

A REINTERPRETATION OF SUSTAINABILITY UNDER THE SIGN OF CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

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Abstract

Sustainability is usually constructed in terms of environmental preservation or of replicating a certain output level. To challenge the status-quo, we argue that it is a matter of preserving a certain version of social order, which can only be replicated by a trickle-down pattern of conspicuous consumption enforced by the efficiency gains and productivity achievements of the given socio-economic system. We also present a different view on the relation between sustainability and time by conceiving longevity as a measure of the physical changes that the system undergoes rather than the classical acceptance of a period determined by two temporal coordinates. This allows us to propose a classification of time, distinguishing between cyclical and chronological time based on the physical changes required to create the sense of progression, in each of the two cases. We relate our theoretical propositions to anthropological, sociological and historical facts, culminating in a short exposition of the way in which sustainability has been transformed from a matter of survival to one of ever increasing consumption and expanding output.

Key words: *sustainability; conspicuous consumption; social symbolism; social order; longevity*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Sustainability and sustainable development are two notions that appear to be related but there is no straightforward progression from the first to the second. Reconciling them to provide a clear, logical transition from the concept (sustainability) to the real-world manifestation (sustainable development) is a tall order, one whose difficulties have been faced by many of those that have tackled the problem. Sustainability is perceived as a concept in search of a context (Shearman, 1990), one that is impossible to conceive as a whole because the effort of defining it is influenced by the fundamental tenets and objectives of the specific group or organization engaged in the act of interpreting it (Mebratu, 1998). It is no wonder that sustainability is thought to be a vague concept because it has so far been defined as a construct of different visions - economic, environmental or social - and not as the product of a unifying, underlying principle (Brown, Hanson et al., 1987; Gatto, 1995; Goodland, 1995; Owens, 2003). This lack of clarity has led scientists to call for location specific approaches (van Pelt, Kuyvenhoven et al., 1995) or advocate the idea of a step by step approach guided by an ideal state that is perpetually redefined through the dialogue between different stakeholders (Robinson, 2004).

In recent years, sustainability and its real-world manifestation, sustainable development, have been devalued by redefinition to suit a wide range of interests while also being used by policy makers and corporations as a catchphrase, an empty adjective used to express a vague, desirable, positive characteristic (Johnston, Everard et al., 2007; Morelli, 2011). Even more worrisome is the tendency to concentrate on the developmental aspect of sustainability as evidenced by the increasing propensity to attribute characteristics such as growth, improvement, and increase to a concept that comes across as lacking scale (White, 2013). This way, sustainability is still perceived as a way of reclaiming the notion of thrift, but not in its original form of accepting and adapting to a world governed by scarcity. The new ideal is built around the concept of preserving the hard-gained abundance of the last 200 years rather than conforming to the constraints and limitations of the biosphere (Yates, 2012).

Sustainability is most commonly defined as development for the present that does not compromise the development potential of future generations (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) or, in other words, it is a problem of intergenerational justice in the sense that the distribution of resources across generations should provide for a non-decreasing average level of life quality (Asheim, 1994). These are

definitions that link sustainability and material wellbeing and for this reason they are usually employed by political and economic decision makers. The difference between the ecologically minded economist and the growth enthusiast is one of perspective. Neither argues against the replication of the output per capita value, the only thing that differs is the method: ecologists want to achieve it through population control and efficiency gains, while the more orthodox economists think it can be done through the age-old tradition of growth and increased productivity. Both perspectives imply that sustainability consists of a mix of optimization and preservation (Folke, 2006) and define resilience as the relation between the time period required for the system to return to equilibrium and the magnitude of the deviation which caused the change of state (Holling, 1973). This type of engineering resilience (Holling, 1996) is born out of a Newtonian view of the world, one that is not consistent with the characteristics of living systems.

A more suitable version of resilience is the one that measures the amount of change that the system can withstand before being forced into a new equilibrium position (Holling, 1973) but this one has not made its way into the conceptual framework of economists, even of those of ecological orientation, because it represents a tradeoff between optimization and preservation, with an emphasis on the latter. The problem lies in the fact that resilience implies inefficiency in the sense that it must preserve functions and agents providing a suboptimal level of efficiency, in the same way that biodiversity acts as natural insurance capital for ecosystems (Folke, Holling et al., 1996). Applying this type of reasoning to anthropic systems is a futile attempt because natural order does not care about the identity between the agent and the function it provides, whereas in socio-economic systems that very identity is essential. Usually, the agent has to persist, and the function has to adapt, whereas nature works the other way around, preserving the function and substituting the agent, and the more type of agents it can utilize, the easier it is to withstand shocks and surprises, thus enhancing the resilience of said system (Costanza, Wainger et al., 1993).

