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GOVERNING THE RESPONSIBLE SELF: EU CLIMATE POLICY AND THE PRODUCTION OF GREEN SUBJECTIVITIES**

Abstract. *The article presents critical analysis of the regime of eco-govern-mentality behind the EU's green transition project, focusing on how it is exercised via the forming of green subjectivities and their individual environmental responsibility. We trace the four dimensions of ethics outlined by Foucault (ethical substance, mode of subjection, practices of the self, telos). Contemporary green citizenship is shown to be characterised by continuous everyday green behaviour and self-monitoring that may be traced back to Christian renunciation practices. This mode of governance, grounded in pastoral power, is argued to serve a dual function: in the name of green modernisation, it consolidates a neoliberal regime of eco-governmentality by promoting a form of subjectivation whereby individuals govern themselves according to the capitalist imperatives. At the same time, this mode of subjectivation complements the EU's technocratic depoliticisation of the climate crisis. By partitioning responsibility within the domain of individual self-deciphered conduct, it systematically redirects focus away from the structural dimensions of ecological crises, preventing them from being articulated as matters of power, inequality, or systemic transformation.*
Keywords: *Climate policy, eco-governmentality, technologies of the self, pastoral power, European Green Deal, individualised responsibility.*

INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) views its green transition as a historic project that answers to the "want" expressed by "Europe's voters – and those too young to vote" to address the pressing threat of climate change (European Commission 2024). Through ambitious policy initiatives and public communications, the EU

frames the green transition as a shared "endeavour" in which "everyone can help build a greener Europe" (European Commission 2020). Here it is important to note that when referring to the climate crisis this discourse is not putting ecological or socio-economical aspects on centre stage and is instead "putting people at the core of the transition" (EU 2024). This framing subtly shifts the burden of responsibility for systemic ecological problems onto individuals: "Reducing emissions and adapting to a changed climate will require us all to change our habits" (European Commission 2020). The idea it promotes is that the climate crisis can largely be mitigated through responsible behaviour on the level of everyday life such as by recycling, choosing sustainable modes of transport, reducing personal energy consumption, and making environmentally conscious consumer decisions. In turn, this discourse also implicitly suggests that individuals and their behaviour are the biggest reason for the climate crisis. Such framing risks depoliticising environmental struggles by presenting the green transition as an inherently practical and positive project, devoid of conflict or structural critique. As Maniates (2001) pointed out in his influential article, focusing on individualisation in environmental politics serves to obscure broader systemic causes and responsibilities. Personal lifestyle adjustments are encouraged at the same time as political, economic and industrial dimensions of the crisis are sidelined: "When responsibility for environmental problems is individualized, there is little room to ponder institutions, the nature and exercise of political power, or ways of collectively changing the distribution of power and influence in society" (Maniates 2001, 33).

Building upon Maniates (2001) assisted by Foucault (2000), this article presents critical analysis of the nature and exercise of political power behind the EU's green transition project, focusing on how it is exercised through the formation of the individual. The main research question is genealogical in nature: how is the contemporary green subjectivity constituted along Foucault's four aspects of ethics and what role does the hermeneutics of the self and confessional practices play in the (micro and macro) configuration of the EU's eco-governmentality. The article thereby offers a unique and novel perspective, complementing existing critical work on green policy based principally on the theory of governmentality by uncovering deeper power mechanisms functioning on the axis of the subject.

GOVERNMENTALITY AND ITS ECOLOGICAL TURN

Using the Foucauldian concept of eco-governmentality, we first present broader critical analysis of the EU's green transition before engaging in detailed analysis of how it constitutes green citizens. The eco-governmentality concept offers a critical theoretical lens for understanding the ways in which power increasingly operates via environmental discourses and ecological rationalities (Darier 1999; Agrawal 2005; Malette 2009; Banjac and Pušnik 2025; Banjac 2025). Emerging from Michel Foucault's (2009) work on "governmentality", this

conceptual framework allows for a historical analysis of how governance extends beyond populations and their social organisation to encompass the management of entire environments. As Malette (2009) argues, environmental governance does not represent a rupture or a fundamentally new mode of power. Instead, it constitutes an extension and "intensification" of the existing logic of governmentality as adapted to the ecological challenges and imaginaries of the modern era. Eco-governmentality should thus be understood as a continuation of biopolitics whereby the management of life extends from bodies and populations to the biophysical systems that sustain them[1]. The forms of knowledge and techniques deployed in statistical models, risk assessments, and behavioural norms remain rooted in the apparatuses of modern liberal governance, although their objects of intervention have been broadened. Climate systems, biodiversity, and soil health itself have become sites of regulation and optimisation. In this way, power increasingly operates through the environment, constituting new forms of subjectivity and social organisation around ecological imperatives.

