

LABELLING LOCAL WOOD: ON THE VALORIZATION OF REGIONALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY IN TIMBER TRADE

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»Local« wood – an object of economic and ethical ambitions.

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ABSTRACT: In the face of climate change and a common call for environmental protection, regionality and sustainability turn out to be as symbolic as monetary values in economic contexts. In order to highlight and certificate these ethical ambitions, an international programme of forest certification has established a label that aims at distinguishing wood as logged and processed within a specific 'regional' area. The article scrutinizes the implementation of this label in the timber trades and deconstructs how the actors involved establish a link between ethical and economic concerns. By describing their everyday perspectives on the micro level, the article reveals shared aims (evoking credibility) and ideals (establishing sustainable action within regional markets) but also contradictions (efficiency and range). It shows that the label borrows from established designation procedures (such as Cultural Heritage, Geopark, Geographical Indications), and yet has its own logics linked to the properties of the material wood and spatial relations that constitute and confine the label's actors network.

KEY WORDS: declaration of origin, timber trade, sustainability, regionality, ethnography, material culture analysis, southern Germany

Označevanje lokalnega lesa: O vrednotenju regionalnosti in trajnosti v trgovanju z lesom

POVZETEK: V času podnebnih sprememb in pozivov k varstvu okolja imata regionalnost in trajnost v gospodarstvu tako simbole kot tudi finančen pomen. Da bi izpostavili in certificirali etične prakse v trgovanju z lesom, je mednarodni program certificiranja gozdov razvil posebno označbo za les. Ta označuje, da je les posekan in predelan na določenem območju. Članek proučuje uvedbo in uporabo označbe v lesnopredelovalni dejavnosti in odkriva, katere etične in gospodarske pomisleke imajo akterji v tej dejavnosti. Na podlagi opisov vsakdanjih izkušenj posameznih akterjev sklepamo, da gre pri certificiranju lesa za skupne cilje (vzbujanje kredibilnosti), ideale (vzpostavitev trajnostnega delovanja na regionalnih trgih), pa tudi protislovja (učinkovitost in doseg). Označba lesa izvira iz uveljavljenih praks znamenja, na primer kulturne dediščine, geoparkov in drugih geografskih označb, ima pa tudi svojo logiko. Označbe lesa izkazujejo lastnosti lesa in razmerja, ki sestavljajo in zamejujejo označbeno mrežo akterjev.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: označevanje porekla, trgovina z lesom, trajnost, regionalnost, etnografija, analiza snovne kulture, južna Nemčija

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1 Introduction: Aiming to understand the logics of labelling in timber trade from the actors' perspectives

»It counts if you have a label on your product saying 'wood from the Black Forest' as the name 'Black Forest' already says something. There are many regions that express more with their names because the names distinguish them and make them special.« – The man saying this to me in an interview in autumn 2021 runs a sawmill in the Black Forest, a region in southern Germany known for its hills and forests (Mr. E. 2021). With almost 50 employees, he is one of the medium-sized sawyers in Germany and yet he has acquired a reputation far beyond the region: he processes only high quality wood which he tags with the label »Local wood from Baden-Württemberg« (Ger. »*Heimisches Holz aus Baden-Württemberg*«). The label names the wood's origin in Baden-Württemberg, a federal state in the southwest of Germany and reinforces this spatial ascription with the adjective »heimisch«. There is no English word that translates this fully, »native«, »homely«, »local«, »domestic« or »indigenous« only name parts of the adjective's meaning: by declaring the wood as »heimisch« the label invokes associative and affective connotations that refer to a certain delimited (spatial, ethnic, familiar etc.) origin and correspondingly shared knowledge, experience and norms. »Heimisch« is as inclusive as exclusive – an attribute that is as attractive as it is repulsive. Its intentional use indicates a central appeal for ethnographically arguing cultural analysis, as well as the questions about its structural implementation and local realization.

The use of names of geographic spaces to label products provides both emotional and economic valorization: these labels refer to images of seemingly delimitable regions which are known beyond the region and thus make them valuable for various economic sectors such as regional specialties or tourism (Fonte and Papadopoulos 2010; May 2016; Welz 2016). The regional label »Heimisches Holz aus ...« borrows from established designation procedures (such as Cultural Heritage, Geopark, Geographical Indications), and yet has its own logic. It was established by the German association of the internationally effective »Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification Schemes« (PEFC) within a bottom-up revision process and aims not only at the valorization of regionality but also at the valorization of sustainability in timber trade. With its claim to sustainable economic activity, the label references one of the central ethical values of the present. This is an interesting agenda for an ethnographic cultural analysis that this article discusses under the following question: how are economic and ethical values linked in the practices of labelling regionality and sustainability in the timber trade?

