	202	19.8	322	28.5
Total	1018	100.0	1129	100.0

Note: The data in the table show that the structure of both national samples is roughly comparable.

**Table 4**

Use of garden, field or orchard for growing food by class categories (Czechia 2010, Poland 2011).

Class category/use of land for growing	Czechia				Poland			
	Yes (within the class category)		No (within the class category)		Yes (within the class category)		No (within the class category)	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Middle class	145	43.0	192	57.0	160	55.0	131	45.0
Working class	95	37.4	159	62.6	136	50.7	132	49.3

First, we have simply compared the middle and working classes in both countries in terms of the share of those who are food self-provisioners. Table 4 shows that both middle and working classes in Poland and the Czech Republic grow food and that the percentage of the middle class growing food some 20 years after the fall of the communist regime is slightly greater than the percentage of the working class doing so.

The data show that both middle classes and working classes in Poland and Czechia grow food. At first sight, the higher prevalence of FSP amongst the middle class seems to be related to land ownership. It would be expected that middle classes more frequently own land on which they can produce their own food than the working class. The empirical data, however, show that the relationships between classes and access to land are complex. Generally, people in CEE produce their own food in yards surrounding their own houses, in gardens next to their second/vacation homes or in allotment gardens in cities. While only owners of houses have their own yards,<sup>4</sup> ownership of second homes as well as access to urban allotments is usual among people who live in apartments in cities. Vágner et al. (2011) estimated the number of second homes in the Czech Republic to be almost 400,000, which means that about 11% of households own them. Similarly, Kowalczyk (1994) estimated the percentage of Polish households owning a second home to be 6%. In both cases, owners of second homes are concentrated in the large cities where single family homes are relatively rare (e.g. only 11% of households lived in a single family house in Prague according to the 2011 census). Moreover, in the specific context of post-socialist CEE the relationship between housing tenure and income is not as one would expect in the western context. Lux et al. (2013) concluded their recent study saying:

(i) f housing tenure, as a traditional measure of housing-based stratification, were to be used in our analysis we would not find any strong link to social inequality in the Czech Republic (p. 285).

In other words, there are many poor households among homeowners. Many poorer households, namely rural ones, live in houses with lots where they can grow their own food. The situation is different in large cities, where the proportion of houses with lots is relatively small. Consequently, the urban poor may have more problems with accessing appropriate land on which they could grow their own food.

Table 5 illustrates the ways in which self-provisioned food is produced. It shows the percentage of food self-producers in both countries (separately for middle and working class ones) who either use no fertilizers, only organic ones, only industrial ones or combine both organic and industrial fertilizers.

Generally speaking, the difference between middle and working class food self-provisioners in terms of fertiliser and pesticide use

is again small (and statistically insignificant). Tables 5 and 6 show small percentages for both countries and both classes regarding exclusive use of industrial fertilizers and pesticides. This suggests that the middle classes, despite their greater disposable income, do not resort to the use of industrially made fertilisers in significantly greater numbers than the working classes (although we note that the percentage of the Polish middle class using only industrially produced pesticides is significantly higher than the percentage of the Czech middle class doing so – see Table 6). Their food-related practices can hence be considered sustainable in the terms understood by the food policy literature (e.g. Carolan, 2011), and greater income levels do not significantly alter this. Furthermore, 21% of the Czech and 24% of the Polish middle class food growers effectively produce non-certified organic food (in that they use neither industrially made pesticides nor fertilisers). For the working classes, the figures are 16% (CZ) and 26% (PL).

There is also no difference between middle and working class respondents as far as their willingness to share at least some of the food they self-produced with other people (and not only with their immediate family but also with friends, colleagues and neighbours). While overall Polish food growers (46%) appear to practice less sharing than Czechs (60%), there is virtually no difference in either country in the behaviour of the two classes.

