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Published in:
Consumption and Society

DOI (link to publication from Publisher):
[10.1332/TIZB1819](https://doi.org/10.1332/TIZB1819)

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Publication date:
2023

Document Version
Også kaldet Forlagets PDF

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Koch, M., & Hansen, A. R. (2023). Welfare within planetary limits: deep transformation requires holistic approaches. *Consumption and Society*, 2(1), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1332/TIZB1819>

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CONVERSATION

Welfare within planetary limits: deep transformation requires holistic approaches

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In January 2023, Anders Rhiger Hansen visited Lund University to talk to Max Koch about sustainable welfare, human needs, social inequality and a little bit about Bourdieu. The message from Max was clear: politicians need to drop the idea of green growth and instead define a safe and just operating space to determine what can be done within this space. His sociological approach combines Marxian and Bourdieusean traditions, and he recommends that the *Consumption and Society* community investigates consumption in combination with processes of production, for example by engaging with critical political economy approaches such as the French regulation school or the Frankfurt School. According to Koch, the survival of the planet requires holistic approaches that would transform society and its exchanges with nature, based on principles of degrowth and on a scale that we have not yet seen.

Key words degrowth • sustainable welfare • welfare

Key messages

- Politicians need to drop the idea of green growth and instead define a safe and just operating space to determine what can be done within this space.
- Investigate consumption in combination with processes of production.
- The survival of the planet requires holistic approaches to transform society and its exchanges with nature on a scale that we have not yet seen.
- This transformation needs to be based on principles of degrowth.

To cite this article: Koch, M. and Hansen, A. (2023) Welfare within planetary limits: deep transformation requires holistic approaches, *Consumption and Society*, XX(XX): 1–10, DOI: 10.1332/TIZB1819

Introduction

At Lund University in Sweden, research on social welfare and environmental sustainability aims at contributing to solutions on how future welfare systems may remain safe and just within planetary boundaries. Under the umbrella ‘sustainable welfare’, Max Koch is a leading figure in this interdisciplinary ‘experiment’ through leading research projects¹ and authoring numerous articles and books. Relating to climate change and the environmental crisis, his work covers topics such as the historical development of capitalism (Koch, 2012; 2017; 2018b; 2019), postgrowth and wellbeing (Büchs and Koch, 2017; 2019), social policy (Koch and Fritz, 2014; Koch, 2018a; 2022a) and degrowth (Buch-Hansen and Koch, 2019; Koch, 2020). He is currently finishing a new book together with Hubert Buch-Hansen and Iana Nesterova called *Deep Transformations: A Theory of Degrowth* (Manchester University Press).

Anders Rhiger Hansen visited Lund University in January 2023 to talk to Max Koch about sustainable welfare, human needs, social inequality, and a little bit about Bourdieu. The message from Max was clear: politicians need to drop the idea of green growth and instead define a safe and just operating space to determine what can be done within this space. His sociological approach combines Marxian and Bourdieusean traditions, and he recommends that the *Consumption and Society* community investigates consumption in combination with processes of production, for example by engaging with critical political economy approaches such as the French regulation school or the Frankfurt School. According to Koch, the survival of the planet requires holistic approaches that would transform society and its exchanges with nature, based on principles of degrowth and on a scale that we have not yet seen.

Sustainable welfare

Anders Rhiger Hansen (ARH): The theme that is guiding this special issue is that consuming ‘more sustainably’ should not be the goal, but rather, a net zero society, with no historic parallel, is necessary. Do you buy this goal, or does it need moderations or changes?

Max Koch (MK): I can start by saying that I’m very sympathetic to the special issue and that we need limits to both production and consumption. At least if we are talking about consumption with a significant energy and matter throughput. This is because we inhabit a limited planet, and these limits make themselves felt and heard increasingly and more often as made explicit by Steffen et al from the Stockholm Resilience Center (for example, Steffen et al, 2015), Röckström (for example, Röckström et al, 2009), and many others.

ARH: You propose ‘sustainable welfare’ as a feasible welfare system for the future (Koch, 2018a; 2020; 2022a; Fritz et al, 2021). Could you elaborate on what this means, and maybe give some examples?

MK: Here at Lund, we have had a long tradition in conducting welfare studies, in a bit traditional, inequality-related ways, and then we also have a long tradition in research on ecological sustainability, broadly defined, but for some reason the two research traditions never really worked together. They developed in separate ways.

At Lund, we have the Pufendorf Institute for Advanced Studies,² where you can develop ideas that are not [yet] as concrete as to suggest them to external funders. In 2015/2016, we got to spend some time at Pufendorf and assembled more or less established welfare and sustainability researchers. A group of 12 people came up with the name of ‘sustainable welfare’.

