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SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION: BETWEEN SOCIAL WELFARE AND DEGROWTH

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ABSTRACT. The main objective of this study is to characterize socially responsible consumption (SRC) through the lens of social welfare and degrowth proposals. The central research questions are (i) whether SRC can contribute to the realization of the foundations of a degrowth society and (ii) whether SRC fits into the critique of the economic growth paradigm. These are essential questions because SRC is often treated as an "invention" of affluent societies that seek more sophisticated methods of consumption (such as conspicuous, green, and ethical consumption) due to the prevailing cultural system. We challenge this viewpoint by drawing on studies from the intersection of social and environmental sciences. For this purpose, Talcott Parsons' extended AGIL paradigm is introduced, referred to as AGIL+DE, as is our proposal of nature-based social welfare. Although this study is preliminary, its task is to develop new interpretative possibilities for the sociology of degrowth and innovative approaches to consumption in particular. The results suggest a change of approach in the study of the consumption phenomenon from the side of redefined social welfare, with a focus on moderate (SRC) and more radical (degrowth) solutions respecting the environmental impact. This change of approach to consumption requires rethinking and incorporating new empirical indicators.

JEL Classification: E21, I31, F64, O33

Keywords: Socially Responsible Consumption, social welfare, degrowth, AGIL+DE paradigm, nature-based social welfare

Introduction

The concept of consumption, understood as the use of goods and services to satisfy human needs, is deeply rooted in a complex network of relations between endogenous (internal) and exogenous (external) factors. The former includes biological needs and, above all, the objective determinants of their satisfaction, while the latter includes culturally produced and evaluated requirements concerning other individuals. In turn, these factors are embedded in the dominant socio-economic model, which consequently shapes people's relationships with each other and with the environment (de-/commodification). Given the vital role of social welfare in

people's lives (Baranowski, 2019; Dean, 2020; Timms, 2019), the realization of which changes with the dynamic process of evaluating human needs, in this article, attention is paid to socially responsible consumption (SRC) and its actual and potential impacts on the environment. This paper's primary aim is to explore SRC, understood as a "multifaceted construct involving a variety of consumer behaviors" (Webb et al., 2008, p.93), in the context of social welfare and its environmental impact. This allows us to introduce a degrowth perspective (Kallis et al., 2018) to the SRC analysis and to pose two main research questions: first, whether SRC, based on the foundations of sustainable development (Baker, 2005), is a valuable strategy for realizing degrowth, and second, whether SRC fits into the critique of the paradigm of economic growth (understood as the expansion of a society's capacity to produce goods and services based on the exploitation of resources to meet societal needs). Research questions formulated this way, mainly when framed through the issue of social welfare, provide an exceptionally heuristically fertile theoretical approach, as well as fill a research gap in the context of the analysis of responsible consumption and the radical degrowth proposal (Asara et al., 2015; Goh et al., 2016; Perera et al., 2020). The latter, in turn, stands for a political, economic, and, above all, social movement based on anti-capitalism principles, anti-consumerism, and—trendy in recent years—sustainable development (cf. Chichilnisky, 1997). This movement promotes the implementation of alternative socio-cultural economic models, such as the commons (Bollier, 2014), barter (Alexander & Gleeson, 2019), cooperative movement (Ferrari & Chartier, 2018), sharing (Jarvis, 2019), recycling (Weber et al., 2019), green technologies and transport (Kerschner et al., 2018), and all kinds of initiatives (cf. Balaguer Rasillo, 2020) that stand in opposition to solutions based on economic growth and the exploitation of nature (Smith, Baranowski, & Schmidt, 2021).

The results obtained as a consequence of the extended AGIL scheme and the redefined concept of social welfare suggest a change of approach in the study of the consumption phenomenon, with a focus on moderate (SRC) and more radical solutions (degrowth) respecting the human impact on the environment. This change in approach to consumption entails the need to rethink and incorporate new empirical indicators capable of capturing the impact of consumption behavior on nature. The municipal waste index is one possible proposal that monitors the environmental impact of the consumption pattern and, at the same time, shows cross-country variations in this aspect.

