

Part 3

Sustainable Consumption

Introduction

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How much is enough? What do we really need in order to live a good life? What does consumerism mean to the quality of life and to society as a whole? Sustainable consumption does not only concern its quality but also includes quantity, scale, sufficiency and modesty.

These terms are of fundamental, even philosophical, importance: Modesty, Sufficiency, Good life. The concept of modesty can be found as early as in antique Greek thinking two and a half thousand years ago, for example at the oracle of Delphi saying: “Of nothing too much”. It can be found in the bible, in the book of psalms, which says: “Lord, give me neither too little nor too much, neither poverty nor affluence”. It is also present in more recent works like “To have or to be” by Erich Fromm, published in 1975, where he shows that consumption beyond a certain level, he calls it consumerism, is no longer an indicator of real wealth but a pathological phenomenon, something that should concern as a society. Here overconsumption is seen as a clear indication of social deficits. Since there is a lack of love, respect, and sense of life, we consume. We try to fill the hole of senselessness with commodities. And we fail and remain unhappy, which is again good for industry, for marketing, for growth. In this logic senselessness and a lack of content and happiness are good for the economy. This point has been taken up by the post growth debate of the last decade. Here consumerism is seen as one of the main causes of non-sustainability.

The term sufficiency also has a long history. One can distinguish two dimensions: the dimension of enoughness and the dimension of adequacy. Here the two questions “How much is enough?” and “What do we really need?” come into the focus. In the sustainability debate of the last one or two decades the sufficiency concept has often been seen as the antonym, the counter-concept to efficiency. Efficiency is about making things better, mainly by better technology. However, in the present debate about green technology, green markets and green growth there is a tendency to leave out of consideration the question of quantities, of lifestyles, of consumerism. This is the reason why we presently face a very hot and controversial dispute between the protagonists of green growth and degrowth.

And finally: The good life. The term was introduced by Aristotle. It is the life you want to live. Ideally in harmony with yourself, with your fellow human beings, with nature. But what does it look like today?

The field of consumption currently shows a lot of positive trends including anti-consumption sentiments showing that common consumer cultures are questioned. Looking into patterns of consumption in private households shows that the consumption of more sustainable products like organic food and clothing in Germany and also the global use of electro-mobility is on the rise. However, simultaneous trends such as the rising number of single households, frequent travelling by plane and the increasing usage of electrical appliances threaten to undo those positive actions. Significant factors such as information, time constraints and infrastructure have to be looked at to understand what reasons lead to deficiencies such as attitude-behaviour gaps and behaviour-impact gaps. The interdisciplinary research on consumption corridors is a promising approach to design the guidelines of a sustainable society (see Fuchs in this Volume).

Do peoples' mindsets even allow for a significant reduction in consumption in today's fast moving society? A representative study (see Nässén in this volume) on anti-consumption beliefs in the general public was carried out in Sweden. It was based on the assumption that people with anti-consumption beliefs engage into alternative and conscious forms of consuming. The study revealed that anti-consumption beliefs are, in fact, rather widespread among those polled. Participants were asked to comment on topics such as the importance of a reduction of consumption for the sake of the environment, the great amounts of time people spend consuming as well as the relevance of consumption for a well-working economy.

For some years now a thriving second-hand sector contributes to more sustainable consumption patterns. The professionalization in the second-hand trade helped establish a more modest and non-excessive type of consumption. Even though people who struggle economically tend to buy second-hand the motivations for buying and selling used products are diverse and by no means simply of financial nature (see Steffen in this volume). However, economic stability proves to be a crucial factor when it comes to pro-environmental behaviour. Drawing on the results from the German socio-economic panel it can be shown

that precarious employment situations result in a negative attitude towards the consumption of organic goods (see Leßmann and Masson in this volume). The growing call for sustainability in the fields of production and consumption therefore might lead to a feeling of being pushed out or overlooked by the mainstream.

Consumption is the most important research field when it comes to resource efficiency on a household level. Individual habits and behavioural patterns need to be at the centre of attention. Interdisciplinary research therefore is vital to find new narratives that close the gap between information and its communication. However, in order for these methods to achieve their aim they need to reflect reality and integrate the consumer.