This was the foundation for the edited volume *Sustainability and the Political Economy of Welfare* with Oksana Mont (2016). It was very much a collective effort, and we agreed that at least one sustainability researcher would work with one welfare researcher on each chapter. We thought this worked surprisingly well.

The main result is that the good old concept of human needs turned out to be central for sustainable-welfare reasoning. There is a lot of talk about subjective wellbeing in sustainability discourses. We are a bit critical here: if you ask people how happy you are after all on a scale between 1 and 10, you may get an 8.5 in Denmark, and 8.9 in Finland and 7.8 in Sweden. In some degrowth circles a lot is made of the fact that these wellbeing levels have not increased, while at the same time economic growth has. We think that this argument is methodologically not very convincing because one scale (wellbeing) is bounded, that is, you cannot get an 11 on that scale, while, at least in theory, GDP per capita can constantly grow. Hence, we don’t think that the so-called ‘Easterlin paradox’ is very applicable to our purposes, which brought us to look more at theories of human basic needs, that is, ‘objective’ measures of wellbeing. There are basically two of them, which were both developed in the early 1990s: one by Len Doyal and Ian Gough (*A Theory of Human Need*, 1991), and the other one by [Manfred] Max-Neef and his colleagues (*Human Scale Development*, 1991). They differ in relevant aspects, but basically both say that there are a limited number of basic human needs including, for example, the need to breathe fresh air, to have a certain education, or autonomy in your action. Then the argument following Max-Neef specifically is that needs *satisfiers* do change over time and across space. The fact that they can take more or less sustainable forms makes the needs approach amenable to sustainability discourses, and especially where limits are concerned.

I think that it is possible to satisfy basic human needs within planetary boundaries. That would be the most general definition of sustainable welfare; yet not only for the happy few in Western societies, but for all people, for north and south, and for future generations as well. One of the advantages of the needs approach is that it allows a kind of ‘science fiction’ dialogue with future generations. Though we cannot know how exactly they will go about satisfying their needs, we can nevertheless assume with some reason that they will also have needs for clean water, a safe space to live, and a few other things. From here, we follow a moral obligation for the present generation to leave the planet in a state that enables future generations to provision corresponding needs satisfiers in the necessary quality and quantity. After all, this was one of the founding definitions of ‘sustainability’ in the Brundtland report, *Our Common Future* (1987). Interestingly, in these documents you don’t have much discussion about what needs are.

ARH: There is a political discussion in Denmark about prioritising ‘green’ [environmental] over ‘red’ [social] policy. Does this ‘competition’ relate to your work?

MK: If we take the ‘sustainability proviso’ (Brandstedt and Emmelin, 2016) seriously, we should not care only about our own welfare, but also about the welfare of people in Pakistan, for example, who have to cope with floods already now, and of course also the welfare of future generations. This means that the welfare standards that we have become used to in our part of the world would need to be reviewed and possibly restrained. The entire concept of welfare needs to be redefined from a global sustainability perspective.

Power struggles and inequality

ARH: I am curious about how we can talk about social welfare and inequalities at the same time, and also the needs of future generations. It all sounds really complicated; could there be some basic principles?

MK: In our work, we have tried to operationalise this general idea by taking Raworth’s concept of a safe and just operating space, which is itself an elaboration of the ‘planetary boundaries’ framework. The ‘human needs’ concept addresses need satisfaction at minimum level or ‘social floor’ of this space (Khan et al, 2023). Here, we see welfare and social policies as important and not easily replaceable. But then there is the other boundary of the ‘safe and just operating space’, which are the ecological ceilings. In this respect we critically discuss, among many other things, unsustainable and ungeneralisable welfare, the ecological implications of economic growth and what the last IPCC report calls the polluter elite (Pörtner et al, 2022). The lifestyles of the rich are absolutely not generalisable to the rest of the world and we do not see any alternative but to do something about that, for example introducing a cap on incomes from wealth and work per year, beyond which 100 per cent taxation would kick in (Buch-Hansen and Koch, 2019).

ARH: You have also written about how we should be satisfied with less, is that also related to some of these things?

MK: This points in the same direction. Sustainable welfare is a particular field of study within the wider degrowth perspective. Green growth is not a viable alternative. We basically tried that for 30 years. Carbon emissions and other environmental ills have only increased in that time. While degrowth is about a far broader transformation of society, sustainable welfare specifically looks at the intersection of social welfare and environmental sustainability and the development of eco-social policies that may help move economy and society towards the safe and just operating space.

