Chapter Six

Buying Green

A Trap for Fools, or, Sartre on Ethical Consumerism

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"What can I do about climate change?" Perhaps, like me, you find yourself asking this question - wondering what *you* can do about the ongoing process of climate change and the horrifying effects it promises to produce. After all, climate scientists are in almost unanimous agreement that we humans face the possibility of systematic environmental collapse brought on by global warming. According to a 2018 report by the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the burning of fossil fuels promises to make much of the Earth uninhabitable if we, as a species, do not reach net-zero carbon emissions[1] by 2050. Perhaps this keeps you up at night.

Luckily, there is no shortage of companies and organizations lining up to provide a ready-made solution. The websites of national and international NGOs like the NRDC, the Sierra Club, and the World Wildlife Fund suggest that the average western consumer ought to alter our behavior in little ways, changing our consumption patterns and shrinking our carbon footprint. We can, for instance, buy energy efficient lightbulbs, eat less meat, take public transit, or offset our next plane ticket by paying to plant some trees somewhere. Where I live in Texas, I am allowed to select how much of the electricity for my house comes from "green" energy sources like solar or wind. All these little changes add up, we are told, and in altering our consumer behavior, we are doing our part to mitigate the worst effects of climate change.

Nevertheless, the dystopian effects promised by unmitigated climate change seem to get closer and more concrete every day, with nine of the ten hottest years on record taking place in the last decade.[2] The more one reads

about our situation, the more inevitable seeming is a future where major cities are under water,[3] millions of people are displaced,[4] previously fertile agricultural drylands become deserts,[5] and conflict over scarce resources becomes more common.[6] This remains true no matter how many inefficient lightbulbs I replace or commutes to work I make by bus. In the face of such facts, our attempts at action through consumer choices seem futile and ridiculous.

In *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre asserts that this sense of impotence is an implicit recognition of a historical tension. On the one hand, we understand the impending environmental crisis as a human-created phenomenon. As western consumers, we feel responsible for the crisis. It does not seem like a mental leap to tie the gas in our cars or the out of season vegetables in our refrigerators to the growing amount of carbon in the air. Insofar as it is the structures that make this lifestyle possible that have caused the crisis, those who enjoy it ought to take responsibility for it by acting—this is the right and good thing to do. But the sorts of actions available to us as individuals in a western consumer society seem feeble and impotent in the face of the collective activity of humanity as a whole. Buying green, if everyone did it, might work. But everyone does not do it. Furthermore, many people around the world *cannot* do it. Green products are neither available nor affordable for everyone. In light of this, my own attempts to "do the right thing" by buying green reveal the limits of my individual agency. Its effectiveness is conditioned by the action of other people elsewhere over whom I have no influence here and now.

From a Sartrean perspective, this lived sense of impotence reveals the way our present environmental problems are equally historical human problems.[7] For Sartre, history is shaped in part by the collective activity of individual humans working in lived isolation from one another. In the case of climate change, our isolated individual consumption and the production that fuels it collectively produces enough greenhouse gases to raise global temperatures, melt ice-caps, flood coastal cities, displace millions of people, etc. An analysis of this lived isolation, or "seriality," demonstrates that making choices as a serialized individual—say about whether or not to buy green—positions us not as individuals actively choosing to posit and pursue a future, but as passive members of an ensemble whose anonymous agency shapes a history and posits a future that nobody wills individually. When I buy green, what I might take to be my contribution to making the world better is actually just an expression of my inability to do anything to steer the action of the collective whose agency actually matters. This historical fact is lived as my sense of impotence.

If we wish to actively project a different future, we need to form groups that empower us to do so. Green consumerism, put forward as a solution to climate change, is a trap for two reasons. First, it is a trap that prevents such

groups from forming because it encourages us to think of our individual consumer choices as morally significant and important rather than as the relatively insignificant actions they are. Second, the serialized conditions under which we decide what to buy actually encourage us to disavow responsibility for the state of the world and betray any commitment to green principles we might have expressed ahead of time—it is a trap that maintains the status quo rather than altering the field of action. For this reason, I close the chapter by arguing that in order to address the impending climate catastrophe, governments should create programs that address climate change by allowing citizens to take an active part in imagining and working together towards a post-carbon future rather than trying to manipulate serialized consumers.