The content of this paper includes five sections. Section 1 presents a literature review on consumption within the socio-economic system. The second section describes the methodology adopted in the article. The description of results is reported in section 3. This is followed by a description of the challenges and limitations in section 4. Finally, the last section provides conclusions.

1. Literature review: consumption within the socio-economic system

Let us start with an analysis of consumption, considered by some academics as "the mother of all environmental issues" (Isenhour, 2015, p. 133). The essence of the dominant socio-economic system is based on consumption; hence, some researchers use the term consumer capitalism (cf. Korkotsides, 2007; Lewis, 2013; Trumbull, 2006; Watkins, 2022). However, we must remember that consumption is embedded in the economic system, whose productive capacities are geared toward producing various goods (products or services) and toward social, cultural, political, environmental, and technological systems (cf. Charonis, 2021). The latter is usually treated as a component of the economy, but there are many reasons to treat it independently (Lancaster, 1966; Meadowcroft, 2005; Sismondo, 2008).

To go beyond standard depictions of consumption, especially in the context of universally understood social welfare, analyses of this phenomenon should include "ordinary" and "inconspicuous consumption," in addition to so-called "spectacular forms" (Evans, 2019, pp. 504–509). When dealing with SRC, an approach that seeks to "minimize or eliminate hazards to society and maximize any long-term benefits to society" (Mohr et al., 2001; Prendergast, Tsang, 2019), in connection with the perspective of everyday shopping, modes of mobility, and the consumption of such trivial elements—from the viewpoint of developed societies—as electricity or water, the sociology of sustainable consumption (Evans, 2019) and the sociology of everyday life (Weigert, 1981) become beneficial approaches. After all, ensuring social welfare for broad groups of people in the realities of the 21st century involves constant access to energy and information sources (Baranowski, 2021a, 2021b). Let us try to imagine functioning—e.g., during the coronavirus pandemic (cf. Farkas & Romaniuk, 2020; Phillips, Titterton & Tooma, 2020; Rybaczewska, Kłopocka, Kuszewski, & Sułkowski, 2021)—without access to electricity and the internet. The latter is directly connected to the issue of nature around us and has an impact on it. Moreover, every act of consumption is embedded in a more or less articulated sphere of complex political–economic relations (who produced the goods and under what working conditions, of what they were made, and what is the environmental impact of their production?).

However, when analyzing the consumption phenomenon, the critical issue of the intentional and systematically implemented process of positive identification and the structural dissemination of this phenomenon should not be ignored. As Thomas Princen (1999, p. 348) noted:

> Economists, businesspeople, religious leaders and policymakers worked together to stimulate consumption. By developing new concepts (e.g., utility, insatiability) and by emphasising some aspects of human behaviour (e.g., the need for acceptance and status through material accumulation), they stimulated consumption in part by construing material consumption as the primary source of satisfaction where more is always better.

Satisfaction, which is the basis of the subjective dimension of the phenomenon of social welfare (Baranowski, 2019; Han & Gao, 2020), in this way, is the primary determinant of consumption and is understood as the function of signs (the sign-function; Barthes, 1968; Baudrillard, 1998) and based on economic growth. However, the mechanism of consumption based on the reasoning "more is always better," which uses technology to increase production and advertising in a broad sense to promote patterns for the continuous acquisition of goods, encounters continual limitations. Although formulated over many years, these limitations have gained particular significance in the context of a widely discussed publication on planetary boundaries (Rockström et al., 2009a, 2009b), within which scholars expect humanity can operate safely (Rockström et al., 2009a, p. 32). This means contemporary explorations of the phenomenon of consumption within the dominant economic system must consider the objective limitations of our planet. These limitations, in turn, concern "incredibly serious natural resource and environmental challenges: climate change, freshwater depletion, ocean over-fishing, deforestation, air and water pollution, the struggle to feed a planet of billions" (Naam, 2013). All the elements mentioned are linked to consumption and, in particular, to the consequences of over-consumption (Hüttel, Balderjahn, & Hoffmann, 2020; Slesnick, 2000). Therefore, alternative methods of reducing consumption are being sought today, whether by weakening the volume of purchases (e.g., consumption of raw materials) or by changing living patterns (e.g., SRC and degrowth).