Having said this, we are aware of the fact that no societal transformation of that calibre has so far come about under democratic circumstances, which is what degrowth would entail. But to be honest, we don’t see much alternative to nevertheless try.

ARH: You and Milena Büchs (Büchs and Koch, 2017) point out how expectations of postgrowth and wellbeing is embodied, and then we also need to address it in that way. Do you want to elaborate a bit on this?

MK: Milena and I made the argument that growth is, first of all, a macro structural phenomenon. And I think we have already talked about this in the sense that a range of institutions that we have in Western societies co-developed in the postwar decades: all interlinked to a permanently expanding economic pie. The macro problem is then how to change that. I'm talking not only about the welfare system, but also the political system, the media and the education system. To avoid social exclusion on the way you would need to change all these social systems in parallel and at roughly the same speed. And for that, we don't really have any historical evidence under democratic circumstances. We are the last to say this cannot be done and that we shouldn't try. Of course, we both think we absolutely should, but we're trying to make people aware of the, well, enormous challenge. Then there is growth at the micro level, that is, individuals. This has to do with norms and values, on the one hand, but also with what Bourdieu and the social practice theory tradition would call *habitus* – a concept that can very well be used also to understand contemporary society. Much of what we do, both in production and consumption, is not reflected on in conscious ways, as maybe academics would do. Confusing academic reflections with other social practices that make up everyday life is what Bourdieu called the scholastic fallacy: putting your own thinking into the shoes of those you are supposed to be studying. Most people reproduce the social order through day-to-day practices, but usually without having that kind of conscious purpose. Let's take a simple example, one that can be related back to Marx. A large-scale social structure such as the class structure is reproduced by the fact that people go to work every day. They may do that for a range of reasons, for example, to make ends meet at the end of the month, but at the same time, by doing this, they unintentionally reproduce capitalist core categories such as commodities, money, wage labour and capital. If we also consider Bourdieu, you see that the same happens in the sphere of consumption. After this interview, you may feel like you need a cup of coffee or a beer, and you do that because you feel thirsty or the need for some caffeine. What you also and presumably unintendedly do is reproduce the existence and use of commodities and money. Hence, we return here to the very key problem of sociology: how social structures come into being and are reproduced through unintended consequences of conscious actions. If we look a little bit more into consumption, then Bourdieu would say that there is a space of lifestyles, where people, unconsciously or consciously, compete for remaining or becoming tastemakers, while others catch up.

Use, exchange and symbolic value

ARH: In your book on the development of capitalism and climate change ([Koch, 2012](#)), you write a lot about use-value exchange and exchange-value, and how these have developed over time. I would like to add symbolic value, and ask how you think of the relations between the three forms of consumption?

MK: Maybe I can start a bit earlier. I re-read Marx to better grasp the links between capitalism and climate change because I thought, and still think, that his critique of political economy is a welcome link between ecological economics, on the one hand, and neoclassical economics, on the other. While neoclassical economics basically exclude matter and energy transformation and look only at

financial transactions; in Marxian terms, it considers only exchange value and not use value. Ecological economics has tended to only address matter and energy transformations and not so much financial flows and exchange value. Now Marx starts his master work, *Das Kapital* (Marx, 2012), by analysing the double character of the commodity. There is first the use value element, which is not specific to capitalism. If you want to sell a product of labour, it has to have some kind of use value, at least for someone, otherwise, it will not get sold. However, if you want to use a product of labour, you normally have to buy it first on some market or, as Marx put it, the commodity must first be realised as exchange value before it can be used as use value. Hence the logics of use value and exchange value coexist in capitalism, whereby the latter tends to dominate the former. In the first chapters of that book (Koch, 2012), I discuss the tensions between the exchange and use value of commodity, money and work a little bit further. I show that these tensions make themselves felt by an inbuilt imperative to grow and accumulate exchange value and that this growth imperative stands in contradiction to the reproduction principles of nature. There is, for example, only a limited stock of resources on a constrained planet, which sooner rather than later contradicts an economic dynamic based on expansion and growth.

On the consumption side, specifically, we have the symbolic struggles around distinction that we talked about before. It is relatively safe to say that our basic needs could today be fulfilled relatively easily, and actually with a lot less commodities, and matter and energy throughput. But the ongoing struggle between avant-gardes and tastemakers results in the development of ever new generations of use values, thereby reinforcing the growth and accumulation principle on which the capitalist production sphere is built. Hence, the significance of symbolic struggles between different lifestyles and fashions, that in themselves tend to reproduce social hierarchies of a more 'objective' kind, can hardly be overestimated.