In the following, I will first map the results of my ethnographic research that I realize as a long-term study in the thematic area of 'Wood and Crafts'. Here, with concrete view on the labelling of regionality and sustainability, certain practices and interpretations within the multi-layered actors network become relevant. I condense them into four core practices which uncover the wide range of objectives, contradictions and conflicts that accompany the processes of labelling of wood. On this basis, I demonstrate in the discussion how the material's size and physical shape, how the valorization of 'region' and 'Heimat' as well as spatial logics shape the interpretation and (limited) use of the label. In this way, I deconstruct the conceptualization and creation of regionality, sustainability and trust in the timber trade.

Accordingly, neither my research nor this article seek to evaluate the effectiveness of PEFC or to compare it to its competitor, the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), since the relevant scientific work was carried out by other authors and subjects (Paluš et al. 2018; Michal et al. 2019; Purwanto et al. 2019). In distinction and addition to this, I do not choose a quantifying research approach but take the emic perspective of the actors that establish and apply (or avoid) the PEFC regional label which has not yet been subject of any scientific work. It is likely that this gap is due to the fact that the label is neither long-established nor widely spread. However, this does not reduce its attraction for cultural analysis, which assumes that only in small constellations of everyday life can 'the whole' of culture be found and understood (Löfgren 1981).

In taking this approach, I locate my work within the interdisciplinary research field on certification and valuation (Helgesson and Muniesa 2013). I connect to cultural analyses of labelling practices, particularly prominent to the works on the distinction of cultural heritage (e.g. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995; Bendix and Hafstein 2009; Tauschek 2013; Adell et al. 2015). The references become even more concrete with regard to the certification practices of culinary specialties through the EU system of geographical indications. In their analysis, scholars in cultural anthropology including myself have already demonstrated the added value of an actor-centered ethnographic analysis in an otherwise predominantly economic-legal discourse

(Tschofen 2007; Fonte and Papadopoulos 2010; May 2013, May 2016; Parasecoli 2016; Welz 2016; May et al. 2017).

And yet, my study of the PEFC regional label opens up new perspectives in this discourse. Central here is the role of the material object to be labeled: wood. As a renewable raw material that stores carbon dioxide, wood is an attractive material in contemporary culture (May 2018, 2021). This attraction causes my motivation to research the labelling of wood as »heimisch« right now. In 2021, an emotional debate about the demand, export, and scarcity of wood flared up in the timber sector, media and politics (May 2022). The question of how the timber trade is spatially and ethically (in sense of an anthropology of ethics; Faubion 2011; Laidlaw 2014) organized is at the beginning of my ethnographic research for this paper, in which I describe the complexity of timber trade on a micro level starting from the specific properties of the material and its PEFC regional label.

2 Methods: Realizing an ethnographically based analysis of material culture

In the analytical approach of cultural anthropology »culture« is understood as »the whole way of life« (Williams 1960, 91) and therewith as (Korff 1978; May 2020): the continuously produced result of social practices, meanings, and relations; the historically conditioned, value- and orientation-giving precondition of everyday life. In this sense, the purpose of a cultural analysis is to elaborate, how values and thoughts are organized and correlate with practices and social constellations (Löfgren 1981).

Methodologically, this means taking an emic perspective and describing actions, interpretations, relations and material formations from the actor's perspective in contexts of everyday life. Interviews, observations and media data serve as sources for ethnographic »thick descriptions« (Geertz 1973) of the micro level from which conclusions can be drawn about larger social constellations at the macro level.

In my research, this methodological approach is internalized. Since 2016, I have been conducting ethnographic research in the fields of 'Wood and Crafts'. In sense of contextual material culture research (Beck 1997; König 2012; May 2021) I place the wood into the focus of my work. Starting from concrete material phenomena, I conduct cultural analysis in the fields of politics and economics. As these fields are complex and multi-layered, the method of »studying through« (Wright and Reinhold 2011) proves to be suitable to understand practices and relationships of actors through all layers of their shared network as well as social power relations, economic logics, and long-term effects on ethical values (Adam and Vonderau 2014; Lowenhaupt Tsing 2015). With this aim, I »follow the material« (Marcus 1995) into concrete fields of work – like the network created by the PEFC regional label.