2. Methodology

To examine the relationship between consumption (using SRC as an example) and social welfare while respecting the degrowth assumption, we proposed Talcott Parsons' AGIL (Adaptation, Goal attainment, Integration, Latent pattern maintenance) theoretical scheme, which we modified. The modification we implemented concerned the inclusion of two additional components (dependency and expansion) that allow for increased exploratory power in explaining the role of SRC in implementing the degrowth guidelines.

The extended AGIL scheme allows a critical analysis of the linear concepts of development and consumption and the integration of degrowth or circular economy concepts into the field of social welfare research. This, in turn, makes it possible to study SRC behavior based on rarely considered indicators, such as municipal waste generation (we used Eurostat data for 28 European countries for this purpose).

3. Results

3.1. Toward a new AGIL+DE paradigm

For theoretical soundness, let us begin with the observation that the structural functionalism developed by Talcott Parsons is not the dominant research perspective these days (Turner, 2004). It is also true that the functionalist theoretical and methodological perspective—focused primarily on (a) social structure as a static system and (b) the explanation of the parts of society by employing a state of equilibrium between the parts of the social system—have been gradually replaced by more dynamic research orientations in the social sciences (Sztompka, 2003). Nevertheless, Parsons' concepts are still relevant and essential elements of social research, whether in sociology, cultural studies, political science, pedagogy, or even media studies. In particular, his action-system requisite model (the AGIL schema) is often used anew (Izadi, Mohammadi, Nasekhian, & Memar, 2020; Reale, 2019; Schlenkrich, 2021, pp. 97–112; Treviño, 2005).

Therefore, we propose that Talcott Parsons' sociological schema (1937, 1964), also referred to as the AGIL paradigm, be extended to include two additional components, dependency and expansion. The essence of the AGIL schema in Parsons' structural functionalism view is that to survive, a social system must perform four basic functions (see Fig. 1). It is important to remember that Parsons himself claims that AGIL "is among the most important concepts to influence the remaining decades of his reasoning" (Parsons, 1970; Reale, 2019, p. 3).

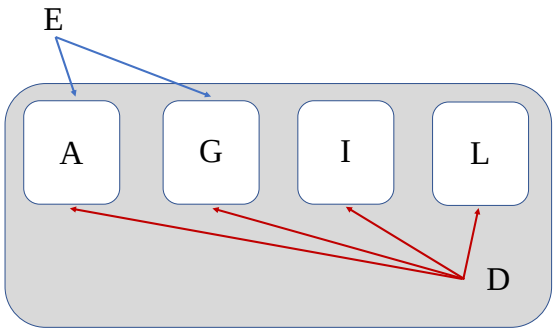

Figure 1. AGIL+DE
Source: *own data*

The former complements societal functions with an environmental component (with its ecosystem services) and the latter with technology (whose role cannot be overestimated today, as the innovations it produces can change the structure of other subsystems; cf. Table 1.).

Table 1. Extended Parsons' AGIL Paradigm and the Media of Exchange

Function	**Subsystem**	**Media of Exchange**
Adaptation	Economy	Money
Goal Attainment	Polity	Power
Integration	Community	Influence
Latent pattern maintenance	Cultural institutions	Value-commitments
Dependency	Natural environment	Ecosystem services
Expansion	Technology	Innovation

