

Weniger ist mehr?

Suffizienz als erlebte Zumutung in liberalen Demokratien



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***Nicht zu wenig und nicht zu viel: Mit Suffizienz in eine
(klima)gerechte Gesellschaft?***

SOZÖKNET AK und FORBA

Hürden für Suffizienzpolitik in liberalen Demokratien

RESEARCH ARTICLE

RESEARCH 243

Can liberal democracies thrive with consumption limits?

Barriers to implementing consumption corridors

Consumption limits and sufficiency approaches face growing opposition in today's political landscape. While proponents of consumption corridors (CCs) assume that setting upper consumption limits is achievable in liberal democracies, we argue that the tensions between CCs and liberal democracy are more profound than suggested. We examine the role of (high) consumption in liberal democracies to better understand the barriers to achieving a good life for all within planetary boundaries.

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Can liberal democracies thrive with consumption limits?

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Abstract

In sustainability debates, the concept of consumption corridors (CCs) has gained prominence. CCs are understood to achieve a good life for all within planetary boundaries. This concept operates on the premise that setting upper limits to consumption is in principle feasible within liberal democracies. But to what extent, if at all, are upper limits to consumption compatible with liberal democracy? In this article, we argue that the tensions between CCs and liberal democracy may run deeper than proponents of CCs suggest. Because consumption plays a constitutive role in social reconciliation, the formation and exercise of autonomy, and democratic legitimacy in liberal democracies, introducing upper limits may indeed hit harder boundaries – boundaries that sufficiency approaches to reducing consumption (and production) levels increasingly face in the current political landscape. Sharing the normative horizon of a good life for all, we propose that for CCs to become a viable lever for transformative change, a deeper analysis of existing barriers may be in order.

Keywords

autonomy, consumption corridors, economic growth, legitimacy, liberal democracy, reconciliation

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Against the backdrop of the ongoing transgression of planetary boundaries (Rockström et al. 2009), the question of how to define and implement societal boundaries considering ecological limits has come to the fore in environmental social sciences (Brand et al. 2021). One suggestion has attracted particular attention: the introduction of consumption corridors (CCs) that differentiate between necessities and luxuries. By means of democratic deliberation (e.g., in citizen assemblies), the suggestion goes, citizens come to agree on how human needs, which proponents of CCs conceive of as universal (e.g., Doyal and Gough 1991, Max-Neef et al. 1991), should be met by culturally variable *satisfiers* (Fuchs et al. 2021). In this context, needs are framed as irreducible minimum standards for a flourishing well-being (Fuchs et al. 2021, p. 13). They are contrasted with *desires*, which are understood as subjective wishes that often correspond with *high-consumption satisfiers*. Although proponents of CCs acknowledge that the satisfaction of desires also brings pleasure and joy, these desires are, as Fuchs et al. (2021, p. 14) argue, “not crucial to an individual’s ability to live a good life”. In fact, Fuchs et al. (2021, p. 18, 47) point out, desires are often an effect of the advertising industry. Based on the distinction between universal needs and subjective desires, CCs imply the definition of minimum and maximum standards for consumption – a floor and a ceiling (Gough 2020). Such minimum and maximum standards, CCs advocates suggest, could form the basis for policies that ensure access to need satisfiers while preventing excess consumption that threatens the very possibility of a good life for present and future generations within planetary boundaries (Di Giulio and Defflorian 2021, 2020).

In anticipation of potential objections to the concept of CCs, proponents have identified possible strands of critique and sought to preempt them (Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014, Gumbert and Bohn 2021). Di Giulio and Fuchs (2014) named, among others, the following anticipated objections to CCs: the *liberalist argument* and the *argument of lacking acceptance*. Both critiques focus on CCs’ *incompatibility with liberal freedom* (Gumbert and Bohn 2021) and

Karl-Werner Brand,
Basil Bornemann (Hg.)
*Die sozial-ökologische
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campus

Suffizienz in der Sackgasse?

