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Advancing the concept of consumption corridors and exploring its implications

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ABSTRACT

As a salutogenic concept, “consumption corridors” aims to support what is necessary for sustainable wellbeing to be achieved in relation to the Earth system, with a deep consideration for justice and equity. Living in consumption corridors is a representation of everyday life whereby people live within limits, so that all people – now and in the future – can access what is needed to live a good life. In this special issue, a series of scholars and practitioners have come together to further develop the concept, engage with its methodological implications, and relate it to consumption domains and policy implications. We begin by introducing how the concept emerged, in relation to the complexity of grappling with the societal transformations required for achieving more sustainable forms of consumption. We then present the different contributions, which demonstrate the importance of considering both maximum and minimum consumption standards, the relevance of human-need theories, as well as the difference between achieving wellbeing and the means necessary for doing so. We conclude by opening up to areas that merit further deliberation: how to relate consumption corridors to everyday-life dynamics, but also to the critical question of power relations at play in implementing consumption corridors.

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Why do we need consumption corridors?

What kind of world do we want to thrive in? This overarching question guides this special issue on consumption corridors, a concept that seeks to explore how sustainable wellbeing can be achieved in relation to the Earth system, and with a deep consideration for justice and equity. In this envisioned world, people enjoy individual freedoms while prioritizing societal wellbeing; natural resources are managed so as to meet

finite needs and not endless greed, for all living beings, now and in the future. Does this sound utopic? We prefer to think about this approach as purposefully salutogenic, in that it supports what is necessary to achieve wellbeing. Too often in sustainability studies, an emphasis is placed on negative impacts and the prevention of harm, or a problem-based approach. Consumption corridors recognizes the highly problematic nature of current consumption patterns, but suggests another starting point for reflection and action: the possibility of allowing people to live a satisfactory life, without impeding the ability of others to do the same, across the globe and for future generations (Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014; Fuchs et al. 2021a). It then asks, what is necessary toward accomplishing this goal, and delineates the establishment of minimum consumption standards and – by implication – maximum consumption standards as providing the most promising answer.

Recent years have seen the convergence of different streams of research in sustainability debates, including advances in environmental sciences and Earth-system dynamics (Rockström et al. 2009; Steffen et al. 2015), new models for reflecting on economic development in relation to ecological considerations (Raworth 2012, 2017; Victor 2018; Kallis et al. 2018), along with the bridging of debates on human development, wellbeing, and sustainability (Fuchs et al. 2020; Gough 2017; Spengler 2016; Jackson 2016; Guillen-Royo and Wilhite 2015; Fischer et al. 2012; Di Giulio et al. 2012). Combined with this work is growing alarm around climate change and biodiversity loss, following the simultaneous release of reports in October 2018 by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and WWF (IPCC 2018; WWF 2018). Notably, the IPCC's 1.5°C report calls for “societal transformation” if life on planet Earth is to remain assured. The climate crisis is not happening in a distant future; it is happening here and now. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic that swept across the world in 2020 (and continues to rage as this article goes to press), people in different localities experienced directly their reliance on basic services such as access to food, healthcare, or public spaces. They also experienced dependence effects with respect to globalized systems, due to the interruption in flows of products and people across space and time. We are living in a moment of compounded environmental, societal, and economic crises. The need to find the right balance between prosperity for all and environmental and social imperatives is all the more critical.

In this context of urgency and uncertainty, there are increasing efforts underway to transcend disciplinary boundaries and to work across sectors toward the common goal of a good life and more sustainable consumption and production patterns. Sustainability solutions often translate into production-side efficiency measures and gains, as demonstrated by many of the green economy and circular economy initiatives underway today, which tend to be both limited in scope and ineffective toward absolute reductions in resource usage. In the past two decades, increased attention has been placed on consumption processes; a consumption focus shifts the attention to how and in what way resources are used up, and by whom. As part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015 by the United Nations General Assembly, SDG 12 is an effort to create commitments to sustainable consumption and production at the policy level, but the consumption angle still presents a relatively weak proposition in this international framework (Bengtsson et al. 2018).