[T]here is a feeling that [this produce] should not go to waste. And in some cases there is really a lot of it. And in fact, there is a sort of exchange... there is a feeling of pride in what you've grown and hence the desire to share it with someone. And as I watch my friends in Warsaw, we exchange pickled mushrooms and similar things... or (alcoholic) cordials that have become extremely popular with my colleagues [...] it's turned out that at least half of my colleagues – and we are not very old yet, we are about 31–32 – and many of them make cordials.

[Man, 32, strategy consultant living in Warsaw and growing food in a second home in the countryside, interview 12 April 2011, Warsaw, Poland]

Well, I have a neighbour and when she lacks something, we exchange it. For example, my colleague does not grow blackcurrants and I have more than I can use, so she takes them from me. Or raspberries. And in turn I get from her tomatoes.

[Woman, 54, kindergarten head teacher in a rural village, interview 27 March 2011, Pietrzwałd, Poland]

Our previous work (Smith and Jehlička, 2007; Jehlička and Smith, 2011; Jehlička, Kostelecký and Smith, 2012; Smith and Jehlička, 2013) has shown that multiple motives for FSP exist in both Czechia and Poland. FSP as a hobby or as a way to access fresh food was the most frequently mentioned motive, while potential financial savings through FSP was mentioned less often. Here we look in detail at whether middle and working class respondents differ in this respect (see Table 7).

The data in Table 7 again clearly illustrate that in both countries and among studied classes reasons for growing food other than economic necessity are more frequent than financial savings. In summary: it is not possible to identify significant behaviour

<sup>4</sup> According to the 2011 census, the share of homeowners was 56% in the Czech Republic in 2011, in accordance with the census (in which 36% lived in single family houses or terraced houses, and 20% in apartments they owned). In Poland, 63% of dwellings were owner-occupied in 2007 (Dol and Haffner, 2010). The share of single-family housing was estimated in 1996 at 49% of the total housing stock (UNECE, 1998).

**Table 5**  
Types of soil fertilisation used by class (Czechia 2010, Poland 2011).

Class/fertilisers	Czechia								Poland							
	No fertilisers		Only organic		Organic and industrial		Only industrial		No fertilisers		Only organic		Organic and industrial		Only industrial	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Middle class	27	18.6	73	50.3	42	29.0	3	2.1	37	23.4	72	45.6	38	24.1	11	7.0
Working class	10	10.5	58	61.1	24	25.3	3	3.2	39	28.9	71	52.6	20	14.8	5	3.7

**Table 6**  
Types of pesticides used by class (Czechia 2010, Poland 2011).

Class/pesticides	Czechia								Poland							
	No pesticides		Only organic		Organic and industrial		Only industrial		No pesticides		Only organic		Organic and industrial		Only industrial	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Middle class	34	23.6	42	29.2	59	41.0	9	6.3	46	28.9	35	22.0	49	30.8	29	18.2
Working class	18	18.9	28	29.5	41	43.2	8	8.4	38	28.1	35	25.9	48	35.6	14	10.4

**Table 7**  
Reasons for growing food by class categories (Czechia 2010, Poland 2011) – number and percentage of respondents who mentioned selected motives.<sup>a</sup>

Class category/reasons for growing food	Czechia						Poland					
	Hobby		Fresh food		Financial savings		Hobby		Fresh food		Financial savings	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Middle class	93	27.5	106	31.4	51	15.1	131	45.0	160	55.0	95	32.6
Working class	61	23.9	67	26.3	48	18.8	110	41.0	125	46.8	105	39.2

Note: The differences for the Polish data (italicised) are statistically significant.

<sup>a</sup> To identify their reasons for FSP, the respondents were offered nine potential reasons and they were asked to choose the three that were most important to them and rank them, from the most important to the third most important. The table displays the number (and the percentage) of respondents who mentioned hobby, fresh food or financial savings among the three most important motives from the nine motives offered.

differences between the middle and working classes in terms of FSP. Our research demonstrates that a significant proportion of the middle classes of Poland and the Czech Republic have behaved in an 'unexpected' way. Despite the increasing wealth and diversification of leisure opportunities for the rapidly expanded middle class of CEE many of them continue to grow and share a sizeable proportion of their own food, and tend to do so in an environmentally beneficial manner.

