

## Democratizing Sustainable Consumption Governance

*Basil Bornemann*

**Sustainable consumption is rarely high on the political agenda. One reason for this may be the dilemmatic relationship between consumption and democracy: Consumption is a central element of democratic politics but also a potential threat to it. Three criteria of democratic legitimacy offer a way out of this dilemma and open up possibilities for democratizing sustainable consumption governance.**

For long, sustainability-oriented governance of economic affairs was mainly concerned with regulating industrial production to enable ecological modernization. The attention was on collective economic actors – companies or entire industry branches – that supply society with goods and services. Although mentioned in landmark documents from the Brundtland Report to the UN 2030 Agenda, the consumption of goods and services has not been consistently high on the sustainability governance agenda. Policymakers have addressed the issue of sustainable consumption, sometimes more, sometimes less intensively. Still, they do not seem to have fully embraced it, resulting in weak and erratic implementation with only moderate overall success.<sup>1</sup>

Consumption typically refers to the use of goods and services by all kinds of actors, including governments. However, the discourse on sustainable consumption, and also this text, focuses mainly on individuals (or groups of individuals, such as households). A universally valid definition of sustainable consumption remains elusive even after 30 years of debate. Existing concepts revolve around the use of goods and services in ways that satisfy individual needs while reducing environmental, social, and economic impacts. This understanding implies the possibility of dematerializing consumption while maintaining or even increasing existing consumption levels, making it a weak conception.<sup>2</sup> More substantial notions require sustainable consumption to ensure intra- and intergenerational justice and wellbeing while respecting fundamental ecological boundaries.<sup>3</sup> In addition to promoting sustainable goods and services, it requires

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1 Jackson (2014).

2 Lorek/Fuchst (2019).

3 Bornemann/Burger (2019).

the absolute reduction of consumption levels to align with normatively justified consumption corridors.<sup>4</sup>

The somewhat half-hearted implementation of sustainable consumption policies may lie in a deeply ambivalent and dilemmatic relationship between consumption and politics, especially in contemporary liberal democracies. On the one hand, consumption is central to democratic politics. It is seen as a key driver of economic growth, which, in turn, is considered a precondition of stable political consent, support, and legitimacy. Democratic politics is therefore interested in maintaining and expanding consumption to fulfill its promises of increasing progress and a good life. Consumption is the common denominator of otherwise disparate political camps. Liberals seek to increase consumption by removing barriers that stand in their way, and social democrats seek to promote consumption through public spending.

On the other hand, consumption is a challenge and potential threat to democratic politics. Even before the contribution of consumption to the exacerbation of the ecological crisis was problematized, critics highlighted the consumer society's psychological and social side effects and its negative consequences for democratic politics. The continued and systemic growth of consumption, the argument goes, masks the parallel development of inequality, rising collective debt, and declining social and infrastructural investments that are central to the functioning of democratic communities.<sup>5</sup> Modern society is subject to a consumerist social pathology that undermines its social, systemic, and ecological integration and the foundations of democratic politics.

How can sustainable consumption be governed, given this dilemma? In the following, I explore the potential of sustainability-oriented consumption governance that reflects its democratic implications. For this purpose, I distinguish two dominant perspectives on shaping sustainable consumption. I draw on these perspectives to inform an approach to sustainability-oriented consumption governance that meets three criteria of democratic legitimacy.

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4 Fuchs et al. (2021); Lorek/Fuchs (2019). On the concept of consumption corridors, see also the contribution in this book by Rico Defila and Antonietta Di Giulio: "Nachhaltigkeit im Konsum – Suffizienz statt Verzicht und Geschützte Bedürfnisse statt planetarer Grenzen."

5 Jackson (2004).

### **Governing sustainable consumption from the top**

The first perspective concerns governments designing and implementing sustainability-oriented consumption policies that target consumption related to various areas such as food, energy, or mobility. In this context, consumption is predominantly seen as individuals' situational or stable behavior in using goods and services. Instead of looking at individuals' behavior, other approaches understand consumption as embedded in complex social practices shaped by configurations of materials and infrastructures, social norms and meanings, and competencies and skills.

Both behavioral and social practice approaches are based on the assumption that targeted interventions in the factors and conditions underlying consumption behavior or practices can change consumption in ways that mitigate its negative environmental, social, and economic impacts. Interventions include a wide range of well-known policy instruments, including sticks, carrots, sermons, and nudges. They can aim to reinforce or promote sustainable consumption patterns over unsustainable ones, for example, by providing positive incentives for dematerialized goods and services over resource-intensive ones. Negative incentives and prohibitions can reduce or eliminate the use of particularly problematic goods and services. In addition to direct interventions in behavior, consumption policies can also reshape the social fabric that generates consumption patterns. This includes a variety of policy interventions that go beyond consumption to address a wide range of social practices related to work, housing, and living.