The choice between optimality and resilience is the fundamental dilemma that must be sorted out if one wishes to grasp the concept of sustainability in all its fullness. Ideational coherence can only be achieved by assessing both elements, optimization in the form of conspicuous consumption and resilience understood as longevity, in relation with the concept of time. To tackle the aforementioned task, the paper will be structured as follows. The next three sections discuss the social significance of the act of conspicuous consumption. Section 5 introduces the concept of time into the equation of sustainability. A short anthropological explanation for the change from a cyclical perspective on time to a chronological one is presented in section 6. Section 7 concludes.

II. THE SYMBOLISM OF CONSUMPTION

Consumption is an act that bears heavy social significance. Goods and services are conception carrying symbols and each conception can be translated into a meaning and all meanings are socially established. Using Geertz's (1977) definition of culture as a universal framework, it is possible to conceive conspicuous consumption as a historical process, a pattern constantly reproduced and reshaped to express a certain attitude towards life. Such a position does by no mean exclude the rational aspect of consumption, but reason can be judged as the fundamental determinant only in a world governed by extreme scarcity, whereas the current paradigm employs reason mainly as a transmutation machine that disguises wants in the form of needs. The same argument is made by Keynes (1965) when talking about consumption as being devoid of practical utility and guided by purely social justifications. While this semiotic perspective on culture proves to be very handy in tackling various practical aspects of anthropological research, to achieve its full explanatory potential, one must answer the following questions: how is social meaning established and by who? Are some symbols more influential than others? How are they reinforced and transmitted (Wolf, 1999)?

Social meaning can usually be found at the crossroad between cultural themes and political developments, in the sense that ideas must be promoted by social agents to gain social significance (Geertz, 1977). Wolf (1999) takes the idea even further by addressing the issue of how power dynamics shape cultural evolution. Symbols and meanings are controlled by the ruling elite which assure the perpetuation of its domination by further manipulation of said ideas (Yengoyan, 2001). The view is not new, since it was expressed more than one hundred years ago by Friedrich Nietzsche who stated that „creating values is the true right of masters” (Nietzsche, 2002, p. 157). If power defines culture and culture sustains the existing power structure, it becomes mandatory to study the will to power as a quintessential manifestation of culture and the manner in which it shapes the act of consumption.

Power is inextricably linked to the concept of will which is expressed by Schopenhauer's statement that individuals are fated to fight with other individuals and to want more than they can ever have (Schopenhauer, 2012). This rather somber view is in stark contrast with the idea of a harmonious movement leading to a universal end goal that was prevalent amongst German idealists such as Kant and Hegel (Wicks, 2017), but one that is fundamental for understanding Nietzsche's concept of the will to power. Unlike Schopenhauer, Nietzsche conceives the will as the imperative of every social organism (Nietzsche, 2002) and describes life as an “instinct for growth, for survival, for the accumulation of forces, for power” (Nietzsche, 1918, p. 46). The life that

Nietzsche is referring to has nothing to do with the biological aspect of the term and it is neither an euphemism for political power, domination and conquest but it should rather be understood as an expression of pure creativity that fosters the creation of new art, ideas and values (Lacewing, 2010). Conceiving will to power as the fundamental driving force of human history forces humans to recognize the current model of excessive consumption, its scope and magnitude, as an inevitable historical development rather than an anomaly, a good habit gone astray. To consume is to be successful and success can be replicated only through more consumption. To fully understand the origins of the current propensity to consume, it is necessary to explain the context and the mechanisms that allowed, and even encouraged, this type of behavior in the first place.

III. THE ORIGINS OF CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

Veblen (2009) links the birth of conspicuous consumption with the apparition and proliferation of predatory behavior and the material accumulation needed to support it. The predatory phase of culture is brought about by the exaltation of violent, honorable, dignified undertakings which escalated because such patterns of behavior allowed for an easy way to compare the effectiveness of the undertaken action and led to the establishment of a clearly defined hierarchy. The plundered surplus and the recognition afforded by the means of obtaining it determined the earliest manifestation of conspicuous consumption.