Klimakrise verschärft sich – Folgen längst spürbar

Suffizienzpolitik bleibt randständig im Schatten von:

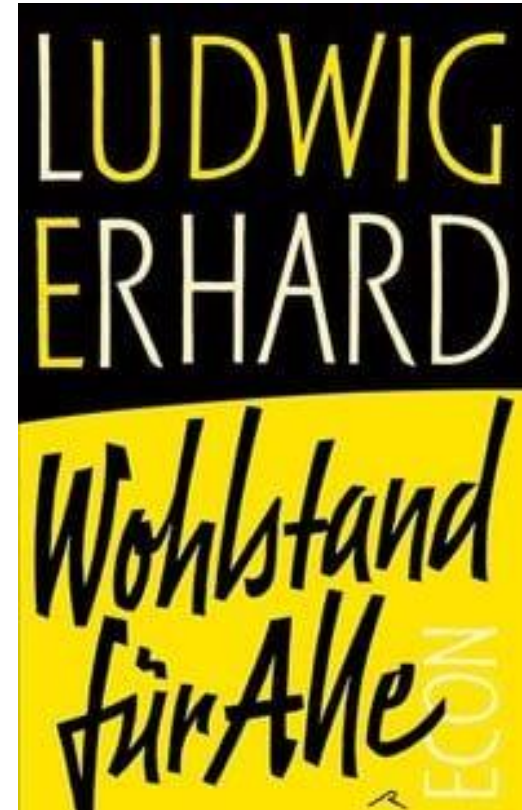
- **Effizienz- & Konsistenzstrategien:** grünes Wachstum
- **Retrograde Reaktionen:** nationale Abschottung, fossile Rückwärtsgewandtheit (Selk/Kommerzell 2022)

Hürden für Suffizienzpolitik in liberalen Demokratien

1. Wirtschaftswachstum und soziale Befriedung
2. Demokratische Legitimation
3. Selbstverwirklichung und Selbstbestimmung des spätmodernen Subjekts

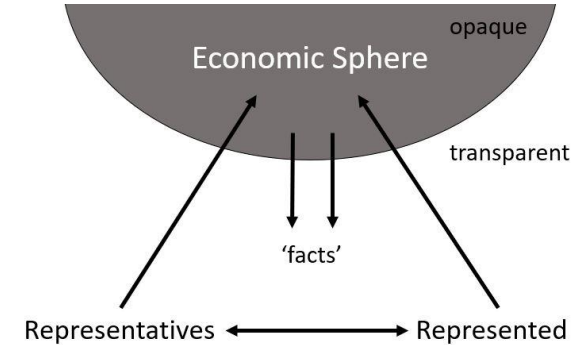
Wirtschaftswachstum und soziale Befriedung

- Soziale Befriedung in liberalen Demokratien beruhte seit der Nachkriegszeit auf Wirtschaftswachstum und der Demokratisierung von Konsumfreiheit, wodurch Konflikte befriedet, Legitimität gesichert – und zugleich Ungleichheiten sowie ökologische Externalisierungen fortgeschrieben wurden (Erhard 1957; Schmelzer 2015).



Demokratische Legitimation

- Suffizienzkorridore werden für den Staat enorme Legitimationsprobleme auf, weil sie die Quellen **passiver Legitimation** (Hausknost 2023) untergraben:
- **Verdinglichung**
- **Externalisierung** (Lessenich 2016, 2019)
- **Performanz**



Das spätmoderne Subjekt

- **Selbstverwirklichung** seit den 1970er Jahren marktförmig gelenkt (Boltanski & Chiapello 2005) → mit der neoliberalen Wende Imperativ des „unternehmerischen Selbst“ (Bröckling 2007; Ehrenberg 2012), verbunden mit Eigenverantwortung, Prekarität und Ungleichheit (Nachtwey 2016).
- Digitale Öffentlichkeit fördert individualistisch erhöhte **Selbstbestimmung** zur Absicherung subjektiver Wahrheiten und Rechte (Kalke 2025).



Suffizienz zwischen subjektiver Zumutung und umweltpolitischer Chance

- **Effizienzstrategien & retrograde Antworten** dominieren
 - Halten Wachstumsversprechen (wenn auch für wenige)
 - Gefährden staatliche Legitimation nicht
 - Stützen Hoffnungen auf individuelle Selbstverwirklichung
- **Suffizienz:** normativ überzeugend, politisch marginalisiert
- „Weniger“ kann für viele ein „Mehr“ bedeuten
- Aber: Umsetzung erscheint vor dem Hintergrund der Hürden vorschnell
- **Sozial-ökologische Politik als Weg aus der Sackgasse?**

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