Perhaps this indeterminacy has to do with the complexity of grappling with the notion of consumption, which can be understood in different ways. For some commentators, consumption is about the using up of material and energy resources across the life cycle of products and services; for others the emphasis is on the consumption of resources by households and the public sector. Consumption can also be seen as the appropriation of goods and services, spaces and ambiances (Warde 2005), or even a form of collective action

and political activism. Consumption remains a black box of complexity for many people, and it is precisely this complexity which makes a consumption focus both necessary and critical: there is a pressing need to be asking how much do we consume, and what is enough when it comes to consumption levels, in relation to social justice considerations; but also, why and in what way certain forms of consumption are privileged over others.

Given the call for societal transformations, what should sustainable consumption look like? There have been efforts in recent years to distinguish what is called “strong sustainable consumption” from other variants, whereby a weaker version would entail, for example, small acts of consumerism, such as buying greener products in a marketplace of possibilities (Fuchs and Lorek 2005; Lorek and Fuchs 2019). Such weaker approaches have been criticized as forms of consumer scapegoatism (Akenji 2014) or as over-individualizing responsibility via consumers (Maniates 2001). This relates to action-impact gaps and rebound effects: for the former, studies demonstrate that even if people are able to act on their best intentions when it comes to sustainable consumption, the actual outcomes of these efforts might be negligible in environmental terms. For the latter, rebound effects occur when a unit of production such as a car, to use one of the more prominent examples, is outfitted with a more efficient engine, but becomes heavier and equipped with more electronics. This enhancement often leads to direct rebound effects in the form of the consumption of a similar or even greater amount of fuel for driving, thus diminishing the energy-saving potential of the car. An indirect rebound occurs when energy savings from more efficient appliances and other units of production lead to an investment in another areas of energy or resource use such as air travel.

Related to individualized approaches, whether focused on personal actions or units of technology, so-called techno-fixes have also been criticized as being too limited in their approach (Cohen and Murphy 2001; Fuchs et al. 2021a). For some researchers and policy makers, rendering systems of production and consumption more efficient is sufficient, with improvements in efficiency the ultimate objective. For others, efficiency gains are needed across the board, but must be accompanied by overall reductions in consumption; the two strategies of efficiency and sufficiency must be considered together. And for others still, the mere aim of striving for efficiency is a problem in and of itself as it places an undue emphasis on particular technological solutions that uphold certain expectations, in an unreflexive stance that fails to recognize the importance of meanings and material-human interactions tied up with energy demand (Shove 2018). Recent debates have focused on the need to consider sufficiency as an aim, or overall reductions in consumption. An emerging body of literature also seeks to understand how limits or reductions can be related to the age-old notion of the “good life” (Millward-Hopkins et al. 2020; Kallis 2019; Spengler 2016), often from a degrowth or sufficiency perspective, and with consumption corridors contributing to these developments.

How to define quality of life has been a central debate for centuries: What is it that makes human beings satisfied with a life they value? Answers come from philosophical, religious, and spiritual inquiries, but also from sociology, anthropology, and psychology. Hedonistic approaches, harkening back to ancient Greece, claim that the good life is about positive feelings that people experience. The *World Happiness Report* (Helliwell et al. 2020) is one example of such an approach. Yet happiness can be short-lived, can be experienced by people living in inhumane conditions, or can be difficult for a society to plan for and protect (Sen 2010; Costanza et al. 2014; Di Giulio and Defila 2020). Brand-Correa and Steinberger (2017) argue that such approaches place an undue focus on individual and subjective feelings and impressions rather than on societal measures. Aristotle’s idea of *eudemonia*, or living a life that allows for flourishing, opens up another approach tied up with meeting human needs, or creating the conditions necessary for people to develop

certain capabilities. The capabilities approach was used as a basis for the Human Development Index (HDI) (Anand and Sen 1994), while other methodologies focus on human needs (Gough 2017; Max-Neef 1991) or a combination of needs and capabilities (Costanza et al. 2007).

Theories about human needs can also be distinguished with regard to whether or not they hierarchize needs. While Maslow, for instance, claims that there is a hierarchy of needs, Max-Neef (1991) and Costanza et al. (2007) contend otherwise. The argument by all those rejecting the idea of a hierarchy of needs is that there is no evidence to show that people seek to satisfy, for example, a need for food and shelter, before eventually moving onto self-actualization. Another point by which human-needs theories can be distinguished is on the basis of the extent to which they posit needs to be the result of societal deliberation. While some authors suggest that the identification of needs must emerge from societal agreement (Max-Neef 1991), others claim that there is enough evidence to assume that all human beings share at least some needs (Ryan and Deci 2000).