This chapter has three sections. In the first section I frame climate change as "counter-finality"—the result of historical human *praxi*s that, although willed by nobody, nevertheless is pursued systematically by historical ensembles of humans. In Section Two, I consider buying green as a strategy for altering the behavior of such historical human ensembles from within them so as to avoid the worst effects of climate change. I show how the nature of shopping as a serialized *praxis* undermines green consumerism as such a strategy. Finally, in section three I consider two policy approaches that might be taken up in light of a Sartrean analysis of green consumerism and seriality. I argue for a certain conception of the Green New Deal over a technocratic "nudge" agenda championed by Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler.[8]

FROM "PRAXIS TO PRACTICO-INERT" AND CLIMATE CHANGE AS COUNTER-FINALITY

If we ever wish to do anything about the threats posed by unmitigated climate change, we first must get clear on the sort of threat that it poses. The purpose of this section is to frame climate change as a historical threat in Sartrean terms and in doing so to describe the bind we find ourselves in. In order to do so, I unpack some key terms in Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason.* In particular, I lay out Sartre's notions of *praxis, practico-inertia,* and, *counter-finality*. These concepts are central to Sartre's understanding of humans as historical beings and therefore central to our understanding of the environmental crisis we face as historical. I begin by outlining the dual nature of human *praxis* as simultaneously individual and collective. I show how our collective *praxis* returns to us as a *practico-inert* field that often works against us as individuals. Next, I interpret climate change as neither bare nature nor accidental consequence of human activity, but as what Sartre calls *counter-finality*—a future posited by our collective activity and pursued systematically despite being willed by no-one in particular.

Praxis

For Sartre, *praxis* names the struggle in which humans engage to transform our situation in the service of a desired result. Put slightly differently, to engage in praxis is to actively negate the passive presence of material reality and rearrange it in service of some end. That end is both the future state of the world that we aim to bring about and the motivation for beginning the struggle in the first place. In this sense, the end aimed at in *praxi*s is "totalizing" insofar as it makes an environment intelligible, assigning a place and function to a situation's various components on account of the end aimed at.[9]

Readers familiar with Sartre's earlier work will notice a similarity to the freedom described in *Being and Nothingness*. There, Sartre argues that we never encounter brute reality, rather, a situation appears as "totalized" in terms of the free project one is carrying out. Due to human freedom, I never encounter brute nature or bare materiality, but always my own projects mirrored back to me through matter. For instance, "a particular crag, which manifests profound resistance if I wish to displace it, will be on the contrary a valuable aid if I want to climb upon it in order to look over the countryside."[10] Here, what one encounters depends on what one is doing and the future one wishes to manifest more than the material composition of the crag. This future serves as both the motivation for action—climbing *in order to* get to the top or engineering some machine *in order to* move the rock - and as the ordering principle of perception—that which thematizes my situation and presents the crag as an obstacle or an aid. As a future-oriented agent, my situation is never an experience of brute, meaningless nature, but always a human one that reflects my own activity back to me. Put in terms of the *CDR,* what is encountered in the crag is its significance within my totalizing *praxis*.

If *Being and Nothingness* was Sartre's attempt to describe the basic structures that operate within individual experience, what interests Sartre in the *CDR* are all of the structures beyond individual experience that condition and occasion human existence. Chiefly, this means investigating the way that our collective human struggle shapes the very conditions under which we discover ourselves as individuals. In other words, Sartre is interested in how entities like a society, a nation, a market, or a class, act upon the very individuals that compose them. In turn he examines how we confront and transform such ensembles through struggling against our material situation - be it individually or in more concrete groups like political parties, labor unions, or even mobs. This means that there is a double constitution of our action outlined in the *CDR*. On the one hand we struggle in a self-conscious way for things we want or need by acting upon and altering our material situation. On the other, through this very struggle, we tacitly contribute to the force that shapes the material reality we struggle against.[11]

Once we begin to think about *praxis* from the perspective of larger ensembles and not just individuals, the dual nature of *praxis* comes into focus. On the one hand, as we have seen, our *praxis* is our own struggle to bring about a state of the world in accord with our projects. On the other hand, we embody and contribute to the collective *praxis* of a larger ensemble whether or not we are trying to or even aware of doing so. Thus, when we confront a situation we don't just see our own projects reflected back to us. We also encounter the ends posited by the ensemble of which we are a part.

The Practico-Inert

Sartre's term for our built environment as one that contains and communicates the historical demands of our ensemble is the *practico-inert.* Rather than bare materiality or our own activity, our material situation bears the trace of the past *praxis* of countless others embodied and communicated through seemingly *inert* matter. As *practico-inert* our material environment thus functions as a "universal memory"[12]—preserving the activity of past humans such that it continues to project a future for those passively encountering it in the present.