ARH: What we call symbolic value, but also could be called appreciation or communicating through consumption (referring to Warde [2010; 2014]). Is that some process in itself, or something that is related to the exchange value and use value?

MK: I would not separate the material aspect of production and consumption from the symbolic one, but rather discuss them in their interaction and mutual reinforcement. It is a bit like domination which has a 'material' and 'symbolic' side. I wrote a bit about the state recently, in connection to degrowth (Koch, 2022b). On the one hand, Bourdieu shows that state domination works in certain clear-cut ways, for example through timetables. Everybody follows a certain rhythm of time without the state managers having to say anything or 'rule'. So, the material side of state domination consists, for example, in the official timetable documents and the clocks. Yet, on the other hand, the symbolic aspect is also always present and expressed, above all, in the, usually unconscious, submission of most people to this kind of state power. Symbolic domination means that (state) power is hardly reflected upon and for the most part not grasped as such. Hence, while one can of course discuss the symbolic and material aspects of power separately, they are nevertheless linked in practice.

Future policy and research

ARH: About ten years ago, you wrote: ‘Future generations are likely to regard the present one as selfish at best. Yet it cannot be excluded that what is today called “Western way of life” will earn our generation a place in history books on a par with mass murderers: people who committed a crime against future generations of humanity’ (Koch, 2012: 178). This is quite a strong statement; what do you think about it today?

MK: Well, I would say that it still cannot be excluded that future history books will characterise us in such terms. If I was to rewrite the paragraph now, I would probably focus less on humanity only, but also open for other species that are likewise being made the victims of both material and symbolic violence in the context of capitalist growth.

ARH: We talked a little bit in the past about what we should tell the politicians in the Nordic countries, for example to be bolder in pushing what people can accept in terms of consumption practices, think long-term, and to drop the ideas of green growth. Is there something else you want to add to that?

MK: I would like to bring back holistic thinking when talking policies. May I point to a new book (*Deep Transformations: A Theory of Degrowth*) that I am writing together with Hubert Buch-Hansen and Iana Nesterova, who are both experts in critical realism? In this book, which I hope will come out by the end of 2023, we are combining their critical realism expertise and my Marxian-Bourdieuian sociology into a scholarly understanding of what we call deep transformations, a theory of degrowth. What Hubert and Iana have convinced me to think about is the complexity associated with degrowth transformations in terms of what critical realists call different planes of existence. When we change something consciously through policy, for example on the plane of social structures, we should always consider what this may mean for other planes such as society–nature relations, the ways we interact with each other and what kind of individual dispositions this may presuppose or produce. We are arguing in this book that something as complex as a degrowth transformation needs to happen simultaneously on all these planes of existence.

Hence, when deliberating eco-social policies, we need to take a holistic perspective. If we demand, for example, a cap on income and wealth to tackle the polluter elite, what are the implications of that for each of these different planes of existence? We think that such plane-thinking may help to conceptualise how degrowth transformations may be initiated and result in a division of labour among different players in various sites, such as the state, civil society and businesses.

ARH: Do you have any recommendations for consumption research?

MK: Always consider relations of production, and how production and consumption patterns correspond in particular growth or accumulation regimes that dominate particular eras in the historical development of capitalism.³ Looking at consumption in isolation runs the risk of redoing the mistake of the notion of consumer sovereignty. Instead, what we would need to do in sustainability research is combine the notion

of ‘consumption corridors’ (see [Fuchs et al, 2021](#)) with a ‘production corridors’ framework. This would be very useful and complementary with the safe and just operation space.

Not everything that was written 50 years ago or even earlier is outdated. Some of the work from the Frankfurt School on Culture Industries is still worthwhile reading. Tastes are made to a certain extent, not least by sales strategies as Bourdieu observed through the example of the housing market. Hence, I am not at all trying to argue against consumption as a field within sociology and social science. Not at all. But I would like to open for more holistic approaches, which we need in the interest of our very survival.

Notes

¹ Max Koch is project leader on ‘Sustainable Welfare for a New Generation of Social Policy’ (<https://portal.research.lu.se/en/projects/sustainable-welfare-for-a-new-generation-of-social-policy>) and ‘Postgrowth Welfare Systems’ (<https://portal.research.lu.se/en/projects/postgrowth-welfare-systems>).

² www.pi.lu.se/en/pufendorf-ias

³ Koch has in much of his work applied the French regulation approach ([Boyer and Saillard, 2005](#)) and combined it with a Bourdieusean sociology of consumption.

Funding

Max Koch’s contribution to the article benefited from funding from Lund University’s research programme for excellence, focusing on Agenda 2030 and sustainable development (project ‘Postgrowth Welfare Systems’).

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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