Regardless of the chosen approach, these notions of the good life all share the idea that people and societies do aim for something more than mere survival: a good life covers much more than barely or merely getting by – it is about human flourishing. They also serve to distinguish means from ends. In other words, if achieving a good life is the aim, how we organize our societies to meet needs, to develop capabilities, or to bring joy requires a better understanding of the systems of provision (Fine, Bayliss, and Robertson 2018) that privilege some forms of need satisfaction over others, as well as need satisfaction of some people (the few) over need satisfaction of others (the many). Max-Neef's (1991) distinction between needs and satisfiers becomes critical; while there is some debate as to whether needs are universal, there is agreement on the notion that needs are satisfied in ways that are socio-historically situated. This has clear implications in relation to sustainability: the need for participating in society or feeling protected might, for some people, translate into automobile dependency. Cars transport people to schools, doctors, and meetings and may contribute to feelings of safety for some users (regardless of the actual costs of car travel in terms of human lives). But a bicycle could serve exactly the same purpose; which option will be picked up depends on social norms and rules, material arrangements (including infrastructures), and people's skills, competencies, and general abilities. Max-Neef (1991) suggests that some satisfiers might meet multiple needs and the bicycle is a good example of this propensity as it also contributes to human health. Some satisfiers, however, can impair the satisfaction of other needs. Extensive car use, for instance, has a range of negative consequences for one's health, and using fuel-intensive forms of mobility negatively affects the wellbeing of others – through both local and global pollution.

The question of how to balance individual freedom with societal wellbeing is also complex, and debates can vary across contexts and cultures. In relation to sustainable consumption, it becomes clear that there is a need to bridge notions of social justice and the good life with environmental concerns, as living a life one values should not hinder the ability of other human beings to do the same. The *Brundtland Report* (Brundtland 1987) provides the most common definition of sustainable development as development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs,” and yet the definition has attracted critical attention for, among other reasons, being conspicuously silent on the need to curb economic growth (Cohen 2021). For the Earth system, unlimited growth in the absence of absolute decoupling, is not possible.¹

Thresholds do indeed exist, even if they cannot always be precisely defined. For example, renewable resources depend on the availability of land, time, and material usage which all exist in finite supply. There

are, of course, limits to nonrenewable resources, such as fossil fuels, and there are also limits on the amount of pollution a body of water can absorb before most life is depleted. Still other types of limits exist, such as limits to the development of land or limited access to capital and labor. Moreover, the distribution of both resources and risks, as embedded in social and political systems, is highly unequal. The (over-)consumption of resources thus leads to negative impacts, both in terms of social inequalities and environmental ailments – not least the climate crisis. If we are serious about meeting needs or promoting capabilities, then there must be some understanding of both maxima and minima consumption levels as central to the approach.

“Consumption corridors” thus open a discussion around limits, toward exploring the question: what are minimal limits that are necessary for people to be able to live a good life and what are the maxima that should not be trespassed by individuals to make that possible? As defined in Fuchs et al. (2021a, 33),

Minimum consumption standards will ensure that individuals living now or in the future are able to satisfy their needs, safeguarding access to the necessary quality and quantity of ecological and social resources. Maximum consumption standards, in turn, are needed to ensure that consumption by some individuals does not threaten the opportunity for a good life for others. The space between the floor of minimum consumption standards and the ceiling of maximum consumption standards produces a sustainable consumption corridor. It is the space within which individuals may make their consumption choices freely and sustainably. It is where they have the freedom to design their lives according to their individual notions of a good life.

While limits are not a notion that are well appreciated in liberal societies, they are all around us. Lower limits have been defined and debated in energy studies, in relation to an energy-poverty line under which needs cannot be met. Limits in terms of maxima are less prevalent, but also exist, such as limits on alcohol intake when driving. In the last few years, there have been emerging discussions around housing-size limits, individual carbon budgets, and limits to air travel – yet these discussions and actions remain on the fringes. In this way, the notion of consumption corridors also links to debates around degrowth and sufficiency. Importantly, such limits should not and cannot be imposed on society or determined by science alone; a societal debate on “How much is enough?” is central toward defining the space between the upper and lower limits of consumption corridors.

