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Building a collective ecological identity: A multidisciplinary reflection

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In this article, collective ecological identity will be theoretically investigated, with the aim to understand the role of public opinion and policy in driving action. In recent years, awareness towards environmental issues is increasing; however, environmental targets set by political agendas are yet to be reached. Hilgartner and Bosk's "The Rise and Fall of Social Problems" (1988) offers an insight into the mismatch between public opinion and action, suggesting that public attention towards certain social issues depends on interconnected public arenas that produce a feedback effect, worsening the social problem. From this point of view, public opinion on a social problem does not engender collective action. However, according to Schudson (1989), the resonance and institutionalisation of a certain cultural object is fundamental to its inclusion in the culture of a given community, making cultural policy a necessary condition to change a society.

KEYWORDS

public opinion, cultural policies, collective ecological identity, multidisciplinary, environmental issues

Introduction

> "(. . .) To acquire a political meaning | you don't even have to be human. | Raw material will do, | or protein feed, or crude oil, (. . .)."[1]

These lines highlight how every natural element can acquire a political meaning, in a society where every human action or word, even those without political origins, has consequences on the community.

The author of the poem is Wislawa Szymborska. She was a polish poet and the recipient of the Nobel prize in literature in 1996. She lived in times when freedom of thought and expression were difficult: she was born in Poland in 1923, and her first book, which was supposed to be published in 1949, was rejected because of non-compliance with socialist standards.

1 Wislawa Szymborska (1923-2012): Children of Our Age, 1993, from People on the Bridge, 1986, in Poems New and Collected (1988), translated by Stanisław Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh.

Unsurprisingly, after an initial period of ideological proximity to socialist realism, she realised she did not identify with it anymore, coming to reject her own early career works. As stated by Gammaitoni (2018), the poet shifted from hymning her communist companions as heroes for building a social collective identity, to promoting individual subjectivity against collectivist thinking. In a regime there is no room for intermediate nuances. However, the aim of this paper is not to start a debate on totalitarian regimes, but to reflect on how strong the interconnection between individual action and society is. Whether this is seen as a critique, a fatality, or a hope, it is an "unquestionable fact"[2] (borrowing the poet's words).

> "Man as an individual, in the meaning of being an exception with respect to the world, can, according to Szymborska, learn from the mistakes of history and not cause suffering to others, while the general problems which bind us are the development of a shared awareness by human society." (Gammaitoni, 2018: 34)

Nevertheless, it seems that humankind has not learned from the mistakes of history, despite having developed a shared awareness of many issues. One of those issues is environmental sustainability: the recent efforts of international policies towards a more sustainable world (see UN General Assembly, 2015) appear to be well-known; however, the current environmental crisis is still severe because of the inconsistency of collective action beyond societal roles. Let us take an example from Italy, which shows how awareness of environmental sustainability has increased enormously in the recent years, without concrete actions taken. In ASSIRM, 2019 (an association that brings together firms specialising in market and social research and opinion polls) launched an Observatory on Sustainability (*Osservatorio sulla Sostenibilità*), with the aim of monitoring the sensitivity and commitment of both Italian citizens and firms to environmental, social, and economic sustainability. To do so, the Observatory conducted research that consisted of two waves, one in 2019 (ASSIRM, 2019), and the second in 2020 (ASSIRM, 2020) on a representative sample of Italian consumers. The two resulting reports outlined attitudes towards (environmental, economic, and social) sustainability, main areas/topics of interest, perceived interest, commitment, and perceived level of information on sustainability issues. Compared with the 2019 report, the 2020 report presented a deeper awareness of environmental issues, but also dissatisfaction regarding the perceived interest and commitment of society towards these topics, most likely due to the high expectations set by Fridays for Future and other recent environmental movements.[3]

This creates a paradox. On one side, public opinion is currently focused on environmental issues and the public are aware and prepared; on the other side, there is a lack of action, which is not only perceived by people but also validated by data: an ISTAT (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica) report on Sustainable Development Goals (ISTAT, 2019) shows that the active progress we are making is still not enough to reach Agenda 2030 objectives.