When describing this extension, Malette (2009) insists that contemporary eco-politics cannot be untangled from the global capitalist and postcolonial structures within which it has emerged and solidified. Environmental governance arises not as an emancipatory project, but as part of the ongoing reconfiguring of governmental rationalities that have historically managed populations, territories and resources. Early forms of environmental concern emerging in the 17th and 18th century, notably in colonial contexts, were embedded in the management of resource extraction, agricultural productivity, and the mitigation of ecological degradation that directly threatened imperial economic interests. In this sense, Malette (2009, 227) argues "the emergence of Western environmental preoccupations was intimately tied with economical expansion from the start". What today appears as the urgency of the planet's survival has deep genealogical roots in the techniques and rationalities of population control, territorial security, and market stabilisation. The environment is becoming a medium through which power circulates, disciplines and organises life on multiple levels.

Malette's (2009) analysis also shows that eco-governmentality operates in both macro and micro dimensions, which are interconnected and thus reinforce each other. On the macro level, ecological governance seeks to reorganise political and economic systems according to environmental logics. Climate risk management, sustainability metrics, and planetary boundary frameworks operate on the level of global governance, rearticulating the issues of security, economic growth, and geopolitical competition in ecological terms. Ecological crises are becoming a problem of global coordination, infrastructural investment, and risk calculation, producing new forms of management rationality aimed at securing resilience and optimising the stability of systems.

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[1] For an interesting and novel Foucauldian analysis of the extension of biopolitics to forests, see Toplak (2025).

On the micro level, eco-governmentality works at the same time to reshape individual subjectivities through appeals to responsibility, ethics, and self-governance. Individuals are here interpellated as green subjects or citizens encouraged to adopt sustainable behaviours, internalise ecological imperatives, and monitor their own consumption, waste production, and energy use. A crucial mechanism by which this micro-level governance operates is the production of norms, modes of behaviour, and truth-claims anchored in scientific rationalities. By taking the "political significance of statistics" into account, Malette (2009, 228) claims

> we can explore the ways in which the progressive mathematization of 'nature' has enabled various ecological rationalities and technologies to produce a wide range of 'norms' which refer to 'nature' not only to supplement the power of the 'sovereignty-law' apparatus, but also to shape a series of 'truth-claims' about ecological modes of conduct by which rational individuals are expected to govern themselves and others.

Understanding eco-governmentality along these lines provides a critical framework for analysing contemporary environmental discourses and policies[2]. It draws attention to how environmental rationalities function as both technologies of system management securing economic growth and geopolitical stability via ecological governance as well as what Foucault (Foucault 2009, 108) calls the "conduct of conduct" producing self-governing responsibilised green subjects. It also recognises the need for genealogical sensitivity regrading the historical continuities that link today's environmental imperatives to earlier regimes of colonial extraction, biopolitical control, and capitalist expansion[3].

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE EU'S GREEN TRANSITION PROJECT

Having established a theoretical framework rooted in eco-governmentality, in this section the mentioned approach is applied to critical analysis of the European Green Deal (European Commission 2019) and accompanying documents like the Climate Pact (European Commission 2020). In order to provide the theoretical and contextual background for the core analysis undertaken in the next section, the aim here is to briefly overview the way the Green Deal functions not simply as

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[2] In this section, we draw from Malette (2009) to provide what could be called a prvaleant account of eco-governmentality that a largant shared by key authors in this field such as (Darier 1999; Agrawal 2005; Malette 2009; Banjac and Pušnik 2025). Since eco-governmentality is not the primary topic of this artice, wel shall not engage in a more thorough theoretical dialog within this field. If the reader is interested in an alternative use of Foult in retiveon to green governance, Hristov (2024) provides an interesting perspective.

[3] Another important sensibility is that the regime of eco-governmentality, the practices of self-formation and expressions of behaviour are dependent on the field of strategic possibilities determined by class, gender and race. While this aspect is extremely important, it is beyond the scope of this article.

a policy package for ecological transition, but as a complex governmental project that stabilises economic growth, neutralises political contestation, and disperses responsibility onto individual subjects[4]. The analysis identifies two fundamental problematics: eco-governmentality and ecological modernisation, and shows how technocratic[5] framing and individual responsibilisation act as mechanisms to cover, justify and reinforce these deeper structures.

