

Introduction: Contributions from the SSH to (Un-)Sustainable Consumption

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Unsustainable consumption patterns and associated practices are responsible for major environmental degradation, including biodiversity loss and the climate crisis, and for human deprivation which threaten wellbeing and reflect deep inequalities in how people live and work in our societies. The Sustainable Development Goal 12 calls for more responsible consumption and production, but while the associated targets have valid aims – such as reducing wasteful consumption – how to address the question of (un-)sustainable consumption remains underproblematized. First, both consumption and sustainability are ambiguous concepts, which merit more precise definitions. Unpacking what we mean by “sustainable consumption” is a good start in any process and draws on different meanings and ontologies, which also requires a normative agreement on the goals and targets we wish to achieve. Second, and historically, various targets have been proposed to support more sustainable systems of production, but the consumption dimension has remained relegated to the need to better “inform” consumers or to calling on consumers to reconsider what they buy, which is a rather limited approach to how change might take place. Better tools are necessary and require a more earnest grappling with how and in what ways people consume, embedded in everyday life activities and associated meanings – or a more systemic understanding of consumption dynamics. Third, how to “intervene” in consumption raises issues related to how societies have framed the private sphere and so-called individual freedoms. Here again, novel approaches are necessary towards supporting transformative changes in consumption patterns.

While interdisciplinary approaches are necessary, the social sciences and humanities (SSH) are uniquely equipped to contribute to these types of challenges.

The three challenges mentioned above reflect three different forms of knowledge for sustainable development, which emerged from within a community of scholars working in the social sciences and humanities in Switzerland in the 1990s. The first major discussion around the role of SSH in achieving sustainability emerged in the context of the first, national inter- and transdisciplinary research program. In the late 1980s, a large “Swiss priority program” on environmental issues was to be launched, primarily informed by technical and natural sciences. At that time, SSH researchers joined in a debate on how best to include their

disciplines in the call for participation. The revised program was launched in the early 1990s, at the same time as the Earth Summit in Rio. This revised Swiss priority program included the notion of sustainability, as necessitating a broader scope than solely environmental sciences, with one module focused on society and one on economy.¹ In 1997, the result of the debates about a more differentiated acknowledgment of the SSH was a synthesis report on how Swiss researchers might contribute to sustainability. Included in these visions is the necessity to distinguish between three forms of knowledge: by bringing together target knowledge, systems knowledge, and transformation knowledge (see Fig. 1); and by engaging in actual interactions with societal actors, to act on and implement any knowledge that might be brought forward.² Consumption, at the time, was not investigated as a specific theme, but there were early discussions on the limits of an individual behavior approach and the need to consider the broader dynamics and structures in which consumption takes place, such as culture, or infrastructures. This conversation was picked up again in an effort by the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences, who brought together researchers from various disciplines to develop six priority themes for sustainability research in Switzerland (published in 2020) which we will turn to again in the conclusion.³

