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The Politics of Sufficiency

MAKING IT EASIER TO LIVE
THE GOOD LIFE



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Introduction

Why the Good Life is a political issue

‘The Good Life’: At first sight, this would seem to be a purely personal or individual concern, because in the final analysis every individual has to decide what is especially important for them in their lives – what they want to consume, with whom they want to live, or what their ultimate goals are.

It is the greatest achievement of liberal democratic societies that they enable a multiplicity of individual life concepts to bloom in mutual toleration, and it is right and proper for people to be sensitive to any perceived threat to this freedom. Any call for a general political framework which encompasses the free individual self-determination of our lives is perceived as just such a threat. People swiftly resort at such times to terms like ‘the compulsion state’, ‘eco-dictatorship’ or ‘neo-socialism’.

A closer look demonstrates that the opposition between the state and liberty is not as straightforward as it is often made out to be, with on the one side, the citizen

yearning for free individual expression, and on the other, the interventionist state blocking that free expression; this view represents a failure to understand either the state or politics.

The aim of politics is to regulate how people can live together on universally acceptable and appropriate terms. Good politics means that people can live their lives as they wish without thereby restricting the life choices of others. Good politics creates the room where the Good Life can be lived.

How quickly spaces of opportunity for some can become restrictions on others can be seen in the example of transport policy. Car-friendly city centres with wide streets and traffic light sequencing are helpful to car drivers, but they generally disadvantage those who want to navigate the city by bike or on foot. Politics has to achieve a balance here. Good politics creates the conditions in which the greatest number of individual life concepts can be realised.

And it is here that a sense of unease has been creeping up on us all for some time. ‘Faster’, ‘global’, ‘more’, ‘commercialised’ – these have been the lines of development over recent decades. They were made possible by an economic policy that placed its trust in free trade and in introducing free markets into as many sectors of society as possible. This has brought us unprecedented material wealth and a previously unimagined range of products and services.

At the same time we feel ourselves pressurised by the dynamic forces it has set free: ever more flexible working times, barely manageable mountains of emails, an impossible range of product choices on the supermarket shelves. It is becoming ever more apparent that a good life needs room for that which is ‘slower’, ‘closer’, ‘less’ and ‘more personal’. This is precisely what lies behind the idea of sufficiency. We will have more to say about this in the next section.

The Good Life requires room for new balances. This means a politics which offers the possibility of self-realisation to a variety of life concepts in a spirit of common global responsibility. This is the goal of the politics of sufficiency.

What’s does ‘sufficiency’ mean? Finding the way to a whole life

The term ‘sufficiency’ has its roots in the Latin word ‘sufficere’, meaning ‘to be enough’. Sufficiency is about establishing what is the right measure. It is about having enough to meet one’s needs – while thinking not only about material needs.

Wolfgang Sachs introduced the concept of sufficiency into the sustainability debate in Germany at the beginning of the 1990s. He encapsulated it in four principles, which

he named the ‘four Es’, from the German terms he used (*Entschleunigung*, *Entflechtung*, *Entrümpelung* and *Entkommerzialisierung*). We have translated these principles into English as what we call the ‘four Lessens’ (with a conscious play on ‘lessons’), which express the idea that we need to lessen our speed, our distance, the encumbrance of our acquired possessions, and the role of commerce and the market in our lives. We will consider these ‘four Lessens’ in more detail later in this book as guidelines for a politics of sufficiency.

‘Slower, less, better, finer’ – this was how Hans Glauber, the founder of the Toblach Talks, framed the idea of sufficiency. Sufficiency is about the quality of ‘being in the world’. About finding the right relationship to space and time, to possessions and the market. For as long as humanity felt itself to be essentially at the mercy of the dangerous forces of nature, and was driven by poverty and hunger, then technological and economic progress offered freedom and emancipation from these compelling forces. Such progress gave rise to a new quality of human life; it was what made civilisation and culture possible.