In contrast with Veblen's position, this paper starts from the premise that violent behavior was adopted because it helped maximize the survivability of the group that engaged in its practice. According to Lotka's energy maximization principle (1922a, 1922b), groups with a higher intake of energy were more likely to outlast those with smaller energy budgets. Constrained by certain environmental limitation, some tribes found that hunting, even though a risky and high energy consuming activity, was the only reasonable method to increase their energy intake. While that was the initial insight, soon enough they realized that the same strategy could be applied against other human tribes, thus signaling the beginning of a primitive arms race so that all groups could ward off the new threat of armed, organized conflict.

The accumulation of excess manpower and materials meant that leaders were faced with two options: concentrate the surplus capital on increasing productive capacity or on strengthening the military capabilities of the group. This was not a one-time decision, but rather a string of incremental steps that led toward the realization of one vision or the other. In the long run, bellicose activities proved to be more effective than peaceful ones because demanding tribute, conquest, plunder and the ability of the community to defend itself were better suited to create a boom of prosperity rather than the slow accumulation of wealth through peaceful means. The predators were almost always more prosperous than the prey.

Alas, there was a catch: for some groups to maintain their dominion over the others they had to do much more than simply coerce the other side, they had to differentiate themselves in a manner that would legitimate the inequalities between master and oppressed (Hayden and Villeneuve, 2011). This was mainly a cost reducing strategy: it was far cheaper to project an image of power that would discourage subjugated populations to rebel, then maintain an army whose interventions could always be foiled by strokes of bad luck, unforeseen events and moments of inspiration on the enemy's part. This mechanism evolved gradually, through the course of successive generations (Khalidun, 2015) and it was an unintentional, almost natural progress. Military expenditure gave way to opulence in the same rhythm that the collective mentality of the subjugated populations started to substitute the hard power of military might with the effects that it allowed for, namely, conspicuous consumption.

IV. FROM CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION TO SOCIAL ORDER – THE SENSE OF DISTINCTION

Using conspicuous consumption to maintain and reinforce a specific pattern of social order is only possible because the commoner has an inherent disposition to agree and sympathize with the passions of the great and the wealthy simply for "the vanity or the honor of obliging them" (Smith, 1761, p. 88). In turn, the rich value their considerable wealth because it allows them to draw the attention of the crowd, but it is not through virtue of any kind that they command such fascination, but through the very nature of their character that is shaped by the wealth at their disposal (Smith, 1761). In accordance with this line of thought, Pierre Bourdieu (1984, p. 469) conceives social order as the fundamental opposition between dominant and dominated powers – a perfect analogy to the predator / prey classification used earlier – and distinction achieved through consumption as the means to maintain it.

Distinction is enforced by two types of consumption: aesthetic and ordinary. Ordinary consumption produces pleasure through the direct intermediation of the senses, while aesthetic consumption enables a sort of "pleasure purified of pleasure" (Bourdieu, 1984), one that imposes a cultural check on the very act of consumption by requiring the acquisition of concepts that go beyond the spectrum of sensible properties. Proper aesthetic consumption requires taste to be a natural attribute of the one engaged in the act of consumption and not the result of study and discipline. This is the same type of distinction that Adam Smith (Smith, 1761) describes when talking about the dispositions of the rich as "a system of happiness that approaches so near to

perfection". The classification of Bordieu mirrors the one proposed by Veblen which identifies two main ways of displaying wealth: dedicated engagement in leisure activities and heavy spending on goods and services (Trigg, 2001). This way, social order is perpetually reinforced by perceiving objective reality through the instruments it offers, consumption patterns. This type of dynamics is no different from Hayek's (1990) insight regarding the selection of traditions based on the success of the groups which adopt them, thus assuring the perpetuation and widespread embracement of said traditions.