The notion of consumption corridors emerged in recent years as a key result of an inter- and transdisciplinary research program on sustainable consumption (Blättel-Mink et al. 2013). The concept is not alone in bringing attention to sustainable development, social justice, and limits. Over the years, scholars have suggested a number of similar or related concepts, such as the “safe operating space” (Rockström et al. 2009), the “environmental space” (Spangenberg 1995), the “doughnut economy” (Raworth 2012, 2017), and a convergence of resource use in a common “corridor of sustainable prosperity” (Sachs 2007). The concept of consumption corridors shares many basic principles with these other ideas, yet it is different in that it most clearly and explicitly places consumption at the center of attention. At the heart of the conception is a justification of minimum and maximum consumption standards via the good life and opportunities for all individuals to satisfy their needs.

Introducing the contributions in this special issue

The goal of consumption corridors is to support a societal transformation that ensures respect for socio-ecological balance while protecting individual freedom, achieving wellbeing, and promoting social justice worldwide. Within consumption corridors, individuals are able to live a good life without compromising the ability of others to do the same, today and in the future (see Fuchs et al. 2021a; Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014).

The articles in this special issue are an invitation for further dialogue between scholars on the theme of consumption corridors, asking specifically: How can consumption corridors be further developed as a concept? What are the methodological implications for studying consumption corridors? How might consumption corridors be explored in relation to different thematic areas? What are the policy implications of consumption corridors? This special issue builds on two exchanges around the theme of consumption corridors. First, many of the articles assembled here were presented at a special session convened at a 2018 conference in Copenhagen by the Sustainable Consumption Research and Action Initiative (SCORAI). Second, the guest co-editors organized an international workshop on consumption corridors that was hosted at the University of Geneva in 2019.

In terms of conceptual developments, Gough (2020) provides an argument for a human needs-based approach in studying consumption corridors, as a way to define a safe, just, and sustainable space for humanity. He also argues that a needs-based approach serves the purpose of making a key distinction between necessities and luxuries. Gough outlines different concepts of human needs and proposes a method for agreeing on contextual need satisfiers. He also explains how needs can underpin the upper bound of the corridor and how this ceiling might be measured in income and consumption. A central issue is how to move from a national to a global perspective, and how to account for rich country corridors in relation to a global consumption corridor. The distinction between luxuries and necessities in affluent nations such as the UK may be relevant for devising domestic policies, but becomes irrelevant when considering what necessities are required through global policies, in a world where over one billion people lack adequate and sufficient access to energy.

Pirgmaier (2020) then analyzes consumption corridors from a Marxian political economy perspective and provides arguments to understand consumption corridors in the context of the capitalist economy. She elaborates on how and why consumption corridors are difficult to envisage and identifies five leverage points for social change, with researchers playing a crucial role. She emphasizes that research – as well as researchers – need to be mobilized toward: (1) escalating transparency about the complete failure of capitalist institutions to deliver justice and sustainability; (2) challenging capitalist institutions by unmasking narratives, ideas, and manipulative tactics that keep societies locked into overconsumption and ill-being; (3) using academic credibility, justifications, and framings directed at human liberation to address the root causes of climate emergency; (4) changing their self-conception from information-providers to change-makers; and (5) engaging in personal self-transformation directed at what it feels and looks like to “live well within limits.”

Brand-Correa et al. (2020) focus on how consumption patterns escalate due to socio-economic, technological, and infrastructural influences. They propose a framework to analyze and understand such increasing trends by distinguishing different orders of satisfiers. The approach is illustrated by systemically considering escalation for a specific technological product – the private car. The framework presented in their article can be used for understanding how consumption evolves over time or as a tool for investigating nested systems of satisfiers. But it can also be used for identifying the most effective leverage points to intervene and prevent escalation from happening in the first place. With regard to the concept of consumption corridors, this tool contributes to answering the crucial question of how to prioritize the satisfiers to which consumption corridors should refer, and it provides a rationale for approaching the question of how many pathways should be defined.