The current literature on behavioural science and social movements identifies both awareness and the formation of a collective identity as a basis to prompt collective action (Melucci, 1989; Melucci, 1996; Talyor and Whittier, 1992; Polletta and James, 2001; Holland et al., 2008; Ackland and O'Neil, 2011). Moreover, in a political context, the relevance of culture and identity in supporting human development is rising: the 2030 Agenda integrates, for the first time, culture in a development program (Kaymas, 2019). For these reasons, establishing the fact that a collective ecological identity is actually spreading could be of paramount importance to support ecological transition and to transform awareness into action. Notwithstanding this, accumulated knowledge on collective ecological identity is fragmented, with a gap in the literature concerning the shared and overarching theoretical articulation of this phenomenon.

Bearing in mind these considerations, this paper serves as a steppingstone to fill this gap. It aims to theorise on the process of building an ecological collective identity, reflects on the role of public policies, opinion, and arenas as tools of dissemination in this cultural climate changing process, and assesses whether those tools act as lock-ins or levers of collective action. This may serve as a foundation to explain how masses can be coherently and meaningfully mobilised, based on a shared social reality (David and Bar-Tal, 2009).

Therefore, the research question is: is a collective ecological identity arising? To answer this, the article is structured as follows: in the first section, definitions, drivers, and challenges of the general concept of collective identity are outlined; in the second section, insights on collective ecological identity are provided; and in the third section, the role of public policy and opinion in the building of a collective ecological identity is more specifically analysed.

The approach used in this paper is multidisciplinary and draws theories from different bodies of knowledge such as social, psychological, philosophical, political, and communication sciences. This is done because of the need to integrate different points of view in order to allow a holistic and meaningful understanding of both environmentalism and collective identity.

Collective identity

The dualism between individual and collective identity has always been the subject of reflection and study for humankind.

2 From the poem "Metaphysics", by Wislawa Szymborska. http://www.ashokkarra.com/2008/07/wislawa-szymborska-metaphysics/(Last visited 31 January 2020).

3 https://www.assirm.it/osservatorio-sulla-sostenibilit-assirm_att78.htm (Last visited 31 January 2020).

From the ancient Heraclitus' disciples, who wondered how immobile identity could exist in a world where "everything flows," to the nineteenth-century French sociologist Durkheim, who described the homo duplex as the individual stretched between individualism and social being, to the contemporary Italian Galimberti, who stated "*l'identità è un dono sociale*" (identity is a social gift), the impossibility of defining individuality as separated from social, cultural, and natural contexts is evident.

Socio-antropological insights on collective identities

The dichotomy between individual and social identity may be explained through Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel and Turner 1986). This theory distinguishes between a personal identity, concerning the unique features of an individual, and a social identity, derived from the knowledge, perception, value, and emotional meaning that an individual experiences upon membership of one or more social groups. The latter develops from two processes: a cognitive process, consisting of the categorisation and attribution of meaning to both self-made groups and external groups; and a motivational process, consisting of the desire to distinguish between her/his own group and other groups. The consequence is a systematic preference for the values, norms, and behaviours of her/his group over those of external groups. Occasionally, this may lead to a process of depersonalisation, explained by the Self-categorisation theory (Turner, 1991; Turner, 1999), in which individuals may define elements of a social category as replaceable and interchangeable, instead of as unique personalities, depending on the intensity of self-categorisation in a specific situation.

The above micro-individual psychological explanation on how social identity functions within an individual serves as a means to explain what occurs at a macro-socio-psychological level in collective identity formation. In this paper, the definition by Holland et al. (2008), as opposed to other definitions provided in the literature, is used, because of the authors' approach, which goes against the idea of movements as unified actors, and emphasises the cultural and anthropological aspects of social movement, seen as a decentred and dialogic phenomenon.