The acquisition of distinction is a self-sustaining mechanism that outgrows its initial purpose and develops into a perpetuum mobile machine, which uses consumption to convey the reality that validates it and, in turn, enforces the validity of said consumption (Bourdieu, 1984). Predatory cultures will constantly create and improve consumption patterns because the two necessary conditions required for such a behavior, the need for perpetual distinction and the great abundance of resources, are defining characteristics of such societies. The problem lies in the fact that the psychology of the elite changes in time, from a utilitarian grasp of conspicuous consumption – opulence for the sake of control – to one of self gratulation – opulence for the sake of opulence.

This transformation is possible because the elite starts to consider itself the higher meaning and not the product of society (Nietzsche, 2002) and therefore, the propensity towards differentiation is no longer aimed solely at the commoners but at their peers too. Even more importantly, they must also differentiate their present from their former selves, otherwise the sense of status would be impossible to maintain. This time-based differentiation is crucial because the initial psychological exaltation induced by a new consumption pattern gradually loses its distinguishing properties and it becomes common, dull and unremarkable. Simply put, the mere passing of time determines conspicuous consumption to become normal.

One of the oldest means to achieve distinction through ordinary consumption was to organize lavish feasts that would not only enforce the current hierarchy but would also constitute means to secure political power, desirable mates and forge advantageous alliances (Hayden, 2009a). The food and beverages used for feasts were considered symbols of power and influence and one can infer that their increased production was not driven by food shortages, but by a desire to obtain social and political benefits (Hayden, 2003, 2009b). In fact, this is the explanation that Hayden (1990) offers for the domestication of animals. He argues that food production by means of domestication remained at low levels even after the implementation of the new technology due to infrequent use associated with feasting activities.

Yet, a consumption pattern can only be defined as aesthetic or ordinary based on the period that passed since it was first devised. A prime example of this dynamic can be observed by studying the history of beer usage. From the excavations at Göbekli Tepe, a site dating back to the beginning of the Neolithic, archaeologists inferred that social change happened before, not after, the introduction of farming. The monumental sanctuary was built by groups of hunter-gatherers from different areas that came together to perform communal work. Such occasions were marked by intensive feasting, thus providing an extra, more earthly incentive, besides religious devotion. In this context, beer was one of the more popular items on the menu but, in light of current evidence, it is thought by archaeologists that the domestication of cereals was undertaken mainly to serve the purpose of beer production and not because of its more common, and arguably more beneficial, use of bread making (Dietrich, Heun et al., 2012). Once harvests became more resilient and the human body adapted to gluten intake, bread became a staple food in all cereal producing cultures where plant variety was suited for such utilization.

To sum up, the position of power was certified by conspicuous consumption and ever-increasing levels of consumption reinforced and sustained the ability to express one's power. Even more importantly, efficiency was usually not the first criteria for the creation of new consumption patterns. At first, new goods and services were infused with powerful social significance, which justified the often-high cost of producing them. As costs decreased and availability increased, social significance was lost, and elites had to resort to other products to retain the symbolism of conspicuous consumption that was so necessary for attaining that all-important sense of distinction.

V. A TIMELESS DEFINITION OF SUSTAINABILITY

So far it has been established that conspicuous consumption is both a requirement and a consequence of human evolution. It is required to create a sense of distinction that justifies and maintains social order and, consequently, the sense of distinction encourages and even forces the creation of ever more conspicuous consumption patterns. However, the most distinctive feature of capitalism is that it no longer confines conspicuous consumption to the quarters of the rich and the powerful. Production is the higher meaning of the capitalist and to produce more means to produce in a cheaper, more efficient way, thus making the product available to a wider audience (Schumpeter, 1994). In this circuit of ever increasing production that must push equivalent levels of consumption (Galbraith, 1998), which then provide the base for a new increase in production capacities, conspicuous consumption plays a key role because it provides the archetypal good or service that needs to be made affordable. This way, the whole society gains access to more advanced goods and services which increase the quality of life and the survival chance of the individual and, arguably, of the group as well.

Human society has become a well-greased machine engaged in an ever-expanding cycle of production

and consumption, but such a development, in and of itself, is not a situation that has to be derided. The problem only arises when one puts things into perspective. Given the particularities of conspicuous consumption and the affluent world in which it has to be perpetually reenacted, the question of survivability changes to one of durability. Human civilization is no longer endangered by famine, virulent diseases, uncontrolled violence or the specter of looming wars. In fact, it has achieved an unparalleled level of wealth and security. What it lacks, though, is a sense of proportion: how much wealth is enough? Or, in other words, when is it right to say no to growth?

