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The Recuperation of Climate Engagement—A Dispositif Analysis of the Carbon-Tracking App *OneClimate*

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Abstract

Many of the most pressing issues of our time are consequences of the way our global economy is organized. As such they call for forms of collective engagement that transcend the level of individual efforts. However, many political imperatives addressing these problems are directed at the individual: Reduce your carbon footprint! Practice social distancing! Such imperatives undermine collective efforts by undercutting the search for a collective response with a direct call for individual action. Theoreticians like Slavoj Žižek or Shoshana Zuboff have pointed to capitalism's self-enhancing tendencies to appropriate resistive impulses as market opportunities. Current digital capitalism's appropriation strategies often connect to individualistic imperatives, and smartphone applications have become essential vectors in this. Carbon tracking apps, for example, are enticing individuals to cut down on carbon emissions by measuring their carbon footprint. We analyse one such carbon tracking app, OneClimate, by systematically stepping through its interface. Such walkthrough creates a data basis of screenshots and field notes that allows for a reconstruction of the app's structure and functions, the intended use, and the ideal user. Our analysis then exposes the app as a micro-dispositif, i.e., as a sociocultural artefact that aligns the self-governance

of individuals with the requirements of neoliberal governance. While providing us with practical means for individual little action for the better, it pushes aside the felt need for system-challenging collective engagement and theorising. Through this offering of a quiet conscience, our empathy with Gaia, our capacity to mourn its destruction and to feel guilty and ashamed for being part of it, is hijacked, reoriented towards the status quo, and further capitalized on.

Keywords: climate engagement, digital capitalism, carbon tracking apps, dispositif analysis, walkthrough method

Exposing the problem: The flattering invocation of carbon tracking apps

Anthropogenic climate change, driven by the burning of fossil fuels, is undoubtedly one of the greatest challenges humanity is currently facing. It is widely acknowledged that the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions is essential to mitigating its negative effects. Within the logic of a growth-based capitalist mode of production, the consequences of climate change could amount to the loss of an entire decade of economic growth (Tol, 2023). In many places, ecological transformation processes have therefore already begun, aiming to establish a more *sustainable* economy (Neckel et al., 2018). Alongside systemic restructuring—such as the transition to renewable energy or electric mobility—these transformation processes increasingly target individual consumers. What these approaches have in common is the goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by encouraging changes in individual consumption behavior. One such approach to lowering CO_2 emissions is *carbon tracking*. The premise is that individuals measure their carbon footprint, educate themselves on how to make meaningful changes, and take matters into their own hands.

However, framing emissions as carbon footprints and using apps to track them introduces propositions—a particular storyline—as to how we relate to climate change. The notion of the carbon footprint originates from the concept of the ecological footprint, developed by Wackernagel and Rees (1994). The ecological footprint aimed to quantify the productive land area required to sustain various categories of consumption. Although the framework theoretically allowed for the extrapolation of an individual's footprint, this was not its focus. Instead, Wackernagel and Rees (1996) primarily used it to compare the ecological impact of the average person across different countries or regions, relating it to the planet's ecological limits.

The carbon footprint, by contrast, gained prominence when it was popularized by the oil company British Petroleum (BP) in the early 2000s during a marketing campaign as part of its rebranding as *Beyond Petroleum*. In this reframing, the ecological footprint was reduced to a single dimension—CO_2 emissions—and individualized. While the carbon footprint could also be used to compare the emissions of nations, regions, products, or industries, its promotion by BP emphasized the calculation of personal footprints and their comparison to national averages. This marks a shift in the frame of reference that plays a crucial ideological role: it relocates responsibility for climate change from corporations and systemic structures to individual consumers, subtly reconfiguring climate action as a matter of personal rather than collective or structural change.

Adhering to the predominant methodology in psychology as it stands current environmental psychology examines the relationship between humans and their environment through the narrow

lens of individual behavior. As a behavioral science, moreover, it not only seeks to study this relationship, but also to influence it by identifying the conditions and factors that facilitate individual behavioral change. Along these lines, individual engagement against climate change is often reduced to the buzzword *pro-environmental behavior*. This is typically operationalized and measured through self-reported behaviors or behavioral intentions that researchers classify as environmentally friendly. In experimental studies, for instance, participants' self-reported consumption habits or willingness to donate are often used as indicators of their commitment to environmental causes (Nielsen et al., 2022). Consequently, the concept of the carbon footprint and practices of carbon tracking are particularly well-suited for integration within this strand of environmental psychology (see, for example, Li & Liu, 2024).

This line of research faces several methodological problems, though, most notably, the intention–behavior gap between self-reported environmental attitudes or intentions and actual behavior, as well as the discrepancy between observed behaviors categorized as pro-environmental and their measurable positive impact. While these immanent methodological problems are at least partially acknowledged, for example, by Nielsen et al. (2022), the individuo-centric fallacy itself remains largely unaddressed. What is lacking is an exmanent critique—such as the observation that these studies are conducted within a societal framework that already presupposes isolated, consumption-oriented subjects.

We therefore argue for a different kind of environmental psychology, the minimum requirement of which would be the genuine reflection on its tools—such as the CO_2-footprint —and their inherent epistemological limits. Following Bourdieu (1997), we must turn our tools of knowledge into objects of knowledge as well. Only by reflecting on the constructed nature of the concepts and terminology used in environmental psychology can researchers avoid falling prey to a form of everyday knowledge that inherently carries an ideological function, one that ultimately reinforces existing conditions.