More specifically, the authors define the collective identity of a social movement as "participants' shared sense of the movement as a collective actor—as a dynamic force for change—that they identify with and are inspired to support in their own actions. Elaborating more fully, a collective identity develops within an imagined world (e.g., Wolford In Press)—or, to use another term, a figured world (Holland et al., 1998)—which is a realm of interpretation and action generated by the participants of a movement through their shared activities and commitments that imagines the terrain of struggle, the powers of opponents, and the possibilities of a changed world." Further, in a note, it is specified that "[. . .] non-participants are important in forming this sense as well."

From this definition, it is possible to identify the importance of the following elements:

(1) The identification with, or belonging to, beliefs and ideals that underlie a particular group.
(2) The presence of an action.
(3) The existence of an imagined or figured world, with shared activities, commitment, but also forecasts and hopes.
(4) The existence of non-participants.

In other words, to resume the concept used previously, collective identity indicates a common recognition that members of a certain group share the same social identity (David and Bar-Tal, 2009). Beyond the listed features, one of the most relevant points outlined in the work of Holland et al., (2008) is that collective identity formation, as in all other cultural phenomena, is fundamentally dialogic. This means that collective identities are continually emerging and changing among people and groups as well as in multiple places of discussion. Identities are built in dialogues concerning the movement, between two or more actors, and result in new cultural forms of knowledge that will be subsequently absorbed and used in further interactions. Thus, it is important to analyse the so-called "places of discussion" when studying the formation of a collective identity.

One common element in this and in other definitions of collective identity detectable in the anthropological and sociological literature, is the importance of diversity: it is possible to group people under one (or more) distinctive element, allowing discernment of that group from the totality or from other groups. This may well be a "double-edged sword" (Saunders, 2008) in the building of a collective identity, and presents several challenges, outlined below, particularly when the overall objective is to create global shared knowledge and action; as in the case of ecological transition.

Firstly, a collective identity cannot be absolute because it requires, by definition, the existence of non-participants. This is already in contrast with the entirety of the aforementioned goal, and may create discrimination instead of unification (Saunders, 2008). Secondly, current society is extremely complex and rapidly changing, therefore, it is likely that individuals identify only partially with a group (Alcantud and De Andres, 2016). It is more likely that they identify with more groups (Chafetz et al., 1998), which can either intersect with one another in some aspects, or lead to completely opposite ideal positions in other aspects. This may cause confusion, not only over the sense of belonging, but also over the consequent actions, leading to an impasse or a step backwards. Finally, according to van Zoonen (2013), most cultural and social theories consider identity to be multiple, dynamic, and volatile. Moreover, the most recent developments in these theories underline how identity may be interpreted as a flexible outcome of specific social and cultural

acts. Instead of being a positive factor, van Zoonen states that this "fragmented self" may in fact hinder the definition of "real selves" and increase inauthenticity (as in the case of whitewashing and greenwashing).

The interconnection among collective identity, culture, and policies

The interaction between collective identity and policies is a relevant aspect to consider when discussing identity formation. In the previous section, identity was depicted as multiple and dynamic. This dynamicity causes significant theoretical and political implications, since, as stated by Chafetz et al. (1998: xvii), an inter-influence between norms (or policies) and identities exists.

Public policy is articulated within the framework of a state that has the political legitimacy to enforce it (Duxbury et al., 2017). Therefore, policies are imposed by an authority that has a double function: legitimacy and coercion (Ruggie 1983). In other words, the authority can legitimise a certain norm and can sanction actors who do not respect it. These functions have a social impact, and can influence collective identity and action, either by identification with, or opposition to, the policies imposed. Policies set standards and guidelines to follow, and for this reason, according to Kantner (2006), political communities develop powerful institutions to defend social roles and to enhance citizen identification with those roles. However, these roles and policies may change as a result of repeated interactions: "Relatively rapid, traumatic events can lead an individual or collective entity to add new identities, or reorder the salience of existing ones. States suddenly thrust into new roles or new environments may radically reorder their priorities. Such sudden policy changes, however, are rare. A greater appreciation for identity can help explain state policies." (Chafetz et al., 1998: xiii). This is, on the other hand, how identities can influence policies. As also suggested by Ramus (2018), social pressure can result in the creation of new policies that, in turn, lead to the institutionalisation of a certain norm, reinforcing the spread of a cultural trait.

