Guidelines for conceptualizing climate boundaries

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CiDAPE

Climate, Inequality & Democratic Action:
The Force of Political Emotions

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Executive Summary

The report outlines the theoretical foundations of the concept of "climate boundaries", based on significant contributions from sociological theory and research. The concept emphasizes understanding the social dimensions of climate change through everyday practices and socially grounded notions of "us" and "them". It centers on the idea that people's actions and reactions to climate change are not just influenced by physical and environmental factors, but are deeply embedded in social structures and cultural narratives.

The report proposes using symbolic boundaries, a concept from sociology that explores how social groups create distinctions that define and maintain group identities, to understand and analyze the public's engagement with climate issues. This approach can look beyond the assumptions that are typically made in the literature on attitude polarization in the climate crisis. It allows to examine the emotional and moral dimensions of how people perceive climate change and its associated challenges, which are crucial for CIDAPE's overarching task of understanding the complex dynamics of social responses to environmental crises. The report outlines key theoretical strands that allow us to delineate how people's perceptions of and responses to climate change are shaped by their social identities, interactions, and the broader sociopolitical and economic contexts they operate within. The report invites interdisciplinary engagement in this discussion.

1 What is the promise of the concept of "climate boundaries"?

The concept of climate boundaries leverages existing sociological theories and empirical findings to trace how people make sense of the climate crisis[1] in everyday life. It should not be confused with the concept of "planetary boundaries", a well-established idea in climate science. The latter refers to a set of key areas, such as global warming, biodiversity loss, and ocean acidification, and delineates the limits and tipping points within these areas, marking the boundaries "within which humanity can continue to develop and thrive for generations to come" (Rockström et al. 2009).[2]

"Planetary boundaries", in short, refers to the earth's habitability. Climate boundaries, in contrast, are concerned with describing and explaining the social world. This does not suggest that the natural and social realms can, or should, be strictly separated. Rather, it points to a fundamental epistemological approach: the key processes underpinning this concept are not governed by the laws of natural science. Instead, they are created, sustained, and altered by human agency, human needs, and the collective actions of groups and social institutions. In this sense, "boundaries" in the social world refer to practices of social demarcation between people. The places people inhabit, the objects they consume, the everyday practices they engage in, and the types of social associations they maintain, can be signified and potentially transformed into categories of social distance or proximity.

With the concept of climate boundaries, we want to highlight that people relate to the climate crisis through their everyday world. From a social science perspective, climate realities are not merely objective facts; they are actively interpreted and made sense of. Hence, there is a need to foreground meaning-making. While scientific epistemologies undoubtedly play a role in everyday contexts, in CIDAPE, we broaden the view and research how people understand and perceive these phenomena in their daily lives, and how they relate them to existing moral ideas, social expectations, shared political emotions, and articulations of social identity. The concept of climate boundaries is a significant contribution towards this understanding.

Take, for example, a tweet on the platform Twitter/X that was posted on March 19th, 2023:[3]

[1] Here, we use "climate crisis" as a shorthand, but we also consider processes such as environmental degradation or biodiversity loss.

[2] See also the Stockholm Resilience Center, https://www.stockholmresilience.org/

[3] Originally in German, translated by the authors.

"Our country will only be healthy again when a #craftsman with 40 years of professional experience is listened to more in public than a 17-year-old #Klimakleber [climate activists gluing themselves to the streets or revered objects] who has just returned from a vacation in Bali."

In this statement, the author expresses a decidedly moral criticism of climate activists: It presents a juxtaposition between those perceived as genuine contributors to society – such as individuals with decades of work dedication – and a young person who, it is implied, is not working but instead enjoying their leisure time. Additionally, the fact that this young person has flown thousands of miles is suggested to undermine their commitment as a climate activist. The tweet conveys a sense that something is fundamentally off-balance in society regarding who receives the attention they deserve: The author, feeling a sense of injustice, believes that climate activists are seen and heard more than others; they express an emotional assessment of the situation. The claim that there is a need to restore the "health" of society and the country, which reflects a broader political and order-specific idea, is conveyed through a social demarcation. Taken together, although brief, this statement entails powerful moral narratives and contestations of social worth in contemporary society in the context of everyday experience. It conveys a climate boundary.[4]

We derive climate boundaries from the sociological literature on "symbolic boundaries" (Lamont 1992, 2000, Lamont and Molnar 2002). Symbolic boundaries refer to the distinctions made by individuals and groups to categorize objects, people, practices, as well as time and space. In them, experiences and expectations are collectively categorized and understood, through meaningful processes of creating group categories by acts of "lumping" and "splitting" (Zerubavel 1996). They are not static but fluid, subject to change and negotiation, often intersecting with power dynamics to establish norms that marginalize or exclude others. While symbolic in nature, these boundaries have tangible consequences; they affect material conditions, opportunities, and life chances, across different social groups.[5]

Symbolic boundaries involve constructions of "us" and "them", defining who belongs to the "in-group" and who is excluded.[6] Researching them means to reconstruct the larger context in which relevant norms and values are embedded, such as the role of power, social structures, and cultural institutions that shape and reinforce demarcations. In this way, symbolic boundaries reflect not merely individual dispositions and orientations, but also nationally specific repertoires of meaning, and larger social forces and ideas of legitimate order in society. Additionally, symbolic boundary research aims to understand the content of the norms and values, exploring what moral orientations are about. It adopts an immanent, hermeneutic perspective of sociological understanding. Rooted in the assumption that people are reflexive and have a relationship with the values that they seek to realize, it argues that social science must engage with their practices of meaning-making.

Research on symbolic boundaries recognizes that people live in contexts of social and economic inequality and posits that people interpret these inequalities (Bottero 2019). In CIDAPE, we foreground how they do

[4] The tweet also addressed the long standing and well-established social inequalities of politicization and being heard in public. Working-class people participate less in public and political debates and their views carry much less weight and influence. Voices of teenagers are commonly not heard, but the issue being addressed by, for example, a 17-year-old climate activist may be widely recognized and legitimized by scientific consensus and the endorsement of mainstream politicians who acknowledge its significance.

[5] Lamont and Molnar (2002) differentiate between symbolic and social boundaries. Symbolic boundaries refer to the categorizations of objects, people, practices, time, and space. Social boundaries are the tangible manifestations of social differences, hence they express the allocation of opportunities and resources, as well as the resulting patterns of social associations.