The Green Deal represents a paradigmatic form of governing through the environment. Ecological systems, carbon cycles, biodiversity levels and energy flows are rendered visible, calculable and actionable as objects of governmental management. Environmental governance is not an external supplement to economic governance; it is integral to securing the future viability of political and economic systems. The discourse of "in(stability)", "resilience" and "climate neutrality" marks a shift toward treating ecological life itself as a condition of the possibility for the reproduction of market societies. The Green Deal's formal aim of achieving climate neutrality by 2050, for instance, is not merely an environmental ambition but a strategic governance technique for ensuring long-term economic competitiveness, "access to resources" and "strategic security". Environmental phenomena are hence integrated into a logic of optimisation and risk management where future ecological conditions must be stabilised to guarantee economic and political continuity: "All EU actions and policies will have to contribute to the European Green Deal objectives. The challenges are complex and interlinked. The policy response must be bold and comprehensive and seek to maximise benefits for health, quality of life, resilience and competitiveness" (European Commission 2019, 3).

Parallel to the logic of environmental management, the Green Deal embodies a deep commitment to ecological modernisation. Rather than challenging the structural imperatives of economic growth, competitiveness, and accumulation, the Green Deal seeks to rearticulate them within a "green" framework. The transition to a carbon-neutral economy is framed as a "modernization" process that will create markets: "Together with the industrial strategy, a new circular economy action plan will help modernise the EU's economy and draw benefit from the opportunities of the circular economy domestically and globally" (European Commission 2019, 7).

The Green Deal is also presented as a technocratic project grounded in scientific consensus. Ecological transition is framed as inevitable, necessary and therefore universally desired. The articulation of policies is portrayed as a rational response to empirical evidence rather than as a field of competing visions, interests, or power relations. Climate neutrality, biodiversity protection,

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[4] For a more thorough Foucauldian account of this topic, see the recent book by Banjac and Pušnik (2025).

[5] An even more dangerous form of technocratic framing increasingly employed by American techno-oligarchs is analysed by Vrečko Ilc (2025), who shows how they are significant drivers of the contemporary poly-crisis.

and energy transformation[6] are framed as technical challenges requiring expert solutions. Policy interventions are legitimised through scientific models, risk assessments, and cost–benefit analyses, which also place environmental governance beyond political debate.

Last but not least, the Green Deal discursively constructs itself as a response to popular "demand". This double framing – scientific necessity combined with a democratic mandate – closes the space for alternative systemic critiques. If the transition is both technically necessary and democratically demanded, then any contestation appears irrational or irresponsible. Thus, the Green Deal depoliticises environmental struggles, while presenting a highly structured and selective reorganisation of capitalism as the natural and inevitable path forward.

In this section, we have seen that the EU's Green Deal exemplifies the contemporary dynamics of eco-governmentality: it governs via environmental systems, sustains neoliberal economic logics under the umbrella of ecological modernisation, and depoliticises ecological governance by framing it as both a technical necessity and a popular demand. Yet to fully grasp the way eco-governmentality operates, it is not sufficient to analyse systemic strategies alone. Power, as Foucault argues, also acts on the level of subjectivity, producing specific ways of being, knowing, and governing oneself. In this context, the figure of the responsible green citizen emerges not naturally but through targeted technologies of subjectivation. The following (core) section hence turns to a closer analysis of how responsible green citizens are constituted along the Foucauldian axis of the subject, a process that is crucial for understanding how ecological governance is internalised, normalised and conducted in everyday life.

GREEN SUBJECTS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO THE SELF

While other Foucauldian-inspired attempts at analysing green subjectivity (see for example (Agrawal 2005; Malette 2009; Banjac and Pušnik 2025)) have thus far remained largely within the governmentality framework, the principle aim of this article is to develop a theoretical approach for understanding how green citizens are formed based on Foucault's theory of ethics and the hermeneutics of the self. Such a perspective however should not be viewed as being *against* the theories of green subject formation within the governmentality frame, and instead as an attempt to *complement* them. To that end, we conduct a critical genealogy in an effort to show that – through their relationship to the self – the green subject of today is not simply (self)-governed but also (self)-deciphered.