In the specific case of policies concerning a strong ethical function in a given society, collective identification is an essential variable according to the Integration Theory (Keohane and Hoffmann, 1991), because without a real change in identity, it is possible to obtain behavioural cooperation by incentivising self-interested actors, but not possible to create a community (Wendt, 1994). Cultural policies are a topical example of how policies can interact, and are interwoven, with collective identities, together fostering collective action towards human development.

The following section takes a closer look at the ecological field, aiming to theoretically detect the main features of collective identity in an environmental movement, and drawing practical examples from the political context in order to explain the relationships between cultural policies and ecological collective identity and action.

Collective ecological identity

Although this terminology has been used extensively, no unambiguous definition is provided in the literature. According to the state-of-the-art, scholars have mostly focused on individual ecological identity, as in the case of Walton and Jones (2018), who developed a measurement scale for detecting ecological identity in individuals. Alternatively, several groups have analysed collective identity in specific green movements (Ackland and O'Neil, 2011; Reisinezhad, 2014; Escalera-Reyes, 2020; Ulug et al., 2021).

"What is an ecological identity?"

A major contribution to a more theoretical social interpretation of this topic has been provided by Light (2000) in his article "What is an Ecological Identity?". He analysed environmentalism from a political point of view: the article is less culture-based than the theories considered up until his writing; however, it offers some insights that could help ontologically reflecting on, and practically coping with, the challenges mentioned in the previous section. Even though he does not use the term "collective," he refers to the social identity underlying the environmental social movement. More particularly, he tried to determine whether environmentalism could be considered as a form of identity politics, similar to feminism or race-based politics, at the core of new social movements.

Identity politics is a form of politics "where agents ground their self-conception as political agents in some aspect of their identities" (2007: 60). It often has a negative connotation attached, because the possessed identity trait is clearly distinguishable, treated differently, and is, more precisely, the subject of oppression. In other words, a certain form of identity politics can arise in resistance to a specific form of oppression. Based on this assumption, the author wonders what is the constitutive profile of ecological identity, or in other words, the characteristic trait that explains and encompasses that identity. For example, the constitutive profile of feminism is being a woman subject to oppression from patriarchal society. Environmentalism is not so simple: its constitutive profile is identified by empathy towards the mistreatment (or oppression) of nature, and not by politicisation of a personal identity trait.

This complexity has led several authors (Young, 1990; Aronowitz, 1994; Sandilands, 1995) to different answers: while Aronowitz (1994) and Sandilands (1995) related environmentalism to other identity politics and new social

movements, Young (1990) had a different point of view. She divides new social movements into three main categories: movements challenging hegemony and the power of decision-makers (she inserts environmental movement here); movements organising independent services (for example, self-help organisations for ethnic minorities); and movements of cultural identity (for example, contemporary feminism) (Young, 1990: 83). According to Light (2000), the third category describes what Aronowitz means by identity politics in general, and, even though Young (1990) does not include environmentalism in this category, this supports the idea that it is possible to consider it a form of identity politics, because "part of the core of environmentalism is a cultural stance" (Light, 2000: 61).

This classification problem is due to the fact that a gap exists between the subjectivity of the politicised trait and the object of identity politics itself, different from the situation in race-based identity politics, where there is no difference between the subject and the object. However, Light (2000) uses the example of male feminism to show that identity politics is chosen rather than internally or externally imposed: a man can decide to be a feminist because of empathy, or to fight the empowered decision-making structures.

Therefore, this subject-object gap can be filled in two ways: 1) a person embraces the radical ideal that humans are indistinguishable from nature, like deep ecologists and radical ecofeminists do. However, this is sometimes criticised because it could lead to ecofascism and 2) since identity politics is chosen and not imposed, a person may decide to embrace some fights for empathy or other types of drivers. The author believes that these two cases (which he calls "attached ecological identity" and "detached ecological identity or environmental liberism," 2007: 67) create two different types of environmental identity politics, which may have different views on political actions to be taken.