1 For the history see also: Defila R., Di Giulio A. (1996).

2 ProClim/CASS (1997).

3 Wuelser et al. (2020).

The contribution of social sciences and humanities to sustainable consumption

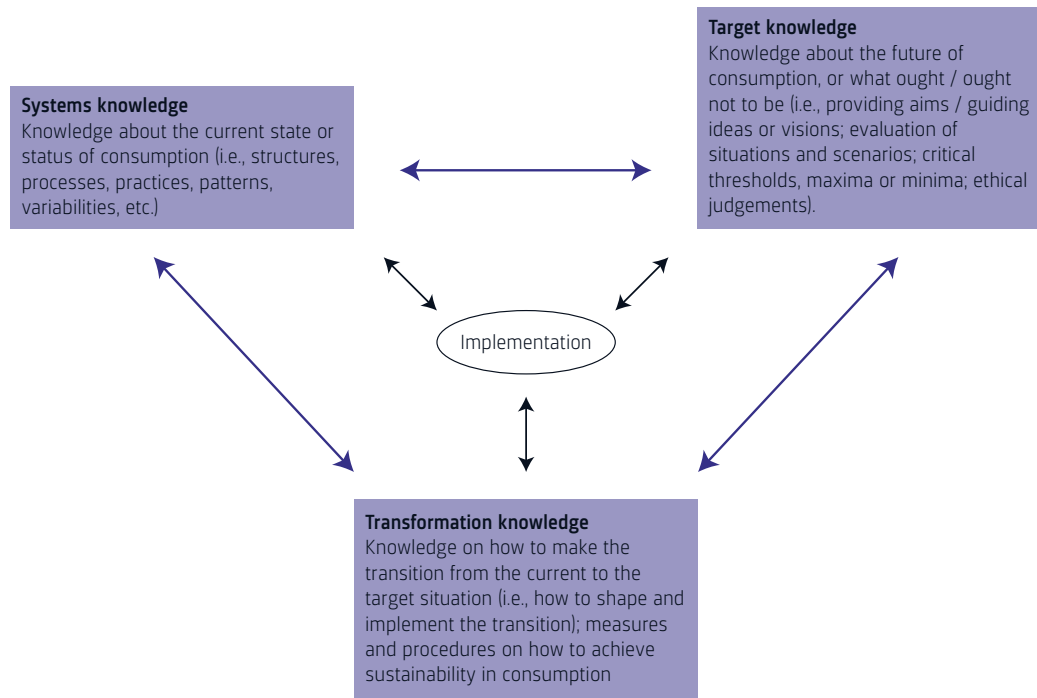


Fig. 1. Different forms of knowledge, as applied to sustainable consumption.

(The figure builds on ProClim/CASS [1997], p. 15.)

Introduction to the contributions

The contributions to this issue represent the diversity of SSH in addressing the question of how to understand and support more sustainable forms of consumption, brought together by researchers at different stages of their career, and from different regions of Switzerland. While this collection does not reflect all of the research on sustainable consumption taking place in Switzerland today, the contributions reveal four thematic areas that are relevant to the added value of an SSH approach.

Wellbeing, quality of life and social change

While in the past much focus has been placed on the environmental dimension of sustainability and consumption patterns, the links to what is a good life are emerging as a strong research agenda, as reflected in several contributions. For Moynat, a central preoccupation is how consumption might be oriented towards

sufficiency, understood as reduced levels of consumption while meeting needs. She takes a normative stance and provides target knowledge on how sustainable consumption might be achieved in relation to satisfying human needs. Defilla and Di Giulio build on this theme and introduce transformation knowledge with the concept of consumption corridors, or maximum and minimum levels of consumption that ensure the ability of people to meet their needs, and how such a concept could be accepted and possibly also implemented in Swiss society. Gruhn provides a cultural studies perspective contributing to system knowledge, in uncovering a deeper understanding of the role of knowledge, and how communication and debates around sustainable consumption could be designed. How this might apply to communities with less cultural, social and economic capital (than academics) is a central preoccupation. The authors of this book agree that consumption cannot be reduced to single actions nor solely to actions of individuals but must be understood in relation to broader dynamics and structures, including social and economic values and mechanisms. Balsiger points at the risks with seeing sustainable consumption solely as a form of social distinction and individual responsibility. His systems-thinking contribution uncovers the importance of markets and systems of provision, deflecting the need for social change from consumption to production. Concluding this section, Wallimann-Helmer emphasizes the importance of bringing in the question of justice in relation to wellbeing, for humans and non-human beings and nature, as a form of target knowledge. He concludes by emphasizing the necessity of navigating the tension between scientific research and political action.