For Foucault (2000, 200), a complex historical experience is "constituted from and around certain forms of behavior: an experience that conjoins the field of knowledge", "a collection of rules (which differentiate the permissible from the

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6   For a convincing Foucauldian take on the European renewable energy transition, see Anfinson (2023).

forbidden, natural from monstrous, normal from pathological, what is decent and what is not, and so on)", as well as "a mode of relation between the individual and himself". In the case of the green subject, the field of knowledge refers to the growing body of environmental expertise, climate science, sustainability models and goals that renders the ecological crisis intelligible and actionable. The rules are constituted by the normative frameworks that define what it means to be a good green citizen: recycling, reducing energy consumption, eating less meat, minimising waste etc. However, unlike coercive disciplinary mechanisms, these rules are rarely codified or legally binding. They function primarily through recommendation, moral appeal, and civic expectation. The dominant patterns of ecological self-regulation are directly enforced much less and accordingly more the result of a "mode of relation between the individual and himself"(Foucault 2000, 200). In this sense, contemporary green citizens are more "active subjects" who constitute themselves "in an active fashion through practices of the self" (Foucault 2000, 291). Nevertheless, these practices are "not something invented by the individual himself: They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group" (Foucault 2000, 291).

Contemporary ecological conduct is thus proposed as a practice of the self ("pratiques de soi"), which in Western society is becoming an ever more important strategy of the individual to construct their personal identity and make sense of the world in which they live and act. According to Foucault (2000, 87), self-forming activities are an important part of the relationship to oneself and can be defined as "the procedures, which no doubt exist in every civilization, offered or prescribed to individuals in order to determine their identity, maintain it, or transform it in terms of a certain number of ends, through relations of self-mastery or self-knowledge". These self-forming activities are especially important because they are "frequently linked to the techniques for the direction of individuals" (Foucault 2000, 277). In the case of green subjectivity, they link the macro-level of ecological governance to the micro-level of self-disciplining conduct, embedding planetary crises within the moral logic of individual responsibility and ethical self-care.

In order to fully understand how the conditions for contemporary green subjectivity are constituted, it is not enough to only consider external factors such as the availability of sustainable lifestyle options, eco-labels or climate policies. We must also undertake a genealogical analysis of the green subject and their individual responsibility within the framework of contemporary green rationality. This analysis benefits from Foucault's concept of ethics, which offers a more precise lens than governmentality for exploring how subjects relate to themselves as ethical beings. Within green governance, the subject is not only concerned with external outcomes but also with being the right kind of person; in other words, a morally responsible green citizen. Individual responsibility is thus not merely a behavioural directive; it is experienced as an ethical demand that must

be internalised and sustained. In this context, failing to live up to the norms of ecological self-care and sustainability not only risks social disapproval or environmental harm but might also generate internal conflict or moral guilt. The subject is invited, even expected, to continuously examine, monitor and correct themselves in line with the ideals of green citizenship – a phenomenon Foucault calls hermeneutics of the self.

For Foucault (2000, 224), "a hermeneutics of the self has been diffused across Western culture through numerous channels and integrated with various types of attitudes and experience, so that it is difficult to isolate and separate it from our spontaneous experience". His genealogical analysis along the four aspects of ethics reveals that Christianity, with its stress on practices of self-renunciation and moral purification, introduced enduring tensions into Western subjectivity. In this light, we argue that the modern green subject and their individual responsibility continues these ethical structures: it demands the renunciation of comfort, control over desire, and a continuous striving towards moral ecological purity. Like the Christian subject, the green citizen is not just required to act, but through practices of the self to become someone responsible and virtuous. To trace these sediments of Christian modes of the relationship to oneself inherent in modern green subjectivities, we first look at Foucault's genealogical analysis of the Christian self and examine (using his four aspects of ethics) how Christianity overturned ancient forms of subjectivity.

FROM ANTIQUE CARE OF THE SELF TO THE CHRISTIAN HERMENEUTICS OF THE SELF

Foucault (2000, 262–65) states that the relationship to oneself, which he calls ethics, has four aspects. The first aspect, called the ethical substance, answers the question of which aspect or part of myself or my behaviour is concerned with moral conduct? The second aspect, called the mode of subjectivation, is the way in which people are invited or incited to recognise their moral obligations. The means by which we can change ourselves so as to become ethical subjects is what Foucault calls the self-forming activities or technologies (practices) of the self, which constitute the third aspect of the relationship to oneself. Finally, the fourth aspect of the relationship to oneself is the telos, which tells us which kind of being we aspire to when we behave in a moral way. In volumes 2 and 3 of the History of Sexuality, Foucault (1988b; 1988a) describes various forms of subjectivity that emerged in specific societies and in certain historical periods in antiquity. What most of them had in common was that they were not rooted in any firm, formal external ethical or legal rules and, instead, the individual's behaviour was regulated by an internal ethical relationship with oneself. Ethical reflection starts in antiquity exactly at the point where rules, regulations and formal restrictions end. Ethics was a matter of personal "aesthetic" and/ or "political choice" (Foucault 2000, 266). If one wanted to occupy an important position in society, rule others, or leave an exalted reputation behind, one

