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Sufficiencyⁱ

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Sufficiency as an idea and as a logic provides guidance for an ecological and relational way of thinking and being. Thinking sufficiency reminds us that there are ecological limits to be respected and planetary boundaries to keep within, and that to do so is a matter of justice and responsibility. It is about recognizing those limits and translating them into guiding principles that reflect the restraint needed in order for us (as societies and as humanity) to stay within them in a way that safeguards a fair distribution of the environmental space available.¹ Sufficiency is a call for the affluent of the world (nations, groups and individuals) to shoulder the responsibility for the ecological crises and social injustices by *refraining from taking*, by withdrawing from the excess environmental space that they occupy.²

Although the globalized economy has made cheap products available for more people, affluence is a key variable to address from a sufficiency perspective, as one's environmental impact (and, hence, one's responsibility to withdraw) tends to increase with income.³ Over-consumption is not only the cause of severe ecological problems such as over-exploitation of natural resources and creation of waste and emissions. The extraction of natural resources needed to sustain the consumption of material goods in affluent societies is also often a matter of life and death for the people living off the land under considerably less affluent conditions.⁴ The socio-environmental conflicts that arise when these people - faced with poisoned soils or ground water, land grabbing or forced displacement - try to reclaim their rights, illustrate very clearly that not only is sufficiency a question of justice when it comes to how much "space" the individuals in the Global North need in order to sustain their current lifestyle, but also when it comes to the human rights of those living in the "shadow places"⁵ that bear the social and ecological costs of their consumption. Over-consumption is thus a question of (in)justice in regards both to a more abstract environmental space and to a concrete place.

Plumwood describes how the dematerialization of the economy makes the affluent lose touch with the material and ecological conditions under which the goods sustaining our lifestyles are produced, and, at the same time, with the people whose labor those lifestyles depend on.⁶ The "increasingly globalised and commodified relationships to nature and place"⁷ have resulted in an intensified irresponsibility in relation to these remote places and peoples, Plumwood claims, when what is needed is the opposite – *more* responsibility. As Harvey

¹ Spangenberg, "Sufficiency."

² Callmer, *Making Sense*.

³ Spangenberg, "Sufficiency."

⁴ Martinez-Alier, *Environmentalism of the Poor*; Temper, del Bene and Martinez-Alier, "Mapping the Frontiers."

⁵ Plumwood, "Shadow Places."

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid, 142.

reminds us, relations that play out between people in a capitalist economy stretch far beyond the place, and in doing so, they have moral implications for the individuals taking part in that economy. In a capitalist urban setting, the consumer and the producer are physically separated from each other, but they still relate to one another through the mediation of money.⁸ The people behind the goods may thus remain invisible to the ones consuming the products, but the relationship is still there. And *they* are there: there are Congolese kids working 15 hours a day in a gold mine and Chinese workers with suicide nets outside the factory windows in a new smartphone; there are women in Bangladesh working 16 hours shifts without ventilation or bathroom breaks in the seams of a new pair of jeans. They laid the last hand on the shirt that is put on in the morning. The touch of their skin lingers in the food and the drinks and the clothes and in the technology consumed in other parts of the world. Even though their fingerprints have long since been erased, even though it is made sure that they are nowhere to be reminded of. They are there, and they are the people who so many depend on for maintaining their way of life.

The dematerialization might be comfortable for affluent consumers. It is easier to talk about a remote “they”. Just as it is easier to not think of the physical places that bear the true ecological and social costs of that which affluent individuals put in their mouths, on their bodies, and take into their homes. But recognizing the existence of these shadow places, sufficiency is a call for the affluent of the world to retract from them. To withdraw from the environmental space their consumerist lifestyles demand, to stop striving for more and to instead strive for being content with good enough. It is a call for responsibility, one that obliges affluent individuals, groups and societies to refrain from taking more than their fair share. It is further a call for an ethical engagement to ensure a just distribution of the Earth’s resources in order to make it possible for others to live and flourish, including the people currently holding low-income jobs within unsustainable manufacturing industries.

As a theoretical and political project, sufficiency is mainly a question about *setting limits* to the activities of a society – limits that recognize and respect the existence of the planetary boundaries. These limits can come in the shape of caps on emissions or resource use, carbon budgets, or limits to maximum income or number of work hours. Such measures further need to be combined with policy measures for effective redistribution⁹ and a “floor” of social protection.¹⁰ A politics of sufficiency also needs to address questions of reducing the impact of the market in society and of slowing down the speed at which everything is expected to happen.¹¹ Part of this entails a dematerialization of the economy in another sense of the word than the one Plumwood highlights; to dematerialize wants and needs as a way of reconceptualizing the meaning of “theGood Life”.

In regard to sufficiency at the individual level, affluent individuals can also be claimed to have a responsibility to withdraw from the excess environmental space that they occupy. This withdrawal can in turn be helped by the development of a sense of sufficiency, of contentment with the fact that what one already has is good *and* enough - not only in terms of material standard, but in regard to what one needs to live a good life.

⁸ Harvey, *Justice, nature and the geography of difference*.

⁹ Rijnhout and Mastini, *Sufficiency*.

¹⁰ Spangenberg, “Sufficiency.”

¹¹ Schneidewind and Zahrnt, *The Politics of Sufficiency*.

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ⁱ Callmer, Åsa. "Sufficiency." *An A to Z of Shadow Places Concepts* (2020).

<https://www.shadowplaces.net/concepts>

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