Source: *extended elaboration based on Shin (2008, p. 58)*

The AGIL+DE scheme provides a complete theoretical framework for analyzing contemporary societies, especially in the realization of social welfare. Moreover, the latter coincides with Parsons' core functions, which enable society's persistence over time. This persistence is determined by planetary boundaries and several components of lesser influence on the human imagination and the global ecosystem (cf. Beck, 1992; Panico, 2020; Wilson, 2019). Technology, on the other hand, combined with the dominant capitalist system, enables the continuous expansion of global value chains, which are based on the constant exploitation of nature (usually beyond the borders of the wealthiest countries). We have chosen to define the medium of exchange for technology using *innovation*, because it contains a peculiar tension. What is more, innovation, on the one hand, enables and develops the global value chains of contemporary capitalism (cf. *The Economist*, 2021) and, on the other, provides a potential solution to environmental problems (Bakker, Wever, Teoh, & De Clercq, 2010) caused by these chains (concerning "techno-eco-optimism," see Kopnina et al., 2021). The contemporary impact of technology (as a function of expansion) on society as a whole—as we understand it—cannot be reduced to a mere sub-system of the economy (adaptation).

Interestingly, even ideas in the field of alternative approaches to the economy and the environment (e.g., the circular economy) include the implementation of technological innovation in place of inadequate solutions from the perspective of current environmental requirements and the state of knowledge. Thus, it may be said that the circular economy, among others, is an excellent example of how important dependency and expansion are from the perspective of contemporary and global challenges and threats. Knowing that the circular economy is a "model of production and consumption, which involves sharing, leasing, reusing, repairing, refurbishing and recycling existing materials and products as long as possible" (European Parliament, 2022), the function of dependency (D) and expansion (E) becomes apparent. Without respect for ecosystem services (D) and technological innovation (E) to minimize the use of raw materials and the volume of waste, there can be no circular economy. Let us illustrate the data on municipal waste in European Union (EU) countries (Fig. 2). Municipal waste is a good indicator of both SRC and degrowth, and the changes in the amount of waste over time can indicate the direction of the transformation of individuals' consumption behavior (Rooney & Vallianatos, 2022; Weber et al., 2019).

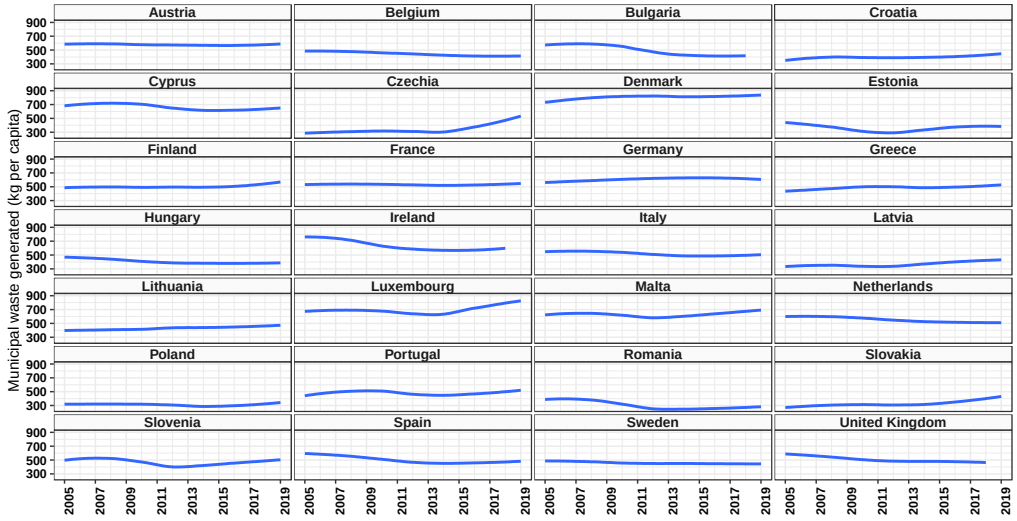

Figure 2. Municipal waste generated, 2005–2019
Source: *own elaboration based on Eurostat data (2021)*

While the differences in waste generation between countries are significant, this does not change the fact that almost 225 million tons of municipal waste was generated in the EU in 2019, representing 502 kg of municipal waste per person (Eurostat data, 2021). The role of consumption patterns and the growth-oriented economy play critical roles in this dimension. Fig. 2 shows the cross-country differences in waste generation per capita. The example of Denmark may come as a shock, as Scandinavian countries are seen as exceptionally environmentally friendly. It turns out that these countries are not sustainable in terms of waste disposal (this is also shown, though to a lesser extent, by the examples of Finland and Sweden). Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries set positive patterns in terms of waste generation, which can be explained in terms of both lower economic indicators and different (weakened) consumption patterns correlating with these indicators.