On a semantic level, footprints signify the traces left by a walking or standing body. In this sense emissions are framed as byproducts of embodied individual actions, rather than as the outcomes of industrial production. Consequently, reducing emissions becomes primarily a matter of reducing the aggregate of individual actions. To achieve this goal, carbon tracking apps address users as autonomous agents, responsible for and capable of altering their own destinies. They promise to empower individuals to take responsibility, offering opportunities for active engagement in the fight against climate change. But does it truly make sense to conceptualize carbon-emitting industries, economies, or societies merely as the sum of individual actions? Can such large-scale social formations be transformed through abstentious personal choices? Or are we ensnared by the seductive simplicity of this flattering invocation?

Dispositif analysis of digital artefacts

To answer such questions, we examine the app *OneClimate* as an actual example of how such carbon tracking devices shape the way subjects relate to climate change. Apps have become omnipresent cultural artifacts in our daily lives, playing a profound role in scaffolding how we feel, perceive, and interact with our surroundings, as well as how we develop as subjects in the first place. In this sense, they must be understood as the dominant psychotechnics of our time. From a Foucauldian perspective, apps can be analyzed as *dispositifs* of power (Meister & Slunecko, 2021). A dispositif is a social formation or, to paraphrase perhaps one of the most cited

passages of Foucault (1980, p. 194), a net composed of a heterogeneous ensemble of discursive and non-discursive elements—such as institutions, architecture, rules, laws, scientific statements, or moral tenets—all of which are both constituted by and constitutive of power relations.

Deleuze (2016) identified two investigative strategies within Foucault's work, focusing on either micro- or macro-dispositifs. While a macro-dispositif can be understood as an abstract principle pervading the entire social field, micro-dispositifs comprise a heterogeneous multiplicity of techniques, objects, or social practices that subjectify individuals and thus serve strategic functions within overarching power relations. In this sense, the difference between micro- and macro-dispositifs is not merely one of size or magnitude; rather, it reflects a shift in perspective—from how individual elements or limited social fields are entangled with power, to how power relations permeate society as a whole. We aim to integrate these two research stances by first examining the operating principles of the *OneClimate* app as a micro-dispositif and then zooming out to connect the results of our analysis with the strategic functions of contemporary digital capitalism and its macro-dispositifs (Schaupp, 2019).

Dispositif analysis is a style of research rather than a strict methodological template; i.e., it draws upon and integrates other methodologies, such as discourse analysis (Bührmann & Schneider, 2012) or picture analysis. While dispositifs are permeated by discourse, they also encompass non-discursive elements. Thus, the concept extends discourse analysis with a material-technical dimension, focusing not only on symbolic representations or texts, but also on the architecture and functioning of digital artefacts (Schaupp, 2019).

For the analysis of apps and digital platforms, Light et al. (2018) proposed the Walkthrough Method. As a first step, it asks researchers to fully immerse themselves in the app's use, taking notes and screenshots during their practical engagement. In a second and more deliberate phase, researchers adopt a slower, systematic stance to analyse the app's discursive and non-discursive elements, i.e., textual, symbolic and pictorial elements, as well as the app's overall architecture and functions.

As an enactive-ethnographic method, the walkthrough entails the immediate engagement of the researchers as experimental users, employing their knowledgeable body and embodied sensitivity as key instruments of inquiry (Wacquant, 2015; Meister & Slunecko, 2021). In this process, moments of subjective irritation and the researchers' reflections on them are acknowledged, documented, and processed within the framework of qualitative-interpretive methodology. The methodological argument for treating researchers' irritations as part of the research material, or even as a starting point for scientific inquiry is particularly prominent in the *Viennese School of Cultural Psychology* (Slunecko, 2020). Admittedly, the perspective generated through this approach, as with any interpretive process, is specific and shaped by the positionality of the interpreters. In our case, this is a critical and theoretically sensitized perspective, informed by Foucault. Our findings do not rule out the possibility of idiosyncratic or even resistant uses of the app. However, exploring these would require a different approach, such as capturing current user interactions with the app through interviews, group discussions, or media go-alongs.

By methodically stepping through the interface, the walkthrough generates a data set consisting of screenshots and field notes. This enables researchers to map the app's structure and functions, identify affordances that preselect or constrain interactions between the user and the interface and thereby shape the app's habitual use (Møller & Robards, 2019). Beyond the technical walkthrough, Light et al. (2018) propose examining the app's institutional context, operating model, and

vision—drawing, for instance, from its self-representations on websites and app stores—to reconstruct what they term the app's "environment of expected use," i.e., its perceived purpose and its conception of the ideal user.

The context of *OneClimate*—a prototypical carbon tracking app

A search in the Google Play Store using keywords such as "Carbon Tracking," "CO2 Tracking," "Carbon Footprint," or "CO2 Footprint" yields a significant number of carbon tracking apps—e.g., *OneClimate*, *Klima*, *Carbon Tracker*, or *Capture*, to name a few. After an initial investigation, we selected *OneClimate* as our research object, as it proved to be representative of the field in terms of both its operational model and its appeal to the individual subject.

The app was developed by Climony GmbH, initially founded as a project of wattx—a company builder that is part of the Viessmann Group. Originally Viessmann is known for manufacturing heating technologies, including oil and gas heaters, as well as climate-friendly technologies such as heat pumps, solar panels, and solar heating systems. In 2023 Carrier Global acquired Viessmann's core business branch under the label Viessmann Climate Solutions. While the Viessmann Group still offers cold storage cells for the gastronomy and healthcare sectors, it continues its operations mainly as an investment company. In addition to developing the group's real estate and supporting its foundations, Viessmann invests in start-ups and digital technologies through its venture capital unit including wattx and other subsidiaries. While the founders of *OneClimate* market themselves as "Ecopreneurs", the business environment of *OneClimate* is anything but nonprofit.