But the negative ecological, social and economic consequences of this successful narrative of progress are increasingly catching up with us. So a change of course towards sufficiency means correcting the balance. It is not about abandoning the impressive historical gains in pro-

ductivity, but about a new communion of productive progress and frugality.

In his book 'The Economics of Good and Evil' the economist Tomas Sédlacek describes the failure of modern economic analysis. As human beings we can develop an unlimited number of new wants. These wants come up against a limited world – one that is constrained not only by limits to the factors of production, but also by finite natural resources. Contemporary economics aims to teach us how we can get ever more out of these limited resources. It is banking on efficiency to raise productivity and thus to increase supply and satisfy our limitless demands. And we have in truth made enormous improvements in this area: the volume of goods and services at our disposal today is incredible. But still this is a race against ourselves, involving ever more participants, which we can never win. Because satisfying existing wants stimulates the human imagination to create new ones. The race cannot be won, the finishing line always moves further away from us – and meanwhile, running our economies in the way we have until now is devastating the natural foundations of our existence.

So in order to see the full economic picture it is all the more important to consider the demand side as well. A fulfilled and fulfilling human life consists precisely in not pursuing every want, in not being cogs in the machinery of ever expanding desires. It consists in being able to con-

sciously choose to forego things, to defer things, to enjoy what is already there and to cultivate our relationship with the world as it is – rather than always demanding something new. These are all virtues that contribute to a fulfilled and fulfilling human life. Sufficiency and efficiency belong inseparably together. It is about time economic theory re-discovered this.

In this context, the sociologist Hartmut Rosa emphasises the significance of resonance experiences. Experiencing oneself as connected to the world, to nature, and especially to other people, is a fundamental element of a good life. Modern societies, with their hectic rush, their overwhelming mass of stimuli and their commercialisation of so many areas of our lives, make such resonance experiences ever rarer. This becomes particularly apparent in the sterile atmosphere of shopping centres, airports and many of the pedestrianised precincts of big cities. It is hardly possible for an authentic connection to our shared natural and social world to arise in such an environment, radically insulated as it is from time and space and with a universally interchangeable array of shops and goods. The politics of sufficiency is therefore one which would improve the pre-conditions for resonance experiences and make the Good Life easier.

Why sufficiency is a social issue as well – sustainability policy beyond the efficiency revolution

But it is not only at the individual level that sufficiency plays an important role in the achievement of the Good Life. The global challenge that sustainable development poses to society at large will not be overcome without sufficiency. Sustainable development means development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Since the Brundtland report of 1987, the concept of sustainable development has been used to combine the environmental and the development agendas. It is about striking a fair balance between the countries of the global North and South and simultaneously about the long-term protection of resources and the environment. It will hardly be possible to achieve both. This is particularly graphically illustrated by the climate issue: the prosperity enjoyed by the industrialised world over the last decades was made possible only by massive use of fossil fuels – coal, oil and gas. So the huge increase in CO₂ emissions into the atmosphere can be put down to how the economy works in those countries. Every US American emits around 20 tonnes of CO₂ every year; every German around 10; an Indian or African, by contrast, just a tonne.

However, the ecological consequences of the very substantial rise in green house gas emissions impact mainly

on the poorest countries, those that cannot protect themselves: increasingly frequent extreme weather events such as hurricanes, floods or droughts strike countries like Bangladesh, Vietnam or Haiti – countries that bear hardly any responsibility at all for the rise in CO₂ emissions.

At the same time the poorer countries insist on their right to an economic development comparable to that enjoyed by the industrialised countries. Many of the emerging economic powers, with China in the lead, have already made impressive progress in catching up – including in terms of the associated CO₂ emissions. Thus, China now has a figure of over five tonnes of CO₂ per capita, and – because of its larger population – has overtaken the USA as the world's biggest producer of CO₂.

