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Papers

A question of power: sustainable consumption and ecological sufficiency as alternative discourses for sustainability

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Abstract
Based on the concepts of sustainable consumption and ecological sufficiency, this article seeks to distinguish between the different discourses associated with the topic, such as ecological modernization, Amartya Sen's approach, the South American *buen vivir* movement, environmental justice, deep ecology, and ecosocialism, as well as to reveal the influence of power relations over the transition into fair and sustainable forms of social organization.
Keywords: Sustainable Consumption, Ecological Sufficiency, Power Relations.

Introduction

Sustainability science, according to Baumgärtner and Quaas (2010), refers to the rational use of resources in a long-term perspective with intrinsic uncertainty, which aims at the intertemporal satisfaction of human needs and at the prevalence of justice in the relations between humans and between humans and nature. To Scerri (2012), it is a discipline that includes ethical and moral aspects and in which not only efficiency, but also intra- and intergenerational justice is considered, i.e., a field involving analyses concerning possibilities and purposes within the biophysical and social contexts of the relations between humans and their environment.

The 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (also known as Brundtland Report), which made popular the concept of sustainable development, unequivocally mentions the need to

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achieve sustainable consumption patterns. It states that "[s]ustainable global development requires that those who are more affluent adopt life-styles within the planet's ecological means – in their use of energy, for example" (WCED, 1987, p. 9).

This same idea was present in the debates put forth in the 1970s by Paul Ehrlich, John Holdren, and Barry Commoner, who explicitly inserted the impact of affluence – understood as wealth *per capita*, individual material accumulation, or production and consumption intensity – in an equation that ascribes environmental impacts to the product of populational, technological, and affluence indicators. Whereas discourses dealing with populational issues took center stage, progress on the problems posed by affluence faltered. This situation would change in the beginning of the 1990s, when the discourse of ecological modernization gained ground (ROPKE, 2005).

A competing concept with the notion of sustainable consumption, ecological sufficiency is defined as the voluntary restriction of individual consumption motivated by a sense of responsibility, enacted in daily life, toward the future of human and non-human species (HEINDL & KANSCHIK, 2016). Such a formulation implies the reduction of consumption in absolute levels to the point that the scale of human activities, from material and energetic perspectives, complies with the biophysical limits of Earth's carrying capacity.

In the effort to understand the scope, limitations, meanings, and consequences of the discussions arising from the concepts of sustainable development and ecological sufficiency, this paper highlights opposing or concurring discourses in the context of the power relations that are embedded in such a complex and polemic topic. In Section 2, the notion of sustainable consumption is analyzed and interpreted in terms of its appropriations by different technical and ideological discourses. Section 3 presents ecological sufficiency as a contribution to the idea of a strong

sustainable consumption based on individual voluntarism. Amartya Sen's approach is showcased as a theory which corroborates the practice of voluntary sufficiency, linking it to individual liberties and to the connection between the satisfaction of human needs and environmental sustainability. The discourse of the South American *buen vivir* movement is another example of initiative in favor of the precepts of ecological sufficiency. Environmental justice is depicted as a field of knowledge that opposes the dominating discourse of ecological modernization, with focus on social and environmental conflicts, as well as on the power relations between North and South. Deep ecology is assessed as a discourse in defense of the intrinsic value and rights of nature. Finally, ecosocialism is presented as an alternative mode of social organization which contributes to the topic at hand by combining the Marxist concept of human emancipation with ecological constraints. Section 4 brings some final remarks.

Discourses on Sustainable Consumption

The Brazilian Ministry of Environment defines sustainable consumption as:

> the use of goods and services that meets basic needs and allows for a better quality of life, while minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials, waste generation, and the emission of pollutants throughout the life-cycle of the good or service, so as not to endanger the needs of future generations (BRASIL, 2011, p. 6, translated by the author).