The business model of *OneClimate* relies on affiliate links (e.g., to online stores for sustainable fashion) and on commissions earned from payments, made through the app, to a climate transformation fund called *OneClimate Fund*. This fund is managed by Milkywire, a nonprofit organization that administers various impact funds. Prominent contributors to these funds include companies like Klarna (a buy now, pay later service provider), Spotify (a music streaming platform), and Northzone (a venture capital firm). The fund supports projects for nature protection and restoration, decarbonization, and carbon dioxide removal. In return, contributing companies receive metrics that allow them to market their climate protection efforts and positive impact to their customers, business partners, investors, and employees. Additionally, contributors are even offered tools to integrate their impact metrics into their products, enhancing their value proposition. While Milkywire markets their funds exclusively to larger companies, *OneClimate* acts as an intermediary for individual consumers, allowing them to make contributions through the app. The app enables users to estimate their carbon footprints, offers guidance on reducing emissions, and provides mechanisms for offsetting them through monetary contributions. This operational model appears prototypical of the carbon tracking apps available on Google Play.

Branding OneClimate: Logo and title

The first impressions that users encounter in the app store are the app's logo and title. The latter, *OneClimate*, evokes a sense of unity, of community, of "us" It suggests that, as humanity, *we* are all part of the same ecosphere. That climate change affects everyone and that therefore every single

on of us must do our part to mitigate it. It may also instil a sense of urgency—since there is only one climate, we don't have a second chance. If we fail, everyone will be affected.

Figure 1: Logo of the OneClimate app (2024)

The *OneClimate* logo displays an incomplete circular, C-shaped form set against an off-white base. Inside, pastel colour gradients allude to a natural scene with water in the foreground and mountains behind—untouched by human presence, evoking harmony. The shape may be seen as side view of a breaking wave or as a bulging droplet that, contrary to its natural flow along gravity, performs a circular motion.

However, only a fragment of the landscape is visible inside this shape, with the off-white background blocking the view—most notably or annoyingly in the center. It feels as though an intangible force—visible only through its effects—intrudes upon this nature reserve, consuming it much like "the Nothing" in Michael Ende's (1984) *The Neverending Story*.

What might be the nature of this intrusion? Both wave and droplet are liquids prone to forming bubbles when a gas is trapped. Along this interpretive trajectory, the enclosed part of the background could be a bubble—but of what? If one follows the contour of the shape from its upper tip to its rounded base, it gives us the letter C, while the inner bubble suggests an O—albeit slightly open. The letter sequence CO can be interpreted as the chemical symbols for carbon and oxygen, as found in the CO_2 molecule. Now, the great invisible intruder is identified.

Interestingly, the interpretation can be reversed: Read from top to bottom, the letters give OC. Seen this way, the logo could also suggest a dynamic in which, as if by an external vacuum, a gaseous material—something potentially harmful, something that is in the way and obstructs the view—is drawn out of the picture. Here comes *OneClimate*—the supposed saviour of the pastel idyll.

Fig. 2 OneClimate logo version 1.2.4 (effective since 8th of May 2024)

Apps are quite adaptive, they have their biographies (Burgess & Baym, 2020), and one can usually learn a lot from the comparison of successive versions (e.g., Slunecko & Chlouba, 2021; Meister et al., 2025). A significant change we noticed during the time frame of our investigation concerns *OneClimate*'s logo: The idyllic landscape is gone, and the shape now stands against a dark, black-bluish background. The colours within the shape transition from light blue (top left) to a faint light green, then to yellow, and finally to a richer orange (lower right). If one interprets the half-round shape in the upper right section of the C as a celestial body and the lines in the yellow-orange section as clouds or layers of air, the colour gradients imply a transition from the coldness of outer space (or the exosphere) to the warm(ing) layers of the Earth's atmosphere. Here, too, the background seems to either intrude into the C-shape or be drawn out from it, as if through a vacuum. However, the once off-whitish gas has turned black—a change not necessarily reassuring, but one that adds more contrast to the logo overall.

Perhaps most importantly, the viewpoint has changed from a place still on the earth's surface to one beyond the clouds. The Earth—if it still is her—now more closely resembles a (heating) planet in the blackness of space. Tentatively, this could be interpreted as a manifestation of a greater detachment of the observer from the earth and its earthlings—a visual analogy to what, in the next subchapter, will be described as the app's appeal to monitoring and controlling.

Analysis of the micro-dispositif *OneClimate*

On this basis, we now turn to the essential threads of our analysis, illustrating each of them with screenshots and quotes from the app, its homepage, or Google Play.

The use of activist and revolutionary jargon

Already upon first contact with the app, the user is confronted with revolutionary and activist jargon and imagery. On *OneClimate*'s homepage, we are greeted by the slogan: "Act now, change tomorrow with OneClimate". The imperative "Act now" is a phrase commonly used in relation to climate change (e.g., the United Nations campaign "Act Now"). It invokes a political activist attitude, further emphasized by the subheader: "Join the climate action revolution, because together we can shape a sustainable future". Not only are we invited to join a revolutionary movement, but we are also promised a sense of togetherness or community.

Before we pursue this line of interpretation further, however, we need to consider something else: On Google Play, *OneClimate* addresses potential users with four key appeals: “Measure”, “Swipe”, “Understand” and “Monitor”. Such imperatives appeal to what we call a *strong subject*, i.e. to a quite detached subject—to an observer, to someone seemingly in control. The subject that is invoked here appears to be eager to quantify aspects of their life, to take and leave at his own will (“Swipe”), to attribute causal relationships, and to work with such attributions in an intellectual domain (“Monitor”), as if it were a supervisor or a captain in a cockpit.