For the sake of completeness, let us add that Parsons' approach and these two complementary subsystems must consider the dynamic nature of social change to meet the requirements of analyzing complex contemporary societies. Consideration of indicators in consumption studies that draw attention to environmental costs is becoming a necessity, as are technological solutions to extend the life of materials containing rare minerals.

3.2. From social welfare to nature-based social welfare

The concept of social welfare (Baranowski, 2019), given the aforementioned planetary boundaries (defining "the environmental limits within which humanity can safely operate" [Steffen et al., 2015]), must also be extended to include an environmental component. In other words, welfare systems "should (...) be seen as embedded in ecosystems and in need of respecting the regeneration capacity of the biosphere" (Hirvilammi & Koch, 2020, p. 2). Within the AGIL+DE scheme, the natural environment is included, because the social system as a whole depends on nature. At the same time, the latter is increasingly conditioned by human activity (hence the terms "Anthropocene" [Crutzen, 2006] and "Capitalocene" [Moore, 2017]). Current research increasingly and in more detail describes the impact of the environment on human welfare, with a particular focus on psychological well-being (which is a subjective component of the broader social welfare phenomenon, see Baranowski, 2019). Further, within urban research, environmental issues play an increasingly key role because "besides mental

health benefits, we know that healthy natural spaces provide us with a whole range of essential "ecosystem services" for free, from clean air and water to nutrient recycling, flood defense and pollination" (Douglas, 2021, pp. 38–39).

Let us remember that social welfare—contrary to simplistic and stigmatizing approaches (cf. Shucksmith et al., 1994; Scott, 1967)—concerns meeting the social needs of society as a whole, not only disadvantaged groups. In the approach presented here (based on Baranowski, 2019), we propose that social welfare can be defined in the context of the natural environment and referred to as nature-based social welfare (N-BSW). Social welfare understood this way (hereafter N-BSW) refers to the degree to which a society's material and non-material needs are satisfied at both the collective (supra-individual, objective) and individual (subjective) levels, with particular reference to the natural environment's role in (a) their realization and (b) as a consequence of satisfying them. The collective and individual levels (Baranowski, 2019) should be considered together because, from the sociological perspective (which places particular emphasis on the supra-individual), the subjective component is shaped by *what is social*, while *what is social* is formulated at the micro-level.

This broadened understanding of social welfare opens sociology to environmental issues, such as sustainable development, green revolution; or – increasingly significantly-steady-state, agrowth, post-growth, or degrowth economies (van den Bergh & Kallis, 2012). Nevertheless, considering nature's perspective means that social mechanisms of income redistribution and the satisfaction (institutional and non-institutional) of human needs must be extended to ecologically efficient solutions. This concerns ways of using the planet's resources, reducing pollution, and stopping global warming, as well as—as a consequence of the above—developing democratic methods of managing and controlling nature in a transnational dimension. Furthermore, this is where the technology element sets the scene, offering specific opportunities to implement environmentally sensitive social welfare systems. As Nicholas Stern, head of the UK Government Economic Service, noted, "Climate change presents a unique challenge for economics: it is the greatest and widest-ranging market failure ever seen" (Stern, 2008a, p. 17). He added, "The economic analysis must therefore be global, deal with long time horizons, have the economics of risk and uncertainty at center stage, and examine the possibility of major, non-marginal change" (p. 17).