To date, this regional label is used by 38 companies, 37 of which are located in southern Germany (<https://pefc.de>). That dictates the geographical scope of my study: I have conducted six guided narrative interviews and field visits in forest administration, sawmills, wood industry and manufactory in southern Germany since 2017, mainly in 2021. The companies and actors are not randomly selected. Their selection follows the methodological logic of studying through. It is not the number of interviews but the functions of the actors in the network that make my conclusions plausible. The interviews last between 35 and 120, on average about 50 minutes. Due to the pandemic, I conducted two of the six interviews online and four on-site at the companies and workshops, which included longer stays and observations. Following this, I took notes and transcribed the interviews. I reviewed the data set several times, then coded and categorized it. Together with the background of about 40 narrative interviews and observations as well as a continuous media analysis from the last five years, this forms the basis for the following presentation of results and discussion, in which I trace the perspectives of the actors on their everyday work.

3 Results: On the practices of labelling locality and sustainability

In order to do full justice to the complexity of actions, interpretations, evaluations and relationships that I identified during the interviews and observations in the field, I will outline my study's results in four clusters of practices. By practices I mean, referring to the philosopher Theodore Schatzki (1996, 89), a »nexus of doings and sayings« within the timber trade.

I use the working description »timber trade« in a broader interpretation than the actors in my field, as I understand »trade« as a central cross-cutting dimension of the actors who produce, process, or deal with wood. This perspective should highlight the interactive relatedness within the local field which is connected by buying and selling wood (products) but not reduced to that. In doing so, »local« and »regional« cannot be consistently distinguished: I do not conceive of them as distinct physical quantities, but as frames of interaction and spaces of attribution. I use »local/ity« primarily as a reference for actions within the spatial network whereas »region/al/ity« to denote the label and its geographical orders.

I condense the results of my ethnography-based analyses of material culture into four aspects, which I link to four key actors, to highlight that labelling practices are much more complex than a simple awarding of qualifications. They appear as practices of negotiations and relations in a multi-layered network of actors, in which territorial implications, the material's size and physical shape, (lack of) knowledge and the actual socio-cultural claims for sustainable actions play a crucial role.

3.1 Creating need and narrative

PEFC is the acronym for Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification and the name of an international organization that claims to aim »at documenting and improving sustainable forestry with regard to economic, ecologic and social standards« (PEFC 2021, 1). PEFC is divided into 55 national organizations that report to the international PEFC Council, which in turn expects to revise national standards every five years (PEFC 2015).

In 2013, PEFC Germany initiated such a standard revision process to establish cooperation between stakeholders from forestry, timber trade, the paper industry, environmental associations, trade unions and academia (PEFC 2014). The revision took place over a period of one and a half years and combined working group meetings with conferences and online surveys. During this process, certification criteria were discussed and new ideas were launched – including: forest Christmas tree standards, criteria for certification of recreational forests and the implementation of a regional label, which at the time was called »Wood from the Region« (Langhans 2014, 31).

Seven years after this standard revision, I met the managing director of PEFC Germany for an interview (Mr. T. 2021). I asked him about his experience with the label, his role in his daily work and how the initial procedure took place. In this interview it became clear that in addition to the need for a regional label, the narrative of 'local wood' was developed during the revision process: The wish for a regional label was endorsed by the forest owners. They complained that neither 'small' sawyers nor artisans were interested in a 'normal' PEFC label.

To understand this, it is necessary to outline the logic of certification systems in timber trade; here in the words of Mr. T.: »Labels are based on the consumers' bad feeling when they buy a wooden product and relate it to tropical forest destruction, illegal use and overexploitation.« In his experience, however, customers do not have a »bad feeling« when they buy from regional crafts as there was a »basic trust that the craftspeople and small sawyers only process wood from the region«. This trust that customers place in small workshops and sawmills represents a gap in the market for PEFC. And as PEFC follows the logic



Figure 1: Regional label »Heimisches Holz aus Bayern«.

of markets and strives to »raise its own profile,« the regional label should fill the identified gap – by intending to »help« the actors in timber trade who buy and sell wood (products) locally.

