



Group Assembly Process (GAP) - Stirring Paper

"Politics of sufficiency" as politics for the good life

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"Politics of Sufficiency" is often misunderstood as politics of renunciation, of forced restriction and reduction – which politicians generally prefer to stay well clear of.

A different interpretation of the politics of sufficiency is however possible: It can make it easier to practise sustainable lifestyles, to fulfil our global responsibility at the beginning of the 21st century, and to enable people to live the „Good Life“. Such an interpretation highlights the fact that the ability to realise a „Good Life“, our consumption habits and lifestyles are shaped culturally and institutionally in many ways.

It is important to understand those influences and to realise that many achievements of the modern age – such as liberty, participation and solidarity – are threatened, if the realm of politics is reduced to a focus on economic growth politics.

However, this type of argument is highly disputed: the more common argument goes that consumption habits and lifestyles should not be subject to governmental regulation, because they are based on purely individual decisions. 'The Good Life' – according to this view would thus seem to be a purely personal or individual concern. Because in the final analysis every individual has to decide what is especially important for them in their lives - what they want to consume, with whom they want to live, or what their ultimate goals are.

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

Nonetheless, it is argued here that politics for the Good Life in modern liberal-democratic societies is not only justifiable, but also a virtual necessity. The question is, does a politics of sufficiency interfere with individual rights and liberties? Of course it does – just like any other policy field. A closer look demonstrates that the opposition between the state and liberty is not as straightforward as it is often made out to be. On the one side, the citizen

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

The aim of politics is to regulate how people can live together on universally acceptable and appropriate terms. Good politics means that people can live their lives as they wish without thereby restricting the life choices of others. Good politics creates the room where the Good Life can be lived. How quickly spaces of opportunity for some can become restrictions on others can be seen in the example of transport policy. Car-friendly city centres with wide streets and traffic light sequencing are helpful to car drivers, but they generally disadvantage those who want to navigate the city by bike or on foot. Politics has to achieve a balance here. Good politics creates the conditions in which the greatest number of individual life concepts can be realised.

And it is here that a sense of unease has been creeping up on us all for some time. 'Faster', 'global', 'more', 'commercialised' – these have been the lines of development over recent decades. They were made possible by an economic policy that placed its trust in free trade and in introducing free markets into as many sectors of society as possible. This has brought us unprecedented material wealth and a previously unimagined range of products and services. At the same time we feel ourselves pressurised by the dynamic forces it has set free: ever more flexible working times, barely manageable mountains of emails, an impossible range of product choices on the supermarket shelves. It is becoming ever more apparent that a good life needs room for that which is 'slower', 'closer', 'less' and 'more personal'. This is precisely what lies behind the idea of sufficiency.

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

From the perspective of sustainable development, it is a notable advantage of sufficiency that under favourable conditions it can be implemented far faster than new technologies can be developed. New technologies have to be conceived, tested, improved and brought to market in a complex and expensive process. This can take years or even decades. In matters of sufficiency, we can all learn from each other as global equals. For unlike technological innovations, which need competitive industrial sectors and a sophisticated research and development system, sufficiency innovations can originate anywhere. Just as we can learn from India's vegetarian culture, we can also take lessons from Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index or from the cycling culture of Copenhagen, where today it is perfectly normal for people to travel to work by bike, and where over one third of all traffic journeys are made by bike. The politics of sufficiency creates a framework within which both social innovation and new forms of technological innovation are possible.

Politics of sufficiency can further be understood as politics of enabling: Creating the conditions where citizens have the freedom to choose and the chance to develop the ability to practise a sufficient lifestyle – via suitable health, education, employment and consumer policy.

The experimental character of sufficiency-oriented politics - but even more the fact that it is about enabling the Good Life – means that it is essential for it to be created through a participatory process. Citizens must be able to participate in the discussion and design of a legal and regulatory framework that would make possible a varied and fulfilling life for the greatest possible number.

Politics of sufficiency is multi-level politics: Creating the framework conditions in which it is easier to live the Good Life is just as possible at the international or national level as it is regionally or locally. Sufficiency policy can gain a foothold at any of these levels. So it is equally appropriate as a topic for the town council as it is for regional or national government. Initiatives at these different levels complement each other, and their reciprocal interaction reinforces the framework for the Good Life, so they must be considered in relation to each other.

So, how can politics of sufficiency work in practice? What are concrete approaches for creating political framework conditions that make living the Good Life easy? What other features characterise the politics of sufficiency?

The basic idea of the politics of sufficiency has been outlined and discussed by Uwe Schneidewind and Angelika Zahrt in their book: „Politics of Sufficiency“. This book is meant as a starting point for a broad discussion of the politics of sufficiency with people who practice sufficient lifestyles and want to create links to the political dimension their everyday practice has; with sustainability-oriented actors in society, politics and business who are looking for social and ecological perspectives going beyond „green growth“; with actors from civil society, business, science and especially politicians who want to actively contribute to the development of more comprehensive politics for the Good Life; and also with critics who want to discuss the still unfinished ideas of the politics of sufficiency.

The aim of this stirring paper is to collect initial ideas and (in fact) existing examples or initiatives of a politics of sufficiency – in cities and municipalities, at the regional, national and international level – and to discuss these as regards their impact, their cultural, social and economic preconditions, and their expected results. A further aim is to critically discuss the process of politicisation of possible measures: Where and how is the discussion taking place? What are barriers for politics of sufficiency? What type of resistance is to be expected? When and under what circumstances can acceptance be hoped for? Which countries have already introduced binding restrictions or other types of new framework conditions due to the (climate) crisis? What have been conditions for successful implementation and what have been the reasons for failure? What can be learned from past experiences, e.g. with regard to speed limits (which has successfully been introduced in many countries, but failed in Germany)? What specific fields of politics of sufficiency would be good starting points?