[6] In this regard, its focus aligns with that of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 2004), which examines ingroup and outgroup distinctions and consistently finds that people favor their in-groups. Social Identity Theory examines the psychological process of identification, such as deriving self-esteem from group membership, the role of bias in this process, and how it shapes behavioral outcomes like discrimination. However, symbolic boundary research goes beyond this focus by emphasizing the social constructedness of these processes, challenging the arguably naturalistic assumption that specific social ideas or values are inherently "hard-wired" into cognitive structures. Symbolic boundary research takes into consideration the social and institutional context.

so by drawing on emotional ways of understanding. People make sense of disparities in affective ways, by mobilizing particular sentiments of social class. Examples include emotions such as shame, pride, envy, resentment, or benevolence (Sayer 2005: 139-165). These emotions are integral to the everyday pursuit of well-being and flourishing because they are closely tied up with social relationships. People depend on social relationships for their sense of worth, respect, and inclusion and they negotiate social relationships through emotions (Abend 2014, Luft 2020, Zelizer 2012). This is a crucial proposition for symbolic boundary research: It recognizes that individuals perceive economic and social disparities not just in economic terms, but as part of wider social objectives and commitments. It is therefore not narrowly "economistic", instead paying close attention to how inequalities are made visible in everyday life.

Why is there a need for researching symbolic boundaries in the context of the climate crisis? A primary reason comes from the fact that the climate crisis is not just an environmental issue but also an unfolding process of social inequality and resource redistribution. The responsibility for carbon emissions is dramatically uneven: The wealthiest fraction of the global population is responsible for a disproportionately large share of emissions (Chancel et al. 2023). There is now a broad literature that shows that the impact of natural disasters such as floods, heatwaves, biodiversity loss, and the increasing uninhabitability of land varies significantly, with strong inequalities in terms of exposure, as well as in the capacities of states for mitigation and adaptation (see Wallace-Wells 2019). These disparities give rise to social conflicts centered around questions of inequality and resource allocation: *who is exposed to what kind of risks; and who receives what kind of support, and why?*[7]

In the following, we will first briefly outline the sociological foundations of the concept of climate boundaries. Next, we will explore how contemporary research on culture and inequality can enhance our understanding of this notion. We briefly argue what the benefits of using this approach are over a related concept, the notion of polarization. Finally, moving towards a more robust conceptualization, we discuss the elements and consequences of symbolic boundaries in the context of the climate crisis, surveying the growing literature on inequality and the welfare state in this context.

2 Sociological backgrounds of the concept of symbolic boundaries

2.1 Durkheimian tradition

The concept of symbolic boundaries takes inspiration from a broad array of classical sources. One of them is certainly the work of Max Weber who theorized the problem of relations between various status groups (Weber and Tribe 2019), focusing, among other issues, on the role of honor and dignity in establishing intergroup differences. Among classical social scientists who focused on the problem of boundaries was Thorstein Veblen who developed a theory of the dynamics of class differences and lent his name to the idea of "Veblen goods" as peculiar economic entities that allow wealth and status symbolization, as well as the concept of "conspicuous consumption" (Veblen 2009 {1899}). Finally, Georg Simmel contributed to the early history of boundary research by exploring, for example, how fashion becomes a subject of class differentiation (Simmel 1957 {1904}).

In our approach to boundaries, we draw on the work of French sociologist Emile Durkheim. Writing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Durkheim (1995 {1917}) described "sacred" and "profane" as key categories through which people classify the world. This distinction, he maintained, is not only evident in the realm of religion but also across a variety of social practices, primarily serving to foster solidarity and maintain social order. Working in this tradition, British anthropologist Mary Douglas recognized the symbolic power of collective ideas and representations at play in these moments of classification. In her seminal work *Purity and Danger* (1966), she explores how different societies perceive certain people, behaviors or objects as "pure" or

[7] Furthermore, in CIDAPE, we propose that political trust and popular legitimacy, two essential mechanisms to enable strong, effective governance as required in policy frameworks like the European Green Deal, are rooted in social dynamics. Symbolic demarcations play a pivotal role in the social, pre-political base of society. Hence, consistent with our overarching objectives in this project, understanding these demarcations is crucial for addressing the underlying factors that influence policy support and effectiveness in tackling the climate crisis.

"polluted". She argues that these categorizations are not based on inherent qualities of the objects or people themselves but are constructed by the cultural and social contexts in which they exist. Ideas of purity and pollution are expressed via symbolic boundaries, allowing people to define who is part of "us" and "them".[8]

The Durkheimian approach focuses on social integration and considers practices such as boundary-drawing as elements of the broader problem of social belonging (Alexander 2006, 2007). In this perspective, morality plays a particularly important role: it is understood as the force that binds society together. Conversely, the approach argues, people deem as "immoral" the kinds of behaviors and attitudes that they regard as undermining the collective effort to foster the social bond. This methodology is particularly attuned to instances of disruption in conventions, injuries to social obligations, and violations of what is considered "normal": In these moments, the binding power of norms and social expectations becomes apparent.

Thus, in the way we approach and read Durkheimian's contribution, we aim to reconstruct the processes by which certain lifestyles are deemed legitimate and others are not: Lifestyles are evaluated by others based on their perceived ability to enhance or diminish social solidarity and integration. Crucially, this approach allows for the study of emotions. They might manifest as "collective emotions" (von Scheve and Ismer 2013, Collins 2014), as part of the integrative or disintegrative social forces that Durkheim was most interested in. Here, emotions are not merely psychological phenomena but forces that compel individuals, acting as a kind of visceral energy that guides their thoughts and actions.

2.2 Bourdieusian tradition

Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984) explores symbolic boundaries extensively in his work, in particular via his notion of cultural capital. Bourdieu revisits Max Weber's distinction between class and status. For Weber, class refers to how life-chances are shaped by market position, whereas status refers to how perceptions of honor or social prestige affect life-chances. According to Bourdieu, what Weber thought of as status, was more akin to the symbolic dimension of social class. Bourdieu argues that negotiations of status are often expressed and articulated in the cultural field. This relates to tastes and dispositions, such as what to purchase, what to wear, what kind of music to listen to, where to travel, and so on.