Concomitant with these appeals, the *OneClimate* Fund is introduced with the slogan, “Together for Climate Protection and System Change”. At this point, the app shifts away from imperative language and adopts the style of political rallying—an empty rhetoric that addresses no one in particular. Given the business model of *OneClimate*, it would have been equally plausible to extend the series of imperatives with phrases like “Donate for Climate Protection!”, “Fund Climate Projects!”, or “Make Your Contribution!”. Instead, the call for monetary engagement with climate initiatives remains unspoken, replaced by an abstract appeal to a collective sense of community, protection, and change—an appeal without immediate consequences or implications for action.

How does this tie in with the activist appeal? The promotional text on Google Play provides a clue. There, the app promises to redefine the approach to climate change and to offer daily tips for "everyday activism." Through its tools, *OneClimate* aims to make "your climate contribution tangible and measurable – and easy!" By employing action cards, climate points, and climate projects, the app transforms "passion into real progress, directly on your mobile phone”. Only through the quantification of one's individual contribution to climate change and through gamification features like *OneClimate* points do climate protection and systems change become accessible, tangible, and manageable for the subject. It is only through this process of quantified and, on top of that, playful engagement that an affective response to the climate crisis—which could have otherwise turned into activism or resistance of a more traditional kind—can be converted into measurable progress.

Throughout the provision of tips and informational materials in the app, references to an imagined community—a climate movement—are repeatedly made. The decisive characteristic of such a community would be that its dedication to the “*decentralized* shaping of a sustainable future" (our italics)—a dispersed community, thus, and one quite different from collectively organized forms of political engagement as we traditionally have come to know them.

Figure 3: Example of raised fists in the imagery of OneClimate (2024)

At various points in *OneClimate*, we are shown three raised fists. Figure 3 shows that these fists seem to be somewhat associated with or illustrative of what the app calls climate handprint. Such a handprint is characterized, at another point, as "the good that we bring into the world" and as "independent of our emissions". It obviously represents a semantic echo and logical antipode to the talk of carbon footprints. This handprint is something that we *should* maximize (see fig. 3), and we *can* maximize it by setting and fulfilling digital goals, i.e., in-app tasks like completing tips or simply by interacting with content, and—most importantly for the app's business model—by making monetary contributions to the *OneClimate* Fund. In doing so, we gather "climate points", which document and keep an account of our good deeds. All of a sudden, the logic of reduction (of carbon footprints) is juxtaposed with a logic of maximization (of climate handprints). Users who are encouraged to minimize their negative impact on the climate by reducing their emissions are, at the same time, called upon to maximize their positive impact. This implicates a strong dichotomy between good and bad—that is, one's actions have either a bad or a good effect on climate change, but not both (e.g., the fact that using an app all the time or travelling by train instead of flying also contributes to emissions cannot be properly conceived this way). Moreover, it invites a logic of guilt (for one's footprint) and redemption (through one's handprint), all of which is processed through the app's mathematical scaffolding. It is only through this scaffolding that we will understand the connections necessary for systems change (see fig. 3).

Altogether, the revolutionary or activist jargon and imagery remain empty and abstract. Nevertheless, they divert attention from any substantive political understanding. What might at first glance appear to challenge the capitalist logic of accumulation is ultimately subsumed into it—or reined back in (e.g., the imperative to collect as many climate points as possible). By

succumbing to this logic, we remain confined within an individualized—"decentralized," as the app frames it—consumerist framework.

One specific instance highlights this inherent contradiction succinctly. To grasp it, one must first recognize the app's overall educational zeal of providing suggestions and informational materials on how to curb emissions—such as saving energy in one's household, traveling by train, or buying sustainable clothing. Immediately after reading about sustainable fashion, though, we are presented a link to an affiliated online store of a particular brand of such fashion. After all, the fists that were meant to associate the app with revolution and activism turn out to be the grasping hands of consumers and bargain hunters.

We're on a road to nowhere

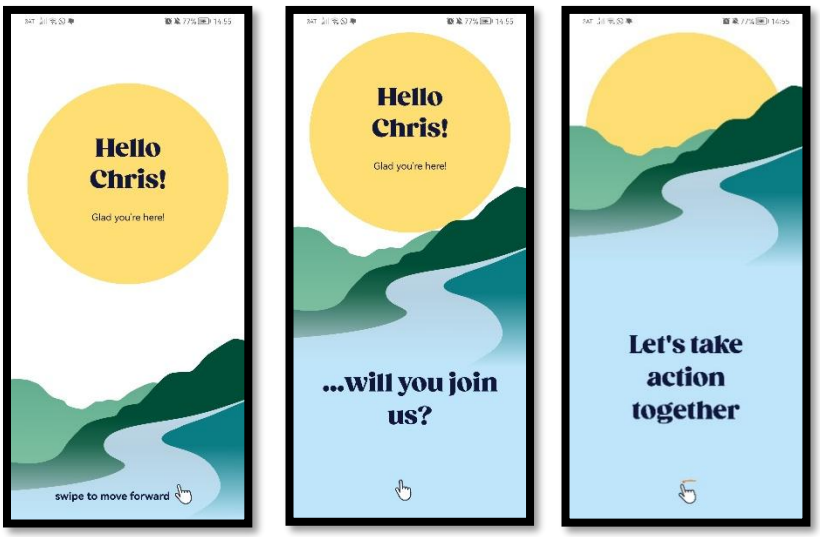

Figure 4: First impressions when opening OneClimate (2024)

Upon first entering the app, we are welcomed with a road-to-nowhere kind of imagery. In a yellow circle—presumably representing the sun—a welcoming message appears: "Hello Chris! Glad you're here!" (at this point, the German version of the app additionally commits us to "make the world greener, fairer, and safer"). After a swipe we are asked whether we are ready to join, and with the next swipe, this transitions into a call to action: "Let's take action together." Clearly, without having done much, we have already joined at his stage. This channelling of intimacy, mimicking a live conversation between physically present individuals, is a familiar technique in the world of apps (Schulz, 2019).