Consider shopping for instance. To wander the aisles of the local big box home improvement store is certainly not to encounter a neutral materiality onto which we can project our own ends. The aisles suggest an activity, a speed, a cautious respect for the space of others, etc. In such routine activity, we passively receive directives communicated through the material of the hardware store that we need not invent and posit ourselves. What this means is that, when we are shopping, our individual existence unfolds in the presence of past others whose struggle and praxis works on us through the *practico-inert*. People engaging in similar activity elsewhere established the situation in which we find ourselves by establishing the norms of suburban shopping. The material of the store itself reflects and supports those norms, communicating them in the width of the aisles, the size of the shopping carts and the brightness of the lights.

This material situation constrains our decisions. Of course, we could decide to rob the store or stage a play in its aisles, but doing so would meet resistance beyond the material resistance of the floor and the lights. If we did this, we would be challenging a certain inertia present in the behavior of others who follow and enforce the norms communicated through the floor and lights. In this way, when we engage in seemingly individual action like shopping, we are not acting only as ourselves but also as agents of the *practico-inert*. We behave in the way that best suits its needs rather than ones we have had to decide on for ourselves. In going about our day-to-day customary routine,

we are turning ourselves into one of those people elsewhere, whose activity determines my present as a consumer and for an indeterminate number of other future humans.

Such collective *praxis* takes on material form in our built environment. By engaging material through *praxis* in order to deal with problems, we reshape material. But because the field we engage is not just natural insofar as it acts back upon human beings elsewhere and defines their future possibilities—in transforming our material situation we also affect the futures of indeterminate others. Thus, our individual *praxis* when taken in aggregate with other isolated but identical *praxis* shapes the *practico-inert* field which prefigures the shape of lives yet to be lived and choices yet to be made.

Counter-Finality

While wandering the aisles of a big box hardware store is a relatively benign example, the *practico-inert* also functions in a way that can completely undermine the possibility of individual *praxis*—indeed, collectively our *praxis* sometimes posits an end that runs counter to the possibility of individuals positing ends of their own. Sartre calls this "counter-finality." To illustrate the point, Sartre uses the example of Chinese peasants turning forest into arable land. From any farmer's individual perspective, the forest appears as an obstacle to their project of getting food from the soil. This project is "totalizing," allowing the material of nature to always already appear in terms of human ends and aims. For the farmer, trees appear as obstacles and "every tree growing in his field should be destroyed."[13]

From an outside perspective, however, it appears as though the peasants are engaged in an altogether different project—something more like collective suicide. Deforestation leads to flooding. Over time the main thing they collectively accomplish is the degradation of the forest and its root structure, thereby allowing the ensuing floods to carry away the soil—the very thing that make their agrarian lifestyle possible. This anonymous collective project is so well organized and so efficient, it is like a *praxis* of its own that works against each individual peasant. As Sartre observes, unlike nature, whose destruction is "imprecise, [leaving] little islands, even whole archipelagos " (163), the human caused deforestation is organized and devastating. "If some enemy of mankind had wanted to persecute the peasants of the Great Plain, he would have ordered mercenary troops to deforest the mountains systematically."[14] Thus, Sartre argues, the enemy of the peasants is not a natural disaster in the form of a flood, but an "inverted *praxis*" or "counter-finality" that works against the future posited by the individual farmers. Their collective *praxis* makes use of each peasant working in isolation and posits a future in diametrical opposition to the peasants' way of life. This future can only

be brought about by the systematic activity embodied in Chinese farming practices—it is human activity through and through, though no individual human wills it.

As we have seen in this section, to engage in *praxis* is to actively project a future onto matter; to be situated within the *practico-inert* is to passively receive an already suggested future through matter. We can only begin to engage in *praxis* from within a *practico-inert* field, but this means that a certain future has already been selected for us. In order to continue, I will have to be a worker of some kind. I will have to have a job. I will have to buy things. I will do these things in order to facilitate projects I have elsewhere that allow me to project a future of my own making.

However, in my individual struggle, by making use of human structures and objects, I embody and further the collective *praxis* of which I may be unaware except through my reception of it as an impending inevitability. In our case, as with the Chinese peasants, that future is a *counter-finality*—an end posited collectively that undermines the very way of life that calls it forth.