Gumbert and Bohn (2021) explore one of the central objections to the concept of consumption corridors

– that limits on resource use would interfere broadly with liberal freedoms and would hence not be compatible with a liberal democratic setting. They show that this objection rests on the assumption that protecting liberal freedom rights and enforcing limits constitute countervailing forces and that in this reasoning liberal freedom is equated with the expansion of (unlimited) options of choice. Gumbert and Bohn counter this line of argument by elaborating how in most liberal accounts freedom and limits are mutually supportive of each other and show that the understanding of freedom as “the absence of limits” is, in fact, a particular understanding that has become dominant. They contribute to the debate by articulating the notion of “green liberal freedom” that posits limits as a core concern of liberal understandings of freedom and is hence compatible with liberal thought, and does support the negotiation and implementation of consumption corridors.

Fuchs et al. (2021b) highlight the need to consider discursive power when considering consumption corridors in the context of energy services. Linking consumption maxima to the potential for reduction in energy-service demand and consumption minima to a broadening in needs-satisfier access, they discuss which ideas and norms would help or detract from a potential transition in which low energy-service demand is coupled with broad needs-satisfier access. To this end, the article takes three steps. First, the authors distinguish between access to needs satisfiers and energy-service demand (as created by volume and efficiency) to show the range of possible combinations of the two objectives. Second, they add consumption corridors to the picture to highlight the role of minima and maxima with respect to desirable trajectories of societal development with respect to energy-service demand and needs-satisfier access. Finally, the authors delineate how exercises of discursive power can shape relevant societal norms, ranging from fundamental societal paradigms to specific regulations, and thereby influence where on a trajectory between specific combinations of “need satisfier” access and energy-service demand a society will be located at any point in time.

Continuing with conceptual advances, Di Giulio and Defila (2021) first delineate how consumption should be conceptualized in order to provide a suitable point of departure for deliberating about and defining corridors of consumption. Proceeding from the theory of Protected Needs, a theory of the “good life” that has been specifically developed for the context of sustainability, the article then explores how this approach to quality of life can contribute to advancing the concept of consumption corridors. Di Giulio and Defila draw on the results of a representative survey in Switzerland ($n = 1059$) and demonstrate that embracing the existence of universal and incontestable human needs and endorsing the idea of limiting consumption might be part of the same worldview. Based on this reasoning, the authors point out the conceptual challenges that must be overcome to build a robust bridge from human needs to lower and upper limits of consumption.

Linking theory with methodological considerations, Guillen-Royo (2020) discusses Max-Neef’s approach to fundamental human needs (FHN) as a potential framework for the study of and action on consumption corridors. She builds on the differences between human needs (which are universal), satisfiers (which are culturally and historically relative), and consumer goods (which vary according to fashion and across socio-economic groups). Based on a participatory methodology, Guillen-Royo describes how a constellation of synergic satisfiers are linked to environmental sustainability considerations. She draws on the results of a needs-based workshop at the University of Oslo to illustrate the contribution of a FHN perspective, using the case of information and communication technologies (ICTs). The study finds that if synergic satisfiers such as shorter working weeks, noncommercial meeting places, simplicity-focused practices, and direct participation in local policy making are present in the society, ICTs can contribute to the

fulfillment of human needs and environmental sustainability. The constellation of satisfiers that define such a condition supports the emergence of maximum and minimum standards in the use of ICTs.

Sahakian and Anantharaman (2020) contribute an empirical application of the core elements of the concept of consumption corridors, specifically needs and limits. Their article reflects on how this notion could be applied to territorial development for green public spaces in the cities of South Asia. Focusing on three parks in the Indian coastal city of Chennai, the authors discuss need satisfaction by relating how people engage in different activities in the parks to a list of Protected Needs (Di Giulio and Defila 2020). On the basis of this research, Sahakian and Anantharaman highlight three core findings. First, they describe how people satisfy human needs through social practices, or a set of activities that include material arrangements, skills and competencies, and social norms and other meanings. Second, the article demonstrates the ways in which all needs can be satisfied by going to the park, suggesting that green public spaces are synergic satisfiers (Max-Neef 1991) as opposed to other spaces in the city, such as shopping malls. Finally, they elaborate on how a consumption-corridors perspective brings attention to spatial limits and how access to spaces – such as parks – reveals unequal power dynamics, both in terms of planning for recreational and leisure facilities and their eventual usage.