In the background of these textual messages, the pastel tones of the app's logo depict a path or road winding upward through a mountainous landscape, gradually shifting higher with each turn. The yellow circle above also moves slightly upward on the second slide, eventually disappearing halfway behind the mountains in the third, resembling a sunset. The upward-twisting road through a scenic landscape could be interpreted to symbolize the road to change or progress. However, if one extrapolates the road's course just a bit further, it becomes clear: it cannot climb forever; ultimately, this road leads to nowhere!

At first, our viewpoint on the road is positioned at the bottom edge of the screen, but it progressively shifts upward on the following slides. If we were to follow this road in the real world, the proportions of the road and mountains would need to change. Here, however, they remain static; the mountains appear equally distant in all three frames of figure 4, as if they were the proverbial carrot that keeps the donkey moving. I.e., the three images are drawn from a consistent vantage point, which only moves further up within the frame. We swipe in order to move forward, but we remain stationary. Just as its empty revolutionary and activist semantics, *OneClimate* remains completely vague in terms of the long-term goals and the kind of change that is wanted or needed. The imaginative metaphor is that of a road that leads to nowhere and allows for no progress—yet it certainly leads upward.

In front of the road, there seems to be an invisible boundary, and the expanding blue area beneath it appears inaccessible. This raises the question not only of where the road leads but also where it begins. If one strives for change, one must have at least some idea not only of where one is headed but also of where one comes from. To put all this in a nutshell: Lured by an empty appeal for systems change and an imagined community, users are ultimately addressed as isolated consumerist subjects emerging from nowhere. They are assured that nothing truly has to change, allowing them to remain within the logic of ever-increasing growth and consumption. Following this vein, the app's slogan, "Act Now, Change Tomorrow", can be re-read in a much darker light: Instead of acting differently today to shape the future, we may simply continue as always while postponing change indefinitely.

Feelings of guilt and shame

Another thread of our analysis examines how the app induces feelings of guilt and shame. This is particularly relevant in light of Foucault's (e.g., 1978, 2007) fundamental insight that contemporary power no longer operates by enforcing behavioural rules or by imposing a universal moral value system. Instead, it functions through the self-examination and self-inquisition of subjects, fostering self-governing—and self-enterprising—individuals (Rose, 1989, 1998). Rather than providing concrete answers for every life situation, the act of posing questions—the formula of problematization, to borrow Duttweiler's (2007) term—becomes the central technique of power. In this sense, totalitarian power is not the entity that has the right answer to everything, but the one that asks the right question in every situation (Žižek, 1989).

In *OneClimate*, questioning plays a significant role, particularly during the crucial moments of first entry, but also in everyday use: As *OneClimate*'s central feature is about quantifying the user's personal Carbon Footprint, when first on-boarding the app, we must answer several questions in order to get an initial estimation of our carbon footprint. This questioning inherently implies a certain level of guilt on the part of the user. Since everyone has a quantifiable CO_2-footprint and one's emissions can never be minimized beyond a certain irreducible residual, the questions serve merely to ascertain the magnitude of everyone's guilt.

Assuming that we log in from Germany, the app initially informs us that the average annual CO_2-consumption per person in Germany would be 11.2 tons. This figure serves as a benchmark against which our own values will later be compared. As greenhouse gas emissions caused by an individual are difficult to grasp as mere numerical figures, such a *national* reference point is indicative in order to determine whether the then calculated *personal* carbon footprint represents a high or low value. Only after this, our own personal CO_2-consumption value is determined through further

questioning, a questioning during which our personal footprint, constantly displayed in the top-right corner of the interface, is fluctuating with our answers.

The questions pertain to areas such as housing, mobility, travel, diet, and lifestyle. In the housing category, for example, users are asked how many people live in their household, the size of their home (in square meters), and whether they live in a single apartment or a shared flat. Alternative forms of living beyond typical living arrangements are not selectable. The CO_2-footprint, which updates with each step, increases significantly with fewer people inhabiting a living space. In this regard and others, the CO_2-footprint value behaves quite logically and predictably: the less space you occupy, the better your footprint. While it is possible to skip any question with a swipe, the app then informs us that in this case it proceeds with an average value. Someone who does not conform to the common living arrangements represented in the app (e.g., climate activists living in tents) would need to set their living space to zero to avoid being assigned this average value. Even when all questions are answered as precisely as possible, the final sum remains an approximation, composed of rough estimates. Moreover, the areas covered in this survey are focused on specific factors, such as mobility and living. This focus highlights certain aspects of life as the primary arenas for engagement against climate change.

Accompanied by visual feedback in the form of positive or negative emojis, the resulting personal CO_2-footprint is then once more compared to the national average. The scale of one's carbon footprint is not only expressed numerically but also visualized through three circles of varying sizes, representing the respective values of the individual user, the *OneClimate* community and the German national average. This introduces a logic of comparison and competition, in which the urgency to reduce one's emissions depends, at least in part, on one's position relative to average values. Put more pointedly, individuals inevitably find themselves in competition—both with the OneClimate community and their national average. As a result, the objective shifts from collective emission reduction to individual competition for a lower footprint—a dynamic that plays to narcissistic tendencies. Having a smaller carbon footprint than the national average allows one to portray oneself as virtuous—or at least less guilty than one's fellow citizens.