The impotence we feel when faced with the bleak future promised by climate change is an implicit recognition of this historical bind. As free beings capable of *praxis*, we ought to be able to transcend our material situation towards a future of our own choosing. We ought to be able to *do* something about global warming, for instance. But as historical beings, our environment is never simply material. It is an environment which specifies me and offers me a determinate future that I have not chosen but must make use of in pursuing my own ends. Passively accepting that future as the one in which I will exercise my freedom through *praxis* as a worker, a shopper, a capitalist or any other predetermined role means contributing to the impending disaster of global warming returned to me as *counter-finality*.

SERIALITY AND IMPOTENCE AS OBSTACLES: BUYING GREEN AS A SELF-UNDERMINING PRACTICE

By now it should be clear that if we want to avoid the worst impacts of climate change, what we need to deal with above all is the collective practice of humans that creates it rather than just the determinate effects. So how best could we do that? From the perspective of the western consumer, buying green is an attempt to alter the behavior of the historical ensemble to which we belong from within it. And it is popular! A 2015 poll of 30,000 consumers in sixty countries found that 66 percent of consumers tend to choose products from sustainable brands. Numbers are even better for young consumers with 73 percent of millennials (born 1977–1995) and 72 percent of Gen Z (under 20 **[AU: after 1995?]**) expressing a similar preference.[15] However, the

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so-called "30:3 phenomenon"[16] or "attitude-behavior gap"[17] causes problems for buying green as a practical solution to global warming. As observed in an oft-cited study, only about 10 percent of consumers who report a preference for such sustainable products actually purchase them.[18] As I will go on to demonstrate in this section, through a Sartrean lens, the attitude-behavior gap is produced by the way that we are positioned within the *practico-inert* field as a serial ensemble of shoppers. Our serialization in shopping creates the perfect conditions for betraying any previously expressed commitment to buying environmentally friendly products. This makes buying green an ineffective strategy if we wish to *do* anything about global warming.

On the face of it, trying to change collective behavior by recognizing oneself as a member of the ensemble and changing one's own behavior is not necessarily a bad idea. A family or a hockey team, for instance can change the way they behave collectively through the efforts of members who seek to change them from within. But, not all ensembles function the same way. Families and hockey teams are groups in which we participate according to reciprocal, albeit at times asymmetrical, relationships with other members. As members of such groups our roles are defined by what we can uniquely offer in service of the future that our groups aim to bring about—winning a game, or getting over the death of a loved one, say. Of course, these groups can be oppressive in their own ways. Families especially seem like a regular site of misrecognition and oppression. Teams can be dominated by bullies. I simply bring these up as an intuitive point of contrast with serialized ensembles. When reciprocal groups are functioning in a way that supports the freedom of their members, members are valued and recognized by others in the group for what they can contribute to this shared *praxis* and they likewise value others for reasons unique to them.

This is not the same as the sort of ensemble we belong to as shoppers. For Sartre, the collective activity that we engage in as shoppers is marked by individual isolation and impotence with respect to the aim of the group. In such a serial unity, we are not unified by active *praxis* but by a passive shared interest. We want the same thing to happen and we bring it about by passively allowing our *practico-inert* field to determine our future and our action.

In order to illustrate the concept, Sartre uses the example of a group of Parisians waiting in line for a bus.[19] Each person waiting in line has their own independent reasons for being there, and these are all tied to the more reciprocal relationships they have elsewhere.[20] Each person is an individual that does not worry themselves with the individual projects and cares of the others and in doing so, actively negates the possibility of a reciprocal relationship from forming at the bus stop. In Sartrean terms, for the Others at the bus-stop, we are not ourselves, *but Others*. Anyone who has waited for a bus certainly knows this—it is rare and difficult to make conversation

in such a situation because each person isolates themselves from each other and in doing so presents themselves as a demand that others do the same. In this way, "Everyone is the same as the Others in so far as he is other than himself." We are a collection of isolated individuals rather than a group characterized by reciprocity and the sharing of a common aim.

We are nonetheless, a unity. Indeed, from a distance, an observer would see an organized collection of bodies behaving in a coordinated way. The people in the line at the bus stop behave together—they line up according to the sequence in which they arrived at the corner until the bus arrives, at which point they board the bus in order. In this way, the people in the line are a "plurality of isolations"[21] passively organized according to the needs of the *practico-inert* object that acts on them and determines their fate—the bus system. We line up for buses not because doing so suits our needs (if we are late and it is clear the line is too long to get on the next bus for instance), but because it is the most efficient way for the bus system to carry out *its* project of moving people around efficiently. In waiting in line for the bus, we objectify and instrumentalize ourselves in terms of the *bus's project* rather than our own. We become a part of the *practico-inert field* by tacitly reinforcing the norms of the bus system for others by isolating ourselves from them.

