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Cracking the consumption paradigm: reinterpreting necessity amidst the ecological transition

par BIERMANN SIMON, BORCIER SIMON,
LIVOREIL VICTOR & MARTINS TRISTAN

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1. Introduction

According to a survey by the public relations consulting firm Onclusive [1], environmental and energy issues were the third most covered topic by the French media in terms of Media Noise Units¹ in 2022, following the war in Ukraine and the presidential elections. In the same vein, 2022 marked the conclusion of the “Affaire du Siècle” (Case of the Century) after more than four years of legal proceedings. In this case, four organizations and over two million citizens took sued the French government for its inaction in the fight against climate change. Thus, the 21st century seems to be defined by the climate crisis and mobilization behind a political agenda that prioritizes the environment.

However, this focus on our relationship with the environment and the way we interact with ecosystems is nothing new, and in fact dates from before the climate crisis. The ecological transition, defined as the process of adapting our production systems and lifestyles in a world constrained by planetary boundaries, appears to be a true crisis of modernity. Yet rather than resorting to ever more modern and technical approaches, the solution to the crisis could benefit from being enriched by a historical perspective.

The concept of transition is often accompanied by the word “sufficiency” or “*sobriété*” in French— ranging from President Emmanuel Macron’s² “*sobriété raisonnable*”, and the Plan *Sobriété Énergétique*, to Pierre Rabhi’s [2] “*sobriété heureuse*.” This notion refers to changes in individual behavior to foster a downshifting that uses fewer resources. This notion of sufficiency is in fact undergoing a resurgence, given that Franciscan theorists developed the economic thinking that laid the groundwork as far back as the 13th century. This Franciscan ethic, initiated by Peter John Olivi, advocates for consumption guided by necessity and in a respectful relationship with the surrounding resources. This economic morality thus represents an early approach to sufficiency as a limitation of consumption to strict human needs.

Unfortunately, with technological progress, the Industrial Revolution, and the development of capitalism, this worldview was quickly forgotten and replaced by the

¹ *Unité de bruit médiatique* (UBM) is an indicator for measuring the media impact, both offline and online, of a current topic or personality and commonly referred to as the “media coverage metric” or “media impact measurement.”

² Emmanuel Macron, speech on June 19th, 2023 - Le Bourget.

massive advent of a consumer society completely disconnected from necessity. As Paul Mazur [3], banker at Lehman Brothers, stated in 1927, “We must shift America from a needs- to a desires-culture. People must be trained to desire, to want new things, even before the old have been entirely consumed. [...] Man’s desires must overshadow his needs.”

Today, it is clear that the transition cannot occur if we maintain our mode of excessive consumption, and that a change in our relationship with natural resources must take place. In the search for solutions enabling this shift in mindset, an economic movement has developed in recent years, reinterpreting Franciscan thought with the aim of reconnecting consumption to needs. Members of this movement argue that, in an era marked by criticism of punitive ecology and given the lack of popular support for a seemingly obvious and necessary transition process, part of the solution may lie in an evolution of both mentalities and the democratic framework.

Our study seeks to examine the individual’s relationship to consumption and how it constitutes a crucial variable in the advent of the transition. The aim is to deepen our understanding of eco-sufficiency, as a part of the transition process, and offer a perspective enriched by a historical, sociologic prism. Our analysis focuses on Western societies, where consumerism is deeply ingrained, and where efforts towards sustainability are particularly pressing.

2. Turn of the second millennium (11th-13th century): worldviews from a frugal society

In this first part, we will delve into the shifts in the perception of material wealth that emerged from the year 1000, aiming to enrich our contemporary reflections on the imperative of frugality in the context of climate change.

At the beginning of the second millennium, the image of a humble Christ resurfaced and became a central value of Latin Christianity, in a reaction against the enrichment and politicization of the Church. Biblical passages, such as Matthew 19:21, convey Christ's injunctions to renounce material possessions: "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have, give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; come, and follow me." Poverty thus became a social value permeating all strata of Roman society. Various ecclesiastical movements sought to emulate Christ by embracing humble conditions, even to the point of self-dispossession [4]. Evangelical poverty urged followers to relinquish the vanities of the world to embrace its profound essence. Material attachment, embodied in objects, was seen to restrict individuals to a fragmented experience of the world and prevent them from embracing the universal nature of Creation.