first had to conduct certain work on oneself, an ascetic practice that would give one's subjectivity the right form. To be able to rule others, for example, one first needed to become a master of oneself. This was done through what the Greeks called care of the self (*epimeleia heautou*). Foucault explains that for the Greeks care of the self "does not mean simply being interested in one-self, nor does it mean having a certain tendency to self-attachment or self-fascination. The care of the self is a very powerful word, which means working on, or being concerned with something" (Foucault 2000, 269). This is because "no personal skill can be acquired without exercise; neither can one learn the art of living, the tekhne tou biou, without an askesis which must be taken as training of oneself by oneself" Foucault (2000, 273).

In volume 3 of The History of Sexuality, The Care of the Self, Foucault (1988a) goes on to describe how for the Stoics care of the self is still extremely important but what has changed are its ethical grounds. Ethics is no longer only a personal political or aesthetical choice but begins to acquire certain universal aspects. Before, the mastery of oneself "was directly related to a dissymmetrical relation to others" (Foucault 2000, 267) since "in the classical perspective, to be a master of oneself meant, first, taking into account only oneself and not the other, because to be a master of oneself meant that you were able to rule others" (Foucault 2000, 267). On the other hand, the Stoics were faced with the decline of classical political institutions (polis) that resulted in a redefinition of classical values. As a consequence, the role of males in society changes "both in their homes toward their wives and also in the political field" and "becomes much less reciprocal than before" (Foucault 2000, 267). Being a master of yourself is no longer a choice but a universal imperative: "you have to do it because you are a rational being" (Foucault 2000, 266) and "in this mastery of yourself, you are related to other people, who are also masters of themselves" (Foucault 2000, 267).

These newly introduced aspects of universality presented a fertile substratum for the forthcoming Christian ethics of the universal and absolute law of God to which individuals must subject themselves completely. This transition was analysed by Foucault (2022) in the final – recently published – volume 4 of The History of Sexuality. For Foucault (2022), this is the point when the ancient culture of the self was eroded by Christianity, which replaced the antique idea of creating the self as a work of art with the idea that the self is something that has to be renounced:

> *From the moment that the culture of the self was taken up by Christianity, it was, in a way, put to work for the exercise of pastoral power, to the extent that the care for the self became, essentially the care for others which was the pastor's job. But insofar as individual salvation is channeled to a certain extent at least through a pastoral institution that has the care of the souls as its object, the classical care of the self disappeared, that is, was integrated and lost a large part of its autonomy. (*Foucault 2000, 278)

In these conditions, the relationship to oneself (ethics) changes. Ethical substance for the Christians becomes desire, flesh, concupiscence which had to be neutralised, suppressed to reach the telos: "the Christian formula puts an accent on desire and tries to eradicate it" (Foucault 2000, 269). The Christian telos was absolute purity, which is supposed to bring the individual closer to Heaven, God and immortality, while the mode of subjectivation for the Christian self was the divine law imposed by God, an external and absolute metaphysical authority. Since God is omnipotent and absolute, the individual as a limited being is put in a position where they never fulfil their moral obligations enough, and they never surrender enough. The Christian was never clean enough because, according to Foucault (2000, 270), "for Christians, the possibility that Satan can get inside your soul and give you thoughts you cannot recognize as satanic, but might interpret as coming from God, leads to uncertainty about what is going on inside your soul. You are unable to know what the real root of desire is, at least without hermeneutic work". Such constant internal tension and uncertainty demands new technologies of the self, which for the Christians take the form of endless "self-deciphering" (Foucault 2000, 268): "the new Christian self had to be constantly examined because in this self were lodged concupiscence and desires of the flesh. From that moment on, the self was no longer something to be made but something to be renounced and deciphered" (Foucault 2000, 274).

Essentially Foucault is suggesting that contemporary Western subjectivity continues to bear the scars of Christian self-renunciation and the associated hermeneutic techniques by which the self is called upon to decipher and govern itself. As he notes, "we inherit the tradition of Christian morality which makes self-renunciation the condition for salvation" (Foucault 2000, 228). This inheritance persists not as a static legacy but as a dynamic set of ethical technologies that continue to inform the formation of modern subjectivities. It is through these very mechanisms reconfigured within secular, ecological and economical registers that contemporary regimes of environmental governance secure their hold on individual conduct.