Let us follow a passage from the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987), which states:

> Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The concept of sustainable development does imply limits – not absolute limits but limitations imposed by the present state of technology and social organization on environmental resources and by the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities. (p. 15)

In the following, from today's perspective of the degrowth currents, some solutions are challenging to accept unequivocally, namely that "(...) technology and social organisation can be both managed and improved to make way for a new era of economic growth" (WCED, 1987, p. 15). That is, unless we redefine economic growth altogether, at least in relation to the eco-efficiency approaches (cf. United Nations, 2009) of Green Growth, understood as "fostering economic growth and development, while ensuring that natural assets continue to provide the resources and environmental services on which our well-being relies" (OECD, 2021). However, these ideas leave much to be desired and can be seen as a mere façade for changes that do not address real socio-environmental, political, and cultural problems.

3.3. Consumption—between social welfare and degrowth

Starting from consumption rooted in the problem of social welfare, which considers environmental issues (which we have termed N-BSW), let us look at the following passage: "The truth is, not that 'needs are the fruits of production', but that the system of needs is the product of the system of production" (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 74). Jeremy Rifkin in *The End of Work* (1995) described several cases by which the business community created this system of needs, which "required changing the lifestyles and eating habits of consumers" (Rifkin, 1995, p. 21). Since the beginning of the last century, these fanciful and innovative marketing practices completely ignored environmental issues, following the iron logic of generating profit through increased sales. All this was done with the approval of state institutions, which in turn cared above all about economic growth, which was supposed to stimulate consumption and generate jobs.

With increasing material prosperity, economically developed societies pay increased attention to the broader environment, including food products or forms of mobility. This brings us to the issue of SRC. According to Villa Castaño, Lida Esperanza et al. (2016, p. 471), SRC is "understood to be a type of consumption that takes into account the public consequences of private consumption, whereby it seeks to minimize damage and maximize long-term benefits to society." Especially, the first approach of SRC pays close attention to the impact of consumption on the natural environment. However, this type of consumption includes "practices regarding environmental care, the regulated consumption of energy, the use of environmentally friendly products, and fair trade" (Villa et al., 2016, p. 471).

This type of sustainable and socially responsible consumption (taken synonymously here) seems promising. To some extent, it could reduce the negative externalities related to the phenomenon of purchasing services and goods (cf. Fairbrother, 2016). However, it implicitly adopts the perspective of developed economies, which are out of touch with the realities of countries at a lower level of socio-economic development. In the latter, according to WHO and UNICEF, more than two billion people do not have access to potable water where they live (cf. *Progress on Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene*, 2017), not to mention the range of other directly or indirectly life-threatening situations experienced daily. As Ladislau Dowbor (2017, p. 13) pointed out, we also overlook the fact that "in Brazil, 97% of households have televisions, even if there are no decent toilets." This last example shows the curious power of cultural influences on the priorities of the needs system (cf. Dowbor, 2021). Nevertheless, more importantly, because needs are culturally produced, they can be used to create entirely different hierarchies of consumer values.

Deliberations of N-BSW, degrowth, and SRC (cf. Table 2) must consider the different levels of socio-economic development (primarily in countries at various stages of development). While the discussed degrowth scenarios and golden advice in the form of "Let us be less productive" (Jackson, 2012) may be appropriate to the conditions of the world's most developed countries, at first glance, they sound paradoxical in the context of poor ones. Of note, however, is that this does not automatically mean that "limited" consumption or degrowth scenarios are inappropriate for countries outside the richest group (Lemańczyk & Baranowski, 2021). Both wealthy nations and those on the decline are characterized by great income, wealth (cf. Piketty, 2014), and social (cf. Therborn, 2013; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010) inequalities.

In the table below, we have distinguished consumption profiles with their characteristics. They all fit within the narrative of the problems of the most developed parts of the world, where there is a growing awareness of the impact of consumption on the environment (green/organic, sustainable, conscientious, responsible, SRC), our health (healthy,

conscientious consumption), and our values (ethical/activist, efficient/rational, conscientious, responsible consumption).