Market dynamics and legal considerations

The pursuit of sustainable consumption inevitably touches on questions related to the regulation of the economic system and its legal legitimacy and thus necessitates transformation knowledge – this lies at the heart of the following contributions. In his contribution, Bornemann focuses on governance and discusses how sustainable consumption could and should be defined in relation to democratic legitimacy. Sustainability cannot be imposed top down, but must be negotiated democratically and must emerge from an understanding of specific life-worlds, or a better understanding of systems. Favre complements this perspective with a look at the legal regulation of sustainable consumption and production and at the role of the state as legislator. She assesses what the current Swiss legal framework entails and what could be done to accelerate the transition to a sustainable society from the point of view of preserving nature's biocapacity and the constitutionally guaranteed right to life. Michaud Gigon builds on

a systematic approach, in suggesting a new paradigm for economic activity and the necessity of involving economic actors in defining a new form of prosperity for society. Her contribution towards transformation knowledge lies in recognizing the different scales of action for change, involving actors ranging from the State to small-to-medium enterprises. Swaton further operationalizes the role of the economy towards transformative change, by introducing her concept of a *revenu de transition écologique* (RTE) or ecological transition income. Such an income would be necessary for supporting a shift from unsustainable forms of production and consumption to more sustainable pathways. Conte zooms into the potential and limitations of marketing instruments, and the importance of not solely nudging consumers to behave better – with limited long-term impacts. He encourages readers to grapple more earnestly with the question of consumer culture and narratives, along with routinized habits.

Methodologies: inter- and transdisciplinary approaches

The section on methodological contributions relates to how transformative research towards sustainable consumption as a normative aim can be conducted. Kueffer expands on the point that SSH should be engaged in investigating in and finding solutions to relevant societal problems, through inter- and transdisciplinary collaborations – echoing the debates in Switzerland since the 1990s. He introduces methods and concepts that have been developed in Switzerland and elsewhere, setting the groundwork for Stauffacher’s paper, in which living lab methodologies are discussed. A living lab or real-world laboratory engages diverse actors in forms of experimentation, which can lead to novel ideas and approaches for achieving sustainable consumption. The question of the contribution of science is not limited to which methods are relevant, but also which questions are investigated and which knowledge is valued. This point is taken up by Niwa, who picks up the climate strike call, to “change the system and not the climate”. By shifting her gaze to universities, she questions the aims of scientific knowledge and provides examples of how the University of Lausanne has brought different actors together to imagine more sustainable pathways – where action can be applied to transformative change. Markoni et al. provide an example of a transformative research project taking place in the Bern region, in which sustainable practices are developed and explored around food and nutrition. They apply the concept of consumption corridors at an individual level, where people come together to co-design ways of planning for socially just forms of consumption within limits.

Narratives and storytelling

When it comes to changing the system, narratives come into play. How to uncover narratives as belief systems and change them, is a primary concern, as is the question of the potential of different forms of storytelling. One way to enact storytelling is through theater, as in the example provided by Nisbet around a performance called *Lungs*, an “absurd eco-drama” that aims to support an alternative narrative around sustainable consumption. Theatergoers become co-performers and show a strong affective response to the play, in which actors play the role of consumers in a capitalist society who desire to adopt an alternative narrative. Another form of producing transformation knowledge through theater is the use of semi-improvisation, as discussed by Pavitt. In *Helvetia2050*, actors are transported to an unsustainable future and must improvise their way around various environmental constraints, with actions voted on by the audience. The performance encourages people to come up with solutions in the immediate, potentially affecting their long-term reflections. Soltysik Monnet takes on another type of storytelling through fiction, and the potential of solar punk approaches – a literary and visual art genre – to provide ambitopian futures that are neither utopian nor dystopian. Through Callenbach’s *Ecotopia*, for instance, she suggests that readers engage experientially and emotionally with a possible version of a sustainable future, in a more compelling way than simply describing sustainable consumption factually – or a form of transformation knowledge. Rossfeld provides systems knowledge by bringing a historical perspective to the question, showing how narratives come into play in society, and their power in inhibiting and possibly fostering sustainability. Building on knowledge about past events and dynamics allows us to understand present situations, for example: how the post-growth discourse builds on debates from the 1970s; or how current modes of consumption are fueled by fossil energy sources that underpin a societal commitment to growth at any expense and reflect, at the same time, improvements in wellbeing that have been achieved after World War II. Stroude provides target knowledge by inviting us to investigate three possible futures: one that represents continuity with the present (un-)sustainable situation, a second that directly rejects this proposal, and a third path that is based on grappling with uncertainty. Representations of the future become a rich terrain for changing practices in the present.

References

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