In shopping too, we belong to a series.[22] When I am in the hardware store for instance, even if I have come there alone, there are other people with me. Though we may not think of ourselves as being together in any meaningful sense, we exist alongside one another and our behavior is more or less coordinated. We remain a respectable distance apart, line up at the cash register, and take turns poking through the various displays. We are all shopping and thus we belong to an ensemble of sorts—we are shoppers. In Sartre's words, rather than a coordinated group working together towards a common goal through shared *praxis,* we are unified as "plurality of isolations,"[23] a series of experiences "lived separately as identical instances of the same act."[24] We are all there, alone together, shopping for the same things in the same place. Our ability to do so depends on everyone observing the same norms of the hardware store, isolating ourselves from one another.

An important thing to notice here, is that we make use of these serialized ensembles all the time in order to pursue our own *praxis*. We objectify ourselves for others at the bus stop or the hardware store because doing so facilitates a project that matters to us elsewhere. In addition to being a serialized member of a collective, there are other parts of our lives where we are related to others in more reciprocal ways - as a family member or a professional, for instance. In these other groups, "everyone can regard himself both as subordinate to the whole and as essential, as the practical local presence of the whole, in his action." A family or a professional organization only works if

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it's members act on behalf of the group or in the name of the group from time to time. Doing so well differentiates you within the group for other members of the group and demonstrates your value within the group. You are able to play a role that is valued for its uniqueness and recognized as mattering by the other members of the group as valuable to the group.

At the bus station and in the hardware store, the opposite is true. In those contexts, you subordinate your identity to the material practicalities of waiting for the bus by turning yourself into someone who is substitutable for anyone else. In seriality, we make ourselves other than ourselves by making ourselves just like the others.[25] In doing so, we relinquish any say in the ordering principle of our behavior in the name of expedience and efficiency of the process of which we are a part. There may be too many people at the bus station to fit onto the next bus, for instance. Determining who will get a seat need not be the free project of the people at the bus stop. One need not consider the uniqueness of the situations of the various people in line. There need not be a spontaneous deliberative counsel formed to determine the most just way to deal with the scarcity of seats. The decision is already made by the norms of lining up which treat each individual in line exactly the same based on exterior and contingent facts about them.[26]

We make use of the anonymity at the bus stop or the hardware store to support the projects and identities we engage in elsewhere. We turn ourselves into the passivized parts of the *practico-inert* field that facilitate the smooth operation of the system in order to make use of the system. There is nothing inherently wrong with this alienation. It is a necessary structure of human existence given we live together and make history. Serialization and the inertia it continues only gives us problems if we wish to alter our situation and relationships with others.

The moment we want to change the norms of shopping or waiting for the bus, our serialization itself becomes an obstacle. For one thing, the collective of which we are a part expands to include all the other people who perform the same action at different times and places. I am no longer just alongside the 50–100 people at the big box hardware store or the 10–20 people at the bus stop, but the millions of people around the world who also need to buy things or take the bus. I am in fact, isolated bodily from these others who anonymously uphold the norms I aim to subvert. But even if I just tried to start with the people at the bus stop with me, the norms of waiting for the bus make this impossible. Trying to engage others at the bus stop will be ignored, or laughed off uncomfortably. The same thing will happen if I try to subvert the norms by behaving differently than others, "leading by example" by waiting for the bus in my own unique way. My action will be shown to be nothing more than a "mad initiative"[27] when others pretend not to see or hear. We effect our own isolation from one another at the bus stop so that the

bus system can run smoothly and we can all get to the places we need to go. My main obstacle to altering the course of the collective is this very isolation and alienation from others that is a condition for the smooth operation of the collective.