Moving beyond broad definitions, it is necessary to differentiate the weak from the strong version of the concept of sustainable consumption. The former addresses efficiency gains in the flows of matter and energy which compose processes of production and consumption, either in relation to the use of natural resources or pertaining waste generation. Strong sustainable consumption, on the other hand, entails significant changes in the

consumption habits of wealthier individuals, seeking to reduce economic flows of matter and energy in absolute levels (SEDACKLO et al., 2014).

Still according to Sedlacko et al. (2014), the dissemination of the term "sustainable consumption" did not lead to a boost for research and public policy dedicated to changes in the life-styles of the rich, i.e., related to strong sustainable consumption. Conversely, there has been a burgeoning demand for studies and policies dealing with weak sustainable consumption. Appropriated by the discourse known as ecological modernization, such demands are deemed to be in synch with continued economic growth. New business opportunities would be created by means of the creation of a demand for ecologically "competitive" products, without any reference to the quantitative scale of consumption processes or to the needs of poorer populations for basic consumption. The synergy between the discourses of ecological modernization and continued economic growth is largely based on the idea of the dematerialization of the economy, in which technological progress would enable further growth without increments to the flows of matter and energy (SÁ BARRETO, 2014). The authors illustrate such a view with a document from the United Nations Environment Programme, which argues that sustainable consumption is not about consuming less, but about consuming differently, with efficiency gains and better quality of life (UNEP/CDG, 2000). Economic growth, seen as a condition for social stability in a capitalist setting, is characterized as the solution for social and environmental problems. Such a cornucopian view is based on dubious claims related to the capacity to dematerialize the economy and legitimates an unequal and unlimited appropriation of natural resources.

Lorek and Fuchs (2013) contribute to the analysis of the discourses on sustainable consumption when they affirm that studies covering this topic do not sufficiently interact with other lines of research on sustainable development, as in the case of the theory of economic degrowth, despite the potential benefits of a systemic approach to the challenges facing

sustainability science. To the authors, this situation is due to the dominance of the discourse of ecological modernization in the context of sustainable consumption, which focuses on efficiency gains stemming from technological progress. Moreover, they state that governance modes based on weak sustainable consumption cannot provide satisfactory answers to problems such as the biophysical limits of the carrying capacity of ecosystems, or the distributive conflicts that are inherent to social structures with a tendency toward wealth accumulation, as is typical in capitalistic economic systems. Alternatively, strong sustainable consumption would be instrumental to a sustainability science which is genuinely interested in the intertemporal satisfaction of human needs and in the prevalence of justice in the relations between humans and between humans and nature. However, it still lacks political power.

Empirical results that point to an increasing decoupling between wealth and well-being (or happiness) as individual affluence level rises, a phenomenon known as the Easterlin paradox (EASTERLIN, 1974; CLARK et al., 2008), did not suffice to promote strong sustainable consumption as a worthwhile discourse, especially given the opposition of dominant social segments, such as consumers and corporations (ROPKE, 2005). If recent research results on the determinants of well-being were properly disclosed and assimilated, strong sustainable consumption as a scientific and political discourse would be more likely to make progress. Feedback mechanisms between scientific research and social discourses (e.g., between new knowledge in the environmental sciences and environmentalist movements) might lead to the emergence of new political agendas which, nonetheless, must compete with other agendas, with varying degrees of dissension, put forth by other interactions between scientific and social discourses. The task of discourses in favor of a strong sustainable consumption, therefore, is to overcome the dominance of a political agenda based on the ideas and practices connected with the discourse of ecological modernization.

The analysis of the power relations underlying the appropriation of discourses related to sustainable consumption is frequently omitted from research results and public policies dealing with the issue (FUCHS et al., 2015). The absence of an explicit and encompassing approach to such relations might hinder the understanding of the mechanisms that drive consumption, which makes it even harder to elaborate consistent proposals in favor of changes in consumer habits that reduce the pressure on the environment and stimulate social justice. To Fuchs et al. (2015, p. 306):

> Power is intrinsic to human interaction, to social organization and to the shaping of societal change. Power is essential in understanding what drives overconsumption and creates barriers against attempts to make it sustainable, and in identifying where potentially effective intervention points may exist. Sustainable consumption and absolute reductions research and action need to consider who sets the agenda, defines the rules and the narratives, selects the instruments of governance and their targets, and thus influences peoples' behavior, options, and their impacts.