For a long time, the search for solutions to this problem met with an answer along these lines: we need to decouple negative environmental impacts from economic activity by increasing eco-efficiency. This concept denotes production processes and products which achieve equal or even better economic performance with much smaller environmental impact. The key to this is technological innovation. And there have been substantial successes in this area in recent years: modern car engines are far more efficient than the models of the 1990s, and the energy needs for many chemical production processes have been sharply reduced. All this produces the nice illusion that, because new green

technologies quickly turn into important export winners, ecology and classical economics can be successfully combined without difficulty. This is the Green Economy – the great hope.

Current studies indicate that it has indeed been possible to achieve substantial relative decoupling in many fields, so that environmental impact per product unit was reduced. However, these relative savings were then more than cancelled out by a simultaneous growth in product volume or by increased product turnover. The consequence is that absolute environmental damage continued to grow – even where global tolerance limits have already long been exceeded, for example with respect to climate change. Thus, rather than decreasing, global CO₂ emissions have increased by 20 percent since the major conference on sustainability in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 – and this despite the huge technological progress of the last 20 years.

And this increase is linked to the efficiency gains made, because eco-efficient engines and production processes reduce not only environmental impact but cost: that is, they are not just ecological, they are also economical. The economic savings are an incentive to increase production or expand the range of fittings and accessories. That is why the latest sequel to the VW Beetle, launched in 2013, not only has a much more efficient engine than the 1960s model but also far more and better equipment fitted as

standard, and is therefore heavier and has far more motorised parts. The end result is that the fuel requirements per 100 kilometres travelled are very similar for both models, even though there is a 50-year gap between them. This is an example of the inbuilt growth stimulus of efficiency gains – what economists call the “rebound effect”. This effect takes many forms, and it is an important factor in explaining why efficiency alone cannot solve the challenges of sustainable development.

Sufficiency is therefore an important tool for dealing with the challenge of sustainable development. Instead of relying on technological innovation alone, sufficiency enables social innovations. Sufficiency creates prosperity with less use of nature and materials.

From the perspective of sustainable development, it is a notable advantage of sufficiency that under favourable conditions it can be implemented far faster than new technologies can be developed. New technologies have to be conceived, tested, improved and brought to market in a complex and expensive process. This can take years or even decades. But – particularly in the field of climate change – time is pressing. That is why it is important to come up with approaches that will have an impact straight away. The energy saving initiative *Setsuden*, introduced in Japan following the Fukushima catastrophe, shows how this can be done. The reductions needed in electricity use

were very quickly achieved. Energy savings of around 15 to 20 percent were made without appreciable cuts in supply: for example, lighting has been used more sparingly and conscientiously since then, and in Japanese offices workers have adjusted their dress code to the temperature rather than switching on the air conditioning. In Germany, the Federal Environment Agency has calculated that the introduction of a national upper speed limit of 100 km/h (about 62 mph) would deliver an immediate fuel use reduction of some five percent.

In matters of sufficiency, we can all learn from each other as global equals. For unlike technological innovations, which need competitive industrial sectors and a sophisticated research and development system, sufficiency innovations can originate anywhere. Just as we can learn from India's vegetarian culture, we can also take lessons from Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index or from the cycling culture of Copenhagen, where today it is perfectly normal for people to travel to work by bike, and where over one-third of all traffic journeys are made by bike.

The politics of sufficiency creates a framework within which both social innovation and new forms of technological innovation are possible. It extends existing innovation policy in order to create the foundations for a civilisation capable of allowing the full breadth of human

potential to unfold and of living up to its responsibility for sustainable development.

The politics of sufficiency as a contribution to an enlightened liberalism

Does the politics of sufficiency encroach on the freedom of the individual? Those who advocate a more supportive framework for sufficiency are quickly accused of being authoritarian. A closer look at the core of what liberalism means may be of some help here; it will soon reveal that such accusations arise out of a very narrow understanding of ‘liberalism’.