This shows how the needs of the actors (to fill the market gap), the standardized rules of an international organization (PEFC revision process every four years), the material wood itself (regionally available, not necessarily labeled as such) are linked into a relational structure of action and interpretation that creates a narrative (local wood is worth labelling). This constellation reveals an asymmetry of action and power (some actors initiate a process for which the others have never seen the need). From the very beginning, the regional label has been at a crossroad between ethical and economic requirements.

3.2 Labelling regional responsibility

On my way to a sawmill in a small town in the Black Forest, a region in southwestern Germany, I am made unmistakably aware of the important role that the timber trade has played here (May 2018): along the small river that gives its name to the town where the sawmill is located, there are quite a few timber construction companies and sawmills. However, this sawmill is known far beyond the valley (e.g. in Japan) for its »quality wood from the Black Forest« (company logo) – certified by the PEFC regional label.

Mr. E. (2021), the owner of the sawmill, a family business with 40 employees, told me in the interview that he was made aware of the label about three years ago by the PEFC certifier he knew and that he found open ears: »We are very strongly anchored in the region. We buy our timber regionally within a radius of no more than 80 kilometers. This label is a chance to show our customers that we use wood sustainably and regionally.« He reported how easy it was to obtain the label: Since he already bought all his timber in Baden-Württemberg before, it only required a change to the internal electronic data processing system: »We did not have to change anything, we just made it a bit more transparent.«

During the interview, the sawmill owner emphasized several times that the focus on regional and environmentally friendly actions is his guiding principle – without neglecting the fact that he sells his products very successfully on the global market. He refers to ecological forest management, which is »feasible in the region and necessary for the region«. Here, ecological and economic claims are linked and it seems – or should seem – that they can best be combined in the social network of relationships that has been made publicly visible by the label »Heimisches Holz aus Baden-Württemberg«.

3.3 Proving credibility and uniqueness

We now change region, professional group and product line and we turn to the Bavarian Forest, a region hardly less well known to the timber trade in Germany. Here, a 'wood manufactory' (with almost 50 employees, exporting to 22 countries) produces 'individual' packaging for business customers: wooden boxes for wine, cigars, beer and gifts, which may be labeled with the customer's logo – additionally to the PEFC label »Heimisches Holz aus Bayern«.



Figure 2: Coordinates of the felled timber: a bid to know the origin of the product.

The owner of the manufactory, Mr. K. (2021), calls »storytelling« the core of his daily work: »With our products, we want to tell stories that our customers can tell their customers. Our packaging should have an independent value, an added value to the product it packages.« Mr. K. has a doctorate in communications. Before he took over the wood manufacturing company, he worked as a managing director in the food industry. He says he knows how to »tell good stories« and wants to differentiate himself from companies that ship wood »in containers across the oceans to Europe to produce wooden packaging as cheaply as possible.« To do this, he has developed his own method of expressing the regional origin of his products, grasped on the slogan »sustainability through traceability«. He offers his customers the possibility to trace the place where the wood of their packaging has grown to »within five meters« on site or via Google Earth.

In the interview, Mr. K. said that he was looking for an »objective« way to assure his customers that his »subjective« technique with the coordinates of origin was »correct and true.« In his presentation, he searched for a long time for a suitable certification option until »an acquaintance told him about an acquaintance« and he became aware of the PEFC regional label, which was easy to obtain because he had »already met all the requirements« before. With the coordinates and the regional label, he considers himself in the possession of »double proof that we really work regionally«.

Three aspects seem noteworthy here: 1) relationships (such as the forest environment of the manufactory as well as the more distant connections of »acquaintances«) are fundamental to the establishment of the label in private companies. 2) »Sustainability« and also »regionality« are valuable concepts in the timber trade, where transparency and credibility are considered crucial especially with regard to the supply chain. 3) To convey credibility and uniqueness, different levels of perception, knowledge and concern can be served. The PEFC regional label should cover the 'rational' part, the geographical tracking data, the dimension of experience and the story behind the affective impact.

3.4 Avoiding the labelling of regional origin

When considering the practices that constitute the regional label and implement it in companies, it should not go unnoticed that there are not only actors who establish, use or develop the label, but many more who avoid it. I tie this observation to a family-run sawmill in Upper Swabia (Baden-Württemberg), but there would have been many more companies where I could have asked why the label is not used. To do justice to this, I supplement my observations in this sawmill with statements from the other background interviews.