One of the orders that adopted these principles, and one of the most influential, was established by Francis of Assisi in 1210, known as the *Ordo Fratrum Minorum* (Order of Friars Minor). The order's constitutional text, drafted in 1223 and approved by Pope Honorius III, is known as the *Regula Bullata*. It explicitly forbade the friars from possessing objects or receiving money, although it did allow them, in compensation for their labor, to "receive what is necessary for the sustenance of the body, for themselves and their brothers" (Article 5, paragraph 3). In this way, Francis of Assisi aimed to enable the friars to attain fullness and embrace Creation. This sentiment finds its greatest expression in Assisi's *Canticle of the Sun* (*Laudato si'*) (1224-1225), where he praises celestial bodies, the four elements, and the universality of beings before turning to those who suffer and forgive out of love. He thus advocates for peace, humility, and fraternity with all inhabitants of the planet, revealing a holistic worldview.

The movement initiated by Francis of Assisi, with its radical nature and resulting demands, sparked numerous reflections on economic thought. Among them, Peter

John Olivi (1248-1298) belonged to a radical branch of the Franciscans, challenging the wealth of the Church and the authority of the Pope, while advocating for a demanding yet pragmatic interpretation of the poverty principle within the Order, which he does in his work *Quaestio de locutionibus angelorum* (1280) [5]. According to Mathieu Arnoux [6], Olivi sees *usus pauper* as “a measured and effective mode of consumption, aligning with a balanced relationship to the community and the market.” In seeking to define the poverty principle for the Franciscans, Olivi proposes a paradigm for evaluating human needs, and establishes the means to distinguish between necessity and excess.

The first matter is the value of things. Olivi identifies three sources of value: *raritas* (scarcity), *virtuositas* (an object’s capacity to fulfill a need), and *complacibilitas* (dependent on the desire to acquire things). While the utility of *virtuositas* is objective, that of *complacibilitas* is subjective, regulated not only by physical needs but also by individual fantasies, tastes, societal fashion, and imposed rules [7]. The second question involves the periodicity of usage: some things are consumed continuously, such as food, while others are used constantly, like clothing and dwellings. For things belonging to the latter category, the Franciscans were permitted to use them constantly within the limits of their real needs, but the former were not to be accumulated [8]. Olivi conceived excessive storage, relative to consumption quantities, as a sign of wealth and therefore contrary to *usus pauper*. Thus, Olivi presented a consumption model, foreshadowing an initial economic and social theory of needs. This model can be used to evaluate an economy’s capacity to meet *virtuositas* while assessing the portion attributable to *complacibilitas*, determined by the political realities of different groups.

3. Modern consumer society

The emergence of the consumer society is a phenomenon primarily observed in the 20th century, characterized by a continuous desire for increased acquisition of goods and services. This transition from an economy mostly focused on fulfilling basic needs to one centered around consumption can be attributed to two key factors.

Beginning in 1880, France initiated a process of secularization aiming to privatize the religious sphere. It started with the establishment of free, mandatory, secular schools in 1881. This move slowly altered societal norms. Moving away from the notion of religiously advocated frugality, people embraced a lifestyle that involved consuming beyond bare necessities, resulting in an improved standard of living and heightened consumption of goods and services.

Simultaneously, in the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution brought about significant transformations, whereby predominantly agrarian and rural societies transitioned to become industrial and urban. This shift laid the groundwork for a consumer-oriented society by introducing technological advancements that continuously introduced novel products to the market. The increased production capacity and availability of goods led to the rise of a consumer culture. Advertising and marketing strategies played a pivotal role in promoting consumption as a pathway to social status, happiness, and fulfillment. Consequently, individuals began to purchase items not essential to their needs but marketed as desirable or status-enhancing.

Modern consumer behavior has been analyzed by researchers as demonstrating a marked evolution. Indeed, Richins and Dawson [9], analyzed the American consumer society and showed that materialism has become a consumer value. This consumerism has taken up a threefold position in modern lives: acquisition has become central to our lives, purchases are seen as a way to pursue happiness, and possessions are considered as a measure of success. Hence, from these conclusions it appears that the modern era has placed materialism at the core of its expectations, desires, and relationships, as it increases self-centeredness.

These consumption habits are central to the strong growth that modern societies

have experienced. The emergence of a middle class has provided a powerful stimulus to consumption, making it a major contributor to the development of our societies. According to the OECD [10], the share of household consumption in GDP represents around 60% in advanced economies. Our modern political systems use GDP growth as a core quantitative measure to guide their action and assess their performance. GDP is a measure of the value added created by the production of goods and services in a country over a certain period, but it says nothing about the social utility of this added value, which is often taken for granted.