Bourdieu famously drew maps to visualize social distinctions, illustrating how patterns of lifestyle can reflect and reinforce them. These cultural practices, guided by the deeply ingrained dispositions of the habitus, also mirror socio-economic positions. In the social space, individuals wield various forms of capital: economic (income and wealth), cultural (educational qualifications, cultural knowledge and tastes), and social (networks and connections). These forms of capital, understood within the context of habitus and symbolic capital, interact within various fields to shape social power dynamics and stratification. Bourdieu sees the social world as structured by these underlying forces. He refers to the correspondence between the space of social positions and the realm of lifestyles as "homology". This means that both spaces or realms are structured in similar ways. Cultural capital is particularly relevant for symbolic boundary-drawing. Individuals from higher social classes often engage in cultural activities considered high status or elite.[9] In contrast, those from lower social classes prefer "popular" cultural activities. By drawing symbolic boundaries, individuals signal the respective cultural value of these practices.

This perspective can identify the strategies that people, often tacitly, use to naturalize inequalities, to accept them as "given" and unchangeable. They do this to preserve their own status, typically without questioning their own thinking and behavior and assume that their own lifestyle is the correct or the most widely acceptable one. Bourdieu primarily focuses on specific tastes and practices, starting from the individual level and observing competition between individuals. Here, legitimacy is not viewed from the perspective of society as a whole – as in Durkheim, where social groups are the unit of analysis – but rather from the standpoint of particular

[8] Durkheim and Mauss (2009 {1963}) also highlighted the important distinction between "gradual" and "categorical" classification.

[9] These tastes and practices are not limited to what might typically be considered "high-brow" activities, such as attending the opera; they can also include adopting the latest developments in tech or showing a refined appreciation for "exotic cuisine".

individuals that are members of dominant groups. For Bourdieu, legitimacy is part of a given social formation that has a legitimate culture, a set of practices, symbols which are widely regarded as "good". This reflects not simply the position of people who like it, but also the workings of cultural fields of production (in the broad sense), the role of cultural intermediaries (such as media institutions) in canonizing certain tastes. Still, from Bourdieu's perspective, the legitimacy of certain lifestyles is a function of their economic superiority and accumulated capital, which is something that individuals either possess or do not possess. Socially integrative norms such as solidarity are less significant in the formation of symbolic boundaries and the production of legitimacy than in the Durkheimian approach. Instead, here, legitimacy emerges as a triumphant outcome in a struggle for power.

2.3 The contributions of contemporary culture and inequality research

In CIDAPE, we bring these two classic approaches together and leverage their respective power. Bourdieu foregrounds inequality and class distinctions, while Durkheim is interested in broader phenomena that drive social integration and disintegration. Both approaches are necessary if we accept the proposition that solidarity is deeply intertwined with social and economic disparities and, in particular, with everyday experiences and perceptions of inequality. Bourdieu, while extensively discussing status distinctions, does not say much about morality and solidarity. Durkheim, on the other hand, did not develop an analysis of how material differences are symbolized across societies. He also did not explore how the "sacred" nature of individualism shapes specific moral economies in modern societies. Furthermore, both of these accounts do not offer a clear explanation of how social groups are formed through practices of symbolic boundary-drawing. Durkheim's analysis operates at the macro-level of society, while Bourdieu mostly studies individual-level dispositions.[10] We want to explore the intermediary space between these two domains and understand what connects them.

In the past decades, a thriving literature on symbolic boundaries has emerged. The field has certainly become much broader: Scholars have applied the concept in different areas such as social stratification, race, immigration, gender, religion, health, and politics (see Pachucki et al. 2007). Contemporary symbolic boundary scholarship – as part of broader sociological research on culture and inequality, as well as stratification, migration, and civil society research – offers crucial findings that provide a nuanced understanding of boundaries.

In the following, we summarize key insights and strengths from the recent body of scholarship, which provides an important step towards the conceptualization of climate boundaries. We argue that, unlike traditional public opinion research or social research which often assumes fixed attitudes, symbolic boundary research suggests that certain orientations may become salient in specific contexts. Symbolic boundaries are formed through processes where differences in attitudes may or may not gain prominence. Understanding what drives these processes of salience therefore emerges as a key research objective. However, the approach has not yet been systematically used in the context of the climate crisis. Moreover, there is, we argue, still a partial understanding of the important connections between emotions of inequality and symbolic boundaries.

2.3.1 Class and the social space: Who draws what kinds of boundaries?

Michele Lamont (1992, 2000), in her comparative study of the US and France as well as in her work on the US, has developed a systematic distinction of symbolic boundaries that is widely regarded as a benchmark in the field. In her framework, individuals can draw three types of symbolic boundaries – moral, socio-economic, and cultural – to reflect, reinforce, or challenge inequalities. Moral boundaries are grounded in ideas of character traits or behaviors that are deemed as "good"/"bad", "legitimate"/"illegitimate"; socio-economic

[10] Drawing on Lamont and others, Sachweh (2013: 9) points out a significant limitation in Bourdieu's method: It interprets symbolic boundaries as implications of observed patterns of behavior and attitudes, rather than empirically investigating these boundaries directly. In other words, it tends to read the "signs of demarcation" and interpret them, assuming that this objective semiotics aligns with the meanings people themselves attribute. A further critique of Bourdieu, towards the context of climate boundaries, is that while climate issues are indeed related to lifestyle, and people are likely to defend their lifestyle, this does not necessarily imply resistance to change in all aspects. This raises a question about the role of reason (including affective reasoning) in Bourdieu's approach: He seems to reject the possibility that people can reflexively address these issues, and change their views based on insights into, for example, climate issues.

boundaries are informed by class and economic status; and cultural boundaries are shaped by tastes and lifestyles. Individuals from lower socio-economic classes often establish moral boundaries, using moral criteria to assert their worth and distinguish themselves, thereby compensating for their lack of other forms of capital. Higher-class individuals, in contrast, frequently draw cultural boundaries to emphasize the superiority of their tastes, which allows them to reinforce their superior social status and cultural dominance.