THE GREEN SUBJECT AND THE FOUCAULDIAN THEORY OF ETHICS

Ethical Substance

Ethical substance for modern individuals is, according to Foucault (2000, 263), "feelings". Here we note that "feelings" in this sense are not purely spontaneous psychological states but historically produced modalities of self-relation, operating as subtle mechanisms via which power organises the ethical conduct of subjects. Critical work by authors like Ahmed (2015) and Doyle (2016) shows that contemporary (environmental) governance increasingly operates through affective technologies. Climate guilt, eco-anxiety, eco-shaming, and green pride function as affective alignments: historically specific modes of feeling that mobilise individuals to govern their conduct according to ecological rationalities.

Mode of Subjectivation

As shown above, for the Christian subject the mode of subjectivation as the way in which individuals are constituted as ethical subjects was structured by an absolute and transcendent norm: divine law. Salvation was conditional on the subject's capacity to recognise their own sinfulness, engage in perpetual self-scrutiny, and strive for moral purity under the guidance of a universally binding religious truth. In environmental governance today, we are witness to a secular transformation of this mode of subjectivation. The divine law is replaced by what we might call a universal planetary imperative: an equally totalising norm that calls on subjects to align their lives with the urgent need for climate action. This imperative is grounded not in religion but in the authority of science, the ethics of intergenerational justice, and a new form of moral universalism. As stated in the European Climate Pact (European Commission 2020, 1), "We have not moved fast enough to prevent irreversible and catastrophic climate change. Science tells us we have to act urgently to stand a chance of achieving the Paris climate goals". The formulation is temporal and normative: it constructs a subject who has already failed and must now double their efforts in the face of escalating stakes. The moral obligation to act derives from a combination of scientific truth claims and an ethical horizon of shared vulnerability: the need "to guarantee a healthy and thriving planet for us and those who come after us" (European Commission 2020, 1). Within this structure, the past becomes a source of guilt, the present a scene of urgency, and the future a field of existential risk. This affective configuration produces not just responsibility but anxiety that one's actions (or inactions) are part of the decline of the planet. The resulting feelings of climate guilt and eco-anxiety are not incidental side-effects; they are integral emotional technologies through which the planetary imperative takes hold within the subject. Similarly, the European Green Deal frames climate action as "this generation's defining task", placing the subject in a historically exceptional moment in which ethical responsibility becomes total: every act, every omission and every lifestyle choice acquires planetary significance (European Commission 2019, 2). The subject is interpellated not merely as a consumer or citizen, but as a historically burdened moral agent responsible for preventing catastrophe and sustaining life on Earth for future generations. What emerges is a form of secular universalism whereby the subject is no longer accountable to God but to humanity, nature, and the unborn. Just as divine law once universalised the duty of ethical self-formation, the planetary imperative now installs care for the Earth as a moral absolute, rendering climate responsibility an integral part of our relationship towards ourselves and others. In this way, the mode of subjectivation in contemporary climate discourse retains the structural features of Christian ethical formation with its universal normativity, future-oriented salvation and moralised conduct but rearticulates them within a secular, biopolitical and planetary frame.

The Telos

The telos is no longer the purity of the soul like for the Christian subject but the purity of individuals' environmental impact, which needs to contribute to the common environmental goals. It is precisely in the process of the transposition from the common to the individual level that the mechanism of the hermeneutics of the self takes hold. While climate neutrality is presented as a strategic and measurable goal on the level of EU policy, its translation into the domain of individual conduct introduces a profound level abstraction and uncertainty. Citizens are repeatedly told across the European Green Deal, the Climate Pact, and through climate ambassadors that "every little step counts", and that personal lifestyle changes are indispensable to achieving systemic transformation (European Commission 2020, 9). Yet the actual impact of individual behaviour on global emissions remains incalculable, unclear, and often negligible when viewed in isolation. This disconnect creates a paradox: individuals are held ethically accountable for a fundamental outcome (net-zero emissions) that they cannot empirically influence in any direct or measurable way. Much like in Christian ethics where divine law demands perpetual self-scrutiny despite the unknowability of salvation, environmental governance calls individuals to internalise the imperative of carbon purity despite the absence of any clear metrics for how their actions contribute to the overarching goal of climate neutrality. Although the subject may attain individual moral recognition for performing ecologically virtuous acts like recycling properly, eating plant-based foods, refusing air flights, these actions remain disconnected from any demonstrable or measurable impact on systemic outcomes. The impossibility of knowing whether one's conduct truly "makes a difference" on the level of planetary emissions does not weaken the ethical injunction; it intensifies it. The green subject is thus incited to endless self-evaluation and self-regulation in pursuit of an idealised environmental self, a purified, future-oriented individual who lives as if every action matters absolutely.

