

Looking Back to Spring Forward

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The diverse contributions to sustainable consumption in this collection, emanating from the social sciences and humanities (SSH), have given us the opportunity to hark back to earlier discussions and debates around SSH and environmental dilemmas in the 1990s, as exposed in the introduction. Looking forward this time, we might also draw from recent efforts to set a sustainability research agenda in Switzerland. In 2020, the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences brought together researchers from various disciplines, with a very good representation from the SSHs, to develop six priority themes for sustainability research in Switzerland, which are relevant for sustainable consumption research and action. Each of the thematic focus areas can be applied to a consumption perspective, such as considering what food systems are needed “for people and planet,” the role of spatial developments for living, working and getting around; the links between financial systems and wellbeing; or how net zero greenhouse gas emissions might be achieved. Considering “synergies, trade-offs, and common threads” is also a key theme towards a more systemic approach to change. Two central themes in the report are “shared values, visions and pathways” for sustainability, as well as “enabling transdisciplinary sustainability research,” which reveal the strong input of scientists from SSH to the discussions.

In reflecting on the past, we have used a framework that was proposed in the 1990s, at a time when social scientists were struggling to make their voices heard in discussions and debates on environmental issues. Much has happened in the past three decades, and yet the three forms of knowledge that were stipulated at that time remain a relevant framework for organizing research and action for sustainability. In reflecting on the contributions in this issue, we now come back to the ways in which this collection opens up towards further research opportunities in relation to these three forms of knowledge: target, systems, and transformation.

Target knowledge for sustainable consumption: knowing the aims that are to be achieved and dealing with tensions

Several of the contributions in this collection help to define targets for what more sustainable consumption might achieve, notably aiming for societal wellbeing and prosperity. Moynat, Defila and Di Giulio as well as Wallimann-Helmer

emphasize the importance of considering notions of wellbeing and social justice, while Stroude proposes that different imaginaries of the future can co-exist, each with its own goals and purposes. Wellbeing is potentially one such imaginary that could be further unpacked, as for some it is associated with individual freedom and happiness, while for others it is a collective aim that must be planned for and “protected” (see Defila and Di Giulio) at the level of societies. Distinguishing the means from the ends is an essential way forward for sustainable consumption research, whereby “satisfiers,” such as the practice of getting to work on secured bike lanes, allow diverse people to meet their “needs,” such as the ability to feel protected and have the material necessities for life. Indeed, and throughout the contributions, there are tensions between more individual and more collective approaches to sustainability, change or wellbeing, or tensions on how sufficiency measures – understood as absolute reductions to consumption – might come to challenge technological or behavioralist efficiency measures or small-step approaches – such as changing lightbulbs or turning off the lights when not in use. Such over-individualized targets, or those that suggest technological solutions as silver bullets, have been amply criticized in the sustainable consumption literature. Challenging the growth rhetoric with a post-growth posture in relation to consumption is also in tension with consumer culture and historic tendencies to associate economic growth with prosperity, as discussed in Rossfeld’s contribution. Several contributions mention “consumption corridors” as a promising target (Defila and Di Giulio), and one that is being experimented with in practice by Markoni et al. in Bern and around the central consumption domain of food consumption. The main idea here is to combine the need to consume in ways that allow all people, today and in the future, to live a good life, which requires new targets around minima and maxima consumption levels.

Systems knowledge of sustainable consumption: understanding and dealing with complexity

The idea that sustainable consumption needs to be further problematized is evident in several contributions, either by considering the historical roots of fossil fuel dependency (Rossfeld) or by considering the opportunities and limits of marketing-based solutions while grappling with the stronghold of consumerist narratives (Conte). Rather than accepting the status quo, several authors invite us to better understand how it came to be in the first place, for example by uncovering different forms of knowledge that co-exist (Gruhn), and then to chart ways forward that address normative understandings and unsustainable

attitudes. For example, authors show how individual approaches to sustainable consumption may be blind-sighted to broader dynamics, suggesting that too many resources directed at individual behavior change may miss the mark when it comes to addressing more structural changes (Balsiger, Favre and Michaud Gigon). Uncovering the complexity of the changing dynamics of everyday life is central to several authors, based on routines and habits that can be hard to change, but also on imaginaries that are difficult to quantify and unravel. Social practice theory with its special attention to routines and habits, is seen as a promising framework for several authors (Conte, Gruhn, Moynat and Stroude). In a systems approach, the question of societal acceptance also gets picked up by several authors: for Balsiger, sustainable consumption should not solely be for “those who ride bicycles with trailers,” but must provide more inclusive solutions and solutions that deal directly with systems of provision. Related to this, understanding the role of governance systems is also critical to systems knowledge, and how to support legitimate democratic processes, as discussed by Bornemann. The role of emotions is a strong theme throughout, both as being part of complex systems, but also as a transformative tool for change, which we will now turn to.

Transformation knowledge: how to support diverse forms of more sustainable consumption.

Taking off from the two prior forms of knowledge, the focus on transformation knowledge is to act upon change; to support and encourage different interpretations of “sustainable consumption.” The three contributions that focus on the role of theater, improvisation, and literature (proposed by Nisbet, Pavitt, and Soltysik Monnet, respectively) all demonstrate the role of the arts in engaging people in moments of reflexivity, as an embodied experience, based on showing rather than telling. This engagement with the arts reminds us of the early days of discussions between environmental and social sciences in Switzerland, in the late 1980s and early 1990s and as discussed in the introduction to this collection. At that time, the social sciences were expected to simply pick up where the environmental sciences left off: where the latter would understand the problem and define solutions, it was then up to the SSH to convey the solutions and deal with the messy work of ensuring the uptake of more efficient technologies, or the “societal acceptance” of any form of proposed change. Thanks to various funding mechanisms in Switzerland that promote interdisciplinary collaborations, we have now overcome many of these limitations (although they undoubtedly persist in certain contexts). In the same way, the SSH should not rely on the

arts to merely communicate a societal message; an inter- and transdisciplinary approach, collaborating with (non-)academic partners in the literary, visual or performing arts, would require working together on a joint problem framing and co-designing solutions and ways forward. This brings us to another strong point of the contributions, which is the emphasis on participatory and transdisciplinary methods – an approach supported by Stauffacher’s call for more such forms of engagement, as well as by Kueffer’s emphasis on transdisciplinary methods and the concrete example provided by Markoni et al. Working at different scales is also seen as essential, as suggested in the contribution by Michaud Gigon, through different actors including universities, as proposed by Niwa, as well as giving value to the transition through a revenue scheme that would support change to more sustainable forms of production and consumption, as proposed by Swaton.

The diverse contributions in this collection suggest that we have sufficient knowledge about the environmental impacts and priority areas of consumption, that there is recognition that achieving more sustainable forms of consumption will require grappling with complexity, but that more work is needed to understand how to support a more equitable and just transition, to shift societies – not just individuals or technologies – toward ways of living, working, and being that are more respectful of our planet and more just.