Later, when using the app, one is encouraged to answer additional questions to refine the estimation of one's emissions. Based on these results, one receives suggestions on how to reduce them and, more importantly, one is offered the opportunity to make amends by contributing to the *OneClimate* fund. Quantifying one's individual emissions and comparing them to a national or community average may induce shame and guilt, and the calculated carbon footprint seems to reveal some sort of inner truth for such feelings. In this context, it is interesting to note that one cannot change one's carbon footprint by completing the actions suggested by the app. Instead, one's emissions are assumed to be constant until one re-takes the survey. The survey, thus, can be seen as a form of confession practice. From the outset, we are addressed as sinners who must confess their misdeeds and atone—either through virtuous actions or by paying a kind of indulgence fee in the form of a donation to the *OneClimate* Fund. It is difficult to imagine a more compelling illustration of what Foucault sought to conceptualize as pastoral power.

We refrain from analysing and critiquing the projects launched by *OneClimate* Fund and similar organizations in this text. Such criticism of the billion-dollar business that capitalizes on guilt has recently grown louder—albeit in non-academic formats (e.g., Voill & Peraus, 2024). However, it would exceed the scope of this text. A crucial condition for the success of *OneClimate*'s business model must still be mentioned: the fact that 20% of all contributions made to the *OneClimate* Fund

are retained by the organization to finance its expansion and dissemination—the "Development and promotion of the app, so we can reach more people like you!", as the app puts it.

OneClimate as an accounting tool

The final thread of our analysis investigates how the app uses the carbon footprint as an accounting technique to quantify the adequate "indulgence fee". Notably, *OneClimate* exercises restraint in its visual design—especially with regard to photographic imagery. When addressing the user's carbon footprint, it doesn't tap into the imagery typically used to illustrate climate change (e.g. melting glaciers, industrial smokestacks, or burning forests).

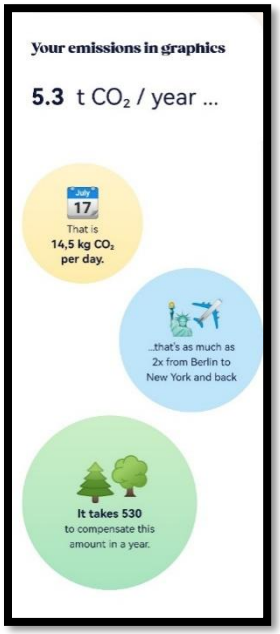

Figure 5: Emissions in graphics in OneClimate (2024)

Under the heading "Your Emissions in graphics" (fig. 5), one's CO_2-footprint is converted stepwise—from tons of CO_2 per year into kilograms per day, then into the equivalent number of round trips from Berlin to New York, and finally into the number of trees that would be required to offset these emissions. Each of these metrics is supplemented with fitting imagery: a calendar, the Statue of Liberty, and trees. By converting an abstract physical unit of one's CO_2 emissions into a countable number of long-haul flights and trees, the invisible gas gains a tangible form. However, these images do not represent indicators, effects, or complexities of climate change. Instead, they isolate and visualize only the quantitative dimension of CO_2 emissions, merely converting one number into another. This keeps the representation firmly rooted in the realm of mathematical abstraction—the realm of observing from distance.

Contrary to a possible first impression, these calculations and illustrations *appear* more scientific than they are. While they seem to draw on results from climatology or other empirical research, they are entirely removed from the explanatory models and research methodologies that have spawned such results. The app's tips and informational texts offer almost no insight into scientific

explanations of climate change. The "understanding" it wants to generate in its users is of a statistical kind, with measurable and calculated behaviour of isolated individuals as its epistemic pivot point. However, even this computational process has little to do with the meaningful application of statistical data, as an average value cannot be applied to an individual without considering variances, estimation errors, or measurement inaccuracies. It ties in with an understanding of "understanding" as self-quantification that the modern subject is already accustomed to and familiar with from other areas of life. Just as one tracks steps, heart rate, or sleep duration, one now also quantifies one's impact on the climate. Strikingly, the form of self-quantification at play here simultaneously adopts the quantitative empirical discourses as established truths while, at the same time, it blatantly violates their inherent methodology and scientific standards—a paradox that is not specific for carbon tracking but holds for many forms of self-quantification.

Such contradictions are often met with claims of 'accuracy' and 'precision'. For instance, *OneClimate*—like many other carbon trackers—promises (e.g., on its website and on Google Play) that its carbon footprint calculator provides a *measurement* of one's emissions. As long as no sensors or automated algorithms for tracking one's CO_2-footprint exist, however, verbal questioning remains the indispensable basis for such measurement. While the survey form of current carbon trackers is—from a perspective of power—effective at implying individual guilt, it always remains a rough approximation by nature and its accuracy and precision can always be called into question. It is conceivable that, in the near future, behavioural data collected by digital platforms and tracking devices could automatically provide an estimation of an individual's carbon footprint. The accuracy of such an automated technical solution would be more difficult to challenge. However, as in other fields of self-tracking, where sensors or other automated solutions already exist—such as heart rate or sleep tracking—the mentioned methodological fallacies persist. Subjects are inundated with references to the quantitative dimensions of their actions or behaviours, such as 'caused emissions' or 'sleep duration', which often run counter to the scientific methodologies underpinning their claims of validity. From a dispositif-analytical perspective the question is not whether these measures are precise or scientifically valid—which they often are not—but rather that the specialized, quantitative-empirical discourses from which they emerge can function as powerful proliferators of 'facts' or 'truths' despite such contradictions. These very contradictions may even be essential for keeping subjects trapped in a loop of endlessly striving for greater "accuracy" and "precision"—ideals which, as we alluded to in our interpretation of Fig. 4, can never truly be attained.

