

Results of the Münster Workshop:
Sustainable Consumption and the Good Life
March 21-22, 2013

The good life is useful as a tool for thinking about and fostering sustainable consumption, but it also involves substantial challenges in terms of its conceptualization. When it comes to questions of potential avenues and barriers to fostering sustainable consumption in terms of the good life, our underlying theories/concepts of power and change play a pivotal role. In consequence, more focus and research on three aspects appear crucial: the “nature” and implications of the good life as a guiding vision for sustainable consumption, the relationship between power and sustainable consumption, and the determinants of change, in particular with respect to the diffusion of sustainability innovations. Especially in the first two of these research foci questions of inequality are also likely to play a pivotal role.

The workshop was guided by three overarching questions:

Q1: Convincing Visions of a Good life:

What ideas and visions of a good life in the context of sustainable consumption exist and how convincing are they in terms of scientific (theoretical and/or empirical) rationale/evidence and societal practicability? How universal are these visions and how universal should they be?

Q2: Changes needed for rooting and pursuing convincing visions of a good life in society:

What ideational and material structures and processes hinder (or foster) a broad societal conception and implementation of a good life compatible with sustainability?

Q3 – Intervening on behalf of a Good Life:

Where can we find truly promising interventions points to foster the societal conceptualization and implementation of a good life? Where is and may change come from?

In the discussion, questions 2 and 3 tended to be discussed jointly. In addition, two more topics became central In the course of the workshop:

T1: Power and sustainable consumption

T2: Sustainable consumption and change

With respect to Q1, the workshop participants noted that the focus on the good life can be used to map and define possibilities as well as necessities in terms of the good life and interventions on behalf of individual and societal abilities to pursue a good life. Furthermore, it can help create an effective language for external communication and serve as a catalyst for change. Consensus existed also on the need to follow a pluralist conception of vision_S of the good life, given the heterogeneity in and across societies. While all human beings have certain fundamental needs, the ways to satisfy them differ widely. Nevertheless, the good life can serve as a useful tool here to identify satisfiers, which are unacceptable from a societal perspective, as they reduce the ability of others to pursue a good life. In other words, thinking about sustainable consumption in terms of the good life points to the need to talk about corridors of sustainable consumption, delimited by consumption minima and maxima. There was some disagreement in terms of the question to what extent sustainable visions of the good life exist in society today and where and how venues for creating and diffusing such visions (could) exist. Moreover, participants debated whether we should look at the individual or societal level when referring to the good life, and suggested that both the “I” and the “we” are essential elements in this context. Fundamentally, the core elements of a good life need to be further explored and debated. The discussion and workshop papers referred to a range of issues in this context, such as the role of crafts, Zufriedenheit, (in)equality, participation, urban planning and food choices. Yet, a more extended exploration and scientific and societal debate on this aspect are necessary. At the same time, participants agreed that it would be wrong to wait for the development of a vision of the good life that everybody can relate to before further pursuing sustainable consumption in terms of the good life, as the last 4000 years have not been able to present a conclusive answer to the question of the nature of the good life.

With respect to structures inhibiting sustainable consumption in terms of the good life (Q2) and relevant intervention strategies and points (Q3), the debate identified a range of aspects. It was noted, for instance, how the potential (re)design of products and spaces influences consumption choices. On the level of language, narratives and norms and values, participants suggested the need to create a new language to better capture the benefits of sustainable consumption, to rely on narratives of inevitability as well as mobilizing discourses such as distributive justice and models of alternative lifestyles to garner support, and to question and change the fundamental norms and ethics underlying today’s socio-economic system. In this vein, papers suggested the need for a new definition of progress and a new ethics of exchange and fossil fuels, for example. In terms of discursive power as well as material structures, restrictions on the advertising as well as the power of financial markets were discussed. Proactive choice editing, the setting of consumption minima and maxima, as well as the reduction of inequality through highly progressive taxes, for instance, were deemed important governmental intervention strategies, albeit also difficult to bring about. Participants felt that the role of science, in this context, should be a proactive one. Its tasks range from openly addressing issues of power, to functioning as performative science, i.e. identifying as much evidence for positive change as possible and highlighting the need

for further change, to joining NGOs and government in appropriate choice editing effort. Questions arose as to whether positive (“look at all these sustainability innovations going on”) rather than negative (“look at these powerful interests opposed to change”) storylines would be more helpful in fostering the political and general pursuit of sustainable consumption. While a common feeling was that networking with civil society (e.g. the climate justice movement) and political decision-makers is important, there was also concern to what extent scholars could have a real influence in an era where policy makers appear to draw on scientific evidence only in so far as it supports their predetermined substantive strategies rather than being open to learning. Finally, the notion of a potential collaborative intervention by science in general and this group of scholars in particular was briefly discussed

The issue of power (T1) reappeared throughout the discussions. In many of the papers, participants noted that issues of agency and power were present but not being sufficiently addressed. They felt that power plays a central role in creating structural barriers to sustainable consumption and delimiting opportunities for intervention, for instance. Here, the financial sector as well as the media, and in particular advertising are noteworthy actors, and participants asked, how one could get power away from these actors. At the same time, many people are disenfranchised when it comes to the question of getting one’s views on a desirable future in, for example. Thus, the relationship between power and sustainable consumption brings us back to the most fundamental questions of democracy. How can one assure actual and not just de jure equality in participation in today’s democracies, characterized by large asymmetries in resources and access to institutions and decision makers? At the same time, one should not idealize participation, of course. Improvements in participation do not guarantee sustainable outcomes. Power is an extremely complex issue of course. It has structural and actor-specific elements as well as material and ideational sources. As such it is tightly linked to questions of (in)equality. Further research and debate needs to more closely relate the power theoretic research that exists in political science in particular to questions of sustainable consumption and democracy.

A second topic generating particular interest among the participants was the question of dynamics and sources of change (T2). Here, the discussion centered on the questions of whether and how the replication and/or upscaling/mainstreaming of sustainability innovations could be fostered. In this context, it needs to be noted, however, that some models do not lend themselves to mainstreaming or even replication. Thus, it appears that the associated practices and learning steps may invite replication more than the models themselves. More fundamentally, the necessity to inquire into the models of change (which in turn relate to issues of power) underlying arguments about the diffusion of sustainability innovations and to link the sustainable consumption research and debate to the literature on social movements and their determinants of success became clear. Based on that literature, for instance, it appears that the clarity of an issue, the existence of inspiring leaders and the potency of discontent, and the visibility of change are among the central determinants of a social movement’s potential to bring about change. An associated

question that arose was whether the desired change towards sustainability “is already here”? Optimistic assessments resulting from the recognition of the large number of (mainly local) sustainability innovations around the world were confronted by observations of an at least equally large number of developments and innovations pointing in the opposite direction. This led to the fundamental insight that the sustainable consumption research and debate needs to be careful not to a priori connote change positively, on the one side. On the other side, the papers debate also identified the need to look for a tipping point, allowing the large number of sustainability innovations to gain momentum in their diffusion into the mainstream. The question thus may not be how to bring about new developments, but rather how to further bring out what is already there.

In sum, the intensive and inspiring workshop went to the core of the question of how sustainable consumption in terms of the good life may be fostered. It showed that this questions in inherently tied to fundamental societal issues and characteristics, in particular questions of power, democracy, (in)equality and sources of change. In our efforts, we need to be explicit about these issues and related assumptions underlying our and others’ arguments as well as utilize existing scientific insights on them more consciously and comprehensively. At the same time, the topic of sustainable consumption also teaches us to be modest and weary of simplistic generalizations due to the importance of contextual factors and the need for learning and reflexivity in its pursuit.