The dominance of the discourse of ecological modernization can be interpreted in the Gramscian context of a capitalistic hegemonic consensus. Such a consensus has been established in the political and scientific realms since the beginning of the 19th century and was intensified in the post-war period with the virtual universalization of the capitalistic mode of social development. The ability of markets to regulate the production, distribution, and consumption of commodities that are deemed necessary to modern life became the cornerstone of a global agenda that perpetuates and multiplies itself, aided by institutions in control of civil and military power.

Furthermore, there is the "illusion of consumer sovereignty" (FELLNER; SPASH, 2014). One of the canons of neoclassical economics, the sovereignty of consumer preferences by means of the demand for goods and services is an alluring argument to justify the social and environmental degradation caused by market practices, as it would be nothing more than the outcome of the aggregation of autonomous individual actions. Hence, if

consumers do not buy "green" products, if they choose a diet rich in meat, if their life-styles lead to intensive greenhouse gas emissions, or if they do not value biodiversity, then markets should, according to this line of thought, reflect that behavior, maximizing the economic welfare of individuals. However, as the authors argue, consumers do not effectively control the economy or their role in it. Their choices and preferences are social or cultural constructs, subject to dominant discourses put in practice through the imposition of those who actually control political, intellectual, or social capital. Legislation, marketing, investment decisions, technological innovation targets, and scientific dogmatism are powerful tools to steer the process of change in consumer habits. Road infrastructure, massive supply of fossil fuels, land transport legislation, marketing of the automotive industry, and technical novelties compose, for instance, a very specific setting in which individuals make their daily decisions on buying a new car in a not very sovereign fashion, contrarily to the position of neoliberal discourses.

Thus, consumer sovereignty is a myth if power relations are considered; disregarding them may lead to a misrepresentation of reality and, in turn, favor the maintenance of the *status quo* (LATOUCHE, 2007). As in Schumpeter's view of the economy, producers can shape consumer habits, "educating" them to wish for new products. Old consumption habits are replaced by new ones in response to a supply which creates its own demand, a dynamic that agrees with the notion of "illusion of consumer sovereignty". Within the capitalistic hegemonic consensus, the ideology of consumer sovereignty finds its moral justification in individualism. Combined with a social order based on free markets and the ideal of individual freedom, such a moral justification provides support for the acceptance of the precepts of dominant discourses, even if they do not correspond to social reality.

The attempt to boost the discourse of strong sustainable consumption, based in the also alluring idea that absolute reductions would be accompanied by workload relief, i.e., would lead to double well-being gains (the expression "double dividends" is common in the literature), brings with itself a counterpoint in the context of power relations, with its own ideology and moralist views (ALCOTT, 2008). As stated by Ropke (2005, p. 11):

> Sometimes the promotion of the double dividend idea can get a moralistic touch: we should just give up all this bad and immoral consumerism and change our materialistic values, as it would simply make us better off – an idea lying in continuation of the old critiques of the consumer society […]. Unfortunately, it is not as easy as that. Although it is easy to imagine a society with less consumption and a higher quality of life due to less stress and improved collective conditions, less "defensive costs" etc., it is difficult to imagine the way to get there, as people in practice make other choices. The main point is that consumption is embedded in social and cultural life – it is not something that can be isolated and reduced without interfering with the foundations of everyday life. Consumption is not only about being egoistic, but can be related to the most altruistic motives (MILLER, 1995; CAMPBELL, 1987; WILK, 2004). Therefore, we face a real dilemma when we argue that curbing consumption is highly needed.