Exploring the social space and the way it structures lifestyles, in a series of contributions, Norwegian researchers (Flemmen, Jarness and Rosenlund 2017, Jarness 2017, Jarness and Flemmen 2019) have applied Bourdieu's theories to understand nuanced forms of symbolic boundary-drawing. They draw attention to the fact that people have a highly ambiguous relationship to class as an identity category (Jarness and Flemmen 2019). Among other things, they argue for differentiating capital volume and capital composition when researching symbolic boundaries. For example, in his study of the Norwegian middle class, Jarness (2017) identifies two very different strategies depending on the relationship between these two elements. The economic middle class, including entrepreneurs and managers, defines itself through economic capital and views financial success as a reflection of moral worth, often emphasizing their "common" status to draw moral boundaries. In contrast, the educated academic middle class, including artists and intellectuals, values cultural capital, prioritizing activities like museum visits and refined tastes in music. Jarness shows that these two middle-class segments tend to mutually devalue each other, engaging in symbolic competition over what is deemed important in life. His analysis provides empirical support for how capital volume and composition can differently interact in symbolic boundary formation.

Additionally, the conventional sociological stratification of individuals into higher, middle, and "working class" categories may face further challenges due to their lack of real-world validity as they often fail to align with the general economic setting and the actual life circumstances they aim to represent. This limitation stems from overlooking economic or social hierarchies such as those found in the labor market, gender, race, etc., and from blending diverse population groups together without considering their significant impacts on people's lifestyles (Burawoy, 2001; Wright, 2005). This convergence is particularly noticeable in economic domains, where class distinctions based solely on income and occupation are becoming less distinct. An illustrative example of this trend can be observed in Central and Eastern European automotive factories, where some blue-collar workers earn higher salaries than numerous humanities university graduates. This evolving economic landscape challenges conventional sociological notions of class stratification, emphasizing the conceptualization of class rather as a social relationship (to capital) intertwined with (climate) boundaries.

2.3.2 How does class interact with other forms of inequality in symbolic boundaries?

Foundational contributions to the study of symbolic boundaries come from research on ethnicity, migration, and racism (Alba 2005, Wimmer 2013). Ethnic groups are not pre-given entities; rather, they are the outcome of social processes of boundary making (Wimmer 2013). Michele Lamont (2000) already demonstrates the intersection of race and class in her work on working-class constructions of dignity in the US. Jaworsky (2016) notes that, in migration contexts, it matters specifically how specific moral and legal criteria are intertwined to categorize migrants as deserving or undeserving.

Perhaps more than from any other field of inquiry, research on migration and ethnicity makes evident that boundaries are generated through social processes and are therefore subject to change. At the same time, "change" is not always something positive: Boundaries can also be reinforced when they become more salient. Zolberg and Woon (1999: 8-9, see also Jaworsky 2016) describe three key types of changes in societal boundaries in the context of immigration: First, *boundary crossing*, where an individual transitions from one side of a boundary to the other without altering the boundary itself. Second, *boundary blurring*, happening when an individual or a group occupies an increasingly vague social position in relation to the boundary. This change results from the acceptance of multiple memberships and the merging of previously distinct and mutually

exclusive collective identities. Third, *boundary shifting*, which is a more profound redefinition of group identity. Here, the demarcation between group members and non-members is realigned to either include or exclude people.[11]

2.3.3 How does national, local, civic, and welfare context matter?

Various contextual sources may shape how and why symbolic boundaries are drawn: national identity and history, regional or local identities and histories, religion, or traditions of associationalism. Jeffrey Alexander (2007: 25) notes that "the imposition of inequality, and struggles over justice, inclusion, and distribution, are culturally mediated". Interpretations of inequalities, which manifest as demarcations in the social space, are based on larger meanings that are created and upheld in specific contexts of public and civic life. Following Alexander, who draws on Durkheim, shared values guide boundary-drawing because community members align with guiding values, which define what it means to belong to a specific community (Alexander 2006, 2007). Nadya Jaworksy and Jan Krotky (2021) dissect how specific ideas circulating in the Czech public are used by proponents and opponents of migration in boundary-discourse in markedly different ways. In her comparative work on France and the US, Michele Lamont (1992) shows that the repertoires people use to draw boundaries are shaped by historically grown value orientations such as egalitarianism in France and individualism in the United States. Norwegian contributions such as by Vegard Jarness (2017) highlight egalitarianism's role in that country as a crucial backdrop for negotiating how symbolic boundaries may be talked about and legitimated. Part of this may be to actively blur boundaries in order to downplay status differences.

Institutional social policy contexts and legacies of welfare architectures decidedly shape people's views about inequality in society, and therefore, the kinds of boundary practices they tend to engage in. The literature on popular ideas of justice in welfare societies provides ample empirical evidence for associations between particular orientations and country-level factors (Mau 2004, Koos and Sachweh 2019, Svallfors 2006).

In WP4, we pursue a systematic overview over these national (regional) and institutional conditions in each of our four country cases: Norway, Slovakia, Spain, and Austria.

Overall, examining how shared value orientations shape symbolic boundaries is particularly important for understanding them as more than strategies of particularization: It seems crucial for exploring the potential for solidarity and group formation through moments of social classification that are not *merely* exclusive.

2.3.4 How do emotions play a role in the formation of symbolic boundaries?

Emotions are crucial and constitutive components of collective life and need to be, as Andrew Sayer notes, "taken seriously" (Sayer, 2005: 139). As James Jasper writes, they "do not merely accompany our deepest desires and satisfactions, they constitute them, permeating our ideas, identities, and interests" (1998: 399). Emotions are not merely superfluous affective components to cognition and rationality. They are integral to how people approach, comprehend, and interpret the world around them. They guide what people care about, help them establish connections between the society and the self, as well as between events that are happening in the world and themselves (Demertzis 2020, Durnová, 2019, Von Scheve and Ismer, 2013). As such, they are crucial for researching symbolic boundaries as well as inequality processes, although sociologists often neglect their importance in these areas.