Table 2. Different profiles of socially responsible consumption

Profiles of consumption	Explanation
Green/organic consumption	– avoids products that might endanger the health of the consumer or others; causes significant damage to the environment during manufacture, use or disposal; consumes a disproportionate amount of energy; causes unnecessary waste; use materials derived from threatened species or environments; involve unnecessary use or cruelty to animals [or] adversely affect other countries; – avoids products which are produced with pesticides, herbicides, inorganic fertilisers, antibiotics and growth hormones (animal welfare is important, and bioengineering and genetically modified foods are not accepted); – seeks to preserve nature.
Healthy consumption	– preserves health
Sustainable consumption	– tries to guarantee that resources are not going to come to an end
Efficient/rational consumption	– are consumed the minimum necessary amounts
Ethical/activist consumption	– involves beliefs and values aimed at supporting a greater good that motivates consumers purchases; – is seen as a conflict area (only exists as a collective movement)
Conscientious consumption	– concerns with the individual impacts of consumption
Responsible consumption	– tries not to cause damage; includes all the previous categories
Socially responsible consumption	– purchases products perceived to have a positive (or less negative) influence on the environment or patronises that attempt to effect related positive social change (two distinct aspects: the environmental aspect and the social aspect)

Source: composed by Durif et al. (2011), Fontelle (2010), Freestone and McGoldrick (2007), Honkanen et al. (2006) cited in Karlaite and Tamosiunaite (2013, p.259)

With awareness of the diversity of these sophisticated forms of consumption, which are evolving toward pro-environmental, pro-health, and ethically committed solutions (cf. Palacios-Gonzalez & Chamorro-Mera, 2020), let us turn to a necessarily brief characterization of a radical proposal for social change.

Well, the very concept of degrowth was "originally placed at the junction of ecological and cultural critiques to economic growth and development, but has recently evolved to encompass also concerns on democracy, justice, the meaning of life and well-being" (Flipo,

2007; Demaria et al., 2013 cited in Asara et al., 2015, p. 377). This multidimensional and multifaceted nature of degrowth can lead to difficulties in interpretation and can become a source of much misunderstanding. On the one hand, it represents the weakness of a concept in a constant process of clarification and reinterpretation. However, on the other, it is an expression of a living and collectively reworked project for making radical changes to the socio-economic system. From the perspective of the research questions posed in this study, it is crucial that the concept of degrowth directly links social welfare issues to consumption. As Sylvia Lorek and Doris Fuchs (2013, p. 37) state, "With foreseeable limits of (cheap) oil and the lack of alternatives and with the enormous costs our protein-heavy food consumption patterns impose on global eco-systems, our energy based highly industrialized and globalized lifestyle is obviously under strain." Even more significant is the other part of their argument, where they add, "It is not just a matter of how to produce goods with less Energy or how to transport them around the globe. It also challenges our lifestyle, where and how we live, work, eat, and relax" (Lorek & Fuchs, 2013, p. 37).

Accordingly, the central question posed in this article is whether (and possibly how) SRC contributes to the critique of the growth paradigm, i.e., whether it supports (can be helpful for) the degrowth project.

4. Challenges and their limitations

A complementary answer to the question of the relationship between SRC and the critique of the economic growth paradigm would have to be based on empirical research impregnated with concrete theoretical SRC propositions. The concept of SRC changes over time and denotes different practices, as mentioned above. Unlike the idea of degrowth, it has many interpretations and is still evolving (cf. Asara et al., 2015). However, criticizing SRC from the perspective of only the wealthiest countries or the richest percentage of the world's population is without merit. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (2020, p. XXV), "the emissions of the richest 1 per cent of the global population account for more than twice the combined share of the poorest 50 per cent." This means that changing the consumption patterns of the wealthiest of the world's population is of enormous significance to the state of the environment. However, the issue is more complex. Ecological and non-ecological consumption styles in the wealthiest countries are made possible by sustaining a global system of inequality and dependency. What this means in practice is an "amplified" St. Matthew effect, in that not only does the social welfare of the world's wealthiest societies increase more rapidly than that of the non-wealthy, but above all, this increase is at the expense of the systemic exploitation of the world's most impoverished areas. Gifts of social welfare in a global capitalist system do not arise from passive and uninvolved positions. Degrowth scenarios must be sensitive to the solutions of simultaneously changing consumption patterns and lifestyles in privileged parts of the world and improving N-BSW in underprivileged countries. Tim Jackson (2009, p. 10) noted:

> If the whole world consumed resources at only half the rate the US does, for example, copper, tin, silver, chromium, zinc, and a number of other "strategic minerals" would be depleted in less than four decades. If everyone consumed at the same rate the US does today, the time horizon would be less than 20 years.