The New Discourse of Ecological Sufficiency

Ecological sufficiency (or Eco-sufficiency) deals with consumption reductions in absolute levels. Even if there is no hard evidence of its effectivity as an instrument for environmental protection, uncertainties associated with the ecological impacts of continued economic growth would justify its application as another initiative conducive to sustainability (HEINDL; KANSCHIK, 2016). Moving beyond consumption reductions, it points to an increase in the consumption of non-polluting goods and services, which are often not provided by market systems, thus elevating the self-sufficiency of individuals in relation to their personal consumption.

Heindl and Kanschik (2016) emphasize four main points in their definition of ecological sufficiency: (i) ecological objective, (ii) individual approach, (iii) focus on consumption, and (iv) voluntarism. The necessity for voluntarism is a hot topic, as more coercive actions in favor of sufficiency could be more effective but are hardly compatible with the values of modern liberal societies. Its potential lies in bottom-up strategies for consumption reductions, without the imposition from central planning authorities, as is today common in democratic processes. Notwithstanding the absence of such impositions, there is an implicit imperative to indicate to consumers what the ecological objective in sight is, or what the fundamentally non-arbitrary quantitative limit is, given by objective biophysical conditions, on which individuals may base their voluntary decisions. However, if basic human needs alone, which are culturally established, already exceed planetary limits, then a moral dilemma arises, one that is still underexplored in the literature.

The role of discourses and power relations is central to the preservation of individual liberties and to the notion of a voluntary ecological sufficiency (HEINDL; KANSCHIK, 2016). The reasons why individuals adopt the practice of sufficiency – such as the formation of personal identity (ELLIOTT, 2004; MANSVELT, 2005), new perceptions toward the concept of quality of life (simple life, proximity to nature and community, freedom from the social pressure to overconsume, etc.) (FISCHER; GRIESSHAMMER, 2013), and other immaterial benefits – are in general subject to the influence of dominant discourses. In any case, studies on the impacts of public policies that favor sufficiency, either in the individual realm or as a comprehensive political platform, are rare; even rarer are those that seek to assess the barriers posed by the dominant discourse of ecological modernization to the dissemination and operationalization of the precepts of ecological sufficiency. On the other hand, studies that relate power and consumption in broader perspectives,

usually in connection with the political economy of Karl Marx or post-structuralism, abound (MANSVELT, 2005).

Finally, the concept of ecological sufficiency opposes the anthropocentric view, in which nature is not more than a source of resources and services for the satisfaction of human needs, void of any intrinsic value. According to this view, the preservation of nature is only worthwhile if its positive impacts over humankind outweigh the negative ones. There would be a hierarchy between species, with humans at the top of the pyramid. Ecosufficiency favors a true ecological responsibility and concern for the well-being of future human and non-human generations, a "biocentric" approach that sees nature as the center of the matter and humans as an inseparable part of it.

Sen's Approach

Amartya Sen (1992, 1999) puts forth an approach based on the idea that the limits of environmental preservation would be linked to the maintenance of the set of most basic human needs, which are culturally established. Yet, if, on the one hand, the satisfaction of such basic needs (by means of self-sufficiency or public policy, technological innovations or new social structures) might lead to environmental preservation, on the other hand, there are no guarantees that natural resources will not be exhausted, even if demand is solely composed of basic needs (e.g., as world population grows beyond the limits of the carrying capacity of Earth's ecosystems).

Whereas access to the natural resource base must consider the principles of sufficiency and intergenerational equity, the set of basic needs of the current generation should not be sacrificed in favor of future ones, which, in turn, would face similar restrictions, with welfare loss for all generations. Sen's approach constitutes, therefore, a normative analysis of the balance between social welfare and environmental sustainability

(BALLET et al. 2013), based on value judgements and individual liberties enjoyed by humans who, embedded in their social contexts, do not worry only about their self-interest, but with the well-being of others, including future generations and non-human species. Sen's approach, thus, transcends the dominant view of humans as *Homo economicus*, which was strengthened by neoclassical utilitarian theories.