This poses a big problem for buying green as an ethical practice. The moment I start to think of my purchasing behavior as activity aimed at altering purchasing behavior itself is the moment that I realize my impotence. I no longer make use of the *practico-inert* unity and the identity it affects in me to get the things that I need. I am now trying to alter its course. If I want my buying behavior to be effective in this pursuit, it depends, not just on my action, or even the action of the few people whose purchasing choices I might actually be able to influence. Rather, it is determined by millions of others in millions of different times and places. It would be impossible for me to affect their action from my position within the series as just one more consumer. A Sartre writes: "I feel my impotence in the other because it is the other as other who will decide whether my action will remain an individual, mad initiative and throw me back into abstract isolation."[28] I realize my impotence when I realize that I depend on these others to whom I cannot speak or influence. I know that what matters here is not whether or not *I* buy the right products, what matters is that *enough* people do so. Whether I buy green or not, all I am doing is making myself other than myself - turning myself into one of the very aggregate of others who determine my eventual fate and that of the rest of humanity. I realize that my only power is to relinquish my power and submit to the eventual outcome of the *practico-inert* field.

Thus, through a Sartrean lens the attitude-behavior gap makes sense. When we shop, the isolation effected through serialization posits us as one among many anonymous others and only allows us to affect the behavior of others by behaving as such an anonymous other for someone else. These are the perfect conditions for the betrayal of any commitment. The *practico-inert* conditions under which I go shopping manufacture a weakness of will. Because, in the end, it will not be my will that decides my fate, but the will of the *practico-inert* object that objectifies me the moment I begin shopping. The most enthusiastic green consumer must recognize that even if they hold fast to their commitment, others will not. Even if we know we bought all the right things, we also know that we cannot prevent other people from turning our ethically motivated purchases into just another set of consumer choices no different from choosing the color of a sustainable, energy efficient lightbulb. In making our choice, we do so in the presence of these others and as one of them.

At the point of purchase, we are left with no real options. Buy green or do not. It makes so little difference as to have the effect of none at all. All that matters is if others buy green. As a result, the preference I might express

As Sartre writes…

in conversation with a friend or a survey taker for environmentally-friendly products or brands has no purchase here. I am someone else when I shop because I am positioned as an anonymous other within a serial unity. And so, I behave as an other, not as myself.

THE NUDGE AGENDA AND THE GREEN NEW DEAL: POLICIES THAT TAKE SERIALITY INTO ACCOUNT

By way of conclusion, in this section I outline two possible approaches to confronting climate change in light of the results of this chapter. If it is true that (1) global warming is the result of human *praxis* returned to us through the *practico-inert* in the form of *counter-finality,* (2) this means it is our collective behavior itself that must be addressed, and (3) our feelings of impotence in buying green are justified because *my own* buying itself *does not do anything* about the problem, then we have two options.[29] Option one: we can try to alter the behavior of the collective by manipulating consumers as a serial unity. Perhaps, by tweaking the contours and exigencies of the *practico-inert* field in which people shop, it is possible to alter consumption patterns enough to reduce our carbon emissions to net zero by 2050 and avoid the worst consequences of global warming. Option two: we can re-organize social relations such that it is possible for more people to actively posit and pursue a net-zero carbon emissions future instead of impotently hoping for it from the sidelines. The Nudge Agenda first articulated by Thaler and Sunstein aims for the former. Some promising aspects of the Green New Deal proposed in the United States Congress by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Ed Markey seem to aim for the latter.

This is not a chapter about policy. My goal in this section is not to provide a detailed analysis of data or specifics of plans. My aim here is simply to illustrate the way each plan conceives of the problem generally. More specifically I am interested in what each would mean for the average western consumer trying to answer the question we began the chapter with: "What can I do about climate change?" If, as I have suggested, our seriality is an obstacle to each of us finding answers to this question for ourselves, then seriality is something that we ought to try to overcome in the way we address climate change. Between the two, only the Green New Deal seems to recognize this. That said, of the two strategies under consideration, the Nudge agenda is by far the most popular solution among American policy makers and economists. This is not to be discounted. The Nudge is perhaps a necessary part of the solution, albeit a very small and far from sufficient part; after all, there will no doubt be people who just need to get to work or need light bulbs and have no interest in dealing with climate change. These people will have

to make use of the *practico-inert* field at their disposal in order to do these things. It makes sense then, to have that field be one which nudges consumers towards green choices to the extent that this is possible. But this does nothing to empower people to work towards a better future themselves. If pursued as the primary policy solution, it puts most of us out of the game.

Sunstein and Thaler,[30] the architects of the nudge agenda, argue for market-based solutions to social problems, including environmental ones. On their account, the most that governments ought to do is "nudge" consumers towards choices that might be better for them. On their account, every choice is presented within what they call choice architecture—the way choices are presented, framed and structured for consumers and producers.[31] Nudges intervene in choice architecture without actually changing the incentives in the situation or the set of available options. The idea is to manipulate the conditions under which consumers make choices so as to push them towards environmentally friendly behavior—precisely in the moment where they couldn't care less about their own behavior—that is, precisely when they are behaving as an anonymous, serialized, consumer.