Indeed, modern economic theory does not distinguish economic activities according to the needs they address, but assumes that all economic activities answer legitimate needs. As Hoover puts it, “Adam Smith, among others, steered the political economy into a dead end by substituting labor for utility as the source of value.” [11] Even when Vilfredo Pareto [12] updated the notion of subjective needs, initially expressed by Peter John Olivi with the term *complacibilitas*, through his concept of *ophelimity*, he established the optimum of economic activity as reaching “maximum ophelimity”. Thus, Pareto sees economic activity as the means to satisfy the maximum number of subjective needs, which as we have seen before, are the result of individual fantasies, tastes, societal fashions, and imposed rules. By supposing that satisfying these subjective needs brings satisfaction and happiness to individuals, the optimum indeed makes sense.

However, social and psychological research has shown that this relationship cannot be demonstrated empirically. Kashdan and Breen [13] have indeed outlined that people with stronger materialistic values report more negative emotions, and less autonomy, competence, gratitude, and most importantly, meaning, in life. As already identified by the Franciscans, material possessions, in particular when considered as one of the main sources of satisfaction in life, narrow down the capacity of humans to embrace the world’s richness and unity. Hence, it appears that our modern economic systems would need to integrate new indicators of economic activity to account for the ability to address, as a priority, basic needs, and then to monitor whether additional needs contribute to the improvement of citizens’ fulfillment, or rather act as an obstacle to their well-being. Furthermore, while consumer society has undoubtedly contributed to improving living standards and increasing material comforts for many, it has also sparked debates regarding sustainability, the impact on biodiversity, and the social impacts of globalization.

4. Conflict between sustainability and consumer society

Consumer society is now facing what it has contributed to creating, namely climate change. Here, we identify its share of responsibility, and how it needs to be reformed.

The growth of modern consumerism has seen its footprint grow in terms of the planet's resources. Rising levels of consumption necessitate greater inputs of energy and materials, leading to increased production and the generation of larger volumes of waste byproducts. Hence, increased extraction and exploitation of natural resources, accompanied by the accumulation of waste and the concentration of pollutants, can result in environmental damage and, over time, constrain economic activity. One way of measuring the extent to which contemporary societies are taking over the planet is to assess the ecological footprint of an individual, which is the area of biologically productive land and water (measured in global hectares) a person requires to produce all the resources they consume and to absorb the waste they generate. This work was carried out by the Global Footprint Network [14], which estimates that an American citizen requires on average a surface area of 7.8 gha (global hectares), while a French person requires 4.8 gha. Overall, the current global ecological footprint is 2.7 gha per person, whereas the biocapacity lies at 1.6 gha. Hence, the GFN currently evaluates that we would need 1.75 Earths to meet our demand for renewable natural resources. This figure clearly shows that our societies are taking too much from the planet, compared to what it is able to generate.

To explain this discrepancy between what is consumed and what is generated, we can refer to the concept of externalities of human produced goods, which are not accounted for in our system. Indeed, while technological progress has led to a drastic drop in the price of goods and services over recent centuries, it is worth bearing in mind that these goods and services do not include the price of the resources they take from nature. Furthermore, over the last century, modern societies have taken more from nature than it is capable of generating, resulting in the current biodiversity and climate crisis. To strengthen the understanding of this relationship between economics and nature, in

2022 the European Commission [15] integrated the concept of double-materiality into company reporting standards, in order to assess the impact of a company on nature, and conversely the impact of sustainability and climate on the company. This should participate in giving us a clearer picture of how our production systems fit into the environment, with the associated risks and opportunities.

Thus, it appears that the road to sustainability requires an eco-efficiency effort to decrease the footprint of our consumer society on the planet. In 2021, the IEA [16] integrated for the first time in its forecasts that, “reducing excessive or unnecessary energy usage” could reduce CO2 emissions by at least 4% over the whole period until 2050, thus showing that scenarios for reaching net-zero require a change in consumption ethics. John Stuart Mill [17] on his side advocated that economies should aspire to acquire a “stationary state” once they reach an optimum level, along with more satisfying life pursuits. Similarly, Jain and Jain (2018) [18] revisit these considerations on a qualitative oriented economy, and suggest curbing consumerism through an eco-spiritual model of sustainable development. They advocate for a model of society that optimizes development within ecological boundaries by attaining *high spiritual quotients*. This underlines the need for holistic policies to address deeply rooted consumer habits and offer positive perspectives of eco-sufficiency.

Having demonstrated that consumerism is antithetic to sustainability considerations, our goal is to provide policy suggestions that contribute to the decarbonization roadmap by promoting ethical consumption behaviors.