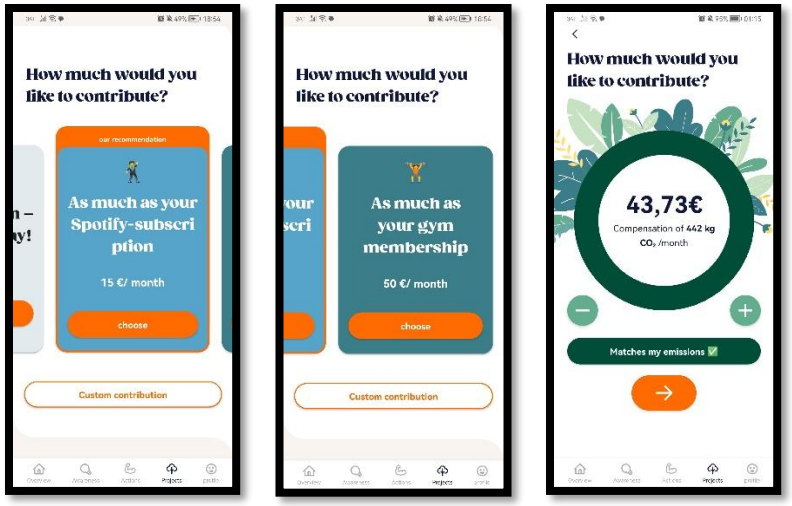

Figure 6: Options to contribute in OneClimate (2024)

In the main menu a blue tile with the title “Support climate protection” leads us to a sub-page where we can contribute to the *OneClimate* Fund. *OneClimate* asks, "How much would you like to contribute?" and immediately offers three suggestions: a minimal contribution of two euros, an amount equivalent to a Spotify subscription, or the cost of a monthly gym membership. The second option is highlighted with an orange border and labelled as "our recommendation."

The presumed users seem to be a consumer of digital streaming services (Spotify) with the financial means for such monthly expenses. The comparison brings to mind one’s, perhaps regular, expenses for more mundane activities than fighting climate change—a reminder that may trigger feelings of guilt. Apart from these suggestions, there is also a "Custom Contribution" option that allows for paying a self-designated amount. As in the app’s explanation of *OneClimate* points, also contributing to the fund is thereby presented as a collective activity where everyone plays their part according to their means. Consequently, there is no fixed price for a *OneClimate* subscription, and one can set one’s own amount, albeit within certain constraints (the price can only be changed in five-euro increments). Since the custom price can’t be entered directly and can only be increased or decreased by manually clicking on a minus or plus sign (as seen in fig. 6), customizing the contribution feels awkward and arbitrary. Therefore, one is drawn to press the button labelled "Match My Emissions” which automatically calculates the amount necessary to fully offset one’s monthly emissions through the fund. Here, the app establishes a direct connection between the *measurable* and *convertible* physical units of one’s emissions and the compensatory payment to be made.

The app works as an accounting tool enabling us to estimate our emissions as carbon footprints and to compensate them with good deeds in the form of equally abstract climate points supposedly documenting our carbon-handprint. This level of abstraction is necessary to compare the two sides and make the solutions put forward by *OneClimate* plausible. We become accountants who keep track of our emissions and educate ourselves on how to off-set them by completing virtual goals and by monetary payments. We are addressed as both virtuous and guilty, but anyway responsible and rational subjects who care for the environment by making informed decisions. It is through

such addressing and epistemic scaffolding that other—more affective, resistive and collective—reactions to the climate crisis are petered out and re-cast.

Zooming out: The recuperation of climate engagement

Both the territory of a state and its inhabitants are no longer seen as divine endowments entrusted to a ruler for mere administration. Instead, they are perceived as entities to be governed by influencing a complex interplay of variables. The mere exercise of power as an end in itself has been replaced by a form of governance aimed at increasing the quantity of natural and human resources and improving the qualitative properties of land and people. For instance, the fertility of agricultural land must be ensured, adequate housing provided, and the health and education of the population maintained. Within this framework of governance, the population is treated as both: an independent subject and an object of power (Foucault, 2007).

This form of governance now extends to the sustainable use and development of human and natural resources and, thus, to climatic changes, as these changes affect a territory's characteristics and its inhabitants (e.g., they may result in fewer but more intense rainfalls, agricultural yield fluctuations, or an increase in heat-related deaths). To put it in a nutshell: climate change and its consequences pertain to what Foucault (2007), in his lectures on the history of governmentality, termed *issues of population.* Such issues can no longer be directly addressed through disciplinary measures. Instead, contemporary governance requires relating to and incorporating science as a kind of intermediary authority—intertwining power and self-techniques. Only in this way, i.e., "oriented towards a knowledge supposedly free from state influence, not obviously supported by ideology, can our private spheres, on which no public power should be exercised anymore, still be regulated in a way that makes them fit into in the neoliberal state of affairs" (Slunecko, 2024a, p. 364).

Climatology thus becomes one of the specialized scientific discourses that are of relevance for the governing of populations. When it comes to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, such modern governance employs a dual approach: fostering individual self-regulation and instantiating top-down societal restructuring. Both strategies, however, remain within the boundaries of the current macro-dispositifs of digital capitalism and its ecological renewal. For instance, replacing internal combustion vehicles with electric cars preserves the primacy of circulating individual transportation, regardless of whether this is achieved through subsidies for electric vehicles or bans on combustion engines.