The considerations made thus far may be easily related to the challenges mentioned in the previous section (discrimination instead of unification in the same social movement, confusion regarding the sense of belonging, and inauthenticity deriving from fragmentation). However, as stated by Light (2007: 68), "the characterization of an ecological identity does not mean that all forms of environmental theory or activism are identity-based. As the analysis and encouragement of a broad-based movement requires [*sic*] an understanding of all of its manifestations, an understanding of an empathy with nature based in personal identity is also required as one manifestation of environmentalism. Wanting as many descriptions as possible of the political ground of environmentalism serves a kind of practical pluralism which may be necessary for achieving a broad-based movement. Providing a more thorough description of an ecological identity ensures that part of that movement will have a coherent basis."

The author concludes that environmentalism may be classified as identity politics; it must cope with conceptual and political problems, but at the same time has many pros. The first pro is that environmentalism could create coalitions with other identity positions in order to be more successful against anti-progressive forces (Light, 2000: 76). The second pro is that environmentalism can overcome the barriers that challenge the formation of a broader ecological collective identity; not only from a political perspective, but also from a more cultural and social perspective.

Since environmentalism has been identified as a social movement, it is thus theoretically proven that it may possess the characteristics listed by Holland et al., (2008): it is undeniable that the complexity of environmentalism is difficult to handle; however, it may arise globally, under the similar umbrella concept of collective ecological identity, as a decentral and place-based movement that depends on the cultural identities, discourses, and practices of a specific group. Thus, fraudulent actions such as greenwashing (third challenge) do not depend on the fragmented self of the ecological identity, but on the intentions of the people that act.

Cultural policies to foster "ecological citizenship"

Policies may catalyse ecological collective action. As mentioned in the Introduction, cultural policies are gaining importance for the regulation of sustainable development (including ecological commitment) and are redefining the role of culture in the European political context. A framework on how cultural policies can serve sustainable development is provided by Duxbury et al. (2017), who identified four key strategic paths for cultural policies in relation to sustainability: the fourth objective is "to foster 'ecological citizenship'" (Duxbury et al., 2017: 222) and is the motivation for this article.

Analysis of the literature shows that the main approach used to define collective identities and public cultural policies is national (Chafetz et al., 1998; Anderson, 1983; Kantner, 2006; Wendt, 1994; Kaymas, 2019; Pascual, 2018); however, according to some authors among those listed, there is a need to shift from a national to an international (or global) concept of state in order to support human development, concerning issues shared by all of humanity, for example, environmental degradation. More specifically, Anderson (1983), for instance, states that cultural policy can create an "imagined community,"[4] able to push global citizenship to address sustainability as a global issue. However, while Anderson referred to the nation when speaking about imagined community, Duxbury et al. (2017) highlight the need for a paradigm shift in cultural policies that aim to reinforce

4 This terminology leads back to the definition of collective identity by Holland, Fox and, Daro (2008).

national identities instead of creating a sense of humanity as a whole.

Pascual (2018) took a more local approach, stating that the starting point is at the international or national level; there is a need to narrow down the implementation area of cultural policies to a local level so that they can truly impact society.

In recent years many international initiatives have promoted the link between cultural identities, policies, and sustainable development. UNESCO is the main promoter of the fundamental role of cultural change to support ecological transition: a practical example is the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (UNESCO, 2005), which recognises cultural rights as the basis of sustainable development, and makes explicit the connection between identity, communities, culture, and sustainability. "Reshaping Cultural Policies" is monitoring the implementation of this convention. This is one of many policy documents published by UNESCO, together with high level events organised by the UNO[5]—mentioning objectives that "Highlight the connection between culture and biological diversity with particular relation to local solutions to climate change and environmental challenges"—or actions implemented by the European Culture Foundation,[6] setting culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development.[7]

These political efforts are not in vain, and a study by Pappalardo et al. (2022), on the effect of the UNESCO designation of the dry-stone walls in Mt. Etna (Sicily-Italy) as a World Heritage, demonstrates the societal impact of cultural policies. The study shows that this designation affected Sicilian consumers' willingness to pay (WTP) to preserve cultural sites, and that the designation sufficiently compensated farmers for the loss of income derived from maintaining the dry-stone walls. As stated by the authors, their findings underline the importance of cultural policy and its effect on environmental values, at least on that specific population.