Sen's approach takes into consideration the restrictions by which choices are conditioned, as well as the lack of alternatives to exercise individual liberties. Such observations allow for a better understanding of the relations between humans and nature in a setting of technical and social evolution, and, consequently, enable the formulation of policies which simultaneously aim at enhancing human welfare and environmental sustainability. The search for new modes of social organization, which might ease the exercise of choices with lower environmental impacts, constitutes, alongside novel insights into intergenerational justice, fertile ground for the development of sustainability science.

To put such a discourse into effect, it is essential to know the vulnerability degree, adaptation skills, and resistance levels of an individual facing the need to alter his use of natural resources. Analogously, it is necessary to know how his actions impact the environment. According to an example brought by Ballet et al. (2011), intergenerational concerns involving deforestation must acknowledge the lack of alternatives of local communities to their use of wood and charcoal as energy sources for their livelihoods. Conversely, if deforestation is caused by the formation of extensive grazing areas or large biofuel plantations – activities not directly related to subsistence – then intergenerational concerns gain a new light, according to the underlying opportunities and restrictions, as well as the expected results in terms of basic human welfare gains today and into the future.

The "Buen Vivir" Movement

Another contemporary discourse associated with the concepts of sustainable consumption and ecological sufficiency draws inspiration from traditions of ancient South American tribes from the Andean and Amazonian regions – the social movement and political philosophy of *buen vivir* (an adaptation from the *quechua* expression *Sumak Kawsay*, meaning "decent, bountiful life"). *Buen vivir* assigns different interpretations and values for terms such as development and well-being, which are rooted in tight community bonds and harmony with nature (ACOSTA, 2015). The intrinsic value of nature is an explicit feature. As an entity, nature holds its own rights. Environmental degradation caused by the creation of artificial needs, therefore, violates the rights of *Pachamama* (the concept of *Pachamama* is complex and resembles the definitions of Gaia, "mother Earth" or "mother nature") (ZAFFARONI, 2011). Economic activity should be focused on solidarity, local autonomy, the regenerative use of resources and waste, and the right of all peoples to a self-referenced decent life.

Buen vivir is an example of discourse in favor of sustainable consumption and ecological sufficiency. It seeks its goals through the attribution of a key role to community as the main regulatory element of social life, with only secondary roles for markets and the State. Nevertheless, Acosta (2015) acknowledges the need to confront starkly disadvantageous power relations, a challenge that goes beyond discourses in the process of implementation of a new reality. Still, a few steps have already been taken, e.g. the incorporation of the *buen vivir* philosophy as a constitutional principle of Ecuador. With an economy based on export commodities, the country fights against the political power of influent groups tied to large-scale extractive projects, which typically yield social and environmental losses (VILLALBA-EGUILUZ; ETXANO, 2017).

Environmental Justice

Environmental justice lies at the core of debates in the field of political ecology. According to Martinez-Alier (2002), as a discipline, it could be defined as the study of ecological distributive conflicts, within which an analysis of the connections between power inequality and environmental degradation is undertaken in the context of economic growth. Furthermore, the notions of sustainable consumption and ecological sufficiency are closely related to environmental justice. Firstly, there is the assumption that, given Earth's ecological limits, in order to satisfy the most basic needs of the poor, the rich would have to reduce their consumption, freeing scarce resources to meet the demands of more vulnerable parts of the world (SACHS, 1993). To Heindl and Kanschik (2016), there is a conflict between the principles of ecological sufficiency and of environmental justice: the former proposes an upper limit and the latter a lower one for social consumption. The resulting interval of possible joint action would be instrumental in this sense, as there would be no public support for sufficiency policies without taking into account demands for social justice; conversely, without realizing the merits of ecological sufficiency, there would be an overshoot of the mentioned ecological limits and, subsequently, large-scale social and environmental devastation.