As Hitlin and Harkness point out, "societal inequality is baked into our emotions, and an environment filled with moral emotional sanctioning maintains steep social hierarchy" (2018: 2) as well as "recreates and reinforces the same sanctioning… in a feedback cycle" (ibid.). Andrew Sayer highlights the significance of moral emotions in the study of class and inequality and proposes that people are evaluative beings that need for recognition and respect. Emotions provide the matter for these "highly sensitive evaluative judgments" (2005: 139) of others and circumstances that shape human hierarchies. Interactions between people of different

[11] A more in-depth reflection on gender and symbolic boundaries is still missing from this section. We will also integrate reflections on socio-spatial, that is, urban/rural boundaries.

social classes are marked by a range of emotions such as condescension, deference, shame, guilt, envy, arrogance, contempt, fear, mistrust, and may involve mutual misunderstanding and avoidance (Sayer, 2005: 1). He further notes – contrasting with Bourdieu – that the "most important struggle in the social field concerns those over commitments" (Sayer, 2005: 125), in particular, social obligations and duties that emerge from reciprocal relationships. If we accept this proposition, then the ways in which people negotiate their commitments to others – with social relationships as key elements of symbolic boundaries – are the most profound expressions of their sense of place and identity in society.

With regard to inequalities, emotions seem to act along two key vectors. The first is inter-group one, which seeks to police and maintain boundaries between classes. Here, emotions are directed at members categorized (Tajfel et al. 1979) as belonging to a different group. These emotions may be negative, such as condescension, which provokes feelings of shame and guilt and often triggers hateful ressentiment among subaltern classes. Such emotional dynamic has been recently identified as one of the driving affective forces behind recent populist upheavals in Europe and the USA (Salmela and von Scheve 2017, 2018; Salmela and Capelos 2021, Hochschild 2018). The second is intra-group, in which emotions that shape solidarity and mutual respect act as a glue holding the group together.

Interestingly, emotions possess the potential to disrupt existing boundaries of social inequality. One example could be the role of solidarity and empathy (in the sense of 'feeling in') that emerges when people recognize suffering and strain of others and imagine themselves being in their shoes. Another example of emotional break through existing boundaries comes from ritual context (Durkheim 1995 {1912}), in which symbolically and emotionally charged behavior disrupts and sometimes even reverses existing social roles. In such cases, emotions prove to be a crucial component of establishing bridges across the deep symbolic and cognitive trenches that tend to separate social groups from each other.

Finally, emotions need to be recognized for their motivating force. As Mary Holmes argues, for example, in the case of anger, it "is a central part of challenges to the symbolic and actual violence of domination" (Holmes 2004: 222). Emotions animate both anti-systemic and anti-democratic (Scheff, 1994) as well as politically productive and constructive movements and need to be appreciated in their own right as crucial elements of social and cultural process (Jasper 2011, van Ness and Summers-Effler, 2018). At the same time, as van Ness and Summers-Effler note, emotions are also central to "sustaining engagement" (Van Ness and Summers-Effler, 2018: 415) and motivating social actors to commit to a cause.

Still, we lack empirical insights into how emotions and symbolic boundaries interact. If emotions shape the definition of a situation, they will co-determine which boundaries become significant, and for whom. This appears to be culturally contingent. Conversely, if specific classes are predisposed to certain emotions (like shame and guilt in the working class), these emotions will influence their interactions with others and their perceptions of inequality. These are "structures of feeling" (Alexander 2006) or "feeling rules" (Hochschild 1979) with a significant constraining aspect to them. Do symbolic boundaries reflect these patterns of feeling or do they have the potential to modify them?

2.3.5 What do we know about symbolic boundary-drawing in the digital world?

Researching social demarcations in the digital world is an emerging field. Individuals often negotiate their membership in specific groups through digital practices – likely, they engage in drawing symbolic boundaries when doing so. We know that people engage in practices of evaluating others online and read various social cues in digital environments. As demonstrated by the example mentioned in the introduction to this paper, even brief statements posted online can convey a range of meanings.

In WP4, we are beginning to examine these issues in collaboration with WP3. We will systematically explore similarities and differences between "offline" and digital climate boundaries in a common Workshop that will be held in month 38 of the project.

We recognize that there is a wide range of different approaches to digital boundaries in the literature . For example, Galos (2023), using a survey experiment in the US, finds that there are cultural markers of social

class in social media platforms and that they are read by prospective employers in a way that disadvantages lower-class individuals. Bhatt et al. (2022) study symbolic boundaries in digital settings in a different way: They focus on the shared use of language and use it as an indicator of group membership. The authors examine a large corpus of emails to understand how groups within a company formed from two merging firms maintain or reinvent symbolic boundaries through specific linguistic styles.

A common challenge in such analyses is the lack of precise information about the individuals that we study, in particular the lack of demographic details and socio-economic background data. Addressing this issue will be a key concern for the shared work between WP4 and WP3.

2.3.6 Why use symbolic boundaries and not polarization as the leading concept?

In recent years, a growing body of research has focused on processes of constructions of "us" and "them" using the concept of polarization. For the purpose of understanding everyday social demarcations in the climate crisis, it is important to acknowledge that the concept of polarization inherently carries certain assumptions that may, in fact, limit its applicability. Polarization rests on three assumptions about particular trends in orientations about certain issues (see Mau, Lux, and Westheuser 2023): First, the concept presupposes the existence of two distinct poles or extreme representations of certain ideas. Second, it suggests that these poles are increasingly diverging over time. Third, it is based on the idea that both poles are focused on the same issue. This is, in fact, a rather narrow angle. It may not adequately capture the relevant dynamics in public opinion about climate change, climate policies, and the broader context of social inequalities. In contrast, the concept of symbolic boundaries does not presuppose a continuum between two opposing positions, nor does it necessarily imply that these positions are becoming increasingly antagonistic. Moreover, it considers more specific framings of a single issue from the perspective of particular groups in society.

A sub-branch of the polarization literature concerned with "affective polarization" (Gidron et al. 2020, Iyengar et al., 2012) seems more closely aligned with the symbolic boundary approach. This notion aims to capture the role of emotions and personal attributions in the increasing divide between political orientations. Specifically, it refers to "the extent to which partisans view each other as a disliked out-group" (Iyengar et al., 2012: 406) – measuring the concept involves asking people about their perceptions of someone who votes for a specific party, prompting them to evaluate both the individual and the party based on this association. There is, then, a moment of personal evaluation, similar to what interests us in symbolic boundaries. However, we argue that the latter goes even one level deeper, as it provides individuals with the opportunity to articulate, in their own words, who they like or dislike and why. Unlike methods that merely quantify sentiments of affection or revulsion, it explores the meanings behind these reasoning processes. Hence, we would argue, in comparison to the polarization literature, symbolic boundary research offers an additional level of depth for the analysis.