If the members of any society are regarded only as consumers, then liberalism becomes no more than a pure liberalism of consumption: everyone can buy and consume what, where and how they like – from long-haul flights and gas-guzzling cars to jet skiing on holiday. From the perspective of true freedom, this sort of ‘free’ consumption by ‘free’ citizens soon reveals a number of hidden problems. Firstly, it is open only to those with the financial means to afford this kind of consumption. Secondly, the free exercise of the right to consume immediately reduces the rights of others who suffer from its impact on their own freedom and self-development. For example, the cyclists who no longer feel safe in traffic because of the num-

ber of oversized cars on the road; or the sunbathers and swimmers in search of relaxation who feel annoyed and endangered by jet ski riders; or those living under airport flight paths and suffering from noise pollution. Nor does this take into account the rights of all those people around the world suffering the consequences of climate change and the other forms of environmental damage wrought by our consumption.

This is why the German constitution (known as the 'Basic Law') contains paragraph 14.2, which stipulates that 'property entails obligations'. The exercise of freedom always comes up against limits at the point where it restricts the freedoms of others. It is precisely in order to strike a balance in this regard that a political framework is needed. A properly liberal politics therefore has regard to the individual not just as consumer but also as legal citizen. Enlightened liberalism aims to provide all citizens with the maximum opportunity for individual personal development. It is about tolerance towards a variety of different lifestyles existing side by side. As a rule, lifestyles based on sufficiency are minimally invasive: that is, they barely impinge on others in the realisation of their own life choices. A politics that makes a sufficient life easier is therefore at heart a liberal politics. It opens the prospect of a multiplicity of lifestyles co-existing in global responsibility.

The politics of sufficiency, as a politics of enabling, pays full and proper regard to all citizens, and to the whole citizen. It weighs up conflicting interests, and debates the alternative development paths and the possibilities for co-existence of different lifestyles. That is why the politics of sufficiency is also highly participatory – as the following section will show.

The essential elements of the politics of sufficiency

The preceding sections demonstrated the potential benefits of a political approach that opens up more space for sufficiency – both as an extension of the possibilities for individual personal development and as a contribution to dealing with the challenges of sustainable development.

A politics of sufficiency would create a framework for actions and lifestyles which could spread not only across one country but around the globe. It is the logical extension and continuation of the social market economy; that is, it represents an institutional policy which brings individual personal development and social and ecological concerns into a new balance.

But how would it function in practice? How exactly can politics create conditions which ‘make it easier to live the Good Life’? What are the defining characteristics of a politics of sufficiency?

Cross-cutting politics. Sufficiency politics extends into many policy fields – into consumer and transport policy, but equally into housing policy, planning policy, health and social policy. It can be applied in local government just as well as in regional, national and European government. It can affect our lives at different levels, addressing both fundamental institutional elements of our economic activity and detailed and specialised policy areas. On the one hand this is a challenge, because it means that sufficiency policy cannot simply be delegated to an existing department; on the other hand it is a big opportunity, as it means that sufficiency policy can be introduced at, and can develop momentum from, numerous different starting points.

Similar considerations apply to other policy fields: health policy, gender equality policy or policies on demographic change are all confronted with the same challenges. But it has proved possible to establish these as overarching issues and to create institutions and offices responsible for the implementation of cross-cutting policies. Sufficiency policy can draw inspiration and learn from the experience gained in these fields.

Multi-level politics. Creating the framework conditions in which it is easier to live the Good Life is just as possible at the international or national level as it is regionally or locally. Sufficiency policy can gain a foothold at any of

these levels. So it is equally appropriate as a topic for the town council as it is for regional or national government. Initiatives at these different levels complement each other, and their reciprocal interaction reinforces the framework for the Good Life, so they must be considered in relation to each other.