A finite game is won when the required conditions are met by one of the players. These are measurable, comparable and observable criteria. Judging things from this perspective, it would not be unreasonable to conceive the specific end game objective of the human species to be the wellbeing of its members. Given the actual production capabilities, such a purpose could be achieved by providing an adequate level of individual wealth through the redistribution of the current wealth stock according to a certain criterion of fairness and necessity. Therefore, from a finite perspective, the game is over and *Homo sapiens* has won. However, finite games can only work within a very specific timeframe that is either agreed upon in the beginning, or is limited by the number, or the array of actions that the player has at its disposal. Once duration is no longer set and the number of actions becomes unlimited, the nature of the game should change to one that emphasizes continuity over efficiency. Yet such a change of perspective does not occur because the players devise their very own efficiency criteria which help transform the continuity of time into a string of instances, essentially breaking up the survivability game into many finite, classical games.

To sum things up, sustainability is the residual effect of a game whose goal is the creation of distinction through conspicuous consumption which, in turn, assures the perpetuation of the social structure that enables the parties engaged in acts of conspicuous consumption to maintain their privileged positions. The provided definition comes into conflict with the views of the economists that have advanced ideas such as the steady-state economy (Daly, 1974, 1991), a stationary state economy (Boulding, 1973) or a bio-economic program (Georgescu-Roegen, 1975). The programs advocate the idea of perpetually maintaining a certain level of wealth per capita, in line with the regeneration rate of natural renewable resources in the context of steady population numbers. Yet all the programs seem to be oblivious to the idea that society is a living, evolving organism. To impose a certain wellbeing level, as generous as it may originally appear, is a temporal non-sense because human beings are not interested in replicating the physical, tangible manifestations of wealth observed at one given stage in the lifecycle of the analyzed system. What *Homo sapiens* really wants is to get as close as possible, at any point in time, to a certain ideal of wealth and prosperity, an ideal that is most dutifully created and constantly reshaped by conspicuous consumption. This observation can be better expressed by using the case of Nathan Rothschild, one of the wealthiest men of his times, who died because of an infected boil (Landes, 2013), a medical problem that is easily treatable nowadays. This means that the average European contemporary citizen has access to higher quality healthcare services than one of the rich persons of the first half of the XIXth century. Yet, the average citizen does not compare his wellbeing level with that of people who died almost two hundred years ago, but with the standard set by the rich and powerful of the day. The environment is part of the equation, but it is wrong to try and understand sustainability from a mainly ecological perspective, because it is not a factor when it comes to decisions about what and how much one should consume. The environment is simply a constraint that has to be taken into account for fear of the negative externalities it may incur on the act of consumption and of its continuous replication.

One thing that seems to be lacking from the provided definition is the concept of time. Longevity (Costanza and Patten, 1995; Voinov and Farley, 2007) is the criterion employed by ecological economists to assess the sustainability of a given system. In essence, it is the most logical choice of evaluation, yet in its current form it suffers from the drawback that it does not take into account the imperative to sustain the social structure through conspicuous consumption. There are two broad directions of development: one emphasizes achievement, the other, persistence. Achievement implies maximum output regardless of the period it can be sustained, while persistence maximizes duration by completely disregarding output value. The development of a socio-economic system consists of a combination of the two extremes, which does not imply an either-or approach but a step by step one. This means that persistence becomes desirable only after the achievement of a certain level of life quality and the more that level rises, the more incentives people get to prolong the current state of affairs. Therefore, there is no choice between achievement and persistence because the former is the condition for the existence of the latter. Yet, this proposition can only be verified at the level of the whole society, not of every individual or even social group, as it is clearly proven by the continual existence, for hundreds of years, of the untouchable caste in Indian society. Their miserable existence is not a matter of preservation, but of forced continuation achieved by means of cultural engineering.

Given the proposed definition of sustainability, conceiving longevity as the period determined by two temporal coordinates is misleading because it cannot convey the idea of active, driven optimization. If time is understood as a consequence of the transformation of space that gives sense to the distinction between earlier and later (Whitehead, 2015), longevity could very well be conceived as a measure of physical transformation. In other words, the same amount of longevity could be expressed in a shorter or longer time span because the

modification of space would be equal between the two periods.