3 Social Demarcations in the Climate Crisis

Following this overview of existing approaches and questions, we can now turn to the main focus of this paper: How to conceptualize symbolic boundaries in the context of the climate crisis?

There is a clear urgency for developing such a perspective: Climate change is fundamentally a social and political process. The manner in which societies around the world adapt to realities such as global warming, ecological disasters, and increased migration flows raises questions of redistribution: *Who needs to adjust their lifestyles, and in what ways? What role should the state play in guiding and shaping this adjustment process, and on what grounds do people perceive the state's actions as legitimate?* These are political questions, yet the answers to them depend on social factors such as trust, solidarity, and everyday evaluations of collective action. This is where climate boundaries – ideas of "us" and "them" in the climate crisis – come into play.

3.1 Lifestyle, class background and ecological behavior: How the social space shapes peoples relationship to climate change

As we have seen earlier, socio-economic background and class position significantly shapes the type and salience of symbolic boundaries. What do we know about how class influences people's beliefs and practices in relation to climate?

Class structure shapes lifestyles, thereby affecting an individual's ecological footprint. This is most evident in terms of carbon emissions: the higher a person's income, the larger their carbon footprint. It used to be that this relationship held primarily in the industrial West, but this is no longer the case: The differences between countries are decreasing in this respect, there is a trend towards convergence on the global level (Chancel 2020). According to the 2022 World Inequality Report (Chancel et al. 2022, Chapter 6), in 2019, the wealthiest ten percent of the world's population were responsible for nearly half of all greenhouse gas emissions, whereas the poorest half was responsible for only twelve percent of all emissions.

We may distinguish three levels on which climate inequalities manifest as closely intertwined with socio-economic disparities (Chancel 2020): First, there is unequal access to environmental resources, like water or energy security. Second, there is a disparity in responsibility for pollution, with wealthier individuals having significantly higher carbon footprints. Third, there is an uneven exposure to environmental risks. Globally, frontline and vulnerable communities, particularly those in economically disadvantaged regions or parts of urban areas, are more susceptible to the adverse effects of climate change, including extreme heat, flooding, and other related hazards.[12]

With respect to varying lifestyles in the context of the climate crisis, there is likely an unconscious element at play. These are aspects that remain implicit, revealing themselves in the way individuals conduct their lives, what they take for granted, what they think they are entitled to consume, what types of travel they consider normal, and so on. These are arguably tacit forces – the naturalization of one's position as described by Bourdieu. Evidence for this can be found, for example, with regard to patterns of taste that may constitute a "green habitus".[13] Research on ethical or sustainable consumption offers some cues here. Within the growing body of literature that examines sustainable consumer choices from a market research perspective, some studies adopt a critical approach, emphasizing interaction contexts and social factors to explain this phenomenon (see Barbeta-Viñas 2022, Zollo 2021). A small strand of research on consumer culture in the US draws on Bourdieu to examine an emerging "eco-habitus" (Carfagna et al., 2014, Kennedy and Givens 2019).

It seems that green consumerism is particularly prevalent in the middle class. For instance in Germany, sociologist Sighard Neckel (2018) observes that the middle class is the strongest advocate for a sustainable lifestyle based on consumption, as expressed in practices such as riding bikes, car sharing, eating vegetarian

[12] Lukas Chancel distinguishes these three levels; but we may also add a fourth: inequality in resources to respond to climate change related disasters (such as flood, or extreme heat) or to deal with socio-economic effects of climate change (the effectivity to implement policies such as levying taxes).

[13] The notion of a "green habitus" lacks a clear definition in the literature. The related term "green distinction" has been applied by Dave Horton (2003) in an article on climate activists. Studying activists in 1990s Britain, Horton aimed to understand how they justify their cause, construct their activist identity, and also shape their lifestyle alongside it. He envisioned climate activists as a group that developed a specific group style and habitus as part of their mobilization strategy. Horton noted, "what unites activists is a willingness to perform environmental commitment in public. Activists seek to demonstrate their understandings to and impress their concerns upon others" (ibid. 66). Further, "environmental activists distinguish themselves by the 'austerity of elective restriction', the 'self-imposed constraint' of 'asceticism', which is one strategy through which the dominated fractions of the dominant class demonstrate their freedom from 'brutish necessity' on the one hand and profligate 'luxury' on the other, and assert the distinctive power of their cultural capital." (ibid. 67) This diagnosis originates from a time when climate activists were considered a rather peculiar group, as part of the new social movements of the 1960s and 70s, characterized by specific counter-cultures such as hippie culture. Arguably, climate concerns have since become much more mainstream. Therefore, the notion that they are confined to specific countercultures seems somewhat outdated today.

or vegan food, and transitioning to more ecological forms of heating. However, there are inherent contradictions in this lifestyle, because the middle class is also heavily invested in a very specific economic project. It practices, according to Neckel,

"*a way of life that aims at constant investment of both [cultural and economic] capital in maintaining and improving status, not only in the individual life course but also across generations. Securing prosperity and competitiveness, protecting the achieved quality of life, expanding and consolidating familial status positions are thus among the classic virtues in middle-class environments*" (ibid. 64).[14]

Neckel argues that there is a deeper reason for why the social imperative of adopting an ecological lifestyle resonates with the values of middle-class individuals: it aligns with their own social logic of investing in the future. To provide an extended quote from him here:

"Due to their susceptibility to status, the middle classes see the principles of sustainability as particularly representative of the value of a lifestyle that strongly corresponds with their central action problem: managing available resources so that they can continue to invest in their own status security. Eagerness to learn and reliable educational capital, health care and body awareness, long-term purchasing decisions and avoidance of demonstrative consumption, secure investments and careful handling of property therefore form the cornerstones of biographical programs and family household management. It is this social logic that gives rise to the particular ethical proximity of the middle classes to the ecological lifestyle, especially in times of low growth, when increases are not to be expected and existing resources must be managed reliably." (ibid. 65)

Members of the working class or the precariat do not typically exhibit this attitude. For them, a primary concern is often to make ends meet. Hence their consumption limits are typically not driven by such considerations, but rather by much more immediate financial constraints. In fact, research comparing popular attitudes in Italy and Germany shows that proponents of the "green lifestyle", often from the middle class, are also more judgmental towards those who do not adhere to what they see as an ethical imperative to live in this way. This critical attitude towards traditional lifestyles is notably stronger among them, whereas such judgmental views are less pronounced in the opposite direction (Gengnagel and Zimmermann 2022: 297).

