

2012 Freiburg Forum on Environmental Governance on
“Sustainable Consumption and the Power of the Consumer”
Scientific paper on the topic of

No Sustainability without Sufficiency!

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No Sustainability without Sufficiency!

Introduction

In industrial societies there are two premises which are hardly being challenged. First, we need growth, and second, we can only produce growth when we accept that the things by which we surround ourselves do only live a short life until they will be replaced by new ones, better one, faster ones. We are constantly told that the good life comes from buying things, more things, and as having goods makes you happy, having more goods makes you even happier. The first premise is spoken out frankly; the second one is implied in the first though we do not like to say it out loud so often. Still, there is a new rhetoric emerging, namely that these two premises on the long-term will inevitably clash with what one can call ecological constraints.

These are environmentalist platitudes and there is no use in repeating them here as there are enough works that have done so before, and done so well (e.g. Beyene 2010; Meadows 1972) .

The aim of this paper is rather to put emphasis on an aspect that is often only mentioned as a necessary side-effect of sustainability, as though not requiring any further explanation.

This is also due to the fact, that it is a very difficult and not easy to pin down issue: maybe the one that is the most controversial in relation to our contemporary lifestyle.

The this paper is devoted is *sufficiency* or the demand for less (resource consumption). But before fully devoting my attention to it, I find it a necessary prerequisite to go a bit more into detail on the notion of efficiency as it is closely related to the principle of sufficiency.

I will then explain the general concept of sufficiency and some of its most prominent advocates. Due to the limitations of this paper I cannot give a full-pledged analysis of all the different thought traditions related to sufficiency, but will rather try to locate sufficiency in the broader sustainability debate.

In a final step I will then try to give an outlook on how sufficiency can be realized in our modern societies.

The conclusion, however, will turn out somewhat deflating. How promising and appealing sufficiency might seem to the single individual, the more illusionary it appears to be in terms of a general societal change towards a less materialist social system.

Linking Efficiency and Sufficiency

Without an increase in resource efficiency there will be no sustainable development. This notion is commonplace and can hardly be challenged (cf. Huber 1999; Baumgartner et al. 2009). Still, there lies some difficulty in the term efficiency, namely its normative vagueness. This is mainly due to its functioning as the guiding principle of our industrial societies.

In economical terms efficiency stands for the best relation between output per unit of input, though this is mostly perceived in quantitative and not in qualitative terms. Quality is only of interest when it is to compromise quantity, and thus, in the end, (monetary) profits (Scherhorn 2008: 1)¹. It is exactly this semantic contraction of efficiency towards a solely monetary interpretation of it that *eco-efficiency* tries to overcome (Scherhorn 2008:1; Lovins et al. 1997). By internalising not only monetary but also ecological costs, it attempts to balance human or economic interests and ecological interests.

Well, as eco-efficiency aims at internalising ecological costs – through mainly conserving natural resources – it is not only demanding for more output for the same amount of subtracted substance but for less substance throughput in general. This is an entirely different ratio. In other words eco-efficiency gives credit to the fact that earth is naturally constrained and thus finite (Lovins et al. 1997: xxxiii). Hence, its major focus is an ethical-material one and not a monetary one: industrial throughput of natural resources should be minimised, not because of economical considerations but for the benefit of nature². Nevertheless it is important not to be too enthusiastic about the power and vigour of this idea. I consider it as very difficult for eco-efficiency to distinctly and unchangeably set itself apart from economical efficiency (cf. Scherhorn 2008:1).

It is always jeopardized to be overruled by economical efficiency in the end as the rebound-effect is surely the killer of every endeavour towards sustainability (cf. Ott & Voget 2008:2, Linz 2006:8).³

Sufficiency as a necessary condition for sustainability

So far this still does not explain what role sufficiency plays. As already claimed, eco-efficiency wants to use less substance in general and not only product-wise. We see that it has a conservationist note with it. Now this is where sufficiency enters the scene. Sufficiency derives from the Latin word *sufficere*, which means being or having enough (Linz 2006:7). For a thematic location, one can perceive sufficiency together with consistency and efficiency as one of the three main pillars of the sustainability research program (Linz 2004:7; Scherhorn 2008:5; Ott & Voget 2008: 2)⁴. In the ecological debate sufficiency describes a behavioural attitude – be it collective or individualistic – that calls for *less* (Linz 2006:7). An increased supply/demand caused by the rebound effect can only be tackled by less demand and less production. In other terms, sufficiency deals with *what is enough* or