Practices of the Self

In line with the telos described above, ethical subjectivity is enacted through practices of the self that echo the ascetic and confessional techniques of earlier moral regimes. These include meticulous self-monitoring, confession (public climate pledges, sustainability disclosures), and the cultivation of habits aimed at minimising one's perceived ecological harm. Among these, recycling[7] is probably the best example. It condenses the regime's central paradox: a simple, daily, repetitive gesture of sorting waste, rinsing plastics and placing them in the correct bin becomes invested with disproportionate moral significance. Regardless

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[7]   We should note that practices like recycling and individual carbon footprint monitoring also have their own history. To a large extent, they have been popularised by marketing and PR campaigns of systemic corporate polluters in the sectors of fossil fuels and plastics. For more, see Mayer and Kohl (2024).

of its limited systemic effect, recycling functions as a visible, performative affirmation of one's alignment with the ecological imperative. It becomes a micro-ritual through which the subject enacts care for the environment, not through direct efficacy, but via symbolic fidelity to the ethic of sustainable living.

A similar logic governs the increasingly normalised practice of reducing or eliminating the consumption of meat. While the ecological argument is clear as animal agriculture contributes significantly to greenhouse gas emissions, the ethical weight that the practice has acquired far exceeds this causal link. In the context of green rationality choosing plant-based foods becomes a site of moral investment, a means of cultivating ecological virtue through bodily abstinence. Here the echoes of Christian fasting and ascetic purification are unmistakable. Just as fasting in Lent demanded the renunciation of bodily pleasures to align oneself with divine judgment, the plant-based diet disciplines the flesh in pursuit of planetary salvation.

These, along with similar practices of the self, are embedded in an affective structure that reinforces the subject's alignment with the ecological norm. The emotional economy surrounding green conduct often unfolds in three main outcomes of self-deciphering. First, a sense of moral satisfaction when acting in accordance with environmental ideals, which manifests itself as pride (Schneider et al. 2017). Second, failure and a feeling of guilt when deviating from those ideals (Schneider et al. 2017). Third, paternalism: the emergence of a subtle or expressed sense of superiority toward others who do not conform, which may result in soft forms of moral correction or eco-shaming (Nielsen et al. 2024). These emotional dynamics are not incidental but central to the forming of the (self)-deciphering ecological subject as someone who not only governs themselves but also participates in the informal governance of others.

Eco-shaming, in particular, reveals a key transformation in the ecology of subjectivity: the hermeneutics of the self is no longer merely an inward-facing exercise in moral clarity or self-regulation. It is increasingly enacted publicly, affectively and relationally (Nielsen et al. 2024). This relational dynamic of green subjectivity is especially illuminated through the lens of "pastoral power", as theorised by Foucault (2009). Originally understood as a form of power rooted in religious care, vigilance, and moral guidance where the pastor assumes responsibility for the conduct and salvation of the flock, this form of governance has been secularised and diffused throughout contemporary ethical regimes (Foucault 2009). A notable example of how green pastoral power is working in conjunction with confessional practices can be found in the figure of the climate ambassador[8] (European Commission 2020). This is a subject who not only engages in sustainable behaviours, but makes those behaviours public, visible, and morally instructive. Social media is becoming a kind of digital confessional where the ideal of the ecological self is made legible to others and to itself by

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[8]   For a more thorough Foucauldian analysis of the climate ambassadors, see Banjac (2025).

way of continuous exposure, storytelling, and moral accounting. Through curated disclosures of green consumerism, lifestyle modification, and personal reflections on ecological responsibility, climate ambassadors therefore enact a contemporary form of confession and employ it as a form of pastoral behaviour guidance. Their authority does not derive from institutional position, but from their ethical authenticity measured by consistency, emotional resonance, and the ability to embody the values they promote (European Commission 2020).

In the environmental domain, green pastoral power is increasingly also exercised by individuals themselves, embedded in everyday relations and micro-interactions. The climate-conscious subject, shaped by discourses of ecological responsibility, does not only strive for internal moral consistency. They also feel ever more compelled to shepherd others to alert, correct or educate those who deviate from environmental norms. This may be seen in casual advice, social media performances of virtue, or more deliberate interventions in the behaviour of peers, family or strangers. What emerges is a distributed, omnipresent secular pastorate linked to confessional practices and the hermeneutics of the self in which each subject oscillates between the roles of shepherd and sheep: responsible not simply for their own environmental conduct, but also for the moral rectitude of others.