3.2 Survey evidence on climate change attitudes: The role of class

There is a mounting literature in environmental studies, political sociology and political science that studies people's attitudes to climate change as well as climate policies. When we examine what attitudes are typically measured in large-scale surveys, it becomes evident that a significant body of the survey research focuses on understanding who believes in climate change and the human contribution to it, versus those who do not believe it is happening or is caused by human activities.

These kinds of findings are relevant for the comparison of our four country cases, Austria, Norway, Slovakia, and Spain.They bring to light some surprising patterns. For example, Poortinga et al. (2019) examine "climate change beliefs" in three dimensions – trend skepticism, attribution skepticism, and perceived impacts of climate change. They find that, surprisingly, Norwegians are much more likely than most other Europeans to express attribution skepticism, that is, the idea that climate change is caused not by humans, but by natural forces (ibid. 27).

Some of the emerging evidence touches on aspects that are highly relevant to conceptualizing climate boundaries. In terms of what explains these attitudes beyond national context, there is evidence that class, or socio-economic position, is one important factor among others. In the US, research indicates that individual factors such as age, gender, political ideology, and personality traits significantly influence the acceptance of the reality and human contribution to climate change. One study looking at New Zealand finds that younger people, women, the highly educated, those with liberal political views, and minority groups are more likely to acknowledge it (Milfont et al. 2015). However, education – which is sometimes used as a proxy for social class – seems to matter decidedly, and more so than other factors. For the US, Ballew et al. (2020) find that level of

[14] Originally in German, translated by the authors.

education profoundly shapes how people think about climate change, and it determines, in particular, whether people hold views that deny human-made climate change or not.

A cross-national overview of Europe (Poortinga et al. 2019) highlights that relevant beliefs about climate change are shaped by values, in particular openness to change versus conservatism, and altruistic versus more self-centered values, as well as by education. In certain European countries, age and gender are also clearly associated with specific climate beliefs, but this is not the case in all countries. In contrast, in another European comparison, Lübke (2022) documents that climate denialism can be traced back to socio-economic roots. People who are uncertain about their economic prospects are notably more inclined to deny the existence of human-caused climate change. Denial and skepticism about climate change tend to be more prevalent in rural, less affluent regions, and in countries with economies heavily reliant on fossil fuels. Lübke notes,

"Climate change disbelief was much more common among members of social classes who are strongly exposed to labour market risks (such as unskilled workers and small business owners), as well as among those who reported feeling insecure about their economic situation in the future. In contrast, people who reported currently experiencing economic hardship were not more or less likely to deny climate change. This finding confirms previous research arguing that it is not economic hardship or deprivation per se, but the fear of losing one's social status that makes people more prone to support populist ideas and parties" (ibid. 164).

In other words, the modes in which people interpret and affectively relate to economic conditions is a key element in how they make sense of climate issues, too. This is further evidence for why we need to study symbolic boundaries in this context.

3.3 The link to welfare attitudes and processes of social transformation

Yet, arguably, we should look beyond climate denialism as the main phenomena of interest. A recent Eurobarometer poll (2023) found that more than three out of four Europeans think that climate change is a very serious problem.[15] Research has increasingly recognized that, while there is often a majority that regards the climate crisis as a serious concern, there are significant disagreements over what measures should be taken to mitigate it and who should bear the costs of these actions. This realization necessitates a shift in the nature of survey questions, moving from general attitudes about the climate crisis to more specific questions about climate policies. This change in focus is still relatively new, with questions about climate policies only being included in large-scale surveys very recently (see, for example, Fairbrother 2022).

The focus on exploring popular views on what scholars call "eco-social policies" (Fritz and Koch 2019, Otto and Gugushvili 2020) – measures that aim to integrate environmental sustainability with social welfare objectives – is an important step into this direction. These policies recognize the interconnectedness of ecological and social issues. Conceptualizing and researching particular policies in this way is driven by the insight that, historically, in European societies, the welfare state has been the primary instrument for mitigating risks. In the climate crisis, the welfare state assumes a key role, as it defines the parameters of social risk (see Gengnagel and Zimmermann 2022). In the context of the climate crisis and the necessary green transformations, we encounter a range of new "green social risks" such as energy and mobility poverty, job loss and relocation, and health issues. Consequently, comprehending public perceptions of policies that mitigate these risks is crucial. This understanding is significant not only for policy and academic debates but also for how people conceptualize inequality, for how they think about who should receive what, and why. A large literature on deservingness beliefs in welfare societies reveals that citizens make distinct judgments about who they consider "legitimate" recipients of public provisions and who not (Van Oorschot et al. 2017). Vincent Gengnagel and Katharina Zimmermann argue that the definition of new social risks in the context of the climate crisis also shapes ideas of welfare deservingness in novel ways, and refer to this notion as "green deservingness" (Gengnagel and Zimmermann 2022). Contestations around such moral classifications will likely gain further traction and widespread political significance. The issue of "green deservingness" directly relates to the formation and the consequences of climate boundaries.

[15] https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2954

Research on eco-social policies in Europe indicates that individuals with higher economic status are more likely to endorse extensive climate policies, while those with fewer resources generally show less support for such measures (Fritz and Koch 2019; Otto and Gugushvili 2020). Yet importantly, it seems that people do not see these things as static or one-point-in-time issues, but instead, when commenting on these measures, evaluate the larger process of transitioning away from a carbon-intensive economy and lifestyle. Mau, Lux and Westheuser (2023) provide empirical insights from Germany, showing that while most people there are concerned about climate change and its impacts, there is a divergence of opinion on the appropriate measures to address it. This is where class distinctions emerge: When climate action is framed as a potential threat to social prosperity and (national) welfare, individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to become highly skeptical of climate initiatives, fearing that they will end up with the short end of the stick.