¹ By narrowing efficiency down to being a purely monetary principle it loses its former connection to effectiveness. As Thomas Princen brilliantly explains in his very thoughtful book “The Logic of Sufficiency” (Princen 2005) efficiency formerly was closely related to being effective in an Aristotelian sense. As Princen points out, Aristotle understood the word efficient as being capable and appropriate to fulfil a certain, specific task. By thinking efficiency in a merely quantitative way it loses its property of “goal achievement, the neat fit of means and ends” (Princen 2005:52) and thus its normative and ethical implication.

² I contend that this kind of efficiency is now much more related to effectiveness due to its ethical conservationist component.

³ For a more in depth analysis of the rebound effect see Sorell 2007.

⁴ As I will still argue in the remainder of this paper sufficiency is well related to personal lifestyle questions. Those issues are normally addressed by sociological studies. Nevertheless these studies are only of limited utility for the sustainability debate as they lack a normative impetus and thus remain rather descriptive (cf. Ott & Voget 2008:2)

moderation. Approached from a more philosophical perspective, sufficiency even deals with what Aristotle called the *good life* (Aristoteles 1986; Ott & Voget 2008: 2).

In Germany the sufficiency approach was mainly promoted by the Wuppertal Institute and there especially by Manfred Linz (cf. Linz 2002, 2004, 2006; Scherhorn 2008; see also von Winterfeld 2007: 47). But authors like Konrad Ott and Lieske Voget or Frank Adler and Ulrich Schachtschneider have also put the topic on the agenda (cf. Ott & Voget 2008; Adler & Schachtschneider 2010). Internationally though, Thomas Princen with his much applauded book “The Logic of Sufficiency”, is surely the most prominent harbinger of the sufficiency debate. In what follows the concept’s definition and scientific provenance will be discussed.

Sufficiency: definition and scientific provenance

Generally it can be distinguished between two different stances towards sufficiency: one argues in a more antimaterialist fashion in the tradition of Erich Fromm and predecessors (cf. Fromm 2009), while the other in a more ecological-pragmatic fashion (cf. Princen 2005).

Nevertheless, both understandings carry a normative burden that endangers them to live a niche existence in our 21st century consumption age. But this is something to be address later on. Considering the scope of this paper, I will mainly focus on the ecological-pragmatic interpretation of sufficiency (albeit Fromm and followers have nothing lost of their brilliance and timeliness).

In the ecological debate, sufficiency stands for the attempt to achieve a smaller consumption of resources or resource intensive products. This can imply (personal) denial, consumption restraint, or even asceticism (Linz 2004: 11). Consequently, sufficiency is about a way of economic activity and lifestyle that positions itself against excess consumption. Manfred Linz also calls sufficiency the search for the right balance: nor scarcity nor abundance/excess (Linz 2004: 12, 39). Scarcity and excess are notions that gain their meaning only by embedding them in a wider social context of materialism. They do not mean the same thing for everyone.

This explains why sufficiency is probably the most contested variable in the sustainability triangle of efficiency, consistency and sufficiency (Linz 2004: 7). As consistency and efficiency are rather technological parameters, sufficiency is somewhat their antipode, as it is, first and foremost, a social and, thus, a normative parameter. Without being joined by sufficiency, the two others would remain nothing but ecologically-technologically abstract. Only in combining the three of them can sustainability be accomplished (Linz 2007: 7).

In summary: sufficiency is a normative principle, it has to do with lifestyle change, even societal change, and therefore with some form of denial or self-constraint. All together, this makes sufficiency more than a sensitive issue.

Convinced neo-liberalists generally heavily disagree with the concept of sufficiency. It is exactly this fear of diminished consumer freedom which makes sufficiency so prone to being dismissed as

regressive, ascetic and, hence, antimodernist (von Winterfeld 2007: 48). Here it is necessary to remind the reader that sufficiency aims at a sufficient satisfaction of human needs, not at scarcity.