Sawyer (2002) questions if wealth redistribution and poverty alleviation would lead to either more or less environmental deterioration. The answer depends mainly on populational dynamics and change of consumption habits, the latter understood in a systemic manner, i.e., with direct and indirect consequences for the environment (which depend on industrial processes, transportation, commercialization, etc.), which are integrated into the economic cycles of production of goods and services, and which are determined by international relations between North and South (to the extent that the flow of export commodities from Southern to

Northern countries are characterized by the transference of natural resources with deteriorated terms of trade). Acknowledging the complexity of the issue prevents a simplistic view in which environmental degradation is caused by consumption in the global North and poverty in the global South, an easy target for discourses and powers in line with ecological modernization and economic growth at all cost, which take advantage of social demands to justify economic expansion and of environmental restrictions to promote new "green" business opportunities.

Deep Ecology

The concern for the welfare of future generations of non-human populations, i.e., for nature itself (without going into the philosophical discussion on the dichotomy posed by the human and the natural realms), is a trait of ecological sufficiency that draws it near to biocentrism and its open acknowledgement of nature as an entity bearing intrinsic value and holding rights of its own. The history of environmental thought is a rich source of examples of discourses that, having adopted biocentric principles and propositions, align themselves with ecological sufficiency from an ethical standpoint.

A more recent sample of this history would include thinkers such as Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), the American transcendentalist author who believed that conspicuous consumption was not only dispensable, but an obstacle to the moral elevation of humankind; John Muir (1838–1914), the American preservationist seen as the "Father of National Parks" and protector of wildlife, which, for him, should remain untouched by humans; and Aldo Leopold (1887–1948), forester, ecologist, and conservationist, who proposed a "Land Ethic" based on the integrity and stability of biotic communities. Author of one of the most influential books of environmental thought, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), Leopold linked property rights to

ethical values pertaining the concepts of responsibility and care as pillars of the relations between humans and nature. There would be a principle of reciprocity of rights and duties, which reflected the interdependency between the *bios* and the *anthropos*. Such a reciprocity would originate from the ecological conscience of property owners – here, consumers – toward the value of non-human biotic manifestations (FERREIRO, 2009).

Notwithstanding the prominence of such authors, the deep ecology of Arne Næss (1912–2009) can be considered as the quintessence of biocentrism. At once philosophy and environmental movement, deep ecology calls for the acknowledgement of the intrinsic value of all forms of life as a basis for the formulation of environmental policies. The adjective "deep" refers to the level of questioning of values and purposes of human existence in our relation to the environment and other beings. It is about scrutinizing fundamental causes and motivations that are tied to every action with implications over life in general. Shallow approaches, in this sense, would be satisfied with short-term solutions, typically with a modernizing imperative, relying on technology, and with a conservative ideology, maintaining the current mode of social organization (i.e., supporters of the discourse of ecological modernization). A deep approach must question the dominant social system and redesign it in agreement with values that preserve life in a broad sense, with all its biological and cultural diversity.

Deep ecology has been attacked for being anti-human or for isolating humans as external entities to the integral concept of nature. However, its main contribution is the proposition to equate the intrinsic values of humans and nature, both holders of fundamental rights, such as the rights to live and to develop (NÆSS, 1989). Thus, deep ecology brings a relevant discourse in favor of ecological sufficiency, combining elements of the transcendentalism of Thoreau, the preservationism of Muir, the Land Ethic of Leopold, *buen vivir* (nature as an entity holder of rights), and Sen's approach (concern for non-human species).

Ecosocialism

The political economy of Karl Marx, in accordance with most environmentalist currents, did not address ecological questions. It would have displayed a productivist character and argued that nature was ultimately one of the forces through which the proletariat would take charge of their own fate. Nevertheless, more recent analyses (BURKETT, 2009; FOSTER, 2000; LÖWY, 2001; 2015) present a view in which Marx would have pointed to the dangers of a "metabolic rift" between society and nature (despite the permanence of an essentially anthropogenic stance). The flows of matter and energy that are necessary for the expansion of the capitalist system cannot be permanently maintained by the carrying capacity of the planet. This was the starting point of the development of the theoretical framework of ecosocialism (or eco-Marxism).