Two other contributions consider how consumption corridors might play out in relation to specific consumption domains. In the initial instance, Godin et al. (2020) explore consumption corridors through the mundane activity of doing the laundry. Across European households, laundry practices rely on social norms and material arrangements, which makes these practices rather “sticky” and resistant to change. Through the lens of consumption corridors, and accounting for wellbeing in relation to Doyal and Gough’s (1991) basic needs of participation, health, and autonomy, the authors study laundry practices and their transformation among 73 Finnish and Swiss households that took part in a challenge to reduce their weekly wash cycles by half over a four-week period in 2018. By using both qualitative and quantitative data, they analyze how participants defined minimum and maximum standards for cleanliness and convenience, for themselves and for others, over the course of the challenge period. The participants’ experiences helped uncover how setting limits toward consumption corridors can be achieved, whereby reductions in consumption can result in sustainable wellbeing.

The article by Vladimirova (2021), in turn, is devoted to fashion and textile consumption. From the point of view of consumption corridors, this domain is both important and interesting because a growing number of consumers are currently engaging in conversations about reducing their apparel consumption. Notably, these discussions about how much is enough are not generally informed by environmental concerns or concerns about social justice but rather are motivated by reflections about individual wellbeing. Vladimirova focuses on three online minimalist fashion challenges that are designed to encourage participants to use a limited number of clothes, shoes, and accessories over a proscribed period of time. She shows how the initiators of these challenges frame the reasons that lead to downsizing and furthermore demonstrates that defining an upper numerical limit on fashion consumption serves as a benchmark rather than a goal.

Lavelle and Fahy (2021) add to the research on consumption corridors by considering factors influencing the formulation of upper limits of consumption and their relationship to public policy. Based on data from a representative set of Irish households, their article analyzes perceptions of material items as needs and satisfiers – respectively as necessity or luxury – in everyday lives. Recognizing that the respondents in their study tended to view the majority of high energy-consuming items such as cars, televisions, laptops, and power showers as necessities, Lavelle and Fahy reveal a strategic need to enforce the concept of

consumption corridors in terms of enhancement of quality of life. They recommend the formulation of policies that promote more intrinsic and meaningful behavioral change in terms of shifting toward sustainable consumption considering the specificities of regions, as well as different cultural groups and socio-economic cohorts.

Finally, Coote (2020) offers a policy brief that explores the contribution that “public consumption” (meant as consumption that provides societal services) can provide in maintaining lower and upper corridor boundaries. This contribution focuses on the recently formulated concept of “universal basic services” (UBS) as a framework for understanding the potential of public consumption in this context. This concept emphasizes the perspective of needs satisfaction, thereby drawing attention to the role of services rather than income. In consequence, UBS also offers an interesting contrast to the idea of universal basic income (UBI), which is more broadly discussed in science and policy. The important strength of UBS in contrast to UBI is that the former shows the potential for policy to focus on collective ways of provisioning, and thus opportunities for satisfying needs in more efficient ways. Drawing on literature from a range of perspectives, the policy brief seeks to explain the relevance of UBS in both theoretical and practical terms.

Consumption corridors, where do we go from here?

The contributions to this special issue lead us to further reflect on promising ways forward for consumption corridors and what makes the concept unique. One key point of distinction is identification of the explicit need for both consumption minima *and* maxima. Maxima can be appreciated not solely as physical limits on environmental resources – such as energy or food – but also as social maxima with respect to the distribution of space, available time, and financial capital. Through the articles presented in this special issue, a critical differentiation is also made between necessities and luxuries, as well as between wellbeing as a normative aim and satisfiers as a means for achieving that aim. This leads to two areas that warrant further research. First, there is a need to consider how we can support societal debates and discussions around wellbeing (what are necessities and what are luxuries, both in a given context but also projected outward to the global population). Second, we need to enhance our understanding of the conditions that are necessary for provisioning certain satisfiers over others, as situated in varying socio-historical settings. The concept of UBS is a compelling step in this direction, in recognizing what collective services may be necessary for meeting needs. The systems of provision approach developed by Fine, Bayliss, and Robertson (2018) is also a promising framework for uncovering not only material infrastructures and power relations, but also social norms and institutional arrangements necessary for enabling some forms of need satisfaction over others.