Surely there are many different ways of approaching the issue⁵. I cannot give a detailed depiction of all these modes of thinking. As already mentioned, sufficiency might be the most difficult of the three pillars of sustainability to define, and thus, convey to a greater public; or as Herman Haly put it: “It will be difficult to define sufficiency and build the concept into economic theory and practice. But I think it will prove far more difficult to continue to operate [as if] there is no such thing as enough” (Haly as cit. in Princen 2005:11). Rather, in the following, I will depict the point of view supported by the Wuppertal Institute which appears very promising to me.

How to introduce (more) Sufficiency in Society?

The Wuppertal Institute follows an approach towards sufficiency that is mainly based on collective, and therefore institutional-systemic, measures to acquire the goal of less (resource) consumption. They ask for a “Politik der Suffizienz” (Linz 2004: 36).

Expecting radical change from individuals seems not promising to them as this would firstly ignore the social embeddedness of purchasing behaviour, and secondly, would overburden the respective individual and like this lead to an, at best, “anecdotic” self restraint (Linz 2004: 33). They opt for a gradual change, as they agree with Micha Hilgers, that more people tend to identify themselves with the option of small steps than with going fundamentally new ways (Hilgers 1997 cit. in Linz 2004: 31). Still, they acknowledge the fact that sufficiency is inevitably aligned to some kind of constraint (Linz 2007: 13) but that these will not necessarily result in a lower quality of life⁶. That said, they see that sufficiency will demand a value change, and thus, will be a message difficult to convey to the broader public especially to politics and the economy (see also Huber 1999:12). To foster and alleviate this change is, as they claim, the paramount task of the sufficiency research. Thus, in the following they promote three steps towards more sufficiency:

1. “Big” public-administrative measures: coercion by consent (e.g. a national ecotax)
2. economical measures to ensure or improve ecological compatibility
3. small-scale steps by the individual (household) (e.g. buy green, borrow instead of buy etc.)

(Linz 2004: 17)

⁵ For a very engaging presentation of a wide variety of sufficiency interpretations see Linz 2007: 12.

⁶ Linz engages in a far-reaching and promising review on postmaterialism and especially quality of life which I cannot repeat here (cf. Linz 2007:12). He accepts the fact that the air of restraint and denial sufficiency carries along with it cannot be fully refuted (Linz 2007: 12), but at the same time emphasizes that there is nevertheless a normative and ethical urgency aligned to sufficiency.

Only in combination of the three, might sufficiency become possible. Surely, this is only a very brief outlook on how sufficiency measures can be implemented. A holistic approach with concrete solutions, including a new social contract, is unquestionably a gigantic task. Nevertheless, only by perceiving sufficiency as a guiding social principle the Inglehartian shift to a postmaterialist, (sustainable) society can be completed (cf. Inglehart 1977). This shift however will only be realizable when tried to be brought about by a collective effort. Theories of societal change have long attempted to explain how this has to be done and is done. But surely there is still a need for more research which positions sufficiency at the centre of its interest and thus focuses on it as an eligible social organizing principle for the shift to a more sustainable society (cf. Princen 2005:7).

Conclusion

Sufficiency is part of the ecological triangle. It is a device to achieve a more sustainable society by reducing the amount of resources that we consume. Ecologically convincing as it is, it nevertheless carries a normative, seemingly anti-modernist attitude with it which makes it hard to convey.

Asking for nothing less than a revolution of our consumption oriented society, it is a highly sensitive issue. Not for nothing do authors like Joseph Huber (Huber 1999), rather, opt for efficiency or consistency as the only means to combat ecological degradation. Therefore, the need for more research is urgent. Sufficiency has to prove its practicability for normal life as well as the economy. It is necessary to carefully and comprehensively scrutinize our socio-economic system to find contact points for a cautious and prudent introduction of sufficiency. Carrying this thought through to its logical conclusion, we will not get around adjusting the capitalist mode of using ever more resources. But for all that, sufficiency is indispensable when humanity really wants to reach the seemingly insurmountable goal of a sustainable society.

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