This observation, we argue, presents a compelling dynamic of meaning-making that symbolic boundary research must illuminate further. It suggests that we need to take into consideration but also move beyond the realm of objective socio-economic positions to explore individuals' subjective perceptions of their economic status in society. The key implication here is that socio-economic position molds people's economic fears and anxieties in consequential ways. Approaches that regard individuals as embedded in specific social milieus (see for example, Fritz and Eversberg 2023) which give rise to particular, socially shared mentalities, and which in turn shape how people view and understand processes of social change, seem highly promising and useful to this end.[16] The understanding that people perceive and interpret the climate crisis as an ongoing process, a sequence of decisions and consequences involving various actors – including political institutions, businesses, and the public – is key. People understand that these actors translate climate challenges and respond to them, thereby creating new realities on the ground.

This overview shows that the struggle over how the green transition is unfolding is significantly interpreted and understood in terms of class-based perspectives. It seems that the key question here is not only: *do you think that climate change is real or not?* but also: *how do you evaluate the process of how society is adjusting and adapting to climate change?* If the question is framed in this way, then it becomes clear why this is an issue where social position matters, where people's imagination about the social realities that they live in matters. Whatever their response to that kind of question will be, it will likely strongly inform the climate boundaries that people draw.

3.4 Imaginations of the future

These findings, finally, highlight a key aspect in conceptualizing climate boundaries: How people view the green transformation as a larger process of change is intricately linked to their visions of the future, their anticipation of what is to come. Sociologists have long argued that ideas about the future significantly influence narratives, networks, and actions within social movements, including climate activism (Mische 2014, Polletta et al. 2011).[17]

A recent report (Potential Energy 2023) indicates that, in the global comparison, the message of "protecting the planet for future generations" resonates more strongly with individuals than any other message about climate change, motivating them to take action and support mitigation measures. People's visions of the future, their temporal horizons and expectations play a crucial role in linking more abstract climate issues such as policies, statistics, and scientific insights, to their personal, everyday lives. Moreover, future narratives in climate debates are often associated with specific emotions (Ojala et al. 2021). These range from feelings of

[16] This aligns with findings in populism research, which reveals that it is not merely economic status, but the perception of economic uncertainty and the fear of losing one's social standing – the notion of "falling from grace" – that significantly drives the right-wing populist vote (Nolan and Weisstanner 2020).

[17] In CIDAPE, climate activism is the focus of WP5 and WP6.

agency and the ability to effect change to emotions of obstruction, passivity, or despair. These emotional responses, in turn, are likely influenced by individuals' class positions.[18]

Therefore, in exploring climate boundaries, we need to understand people's concrete perceptions of where the climate transformation is heading. This may include their personal future visions, those for their families or wider communities, but also references to local, regional, national, or other forms of community and belonging. People already have a narrative about the future – and they integrate, or refuse to integrate, the climate transformation narrative into those existing, anticipatory frameworks of meaning. This intersection, we hypothesize, is where climate boundaries will emerge.

4 Climate boundaries: a conceptual agenda

On the basis of what we have argued so far, we now present a rough outline of a conceptual agenda for this Work Package. For this Working Paper, we choose to do so in the form of questions.

In symbolic boundary drawing, people engage in processes of attributing positive or negative, legitimate or illegitimate, characteristics and features to others. They attribute larger social processes to people, evaluating them personally, their character traits, or their emotions.

People articulate their moral ideas and worldviews by narrating the traits of others, particularly through a sense of violations of moral orientations. Moral ideas are often communicated through definitions of what is considered "normal" behavior. This sense of normalcy, which is itself rooted in deep moral convictions, shapes how people perceive transgressions by others. The idea that someone is acting in "excessive" ways, harmful to themselves and others, or poisoning the larger public debate, can activate these moral scripts. This process of moving from the individual to the group, by generalizing the moral traits of individuals to the groups they belong to, is a way to classify and organize the social world. It is key to the ways in which we conceive of symbolic boundary making: in them, people evaluate not only individual persons but also reference elements of the larger social order. Here, a notion of a "just" social order is invoked, even if it is articulated only fragmentarily.

We understand climate boundaries as a particular version of symbolic boundaries – the kinds of boundaries that people people draw to make sense of everyday attitudes and practices in the climate crisis.

For the conceptualization of climate boundaries, the following questions are particularly relevant:

- What counts as "traditional" lifestyles, versus "progressive" orientations?
- How are such ideas linked to class positions, capital composition and capital volume?
- How are such ideas informed by different national and welfare contexts?
- What drives the salience of climate boundaries? When do they become more or less prominent?
- How are "small", everyday issues linked to broader notions of social transformation? Specifically, how do people imagine that the burden of the green transformation is being distributed in society? Who tells us what to do, and who has to change in what ways?19

[18] Mau, Lux and Westheuser (2023) find that narratives of active engagement with the climate crisis, characterized by a sense of agency and positivity, are predominant among middle-class respondents. In contrast, working-class individuals often perceive the climate challenge as another "top-down" issue, feeling they have little influence over it. This perception is evidently intertwined with feelings of political exclusion and a lack of participation.

[19] As we argued above, the way people perceive others within social inequality regimes is crucial for their sense of solidarity and personal politics. In the face of the climate crisis and the large-scale social transformation that it entails, they interpret society and its impact on others through specific lenses, attributing distinct levels of agency to individuals based on their perceived position within mechanisms of allocation. They see other people as either benefiting or losing from these changes, and they evaluate others – as well as themselves in relation to others – in this process. These everyday perceptions, deeply intertwined with social relationships, significantly influence political subjectivities.

- How does the prospectivity, future-relatedness of meaning-making in the climate crisis shape these ideas? Hopes and visions for the potential of a green transformation are a narrative that links their personal, everyday experience to larger societal issues, and to politics.

We understand emotions in this context as:

- As means to comprehend and prioritize certain issues over others
- As responses to behaviors perceived as “wrong” or “illegitimate” in the climate crisis context, like driving large cars, consuming meat, or participating in climate activism
- As originating from specific class positions and socio-economic experiences and either confirming this location in the social space of challenging it
- As intertwined with specific narratives about the future, cultural contingency means that these narratives can also change
- As the object of what is being evaluated in others in the context of a climate boundary
- As a way to engage with climate boundaries, interpreting their meaning in a particular way, responding to them, and thereby reducing or amplifying their divisive impact. In this sense, emotions can be a source of commonality and solidarity

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