Clearly, consumption corridors are not a silver bullet solution toward resolving today’s ecological and social challenges. Constraints on provisioning will always have to be considered and implemented in larger political, economic, and societal contexts, and through processes that encourage deliberation and participative forms of engagement involving a diversity of actors. Based on a survey in Switzerland, there is reason to believe that certain populations could accept consumption corridors (Defila and Di Giulio 2020). Despite that optimistic evidence, the concept cannot – and must not – be imposed on a top-down basis but rather needs to emerge from within society and for the good of society, as a collectively defined self-limitation or “societal boundaries” (Brand et al. 2021). In such a way, imagining and implementing consumption corridors must consider societal and political contexts and power constellations, including work- and income-related conditions, temporal and spatial constraints, and cultural norms and other meanings, to name but a few.

Consumption corridors – whether at the scale of a household, a city, a country, or the world – would not miraculously appear on a blank slate, but must sit within current societal configurations. Existing material arrangements would include investments in infrastructures and technologies, which may be difficult to upend. To take the case of transportation, in many countries access to various services, and thus need satisfaction, is made possible only through private automobile-based modes of mobility, along with interconnected systems of highways, roads, and gas stations – which can make other alternatives less plausible. There is also a certain geographic endowment which makes oil more available in some places rather than others. The planet is not only a stage for interconnections but also dependencies, with a great flux of people, ideas, and things, and where excesses in one location often lead to constraints in another. There are also inequalities in how endowments are distributed, reinforced through colonialism, capitalism, and other means; the residual and ongoing structures associated with these processes cannot simply be erased through the establishment of consumption corridors – but they likely could be managed in a more just and equitable way.

While most of these aforementioned dimensions are material, there are also more invisible aspects to everyday life that are similarly concrete. The idea that power relations permeate ordinary experiences, and are also inseparable elements of political and economic spheres, is nicely summarized by Brand and Wissen (2021) in their notion of an “imperial mode of living,” whereby everyday-life dynamics, such as being fashionable or doing the laundry, reveal broader social inequalities and forms of environmental deterioration that become “normalized,” accepted, even respected, and thus difficult to change (see Vladimirova 2021 for fashion and Godin, Laakso, and Sahakian 2020 on laundry, in this special issue). It becomes just as critical to address routine and mundane activities in daily life through consumption corridors, in addition to more obvious starting points such as city infrastructures or public services. For example, driving a car may give some people a sense of freedom and independence, and this meaning is bolstered by advertising and other forms of promotionalism. Such meanings are also reinforced by other drivers who make this form of transport more visible and acceptable. Car dependency, when there are no viable alternatives, makes everyday life seem convenient and comfortable for people who can afford it, all the while keeping hidden from view deeper geopolitical questions, such as gas pumps that send money directly to authoritarian regimes, inequalities between some drivers who can afford fuel-efficient cars and others who cannot, or massive carbon emissions from sport-utility vehicles (SUVs). In reality, there are serious constraints on the freedom and independence that are enthusiastically celebrated in car culture – what some experience as autonomy is achieved at the expense of another person’s ability to lead a good life – but these are not always made explicit in how the practice of driving a car plays out on a daily basis.

Social norms and constructed meanings associated with consumption can be resistant to change; in certain cases these features are materially embedded in appliances and infrastructures, and these inscribed attributes favor some practices over their alternatives (Shove and Southerton 2000). In other instances, they are embedded in traditions that have evolved historically over time, such as a preference for meat-based dishes for celebratory occasions. When contested, the result can be reinforcement of the established norm, or a form of orthodoxy rather than the desired heterodoxy – borrowing from Bourdieu (Wilk 2002). One promising way forward is to explore how change can be supported, even if at a small scale, by amplifying new ways of doing and of deliberating. In one real-world laboratory study, over 300 households across Europe came together to design a change initiative which led to reductions in laundry cycles and indoor temperatures. Participants in the project were encouraged to experiment with new ways of doing, and were