5. Changing the modern relationship with consumption: a reflection on the means to bring about this cultural transition

As previously discussed, our various means of production are currently driven by profitability considerations to satisfy a consumption pattern detached from the needs of individuals. Our primary objective is to reconnect consumption with individual needs and to refocus the use of means of production to cater to the needs of both the population and the territory.

To achieve this, a crucial element lies in introducing new levels of deliberative and participatory decision-making. Indeed, to reorganize resource utilization for individual needs, it is essential to collectively define these needs so that individuals can express and identify them together. A first step would involve expanding the democratic process to include the entire economy. Reconnecting individuals to decision-making processes would empower them and trigger initial awareness regarding their consumption habits. This process aligns with the ideal of economic democracy [19], which combines direct democracy on various local political and economic issues — especially regarding the management of commons — and representative democracy at the national or international scale. Concretely, this would involve generalizing and extending what is already in place in neighborhood councils, participatory municipal budgets (as seen in Porto Alegre in the 1980s), the *Assemblée Citoyenne et Populaire* in Poitiers, co-management councils in companies that integrate all stakeholders inside and outside the production unit, and more recently, the *Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat*.

To ensure that these new consumption patterns align with the output of production means, we need to rethink production, not as a pursuit of profitability, but as a means of meeting a need. Marketing and advertising, for example, are often used to create a need and stimulate non-essential, impulsive, or purely conspicuous and positional consumption. One idea could be to introduce restrictions on advertisements for polluting or luxury goods, similar to the policy in place in Grenoble. Additionally, it might be interesting to integrate into company statutes a purpose tied to a socio-ecological mission, akin to what the *Loi Pacte* proposes. This would result in a reversal of the *burden of proof*:

moving from a presumption of systematic social utility for each productive unit to a need to justify that its existence fulfills a specific mission echoing the needs of a territory and population.

Recent developments in low-tech [20] approaches to qualify useful, sustainable, and accessible technologies also allow a reevaluation of the concept of “*usus pauper*” developed earlier in this analysis. This movement goes hand in hand with questioning a society driven by salvific and providential technology, fostering a new approach to consumption that is slower and geared toward happy frugality. This revised approach to work and productivity also involves redefining the notion of value by putting aside the concept of “having” and refocusing our economies on “being,” akin to Amartya Sen’s capability [21] approach, based on the notion of the power to live rather than purchasing power.

Finally, it is essential to align this cultural shift with the challenges of transitioning our economy. Rather than relying on forced techno-solutionism within a framework of low sustainability, the transition from a society where the logic of eco-sufficiency [22] is widespread to a decarbonized society would in fact no longer be a question. Take the example of SUVs, which definitely do not address any needs for the vast majority of consumers: according to a study by the Global Fuel Economy Initiative [23], greenhouse gas emissions could have decreased by an additional 30% between 2010 and 2022 if sales of these vehicles had not surged in recent years. In a similar vein, from a frugality perspective, food consumption patterns would be significantly impacted by a focus on local and less meat-intensive diets. We could continue to enumerate the concrete consequences in terms of greenhouse gas emissions in a post-consumerist economy, whether pertaining to the impact of digital technology and the end of planned obsolescence, the disappearance of fast fashion, or even the aviation industry. In this perspective, the goal of two tons of CO₂ per year per inhabitant would easily be achieved while contributing to a fairer, more equitable society with a healthier approach to work. Of course, this process must go hand in hand with a comprehensive, ambitious national and international planning policy to reorganize resource distribution and steer the transition of industries that are more complex to decarbonize. However, a consumer-driven stimulus would drastically simplify this shift, especially concerning issues of social acceptance, and would add meaning to a political project that is sometimes poorly understood.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the historical trajectory from the ascetic ideals of Francis of Assisi to the contemporary challenges of a consumer-driven society prompts a critical examination of our relationship with consumption. The Franciscan movement, rooted in the pursuit of evangelical poverty, initiated reflections on economic thought through figures like Peter John Olivi. However, the 20th-century rise of consumer society, driven by secularization and the Industrial Revolution, ushered in an era where materialism has become central to life expectations. While contributing to economic growth, this trajectory has also fueled ecological imbalances, evident in the climate crisis. Addressing this requires a paradigm shift, embracing eco-efficiency, ethical consumption, and participatory decision-making. By redefining the purpose of production, aligning it with genuine needs, and fostering a culture of frugality, we can navigate a path towards sustainability, mindful of the intricate relationship between our economic systems and the well-being of both humanity and the planet.

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CONTACT

 the-transition-institute.minesparis.psl.eu

 tti.5@minesparis.psl.eu