CONCLUSION

In the first part of the article, drawing on Malette (2009), we demonstrated that a genealogical sensitivity is essential to uncover the continuities linking contemporary EU green governmentality with earlier regimes of colonial extraction, biopolitical control, and capitalist expansion. Far from being a neutral or purely ecological initiative, the European Green Deal operates as a sophisticated governmental rationality. It integrates ecological systems into the logic of economic optimisation, rearticulates capitalist growth through the discourse of ecological modernisation, and depoliticises environmental transition by presenting it as both scientifically necessary and democratically endorsed. Yet the historical continuity does not manifest solely on the level of EU's governmental rationalities or institutional strategies as it also traverses the axis of subject formation.

By tracing the four aspects of ethics outlined by Foucault (1988b; 2000) – the ethical substance, the mode of subjection, the practices of the self, and the telos – we have revealed a line of continuity that leads back to the concept of the hermeneutics of the self. Rooted in Christian practices of self-deciphering and confession, this concept reappears in contemporary environmental governance in the form of the green subject: self-examining, self-regulating and ethically invested in its own carbon virtue. This ethical self-formation unfolds most intensively by way of the minute, continuous monitoring of everyday life. What one eats, how one travels, what one buys, how one disposes of waste, how one chooses clothing, holidays or domestic appliances – each of these becomes an object of ethical scrutiny, a potential site of either carbon harm or ecological

integrity. In this context, EU citizens are constituted not primarily as political actors but as consumers and behaviour changers, invited to 'participate' not by challenging systemic structures but by improving their own individual conduct[9]. Such expectations, when embedded in the modern hermeneutics of the self, can give rise to a persistent sense of individual responsibility and ethical questioning – an ongoing tension that steers individuals away from questioning the broader structural aspects of the climate crisis.

The construction of responsible green subjects on the substrate of the hermeneutics of the self and pastoral power therefore serves a dual and mutually reinforcing function within the EU's green transition project. On one hand, it consolidates a neoliberal regime of eco-governmentality by promoting a form of subjectivation in which individuals are incited to govern themselves and others in line with the capitalist imperatives guiding the green modernisation. On the other hand, this mode of subjectivation operates as a powerful mechanism of depoliticisation. By locating ecological responsibility within the domain of individual conduct and by employing continuous self-deciphering, it systematically redirects focus away from the structural dimensions of ecological crises, preventing them from being articulated as matters of power, inequality or systemic transformation.

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[9]   Articulating concrete practices of freedom that could resist such a problematic mode of subjectivation is an important next step, which – however – lies beyond the scope of this article. For an innovative attempt in this direction, albeit with a wider sense of polycrisis, see Vodovnik (2025).

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UPRAVLJANJE ODGOVORNEGA SEBSTVA: PODNEBNE POLITIKE EU IN PRODUKCIJA ZELENIH SUBJEKTIVITET

Povzetek. *Članek izpelje kritično analizo režima ekovladnosti v ozadju projekta zelene tranzicije EU, pri čemer se osredini zlasti na to, kako se izvaja prek oblikovanja zelenih subjektivitet in njihove individualne okoljske odgovornosti. Sledimo štirim razsežnostim etike, ki jih je začrtal Foucault (etična substanca, način podrejanja, prakse sebstva in telos), in dokazujemo, da sta za sodobno zeleno državljanstvo značilna stalno zeleno obnašanje in samonadzor, ki izvira iz krščanskih praks odrekanja. Glavna teza članka je, da ta način upravljanja, ki temelji na pastoralni oblast, služi dvojni funkciji: s spodbujanjem oblike subjektivacije, v kateri se posamezniki upravljajo v skladu s kapitalističnimi imperativi, v imenu zelene modernizacije utrjuje neoliberalni režim ekološke vladavine. Po drugi strani pa ta način subjektivacije deluje komplementarno s tehnokratsko depolitizacijo podnebne krize, ki jo izvajajo strukture EU. Z umeščanjem podnebne odgovornosti v domeno posameznikovega ravnanja sistematično odvrača pozornost s strukturnih razsežnosti ekološke krize in preprečuje, da bi jih artikulirali kot vprašanja razmerij moči, neenakosti ali sistemske preobrazbe.*

Ključni pojmi: *podnebna politika, ekovladnost, tehnologije sebstva, pastoralna oblast, evropski zeleni dogovor, individualizirana odgovornost.*