Since climate change is a phenomenon resulting from a highly complex interplay of variables, it is difficult for those in power to address the problem with simple direct or even collectivist measures—especially if such measures contradict the functional logic of the global economy. Instead, it is particularly suited for dispositifs of power that activate individual self-regulation. This is precisely where the concept of the carbon footprint comes into play. By virtue of it, and instead of external behavioural regulation through laws or disciplinary sanctions, individuals internalize a mindset for climate-friendly behavior of some sort: they calculate their emissions, compare themselves to others, and adjust segments of their behaviour accordingly. This is done in a way that does not at all challenge the (neo)liberal credo of free market circulation and non-intervention. Rather, emission trading is enabled within a specialized market, and emissions are assigned a price in order to be imaginary offset through compensation payments. Carbon-tracking apps thus function as an intermediate of power and self-technologies, eliciting specific forms of subjectivation through a reciprocal process in which users are simultaneously objects and agents

of self-governance. Engagement against climate change is framed through such apps within the more general context of self-optimisation. Self-optimisation is one of the most important ingredients of identity management under conditions of globalisation and neo-liberal capitalism (Nehring & Röcke, 2024). It relies on an eclectic quantification of individual aspects of life, subjecting them to a logic of either increase or reduction. Rather than prompting substantial transformations of one's behaviour or worldview, the subjects addressed with the imperative to self-optimize are encouraged to become more resilient and more productive, but only within the frame of the demands of neoliberal work life. Incorporating small checklists of carbon tracking into other fragmented routines of self-optimisation will leave the bigger picture undisturbed. Such simple solutions may make us feel good (and, perhaps, look good for others) and "may address symptoms, but not the root causes, of our collective complex predicament" (Machado de Oliveira, 2021, 23).

Self-tracking - a deceptive gift

Günther Anders (1989) introduced the term *promethean gap* to describe humanity's inability to fully grasp the negative consequences or destructive potential of its own technological creations. He argued that, although our cognitive and emotional abilities are adaptable in principle, they lag behind the rapid pace of technological advancement. In this sense, we are outpaced by our own technological developments. Anders developed this argument in relation to the atomic bomb—which, of course, is a striking example—but it also applies to everyday technologies: The mass production and widespread use of computers, smartphones, cars, planes etc. contribute immensely to climate change, the destruction of ecosystems, and human suffering. From this perspective, the concept of the ecological footprint and the promotion of carbon tracking can be understood as attempts to bridge the promethean gap by equipping individuals with the cognitive tools to conceptualize the negative effects of carbon emissions resulting from their use of everyday technologies. However, as we have sought to demonstrate in our analysis, the implementation of these concepts in apps like *OneClimate* remains firmly within the confines of the consumerist society that produces these machines and generates the demand for them. Therefore, a more appropriate question arises: do such tools and forms of conceptualization not, in fact, contribute to our inability to perceive the negative effects of technological progress? Or, to put it more pointedly: do they not, rather, further widen the promethean gap.

While Anders (1989) advocated for actively developing humanity's ability to perceive such negative consequences, he remained deeply critical of the role of what he referred to as *human engineering*. In his view, human engineering aims to enhance— or at times even reverse—humanity's evolutionary makeup, to correct its supposed misconfiguration, and to reassemble it in a way that makes it more adaptable to the world of machines (Anders, 1989, pp. 57–58). It represents humanity's attempt to elevate itself to the status of the machine, an effort partly driven by what Anders refers to as *promethean shame*, i.e., the shame we feel in the face of a technology that we have created, but which has surpassed us. The idea suggests itself, that what Anders (1989, pp. 44–58) described as human engineering today also encompasses discourses and dispositifs of self-quantification and self-tracking as fundamental psychotechnics for entering the playing field

of the technical.[1] In that sense, carbon tracking apps are more than mere marketing tools or profitable indulgence schemes through which tech start-ups cultivate our guilt only to exploit it. In a very basic and hard-to-dismiss way—hard-to-dismiss because it appeals to our need for identity— tracking tools such as *OneClimate* help divert our attention from the magnitude and complexity of the current climate catastrophe and the broader multi-crisis we are facing. Their effect is not to enhance, but to diminish our ability to grasp the monstrosity of our technological-industrial lifestyle and its looming consequences.

As our investigation revealed, *OneClimate* is not only a prototypical example of carbon tracking apps but also reflects the logic of other greenwashing marketing campaigns—such as BP's early carbon footprint initiative. It first induces and then capitalizes on latent feelings of guilt. Intentions to act on climate change are confined within a strictly individualized framework—aligned with the epistemic prerequisites of neoliberalism. The conversion into numbers and quantifiable data lends the entire process a pseudo-scientific and rational veneer—another such prerequisite. In this way, potential critical or resistant impulses are channelled into daily routines of self-quantification—and thereby neutralised. The result is the emergence of subjectivation and practice forms that can be readily reappropriated by the powers that be.

From a dispositif-analytical perspective, the primary question is not whether carbon tracking and offsetting are effective or efficient solutions to the climate crisis. Instead, the focus lies on interrogating the self- and world-relations that they promote. The emphasis on individualized consumption (and its reduction) as the linchpin in the fight against climate change is not only effective in diverting isolated subjects from potential collective, i.e., political efforts, but also enables digital capitalism to tap these practices as new resources. Carbon tracking apps are both products and instruments of digital surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019). They redirect climate engagement, channelling it back into forms of exploitation. Ultimately, they commodify such engagement, monetizing it through offset payments or redirecting it toward the consumption of more sustainable products. The logic of ever-increasing growth and consumption remains entirely unquestioned. Impulses of climate engagement, perhaps even proto-political dissidence are *dis*oriented and *re*oriented within an individualist and consumerist framework—they are recuperated.[2] *Recuperation*—a notion developed by Guy Debord (1970) and the Situationist International—refers precisely to the process of commodifying discontent and simulating rebellion. It is, not least, this continual demonstration that there is no outside to capitalism which—at least in our narrative—insidiously contributes to the growing unease within, and about, digital culture.

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[1] This involves not merely the mapping of bodily functions, but also identifying the threshold of the barely tolerable, training oneself to endure it, and eventually pushing beyond it in a more or less phantasmatic attempt to bypass the limitations of our physicality (Anders, 1989, p. 47).

[2] Another topical example of recuperation is developed by Slunecko (2024b).

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