Before I arrive at the sawmill, I see it from a nearby hill. It looks like a huge factory with an enormous grey facade, the trucks with logs look like toys in front of it. As I get closer, I see more and smaller buildings (office, saw, powerhouse), clearly different in size, type of construction, material and shape. They make it clear how the sawmill has grown over the past decades. 110 years ago, an ancestor of the current managers founded the sawmill, which has developed into a comprehensive wood processing company that today employs 500 people and is currently building a second stand. What makes this family business special as



Figure 3: Material traces of growth: sawmill in Upper Swabia.

other interviewees told me beforehand, is that every last bit of timber is actually processed here. The company produces many variations of lumber, insulation, pallets and more. Mrs. S. (2021) has a degree in business law and belongs to the generation of the next managing directors. In the interview, she said of her company's ideals: »Our goal is to reduce unnecessary transportation and not leave such a large footprint in terms of emissions. We have our own philosophy: we buy our timber in the region, process it in the region and deliver it in the region.« With that attitude, the company would be just about predestined to carry the PEFC regional label, so I asked her why they do not use it. And her response was, »I did not even know it existed until now.«

The observation that the regional label is not very well known was urgent before. In this Upper-Swabian family-run business, my conclusions about not using the label became more diverse; I summarize them into two aspects. Firstly, not fitting the requirements: In Mrs. S.'s account, the company buys its timber within a spatial radius of 60 kilometers – but only its round timber. As the company has grown immensely over the last decades its sawmill is now far too small and the actors buy sawn timber from »all over Europe«. The high standard the company has set with its philosophy of adding regional value collides with the constraints imposed by the size of the company and the limitation of its saw. Secondly, not knowing and not needing: Other reasons for not using the label lie in the conceptual core of the label itself, as it wants to reach actors who a) have never struggled to establish their credibility in the local timber trading and b) are known for their time pressure and low affinity for bureaucratic processes (May 2018).

So far, some of the key practices, logics and contradictions of the network have been outlined. Next I will deepen the discussion of how these are framed by economic and ethical values (Heuts and Mol 2013) in conjunction with logics of regionality and sustainability in the timber trade.

4 Discussion: On the conceptualization and creation of regionality, sustainability and trust in the timber trade

Having unfolded the ethnographic results, I will now describe the analytical dimensions that run through them. To answer the article's guiding question, four aspects seem to be particularly important to elaborate on the interplay of economic and ethical values: 1) the materiality of wood – and how it enables and limits actions; 2) spatial relations in trade – and how the local and the international have (always) interacted here; 3) the connotations of »Heimat« and »region« – and how they relate knowledge and affect; 4) sustainability as a ethical ideal – and how ethical aspirations and economic goals are interlinked here.

4.1 Properties and limitations of the labeled material

Wood is an extremely versatile material. As a raw material, it takes on gigantic proportions; once processed, it can take on almost any size and be made into very different things: fine caskets and multi-storey houses, fine furniture and rough packaging (May 2018). It refers to nature and even makes its natural growth visible in its rings. The philosopher Walter Benjamin described wood as a »material of desire« (1969, 63), connoting the craftsmanship of times past. Referring to this, the historical and cultural anthropologist Gottfried Korff speaks of wood as a »counter material« (2002, 170), meaning that wood and wooden objects represent an antithesis to economic and cultural-historical modernization processes. And yet, wood is just that: the object and cause of economic and socio-cultural processes of contemporary progress and future hopes.

Currently, wood is receiving enormous attention. As a renewable resource that binds carbon dioxide, the material seems particularly attractive for products of the 'bioeconomy' and the idea of 'green growth', especially in the construction sector (May 2021, May 2022). These material and symbolic qualities shape actions and interpretations in the network of actors formed by the PEFC regional label.

Since Alfred Gell's (1998) influential reflections on 'material agency' and especially since Bruno Latour's (2010) wide-ranging conceptualization of things as 'non-human actors', analyses of material culture have been premised on the assumption that agency can be invested in things and that, equally, emanates from them. Things and materials have a 'social life' (Appadurai 1986) and possess a 'cultural biography' (Kopytoff 1986).