### **Shaping sustainable consumption from below**

Conceptualizing consumers as carriers of consumption behaviors and practices that can be influenced and steered in one direction or another by top-down policy interventions renders consumption a largely passive-receptive object of control. Such a perspective neglects phenomena where consumers are more active and engaged and express political ideas, interests, and identities through consumption. Instead of being a mere object, consumption becomes a political act in itself, and the shopping list becomes a ballot through which political will is expressed. The consumer becomes a citizen-consumer, taking responsibility for the common good.



An activist at the Fridays for Future global climate strike on September 24, 2021, in Berlin holding a poster with a reference to a popular children's song "hum, hum, hum, curb consumption."

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Political consumption includes both noisy, politicized variants and quieter ones. The former refers to activist engagement or protest against certain unsustainable consumer goods to pressure producers to eliminate them. In addition to directly targeting consumption and the underlying production systems, consumer activism seeks to mobilize broader social and political support. In contrast to these loud and often publicly visible forms of politicization, quieter political consumption involves individuals taking responsibility for their consumption in their private lives through conscious consumption choices. Beyond the purely individual sphere of engagement, people are forming groups and communities to collectively organize their consumption of, for example, energy or food. They engage in citizen energy cooperatives and local food initiatives, pursuing alternative forms of consumption in collaboration with other actors.<sup>6</sup> Production and consumption are often more directly interconnected in these alternative forms. Consumers and producers move closer together, get to know each other, and thus overcome the distances and alienations between producers and consumers in existing globalized value chains.

### **Sustainable consumption governance and democratic legitimacy**

Drawing on the intellectual resources of both perspectives, I now outline key features of an understanding of sustainable consumption governance that addresses the democratic dilemma outlined at the outset. Arguing that sustainable consumption governance must reflect its democratic implications, I draw on complex democracy theory to propose three orientations that governance designers should consider when shaping sustainable consumption governance in more democratic ways: democratic input, output, and throughput legitimacy.<sup>7</sup>

*Input legitimacy*, broadly defined, refers to attempts to engage people in governance matters that affect them and their community. It builds on the idea that people ascribe legitimacy to governance arrangements when they have the opportunity to actively shape them, thus moving from affected to participants. Political consumption, whether loud or quiet, is an important source for engaging people in challenging existing forms of consumption and inventing and testing alternative ones. Although rooted in practices of self-empowerment and bottom-up activist mobilization, it should also be central to the design of sustainable consumption governance because of its potential to strengthen input legitimacy. For example, sustainable consumption governance can support actors in

6 Davies (2022).

7 Bornemann/Weiland (2019).



their efforts to politicize consumption by enabling consumers to hold producers accountable for providing options for sustainable consumption, including through legal action. Strengthening the ability and capacity of consumers to articulate and assert their concerns as consumer citizens enables participation and endows sustainable consumption governance with input legitimacy.

With regard to more quiet practices of alternative consumption, sustainable consumption governance can create spaces where participatory experimentation with sustainable consumption practices becomes possible. It can also actively and purposefully empower people to develop and disseminate alternative consumption practices. To reach beyond the “usual suspects,” sustainable consumption governance must actively engage underrepresented consumer groups and provide socially inclusive opportunities to participate in grassroots consumption initiatives.

*Output legitimacy* refers to the problem-solving quality of governance. It reflects the assumption that people view a governance practice/system as legitimate if it is able to provide solutions to problems that meet commonly shared standards of effectiveness, efficiency, or equity. Attempts to regulate consumption tend to be seen as illegitimate in the output sense because they violate deeply held values of individual freedom. In particular, strong sustainable consumption policies that aim to reduce absolute levels of consumption are suspected of undermining people’s freedom of choice and reducing people’s wellbeing, thus compromising output legitimacy.



A referendum poster argues with restriction of freedom (Switzerland, January 2022).

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However, there are ways to improve output legitimacy through comprehensive, inclusive, and dynamically evolving governance designs that target different consumer groups with differentiated measures.<sup>8</sup> For example, consumption policy mixes that consider existing inequalities in consumption levels and seek to redistribute consumption opportunities across various social groups are more likely to be considered just. Such socially differentiated policy mixes could focus on curbing some actors' highly unsustainable consumption levels (e.g., resource-intensive practices of the superrich) through bans or strong disincentives. At the same time, social groups with relatively low levels of consumption can be enabled to expand their consumption options and levels. Still other groups can be targeted with policies that change their consumption patterns and practices toward more sustainable ones.



Whose consumption may be regulated? A private artificial island some 5 miles off the coast of Dubai.