Public arenas as places for discussion of collective ecological identity

Since dialogue is at the centre of collective identity formation, in this section, some theoretical insights from communication and social studies are used to analyse the role of public opinion and communication in the formation of a collective ecological identity.

As demonstrated in several studies, information and communication have a strong influence on pro-environmental behaviour. For example, the research by Han and Xu (2020) focuses on demonstrating that interpersonal communication, traditional media, and social media have a positive influence on stimulating pro-environmental action (that is, a fundamental element witnessing the existence of a collective identity).

However, as stated in our Introduction, the mismatch between awareness and action leads to a paradox. The paradox exists because, without public arenas such as social media or the news, people cannot know that this knowledge is so shared; conversely, at the same time, knowing it leads to higher expectations that are not always satisfied by the real world, consequently generating disillusionment and lack of motivation.

"The Rise and Fall of Social Problems" (1988) by Hilgartner and Bosk offers an insight into the mismatch between public opinion and action. Treating an environmental crisis as a social problem, the authors' model suggests that public attention towards certain social issues depends on interconnected public arenas (such as the media) that produce a feedback effect, worsening the social problem. The magnitude of the social problem is stemmed by the finite carrying capacities of public arenas and is driven by the competition among them as well as by the need for sustained drama to attract consumers. From this point of view, it transpires that public opinion on a social problem is not necessarily related to collective action. However, according to Schudson (1989), the resonance of a certain cultural object is fundamental to its inclusion in the culture of a given community. He identifies a cultural object as the necessary operationalisation of culture: culture is not separable from social structure, economics, politics, or other features of human activity, but requires objectivisation in cultural objects that can be detected and observed.

To examine the power of a cultural object, Schudson measures five dimensions: retrievability, rhetorical force, resonance, institutional retention, and resolution (1989, 160). Retrievability refers to the reachability of the cultural object in space or time, either in the surrounding world or in the mind of a person through memory (1989, 161). Rhetorical force refers to how memorable and powerful the cultural object is (1989, 164-165). Resonance refers to the degree with which a cultural object echoes in the life of the audience (1989, 167). Institutional retention refers to how highly intertwined the considered cultural object is with institutions (1989, 170). Finally, resolution refers to the capability of cultural objects to influence actions (1989, 171).

Focusing on environmentalism, as may be inferred by Schudson's theory, the spread of ecological knowledge is fundamental for the absorption of ecological culture, and,

5 See https://www.un.org/pga/73/event/culture-and-sustainable-development/.

6 https://cultureactioneurope.org/files/2019/09/Implementing-Culture-in-Sustainable-Development-Goals-SDGs.pdf.

7 This categorisation has been extensively analysed by Dessein et al. (2015).

consequently, for the development of a collective ecological identity that will lead to collective action.

Institutional retention requires specific focus, considering what has been revealed about the role of cultural policies in the previous section. The institutionalisation of a cultural object confers power and legitimacy to that object; applying this in the context of environmental behaviour, the institutionalisation of ecological commitment using policies is necessary (although not sufficient) to render environmentalism part of a culture. The study by Pappalardo et al. (2022) discussed in the previous section supports this theory.

Public arenas are drastically changing. The work by Hiltgartner and Bosk (1988) dates back to an age where the internet was not yet common and social media did not exist; therefore, their analysis requires revision considering the rise and capillarity of new information and communication technologies. As stated by Ackland and O'Neil (2011), information and communication technologies perfectly fit the ideological needs of social movements by enabling values such as informality, decentralisation, and diversity, rather than centralisation and hierarchy.