To apply this to my work with wood: wood is harvested as round timber. Depending on its quality and intended use, it differs in size and volume shortly after felling. In the further course of its use, it is usually

sawn and its shape is changed. The PEFC label »Heimisches Holz aus ...« appears on documents and also on wood products – but the process of labeling has no influence on the appearance of the wood itself. The label does not change the material, only the assessment of the actors. Human actors in the timber trade see a challenge here, for instance the already quoted general manager of PEFC Germany: »One problem is that the wood itself is not visually certified: it does not turn red at the moment of certification and I cannot see if I use this wood in my house, everything is red – everything is good« (Mr. T. 2021).

Thanks to its properties, wood creates attractiveness and impact and at the same time it limits the possibilities of human action. A direct and detailed look at the material, at its properties, its appearance and its (lack of) changes allows us to understand human practices and valuations. However, this approach remains incomplete if the human experiences of use and the temporal and spatial context are not also included in the cultural analyzes.

4.2 Valorization of »region« and »Heimat«

Labelling is a qualification instrument for marketing purposes. Here, value is a central concept. For a long time, cultural anthropology has tended to study value mainly in its symbolic dimension excluding the contact with global economic markets (Bendix 2013). Recently, however, the dimensions of symbolic, economic, and social value have been brought together. How can ethnography of local timber labelling contribute to this discourse? And what role does the conceptualization of »Heimat« play here?

Again, I begin with the view of the label givers, in concrete Mr. T. (2021) who stated: »Why we name it 'heimisches Holz'? Because it's a term with good vibes. 'Heimat' is the region where you feel at home. It has marketing reasons.« In his reading »heimisch« has positive connotations, refers to a familiar spatial origin. It links knowledge to emotion – as as powerful as valuable draw, especially in economic contexts.

At the same time, »Heimat« is, especially in Germany, not free from critique and negative connotations (Bausinger 1990; Binder 2010). It carries connotative references to (national) demarcation efforts and practices of inclusion and exclusion. Nevertheless, it is often used in advertisement (e.g. in the food industry; May 2016). The PEFC regional label, however, does not leave the attribute »heimisch« blank but concretizes it by adding names of regions such as 'Bavaria'.

The symbolic-economic power attached to these names results from an interplay of knowledge and affect; in the words of the European ethnologist Jonas Frykman (2002, 48): »When regions take the stage, their character is thus as much a dreamed as a factual geographical unit. They have [...] personality, life, and 'soul.« This understanding of regionality is dependent on cultural contextual knowledge which is linked to certain spaces (Nora 1996). In a global market, local names constitute an added value – symbolically and economically (Tschofen 2000; Barham 2003; May 2016). Nevertheless, the PEFC regional label does not appeal mainly to international trade but to strengthen small-scale trade relations 'on site'. This may be understood primarily as a ethical impulse – because local trade is prevalent in timber trade.

4.3 Local wood in global markets

At first sight, the spatial frame of timber trade depends on the material form of the commodity. While processed wood products, ranging from furniture over planks to pallets, are commonly conceptualized as commodities of the global market, the raw material, round timber, ought to be objects of small-scale trade. This point made for instance Mr. H. (2017) who markets the timber of the state forest in Baden-Württemberg: »Timber transport is extremely cost-intensive. Wood is heavy, weighing almost a ton per cubic meter. This means that the possibility to transport it over long distances is per se gone.« He did not only describe the economic constraints imposed by the material properties of wood but linked them to spatial restrictions and power. Local dependencies increase due to the difficulties of large transport routes: »They have to buy my wood. It must be extremely valuable wood if it is transported over more than 150 kilometers.« Mr. H. said this in 2017; barely four years later, the situation is completely different and it became clear that wood of high and also minor quality is transported over distances way longer than 150 kilometers.

In 2021, media and woodworking crafts call wood a 'scarce resource' in Germany as there was (allegedly) too much timber exported to China and in the USA (May 2022). Mr. H. (2021) put the things in context: The years 2018 to 2020 were very dry, resulting in large quantities of damaged wood that did not meet

European standards; 'substitute markets' with more generous rules were found abroad. Only a small part of the German timber was exported but the outcry was loud because these sales coincided with a general construction boom and global supply chain difficulties triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The practices of export were conceptualized as a 'rupture' from the perspectives of the actors. For a cultural analysis, such ruptures and frictions could provide a gain (Lowenhaupt Tsing 2005) as they hold the potentials for discovering changes in ethical norms, market logics and power structures. In this case, the sudden experience of resource scarcity emphasizes the significance of small-scale market relations in face of global crises and insecurities.