### Quiet sustainability

Our development of the notion of quiet sustainability has been informed by work in a range of disciplines and this section draws on four texts that we have found particularly helpful, and concludes with a discussion of why we are convinced that the concept is relevant to sectors and contexts beyond food in post-socialist CEE. Our argument in this section is organised around certain insights: that consumption studies tend towards a false emphasis on market based consumption (Fine and Leopold, 1993); that valuable commodity chain research has nevertheless been too exclusively concerned with exploring the shopping baskets of the western consumer (Gregson et al., 2010); that relationships may be a more revealing way of understanding people's life with things than identity (Miller, 2010), and that ethical consumption is not a privatised substitution for political action but rather another way of practising citizenship (Barnett et al., 2010).

Fine and Leopold's call for a 'systems of provision' approach to the study of consumption appeared soon after the collapse of state socialism in CEE. They identified the limits of existing consumer

studies, and their proposal was for more interdisciplinary and supple accounts of the nature of consumption. They did not attend to food self-provisioning, and their study focused on consumer goods. Nevertheless, we concur strongly with their statement that '(t)he failure to adopt a more open-ended and inclusive alternative often leads to a false ideological emphasis on one form of consumption or another' (1993, 304). And our own concern with 'false emphasis' goes one step further in asking for closer attention to non-market based actions that hold positive environmental benefits (see Tables 5–7), but that are not practised for that purpose.

The way we understand these practices starts from the fact that they are so clearly separated from market participation, yet do not have an explicit ideological opposition to them. They are 'something else'. In trying to make sense of this we have been helped by Gregson et al's study of end-of-life shops in Bangladesh (2010). They looked at the transformation of their components into furniture, seeking to go far beyond the study of the object and rather investigate them as 'assemblages, ontological conjunctures of stuff, materials, brought together and held together'. This represented an attempt to go down as well as up the commodity chain, and do something very different to the work of 'geographers interested in commodity chains, whose attention remains primarily with the production of point of sale commodities consumed by western consumers' (Gregson et al., 2010, 853).

There are some important parallels here with the ambitions of our own work. Most importantly for us this approach encourages studies of the politics of consumption and sustainability to work inside and around circuits of production and consumption rather than being confined to accounts of linear chains. It is worth noting



some differences however. In the case of FSP in CEE it was precisely that the commodity chain was so short, often just a few physical paces, and outwardly simple, but in fact dependent on conjunctures not just of materials (seed; tools; soil and so on) but also of skill, relationships, exchanges, biographies, histories, tastes and identities, that made these things happen. In our study these elements have been 'brought together and held together' across a century of convulsive changes in politics, economics and culture in CEE. A further difference is that the status of the outputs of FSP as 'commodities' requires qualification, and it is in that process of understanding the nature of the investments and exchanges that we think we are discovering something important that speaks to long running discussions about the relations between development, consumption, class and (un)sustainability.

These emergent middle classes are demonstrating that the everyday lives of people who have achieved what, only a few years earlier, would have been considered unimaginably high levels of mobility, security and choice relative to their own and/or their parents generations' prior experience, continue to want to grow, eat and share their own food. As our discussion of class in post-socialist CEE showed, the postwar experience of state socialism means that the middle classes in this region are in an important sense newly-formed. But while many of their new life experiences of, for example, leisure, travel, work and shopping, are part and parcel of an identity that 'fits' with what social scientists and marketing analysts anticipated, the dogged commitment of a significant minority to FSP qualifies western assumptions about the course of development.