According to Han and Xu (2020), the most prominent factors that affect pro-environmental behaviour are: environmental risk perception, environmental knowledge, environmental concern, and a willingness to contribute to the environment. These have been analysed in relation to the main types of communication and information flow: interpersonal communication, traditional media, and social media. Han and Xu (2020) demonstrated that traditional media significantly influences environmental risk perception, whereas interpersonal communication has a stronger influence on the other factors. Social media seems to exhibit traits of both interpersonal communication and traditional media communication, creating a so-called "pseudo-environment" in which it is possible to present information at a personal level. This "pseudo-environment," thanks to its feedback system (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988), encourages people to share and to demonstrate that they belong to a certain community (in this case the ecological community). This relates back to the "figured world" described by Holland et al., (2008), which discusses the definition of collective identity, making the existence of a collective ecological identity even more salient.

Conclusion

The main objective of this article was to begin a theoretical reflection on the definition and the creation of a collective ecological identity, as part of human culture. Although this reflection could be ascribed to a western and middle-class society (Light, 2000), it reinforces the body of literature that intends to understand how to create a cohesive collective action that may support a transformative change towards an environmentally (and not only) sustainable global society. The research question that led to this theoretical analysis was "Is a collective ecological identity arising?" and, according to the theories considered from different bodies of knowledge, the answer may well be affirmative. However, this represents just a small step in a long and winding path.

Considering collective identity as a shared sense among a population of movement as a collective actor (Holland et al., (2008)), environmentalism seems to meet all the requirements set by the definition, and seems to cope with all the challenges that cultural objects (Schudson, 1989) should face. At the same time, an ecological collective identity may stress both differences and distance among people belonging to that particular social group as well as outsiders. According to Duxbury et al. (2017), in order to use cultural policy as an instrument to decrease this distance, a shift from a sense of national belonging to a sense of global belonging is required, subverting the self-segregating effect of identity politics in issues shared by all of humanity, such as environmentalism. In other words, the development of an ecological collective identity is positive, since this means that environmental concern is (once again) becoming part of the culture of some societies. However, the overall objective should be to reach a level where it is impossible to detect outsiders; where the culture is so absorbed that this is automatic and embedded in human life.

Concerning public opinion and policies, a strong link exists between global information society policies and cultural policies, with implications for technological convergence and change (Duxbury et al., 2017; Kaymas, 2019). This article supports the assertion that they serve more as a lever and an enabler of building a collective ecological identity than as a lock-in, although still not enough action is being taken. The inconsistencies of the intentions of humans is something that can also be detected in other fields, not only in environmental sustainability.

It is well-known that public opinion suffers from many biases and is treated as goods or a commodity by public arenas such as traditional and social media; however, at the same time, public opinion increases awareness and prompts action, which are the basis for building a collective ecological identity. Even though, as stated by Han and Xu (2020), the media may modify risk perceptions of certain phenomena, communication allows knowledge sharing, which is fundamental to developing a sense of urgency and collective action.

Lastly, a final thought on the transformation of a social identity and cultural evolution is worthy. Let us consider the example of the Italian education and university system, and draw a parallel with computer science and information technology. For example, the first information technology University departments in Italy were created in the 60s, and were sections of Mathematics and Physics departments. Only later, thanks to a larger theorical basis and more literature, information

technology became more independent. The first computer science degree program was established in Pisa in 1969, and nowadays information technology courses are present in all universities.

Environmental sustainability has other antecedents, but is following a similar path: in the academic year 2022/2023 28 Italian institutes will establish the so-called "licei TED" (Transizione Ecologica e Digitale): high schools aimed at allowing students to support the Ecological and Digital Transition.

This article offers a number of insights on the issue but does not provide readers with certain answers. Further theoretical, bibliographic, and experimental research, should be conducted to better define the collective ecological identity phenomenon, and to use it as a foundation to support ecological transition to a point where "Raw material (. . .), or protein feed, or crude oil" (Szymborska, 1986) will no longer be perceived as political.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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