VI. A SHORT ANTHROPOLOGICAL HISTORY OF SUSTAINABILITY'S INEVITABLE TRANSFORMATION

The first hunter gatherers were living in societies where only renewable resources were used in the process of production and total output would vary based on the number of people in the group. Over the course of many tens of thousands of years, the growth of output per capita surpassed the ability of the system to maintain it using only renewable resources. The goal of the current section is to determine the changes that made possible and encouraged the transition from a stationary state economy to one defined through the efficiency and productivity gains it constantly delivers so that it can sustain ever higher levels of consumption.

Archaic societies were able to replicate with very little variation the same production, consumption and social patterns because the individual had a cyclical perception of time. The first hunter gatherers traversed space without altering it in significant ways. Their temporal marks consisted of the passing of the seasons, the migration of herds, the mating seasons of their prey. In such a context, time was mainly defined by personal experience (it is no coincidence that in archaic societies storytelling is such an honored tradition). The very first hunter-gatherer groups had extremely few possessions because they were constantly on the move and even though they were covering large geographical areas, they lacked the ability to alter the landscape in significant ways. The only lasting method of modifying their environment consisted of hunting. The extinction of mammoths or the large marsupials of the Australian continent amounted to what we may describe as a systemic defining event. It allowed the tribe to gain a sense of history: there was life before the disappearance of mammoths; there was a different kind of life after their demise. This way, cyclical time was for the first transformed and recorded in a chronological manner.

The pattern of cyclical existence was broken by the first great transformation of human society, the agricultural revolution. It came about as a mean to enhance the survivability of the group by increasing population numbers at the cost of sacrificing individual life quality. It appears that, in its very early stages, agriculture was a trap because hunter-gatherer societies exhibited all the basic cultural characteristics of later, sedentary societies – social norms, hierarchies, goods, politics, power plays and so on – while also expending less effort to preserve their wellbeing and enjoying a more diverse diet and more leisure time than the first communities of farmers (Harari, 2017).

At first glance, it may appear strange that the first farmer communities did not revert to a nomadic lifestyle, especially since species survival is a residual effect of individual action and of social interaction, which means that the notion makes no sense at the level of the individual. There are two reasons. First, the capital and time investment were so significant that it made more sense to persevere and improve the situation instead of simply returning to the old ways. Secondly, a certain period had to pass before the disadvantages of the sedentary lifestyle became apparent and it seems conceivable that the skills required to sustain a nomadic lifestyle would have slowly started to be forgotten by then.

This change of lifestyle also changed the way people perceived time. Moving from a hunter - gatherer to a farming economy involves a tectonic shift in the perception of capital. It marks the transition from a skill based economy to a hoarding economy, one whose emphasis is on physical rather than human capital accumulation. Secondly, and arguably more importantly, the accumulation of physical capital signified the beginning of an unprecedented colonization of space, both in the sense of territory and belongings. This has set into motion a series of cultural developments that culminated in the creation of instruments such as writing, mathematics, government, bureaucracy and organized religion. Many of them found a second, and vastly more important use, in helping to preserve, order and pass on information which fostered an ever-increasing rhythm of development. This created a sense of temporal progression because life could be ordered and shaped by events that affected the system which, in turn, were able to also define the life of the individual.

The idea of two versions of time might seem a bit forced, but it is a historical reality that has been expressed in its most elaborate form by the classical Maya civilization. The Mayans used two calendars to record time, the Calendar Round and the Long Count. The former represented a 52 years cycle, while the latter, though also cyclical in nature, was able to record a period of roughly 5000 years, making it suitable to record momentous events in a chronological manner (Coe, 1999). What is most interesting is the kind of events that the Mayans carved out on their monuments using the Long Count. They recorded the birth, accession, accomplishments and exploits of the autocratic rulers of the many Mayan city-states. In a society ruled by deified kings, these were system defining events, the very fabric of history. This, in turn, stimulated the conspicuous consumption of the ruler and his entourage, because outdoing his predecessor was the only way to, literally, make history. One must remember that the achievements of the king were considered the achievements of society itself and by building bigger temples, more lavish palaces, extending the scope and size of public infrastructure, the people themselves experienced a sense of progress, even though they were living in the same rickety huts and consuming almost the same goods and services as their ancestors 100 years ago. In other words,

conspicuous consumption, in the form of military undertakings or massive building program, was required to give sense to a society that was transitioning from the use of cyclical time to that of chronological time.