A nudge involves altering "any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people's behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives. . . . Putting the fruit at eye level counts as a nudge. Banning junk food does not."[32] The idea is that given the opportunity, within the right choice architecture, enough people will choose to make environmentally friendly decisions to avoid the worst consequences of the impending climate crisis. Proponents of the nudge agenda, argue that such strategies are non-coercive and thus preserve the liberty and autonomy of consumers and producers. This makes them desirable over large scale reforms seen as coercive.[33]

In some sense this strategy makes sense given what we have uncovered about the nature of serialized unities in the *CDR*. The Nudgers seek to manipulate the *practico-inert* field and in doing so, to manipulate uninvested, anonymous shoppers into making pro-social choices. The plan recognizes the non-neutrality of the environment in which we make choices about what we buy and attempts to shape that environment in order to produce a desired result. Through a Sartrean lens, intervening in this way makes far more sense than trying to persuade people about what they *ought* to buy before they go shopping. As attested to by the attitude-behavior gap and consistent with our analysis of seriality and impotence, if we are going to change the behavior of shoppers, it is this anonymous, inauthentic behavior that we must change and it is not subject to persuasion.[34]

Ten years after Thaler and Sunstein first published on the idea, there is no shortage of attempts at putting the theory into practice. Results are mixed.

Many green nudges appear to be limited in their effectiveness, working in some contexts while not others. Ideological biases in some parts of the world are impediments to nudges that work elsewhere for instance. A nudge program around eco-labeling, reminding consumers which products are "green" designed to "capitalize on consumers' desire to maintain an attractive self-image through 'green' behavior" worked very well in parts of Europe, but failed in parts of the United States.[35] It has also proven difficult at times to get initially successful nudges to stick.[36] It is possible that those in charge just don't understand the psychology of serial unities well enough to manipulate them effectively with nudges in time.

At any rate, we are left with two options in trying to answer the question with which this chapter began. If we trust the Nudgers, we should feel fine passively going about our business, confident that whether or not we buy green, the technocrats in charge will nudge enough people towards the right answer to save the day. All the while acknowledging that as Sartre has shown, it makes no difference whether or not *I* buy green. All that matters is that *enough* people buy green. And from within a serialized position, my action does nothing to alter the future posited by the ensemble of which I am a part. To buy green then, is the same as doing nothing. It is out of our hands anyway.

If we do not trust the Nudgers, we are going to need to deal with our seriality, the real obstacle to our playing any historically significant role in altering the behavior of humans that produces global warming. A promising option are clauses in the Green New Deal[37] that suggest community informed projects around green energy sources, updating public transit, or cleaning up toxic waste sites. The bill itself is only a sketch of policy goals with very few specifics. This leaves it up to our imagination to guess what a post Green New Deal world might look like. Attempts to do so range from propagandistic speculative fiction[38] to lists of projects likely to find funding in each state.[39] What is common among them is a marriage of the fight against climate change with work—a sphere of American life that offers far more opportunity to engage in collaborative *praxis* alongside others in reciprocal relationships than shopping. Obviously, this is not true of all or even most work presently conceived. But inviting local input into what kinds of projects get funded and what jobs get created, at least in theory, allows workers and local environmentally concerned groups to begin to project a future of their own design.

Thus, rather than appealing to people where they have the least personal investment and the least at stake, where they behave as objects within a *practico-inert* field rather than humans working together towards a future, and where they make themselves other than themselves, the Green New Deal aims to involve people in reciprocal relations centered on collaborative *praxis*. Giving people something to care about and work for and recognizing them as caring workers means giving them the ability to posit a future

for themselves. It means allowing *praxis* to self-consciously aim at a future posited by local groups that show local results. Resisting global warming in this way means resisting the forces of atomization and serialization at the same time. After a Green New Deal, when we ask the question, "what can I do about climate change?" the answer could be as simple as, "get to work."

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    tail: Toward a social intuitionist framework of ethical consumption." *Journal of
    Business Ethics* (2020): 1–19.

NOTES

1. "Net zero" means that any carbon emissions are balanced by absorbing an equivalent amount of carbon.

2. National Center for Environmental Information. "NOAA study: Most of the years in next decade very likely to rank as Top 10 warmest years" *National Center for Environmental Information,* February 14, 2020. https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/news /projected-ranks.