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In addition, governance designs that deliberately shape sequences of policy interventions can build and sustain output legitimacy over time. For example, stronger interventions are seen as more legitimate when preceded by softer approaches aimed at shaping social norms.<sup>9</sup> While information and education sometimes appear to be ineffective in changing consumption patterns, they are critical accompanying measures for preparing the ground and building support for more intrusive consumption policies and their effective implementation.<sup>10</sup>

8 Bornemann et al. (2018).

9 Fesenfeld et al. (2022).

10 Bornemann/Weiland (2019).

Finally, democratic output legitimacy can be strengthened through governance designs that focus on shaping consumption practices that “work” because they are well embedded in citizens’ lifeworlds and synergize with broader practices related to work and housing. Adapting practices to contexts and lifeworlds is thus not only a question of making sustainable consumption happen on the ground but also a matter of strengthening democratic output legitimacy. It also means considering sustainable consumption governance as part of a broader sustainability governance that includes all stages of economic value chains, including the production and distribution of goods and services. In order to promote acceptance, the sustainable consumption governance must, in particular, counteract tendencies towards one-sided consumer responsibility and ensure that the costs and benefits of a broader sustainable transformation of production *and* consumption are fairly distributed.

A third normative orientation for the design of democratic sustainable consumption governance is *throughput legitimacy*. This concept refers to the quality of governance processes. In order to be considered legitimate, these processes must, among other things, allow for fair cooperation between the actors involved and transparent consideration of their respective positions and arguments. On the one hand, sustainable consumption governance, which is oriented towards throughput legitimacy, aims to create opportunities and framework conditions in which consumers act together and co-produce consumption practices, for example, in consumer cooperatives. In a broader sense, such forms of cooperation also include producers, as in the context of community-supported agriculture.

On the other hand, at a more general policy level, throughput legitimacy-oriented sustainable consumption governance emphasizes the role of discourses and arenas of reflection and deliberation between organized social and economic actors and citizens on sustainable consumption. This involves creating spaces in which different actors reflect on what constitutes sustainable consumption and how it can be achieved in a given context. Such public debates also need to address the systemic links between production and consumption in order to overcome the mutual shifting of responsibilities between production and consumption. Debates about the links between consumption and production and their respective responsibilities can create new acceptance for sustainable consumption policies.



## The role of the social sciences

Overall, democratic sustainable consumption governance is about combining and shaping different governance resources that emerge from different perspectives in such a way that they meet the criteria of democratic input, throughput, and output legitimacy. It is about enabling active participation in shaping consumption practices “from below” (input legitimacy) and prudent design from above that aligns strong and weak interventions in a group-specific way, sequencing them over time and embedding them in broader practices. Finally, democratic sustainable consumption governance is about fostering discussion about specific consumption practices and developing collectively shared understandings of sustainable consumption in general.

The social sciences should continue to improve understanding of the democratic implications of different approaches to shaping sustainable consumption. This requires improved theoretical and empirical knowledge of the compatibilities and tensions between sustainable and democratic consumption. On this basis, strategies for democratizing sustainable consumption governance in terms of input, output, and throughput legitimacy can be further considered and refined.

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## Zusammenfassung

Die Steuerung nachhaltigen Konsums in Demokratien steht vor einem grundlegenden Dilemma. Einerseits ist demokratische Politik an der Aufrechterhaltung und der Ausweitung des Konsums interessiert, um ihre Versprechen von wachsendem Fortschritt und gutem Leben einzulösen. Andererseits stellen das anhaltende Konsumwachstum und seine ökologischen wie sozialen Nebenwirkungen eine Herausforderung und potenzielle Bedrohung demokratischer Politik dar. Um dieses Dilemma zu überwinden, sollten die Gestalter:innen einer nachhaltigen Konsumpolitik Kriterien der demokratischen Input-Legitimität (Mitbestimmung der Bevölkerung), der Output-Legitimität (Wirksamkeit der politischen Entscheide für die Bürger:innen) und der Throughput-Legitimität (transparente Regierungsprozesse zwischen In- und Output) berücksichtigen, um die Konsumpolitik zu demokratisieren. Die Sozialwissenschaften können dazu beitragen, das Spannungsfeld zwischen nachhaltigem und demokratischem Konsum besser zu verstehen und die demokratische Steuerung eines nachhaltigen Konsums zu unterstützen.

## Résumé

La gouvernance de la consommation durable dans les démocraties fait face à un dilemme majeur. D'un côté, la politique démocratique a tout intérêt à ce que la consommation soit maintenue et même intensifiée afin de tenir ses promesses de progrès par la croissance et de bonne vie. De l'autre côté, la croissance continue de la consommation et ses coûts sociaux et environnementaux représentent un défi et une menace potentielle pour la politique démocratique. Afin de surmonter ce dilemme, les concepteurs et conceptrices de la gouvernance de la consommation durable devraient prendre en compte les critères de légitimité démocratique de l'*input* (la capacité à répondre aux préoccupations des citoyen·ne·s grâce à leur participation), de l'*output* (l'efficacité des résultats politiques pour les citoyen·ne·s) et du *throughput* (les processus de gouvernance qui se déroulent entre l'*input* et l'*output*). Les sciences sociales peuvent contribuer à une meilleure compréhension des tensions entre la consommation durable et démocratique, ainsi qu'à l'amélioration de la gouvernance démocratique de la consommation durable.