Experimental politics. Traditional business and technology policy, and social policy as well, are well-established policy fields, in which complex institutions and political arrangements have evolved over decades. Sufficiency policy is a new political approach. It can make use of existing institutions, but it will also be dependent in part on entirely new forms and formations. So the path to a politics of sufficiency will be one opened by trial and error. What will be needed is a highly sensitive weighing up of different possibilities for personal development and personal freedom. This requires creative energy, but also a readiness to learn from one's mistakes and to allow the politics of sufficiency to grow organically.

Participatory politics. The experimental character of sufficiency-oriented politics – but even more the fact that it is about enabling the Good Life – means that it is essential for it to be created through a participatory process. Citizens must be able to participate in the discussion and

design of a legal and regulatory framework that would make possible a varied and fulfilling life for the greatest possible number.

Sufficiency-oriented politics therefore stands for:

(1) an enlightened liberalism, one that also offers a fair chance of fulfilment to sustainable life choices,

(2) an institutional policy based on the goal of prosperity – that is, one that takes into account the entire range of factors of prosperity, and not just economic growth,

(3) a perspective of cultural optimism, one that empowers politics, civil society and business to turn new values into political and economic reality,

(4) policy development that is informed by social science and understands that individual actions are always embedded in institutional and social contexts.

The politics of sufficiency – an approach along four dimensions

In the chapters which follow, this book will present four detailed approaches towards a politics based on sufficiency (see also the figure on p. 159). The intention is to take forward a debate which might in the future lead to sufficiency becoming an established and central concern of politics:

Framing – the prospects for a new institutional politics. The concept of sufficiency-oriented politics is an extension and development of the market economy. It is about having an institutional framework for economic activity which is constructed not just with the national social settlement in mind but with global social justice as well. So in the first place, sufficiency politics is institutional politics which creates a framework supporting the objective of the Good Life. This includes, for example, new measures of prosperity for the national economy – because gross domestic product (GDP) is an increasingly poor indicator of what constitutes genuine prosperity in a society. It is about having competition rules and a fiscal policy which ensure that common or collective goods – the commons – are not depleted; or at least that the user pays for their depletion. Framework policy takes responsibility for infrastructure that enables a good life for all, from cycle lanes in cities to easily accessible recreation areas. Finally, policies for social justice and for redistribution are an important element of a framework policy for the Good Life, because prosperity in modern societies is driven to a much greater degree by relative equality and justice than by the absolute level of GDP. Recent research has demonstrated this impressively.

Orienting – the right measures for time and space, property and the market. Political approaches which provide orientation are a second pathway for sufficiency policy. They address the characteristic tendencies of modern societies: acceleration, globalisation, quantitative growth, commercialisation. These tendencies have structural causes. So on the one hand sufficiency politics has to address the structural causes; on the other hand, it requires policies which offer contrasting points of orientation, which demonstrate an awareness of the values of deceleration, localisation and the search for the right measure. Such political approaches also serve to raise consciousness: they point the way for the kind of development that is needed for the future, and thereby provide support for the simultaneous approach via the other political pathways described here.

Shaping – mobility, housing, food. Good Life policies apply to specific fields of human activity: transport policy, planning and housing policy, or food and agriculture policy. These are policy fields that offer great scope for the promotion of sufficiency. The great advantage of using this way in is that these are established policy spheres with dedicated departments at all levels of government. So sufficiency policies can be hooked on to existing policy instruments to extend them in new directions and integrate them across different departments. Moreover, it

means that a healthy competition for effective sufficiency policies can arise between different countries, regions and municipalities – which presents an opportunity to develop a political culture of experimentation.

Enabling – creating resources for sufficiency through employment, education, health and consumer policy. Good Life policies benefit greatly from being flanked by complementary approaches in other policy fields: education policy, employment (and working time) policy, and appropriate consumer and health policies. In these fields, too, the foundations and the skills for the Good Life are being and will be created. The further these ‘resources’ for the Good Life can be developed, the easier it will be to live a life based on sufficiency.