The above argument becomes hugely telling when we relate it to the use of these minerals to produce goods and offer services. It even reinforces the importance of everyday habits (read: consumption) in developed economies, influencing living and working conditions in exploited parts of the world (on cobalt, see Gordon, 2019).

The emission of harmful gases in developed countries of the so-called West, as a consequence of lifestyles and consumption based on economic growth, is a problem in itself, but not only for the inhabitants of these privileged areas of the globe. Within the framework of the aforementioned global value chains, the systemic relocation of the dirty industry (cf. Woodman, 2019) to the least developed countries has taken place, negatively impacting the N-BSW of the people living there. Following David Harvey, we can say that "the differentiated world of consumer power and consumption preferences here enters in as a major determinant of uneven geographical development" (Harvey, 2005, p. 78).

However difficult to imagine in practice and even more difficult not to imagine in the near future, the degrowth project represents a specific alternative to uneven geographical development. It combines the end of consumption as we know it in the affluent parts of the planet (a diet based on animal protein, air and car travel, unlimited access to cheap water and energy, etc.) with a more democratic distribution of N-BSW (the COVID-19 pandemic situation has shown that this is not a pure utopia). It also represents a more tangible pressure to change lifestyles and consumption in the wealthiest countries, where a step (but not the goal) toward a more environmentally sustainable form of welfare provision may be SRC.

Conclusion

The concept of the embeddedness of economic activity in social and cultural reality, proposed by Karl Polanyi in *The Great Transformation* (1944 [1957]), requires creative developments today that will embed economic, social, and cultural activity into the dimension of the natural world. As clarified in this article, and articulated mainly through the consumption phenomenon, the human impact on nature (and vice versa) is not a complete novelty (Dauvergne, 2008; Spaargaren & Van Vliet, 2007; Ziółkowski, Baranowski, & Drozdowski, 2020). However, the road from conceptual proposal to practice is long and bumpy.

In general, one might get the impression that SRC is more of a destination point for wealthy countries, where there are many opportunities to mitigate the negative consequences of over-consumption, than for countries at lower development levels (Lekkai, 2020). However, we have tried to show that SRC can play an essential role in changing lifestyles and consumption to ensure social welfare in a way that respects the environment broadly. If an ecologically unsustainable contemporary system of needs is produced and sustained by a cultural subsystem impregnated with current neoliberal values (Baranowski, 2021c), it means it is subject to change. This is not an easy task, but it is not impossible either. SRC has a significant role to play here. While we believe SRC is not a sufficient strategy for introducing degrowth society solutions, it can play a key role in the initial phases of transforming lifestyles and consumption behaviors (Schlaile et al., 2018), which are necessary to implement social welfare not based on economic growth.

The results obtained from the application of the extended AGIL+DE scheme show the direction of research on consumption in the context of N-BSW. Traditional approaches to social welfare and consumption abstract from progressive degrowth-type visions of the socio-economic system. The AGIL+DE scheme bridges this gap, allowing the phenomenon of social welfare based on (moderate) SRC or (radical) degrowth approaches to be described and explained. The former should be seen as a preliminary stage of the latter, as changing consumption habits requires both time and concrete, tangible, everyday practices.

Future consumption research must pay more attention to the issue of N-BSW, as the economic system driving "traditional" consumption has its hard limits. Yet, Boulding already stated almost half a century ago, "Anyone who believes that exponential growth can go on forever in a finite world is either a madman or an economist" (U.S. Congress, 1973, p. 248).

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