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6. Rebecca Froese, and Janpeter Schilling. "The nexus of climate change, land use, and conflicts." *Current climate change reports* 5, no. 1 (2019): 24–35.

7. Indeed, as Matthew Ally has argued, Sartre can help us see how natural and human history are really no different at this point, Matthew C. Ally, "The Logics of The Critique" in *The Sartrean Mind* eds. Matthew Eshelmen and Constance L. Mui, (New York: Routledge, 2020) 363–78.

8. Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein. *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

9. Kimberley Engels, "From In-Itself to Practico-Inert: Freedom, Subjectivity and Progress" *Sartre Studies International* 24 no.1 (2018) 50.

10. Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness* trans. Hazel Barnes, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 620.

11. As Juliette Simont puts it, the Critique is a study of configurations "of human intersubjectivity affecting materiality and vice versa" (403) Juliette Simont, "Intersubjectivity Between Group and Seriality from The Early to The Later Sartre" in *The Sartrean Mind* e. Matthew C. Eshelmen and Constance L. Mui (New York: Routledge, 2020), 402–12.

12. Sartre, *Critique*, 123.

13. Sartre, *Critique*, 163.

14. Sartre, *Critique,* 163.

15. Nielsen, Cabinet. "The sustainability imperative: new insights on consumer expectations." *Nielsen Company New York* (2015).

16. Lamberto Zollo. "The consumers' emotional dog learns to persuade its rational tail: Toward a social intuitionist framework of ethical consumption." *Journal of Business Ethics* (2020): 1–19.

17. There is a small pile of literature addressing the attitude-behavior gap. For a recent overview, see Michal Carrington, Andreas Chatzidakis, Helen Goworek, and Deirdre Shaw. "Consumption Ethics: A Review and Analysis of Future Directions for Interdisciplinary Research." *Journal of Business Ethics* (2020): 1–24. There is some consensus that the problem arises from a lack of social pressure at the point of purchase. Notable from our perspective are Deirdre Shaw, Robert McMaster, and Terry Newholm. "Care and commitment in ethical consumption: An exploration of the 'attitude–behaviour gap.'" *Journal of Business Ethics* 136, no. 2 (2016): 251–65. Argues that care is an under-examined notion in the study of ethical consumer behavior. Zollo, "Consumer's emotional dog" emphasizes a shift away from methodological individualism.

18. S. C. L. Futerra, "The rules of the game: The principals of climate change communication." *Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs: London, UK* (2005).

19. Sartre, *Critique,* 256–70.

20. "The practical conditions of this attitude of semi-awareness are, first, his real membership of other groups (it is morning, he has just got up and left his home; he is

still thinking of his children who are ill, etc.; Furthermore, he is going to his office; he has oral report to make to his superior; he is worrying about its phrasing, rehearsing it under his breath, etc." Sartre, *Critique,* 256–57.

21. Sartre, *Critique,* 256.

22. Indeed, we are in series anywhere our conduct is governed by norms of habitual common practice. See Bruce Baugh, "From Serial Impotence to Effective Negation: Sartre and Marcuse on The Conditions of Possibility of Revolution" *Symposium,* 22, no.1 (Spring, 2018) 192.

23. Sartre, *Critique,* 256.

24. Sartre, *Critique,* 262.

25. Sartre, *Critique,* 262.

26. Sartre, *Critique* 260.

27. Sartre, *Critique,* 277.

28. Sartre, *Critique*, 277.

29. Note that these two options are policy options, not options for consumers *qua* consumers. Pursuing them already assumes that *praxis* is possible through political organizations like political parties. Whether or not this is the case and is far beyond the scope of this chapter.

30. Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge*.

31. Schubert, 2016.

32. Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge*, 6.

33. Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge.*

34. Thaler and Sunstein call this "system two thinking" or automatic thinking which is habitual, quick, unreflective and often biased. On their account this is the sort of thinking we perform when making quick decisions about what to buy. Often automatic decisions are in conflict with what they call "system one thinking," which is reflective, rational and slow, and more in line with the sort of thing we might endorse in conversation with others. Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge* 19–22.

35. Christian Schubert,"Green nudges: Do they work? Are they ethical?." *Ecological Economics* 132 (2017): 331.

36. Schubert, "Green Nudges."

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39. April Reese, "What a Green New Deal would look like state by state" *Popular Science,* February 27, 2020, https://www.popsci.com/story/environment/green-new-deal-state-by-state/.