Today, most societies are built on the principles of democracy, anthropocentrism and individuality. Regardless of the profound structural changes, the idea of chronological time follows the same principles as in the days of the Classic Maya civilization. The only difference consists in the democratization of the experience. Nowadays, most of the population of a given society engages in acts that mimic the conspicuous consumption habits of the elite because this is the mechanism that gives sense to chronological time while also allowing for the replication of the social structure.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

Sustainability is usually conceived as a matter of resource scarcity. There are two major strands of thought: human civilization must either reduce consumption to fit a certain resource envelope and to avoid dire environmental negative externalities, or it must maintain a certain consumption per capita level through technical innovation that would bring about efficiency gains and the ability to extract ever larger quantities of the Earth's natural capital. The present paper is devised as a challenge to both perspectives by conceiving consumption, in general, and the conspicuous type, in particular, as a practice that is essential for the maintenance of a given social structure, which is the foremost condition for the existence of sustainability.

The theoretical construct starts from the premise that conspicuous consumption is, through its very nature, infused with social symbolism. It could be a statement of success, power, intimidation, philanthropy and so on. The aspect of conspicuous consumption most relevant for a proper understanding of sustainability is that it is not an effect, but a cause. The current affluence of goods and services does not push the levels of conspicuous consumption, but it is rather the other way around. It is because of the human propensity towards conspicuous consumption that ever-greater levels of productivity have been achieved.

The social role of conspicuous consumption has been to create a sense of distinction between the elite and the commoners, but one that was not intent as a simple barrier to mark the division between those in positions of power and those without power. It was rather an instrument to legitimize and replicate the social hierarchy in a way that would reduce the cost of maintaining one's position while, at the same time, firmly establish within the collective mentality the mechanisms that would perpetually reinforce it. The pattern has been replicated time and again, so much so that it has become a staple of human society, not an option to be pondered upon and it is this very aspect that all researchers of sustainability should consider when building their theories and policy proposals.

The idea that conspicuous consumption fulfills an essential social function is only half the story, because it is also necessary to explain the way in which it has transformed the very idea of sustainability. For that purpose, another concept must be reinterpreted, namely, time. When talking about sustainability, longevity is usually understood as the period determined by two temporal coordinates. Yet time is bound by physical change, meaning that the more one modifies space, the more quickly the system's potential is achieved. Therefore, considering lifespan as a finite number of physical manifestations, a quicker pace of development does not amount to a reduction in longevity, but rather to a simple condensation of time. This makes longevity a rather imprecise measure of sustainability because it does not account for the performance of the socio-economic system that is being evaluated. This means that from a purely temporal perspective, there is no difference between contemporary societies and the tribes of the Amazonian rainforest except for the duration of their continual existence, which is a comparison that is most definitely flawed.

Relating time to physical transformation does not only allow for the quantification of the difference in economic achievements, but it also determines a different perspective on the method of calculating the lifespan of a given system. If longevity is the sum of all possible physical transformation that the system can produce, then it completes its full lifecycle when all those transformation come into being, regardless of the actual period it takes for them to manifest. This helps to explain the beginning of conspicuous consumption as a consequence of the way in which people changed their perspective on time, from a cyclical manner of recording history to a chronological account that had to relate to certain momentous physical transformations in order to maintain coherence. This fundamental principle is still valid today, yet over the centuries it evolved to include an ever-higher proportion of the population that engages in conspicuous and conspicuous-like consumption. It was a necessary transformation because, otherwise, replicating the social structure of society would have been impossible, as proven by violent events triggered by extreme levels of inequality, such as the French Revolution of 1789 or the barons' revolt during the reign of King John, that led to the signing of the Magna Carta (1215) and the Charter of the Forest (1217).

The main contribution of the article is the insight that sustainability should not be conceived in spite of the human propensity towards consumption but, first and foremost, as an enabler of such a behavior. This is an important idea for the researchers, activists and politicians working on environmental issues because it provides them with a clearer understanding of the fundamental premises that govern sustainability, thus helping them produce research and policy proposals that are more realistic and much more likely to be put into practice than if

they were based on a romantic version of the concept.

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