In their "Ecosocialist Manifesto" (2001), Joe Kovel and Michael Löwy stress how capital reduces humankind to a mere reservoir of labor, which is intensified by the promotion of consumerism and the depoliticization of the population. The new ecosocialist model, conversely, would retain the emancipatory objectives of the original concept of socialism, but reject mitigated reform proposals put in practice in capitalist social democracies, as well as other productivist modes of organization that are proper to more bureaucratic strands of socialism. The social character of production and its ecological constraints would be prioritized, in detriment of the imperative of economic growth at all cost. It does not conform to a scarcity paradigm, seeking a transformation of values focused on the satisfaction of human needs, with qualitative aspects overlapping with quantitative ones. In the Marxist jargon, such a transition relates to the primacy of use values over exchange values. To Kovel (2002), the emphasis given by market economies to exchange values, with a constant need for buying and selling in order to

survive, leads to the production of goods until then without use value, simply because it has the power to sustain the capacity to buy other goods.

According to Löwy (2001), as an intellectual current, ecosocialism is the combination of socialism with political ecology. Hence, it is closely linked to environmental justice, standing by the interests of workers, traditional communities, and the global South, in opposition to modernizing solutions for sustainability in a capitalistic setting. The root cause of the unsustainability of the current economic system is capital accumulation, which pervades the organization and logic of the processes of production, distribution, and consumption. From a socio-ecological point-of-view, it is impossible to extend to all, on a planetary level, the conspicuous consumption and the waste of resources of rich Northern countries without implying an irreversible metabolic rift with catastrophic consequences. An ecosocialist economy must, therefore, acknowledge social and environmental circumstances as they are given, and support deep ethical, behavioral, and organizational transformations. The departure from artificial consumption habits and the adoption of the principles of ecological sufficiency are key points in this transition.

Final Remarks

The concepts of sustainable consumption – weak and strong – and ecological sufficiency were presented above. The dominant discourse of ecological modernization, part of the capitalistic hegemonic consensus, in which social and environmental problems are dealt with through the expansion of the reach of markets and the life-saving role of technological progress, was associated with the notion of weak sustainable consumption, based on efficiency gains, technical innovations, and the creation of new "green" business opportunities. On the other hand, discourses such as Sen's approach, *buen vivir*, environmental justice, deep ecology, and ecosocialism provide support for the precepts of strong sustainable consumption and ecological sufficiency. These discourses integrate absolute reductions of matter and energy flows, social justice, and new perceptions of well-being, quality of life, dignity, community, and nature.

The debate on consumption and its ecological consequences is polemic, complex, plural, and often contradictory. There are distinct viewpoints even within groups of interest, scientific disciplines, communities, or cultures. Economic, ecological, moral, and political arguments overlap in a social context in which discourses and power relations have a role as important as that of widely accepted scientific truths. Such truths, in turn, are subject to appropriation by dominant discourses of groups of interest that, weighed by their power and influence, can create and consolidate determined worldviews and, consequently, social reality itself. Changes to the current patterns of consumption – or of accumulation, a broader term that explicits the unidirectional logic of an economic system propelled by growth *ad infinitum* – fundamentally depend on a break with the discourse and power of the capitalistic hegemonic consensus. If not undertaken in an organized and sanctioned manner, this break will be tragically imposed by the ecological limits of the planet. As well put by Fuchs et al. (2015, p. 9):

> For those of us deeply concerned about the long-term existence of life as we know it, to avoid power is to risk condoning a system that is inherently unsustainable and unjust, both in the short and long term, and at home and abroad. Shying away from power allows the trends to play out to their logical and tragic ends. Asking about power, uncovering the hidden and exposing the inequitable is a civic obligation, a sustainability imperative, and a justice prerequisite. It is time social scientists, natural scientists, and humanists, as well as those in applied fields such as business and engineering, study power, question power, and thereby challenge power. Consumption cannot be sustainable or reductions absolute with anything less.

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