able to reduce consumption because they had a shared goal in mind and worked to recraft existing practices (Sahakian et al. 2021). This experience demonstrates that people are indeed able to engage with a form of consumption corridor in their everyday lives, in setting maximum and minimum limits in relation to personal standards (see Godin, Laakso, and Sahakian 2020 in this special issue). When change is imposed from above, consumers may be forced to adapt their habits, yet such changes may not be durable. To take a contemporary example, even if the COVID-19 pandemic led to reconfiguration of everyday life in some respects, we do not know yet to what extent shifts in consumption will be sustained, once restrictive measures are lifted.

A further question might be: What impact do power (in)balances have on the design and implementation of consumption corridors? Recall that minimum consumption standards are defined according to what is necessary for individuals to satisfy their needs. Maximum consumption standards can be determined based on existing Earth-system dynamics knowledge in relation to limited resources, or limits to available capital, time, and labor. In doing so, such a *maxima* would prevent other individuals, or groups of individuals, from consuming to such an extent that they hinder the chances of others to meet their consumption *minima*. This relationship is where power enters the picture, especially in its structural form (Fuchs 2020, see also Fuchs et al. 2021b in this special issue). After all, while the consumption-corridors literature starts from the assumption that a good life can be a shared aim, it also acknowledges that how societies agree on what is “a good life,” and how it can be achieved, would need to be debated and operationalized in society. Such deliberative processes, like any political and societal negotiation, leave room for an exercise of power. To start a conversation in this direction means being aware of who is included or excluded from such processes.

At the same time, it is important to note that the lower minimum consumption standards are set, the higher the maximum consumption standards can be. In other words, the size of the consumption corridor is sensitive to influence exercised in the definition of minimum consumption standards – for example, with respect to the accepted knowledge about biophysical thresholds (available at a given time; see, for example, Rockström et al. 2009; Steffen et al. 2015). In a more egalitarian society, such a corridor, therefore, is likely to be narrower, while a larger corridor in a more inegalitarian society will be associated with a much lower delineation of what should be considered sufficient to satisfy individuals’ needs. If, then, the interests of the poorest segments of the population – as well as future generations – are not adequately represented in those negotiations, there is a risk that more powerful segments of society will define consumption minima at very low levels in order to protect their own relatively privileged opportunities. This situation shows that we have to define justice and related procedures. Similarly, one can imagine that societies could define minimum and maximum consumption standards that truly reflect social justice and ecological sustainability objectives, but that these guidelines are poorly implemented due to a lack of political will, driven by the opposition of powerful actors to consumption corridors. In such a case, poorer segments of societies may still not be able to satisfy their needs while wealthier elites continue to overconsume. In other words, the distribution of power and inclusive, fair, and transparent participatory processes is absolutely essential when it comes to the design and implementation of consumption corridors. Justice is a result of implementing the concept of consumption corridors, but this outcome also depends on how justice is defined in the first place, and on how it is operationalized. Procedural justice, for example, and not solely distributional justice is of essence when considering fuel poverty as injustice (Walker and Day 2012).

Writing in the late nineteenth century, at a time when previously unimaginable wealth due to a period of industrialization was accompanied by unspeakable poverty and precarity, particularly in urban centers, social

critic John Ruskin penned words in *Unto This Last*, an essay that would inspire the work of Mahatma Gandhi (Ruskin 1997 [1860]). He wrote that “but luxury at present can only be enjoyed by the ignorant; the cruelest man living could not sit at his feast, unless he sat blindfold. Raise the veil boldly.” To consume excessively today is to prevent the ability of millions of others to live a decent life, a life worth living. Living at the expense of others is ignorant and cruel. While consumption corridors may sound difficult to attain, starting the discussion is one first step toward lifting the veil. We trust that this special issue will serve to open a discussion and invite others to contribute.

Notes

On one hand, relative decoupling occurs when economic growth can continue with less (but nonetheless positive) environmental harm. On the other hand, absolute decoupling is achieved when economic growth is possible with a decrease in environmental harm – a phenomenon that is lauded as feasible by some commentators and characterized as a myth by others (Jackson 2016).

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