Miller has suggested that 'I can think of no better testing ground for theory than the heat and heart of people's lives in the extremes of what we abstractly call development, but which signifies a maelstrom of transformation, struggle and aspiration' (2010, 125). Their motivations are complex, but the extent of sharing suggests relationships are as important as their (changed) identity. Just as Miller found that '(p)eople tend to care rather more about the people they love than the definition of who exactly they are' (125) we have found that it is in the relationships around the nurturing and sharing of produce and skills as much as in the getting and consuming of food that the significance of these practices lies, both for the practitioners and the world beyond.

Barnett et al's study of ethical consumption sought to understand consumption of fair trade products as a form of political mobilisation and representation. Running against the current of claims that such practices served to privatise political concerns they reframed them as forms of civic involvement and 'citizenly participation'. Their research sought 'to counter the common view that the emergence of ethical consumption activities is a sign of the substitution of privatised acts of consumer choice for properly political forms of collective action' (Barnett et al., 2010, (1). We explicitly do not intend to identify FSP as a way of doing politics, in the way that, for example fair trade purchasing is understood by Barnett et al. However, the productive but non-economic 'space beyond' the market, the state and formal civil associations, resonates with what we have found. It supports our argument that attention should be given to virtuous and 'civil' behaviour that doesn't set out to be considered as such.

## Conclusion

This paper seeks to contribute to debates about class and sustainability, and aims to qualify, albeit not resolve, the class–sustainability–consumption conundrum. Specifically, it has set out to address an important question: 'need it be assumed that periods of rapid economic development and the related expansion of middle classes in emerging economies necessarily follow a Western

pattern of development, with attendant high levels of consumption?' Our research demonstrates that many in the middle classes continue to practice FSP and continue 'quiet sustainability' practices despite becoming wealthier. This finding is of significance far beyond CEE and beyond food sustainability research and policy.

The middle-class food self-provisioners of post-socialist CEE have been defying the expectations of government officials, marketers and researchers. Roughly forty per cent of them are producing roughly forty percent of some types of their own food (e.g. potatoes; soft fruit; eggs). These consumption practices are happening 'in the wrong time and the wrong place'. In terms of assumptions about economic development, class formation, and anticipated behaviours, they are being practised by the 'wrong people' (that is, by all social classes, by urban and rural, and across all age groups). From the point of view of the architects of post-socialist transition the fact that the middle classes continue to grow their own food almost has the status of deviance.

Far from being a 'survival strategy of the poor' FSP helps practitioners to nourish and represent their own identity, and to tend to their family and friendship relationships and networks. The environmental benefits are rarely considered explicitly by the practitioners of FSP, though they are tangible. Scaled across all developed societies, and supported by some appropriate parallel policies (e.g. surrounding land use and transport planning, access to and rights over land for growing and the support for access to skills and tools) Poland and the Czech Republic show how FSP can make a significant contribution to food security, public health and social cohesion. These practices generally result in reduced resource consumption and pollution. While they are linked to frugality and thrift (Crang and Hughes, 2014), they are not necessarily related to virtues of necessity but rather of abundance, enjoyment and exuberance – or, in short, of the 'good life'. The food self-provisioners of post-socialist CEE have sustained a linked set of values, practices and purposes that carry environmental and social benefits. These continue outside the market, beyond the state, and with almost no reference to the formal institutions of civil society. This quiet sustainability is equitable, impactful and carries multiple benefits, while requiring no state or market interventions.

The case demands that the research and policy communities take more notice of these quietly significant aspects of everyday life, and invites consideration of what might be achieved by paying more attention to the everyday practice of quiet sustainability. This requires sensitive attention to people's experience of pleasure, sharing, challenge and the demonstration of skill in a range of fields. This opens up possibilities for nurturing sustainability in new ways in some key areas of environmental impact such as how we get access to what we need and want (transport), how we dress (consumption) and how we make our homes comfortable (energy). It also helps support a sense that sustainability is not so much a future state to be achieved as a strand of lived experience that already exists in the past and present.

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