4.4 How ethics and economy are shaped by regionality and sustainability

What became apparent in a condensed form in the 2021 crisis, was already set before, as a more long-term trend: regionality is a powerful argument trade – even more if it is linked to sustainability such as in the case of the PEFC regional label.

'Sustainability' was applied in forestry (von Carlowitz 2013 [1713]) long before it was adapted to describe (and criticize) the relations among humans and between humans and their environmental surroundings, in a broader sense by the often quoted pillars of environmental, economic and social sustainability (e.g. Purvis, Mao and Robinson 2019). By focusing only on the question of how regionality and sustainability are thought to be bound in the field of the PEFC label, I detect two main lines: the link of regionality and sustainability to ecological action and – even more powerful – to economic trade and social relations (Varga 2019).

In order to elaborate on that, a quote of the sawmill owner serves as a basis: »We can counter climate change only by saving carbon dioxide. How can we do that? We need to promote timber construction [...] and use wood in short distances: The more wood is consumed, built and used regionally, the better our CO₂ balance will be« (Mr. E. 2021; similar Mrs. S. 2021). From the commitment of his statement and also in the observation of his everyday work it becomes clear that he conceptualizes environmental protection as linked to regionality and that he aims to act accordingly.

Besides these, there are other attitudes, such as of the manufactory owner K. (2021): »For me, sustainability is credibility and an emotional experience as well as a commitment to regional value creation and the shortening of supply chains, and thus in the end also to environmental protection.« The context of the interview and the tone of his voice made clear that this list is not a rising but a falling climax. Through the label, K. primarily wants to achieve credibility and uniqueness for his products; he sees ecological caution included in his daily work but aims to prove »sustainability through traceability« as he considers »regionality« as the better argument which is better verifiable.

Not least, there are positions in the field that relate sustainability primarily to trade relations – especially in light of frictions in global trade as recognized in 2021: »The local market is a piece of reliability. If a ship is stuck in the Suez Canal, exports start to limp. In a global market you are dependent from many persons and things, but that's not the case in the region« (Mr. E. 2021).

It might be surprising (or even not) that ecological sustainability plays a minor role within the field of PEFC regional label. Although it touches the work of forestry, the economic and social components are more decisive. In view of the global circulation of commodities, the logics of regional trade relate to security, reliability and control. The interconnection of nature and culture is elementary, especially with regard to the trade in wood. And yet, trans-regional dependencies and commodity flows stand out as dominant lines of action.

5 Conclusions: The interplay of proximity and distance

To study material culture ethnographically means to turn to commodities, things, materialities, to explore how they are embedded in actions, interpretations, and relationships and how they likewise constitute them. In this sense, I put wood at the center of my ethnographic research to understand the cultural conditions and effects of the PEFC regional label »Heimisches Holz aus ...«.

Against the background of my knowledge from a long-term study in the thematic area of 'Wood and Craft' I realized as short as thick descriptions of the 'doings and sayings' of four key actors of the multi-layered network. In this way I made clear: 1) the creation of the PEFC regional label included the active

creation of a need and narrative; the actors aim to prove 2) regional responsibility as well as 3) credibility and singularity by the use of this label; while 4) others avoid its use due to logics and constraints of their everyday work.

In the analytical synthesis of these practices, I identified essential cross-cutting dimensions ranging from the material's agency over market logics to common ethical claims. They, in turn, can be condensed into two crucial points: it is the material and spatial properties that constitute and confine the label's actors network. And it is the interplay of proximity and distance that shapes the practices, potentials and contradictions within this network.

In the view of the stakeholders, the PEFC regional label is designed to strengthen regional value creation and, very specifically, those people and companies that fell and process, buy and sell timber »in the region«. The motivation of the actors has an economic dimension: they want to generate regional added value and strengthen (business) relationships within spatial proximity. Speaking of region and »Heimat« strengthens this perspective of highlighting what is known in order to gain security – especially in the face of global uncertainties. Not at least with regard to long-distance trade relations, climate change or pandemics: 'regionality' and 'sustainability' are extremely valuable concepts.

My ethnographic cultural analysis can show that the interplay of proximity and distance correlates with an alternation of knowledge and affect, connects rational narratives with emotional uncertainties and the ethically framed striving for 'the good' even and especially in the context of economic logics. The focus on the material wood (its limitations and attractiveness) irritates by revealing the visible and the invisible relationships in the network. Those who can endure it see how closely material and mental orders are interwoven.

6 References

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