

# Can liberal democracies thrive with consumption limits?

## Barriers to implementing consumption corridors

*Consumption limits and sufficiency approaches face growing opposition in today's political landscape. While proponents of consumption corridors (CCs) assume that setting upper consumption limits is achievable in liberal democracies, we argue that the tensions between CCs and liberal democracy are more profound than suggested. We examine the role of (high) consumption in liberal democracies to better understand the barriers to achieving a good life for all within planetary boundaries.*

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#### Abstract

In sustainability debates, the concept of consumption corridors (CCs) has gained prominence. CCs are understood to achieve a good life for all within planetary boundaries. This concept operates on the premise that setting upper limits to consumption is in principle feasible within liberal democracies. But to what extent, if at all, are upper limits to consumption compatible with liberal democracy? In this article, we argue that the tensions between CCs and liberal democracy may run deeper than proponents of CCs suggest. Because consumption plays a constitutive role in social reconciliation, the formation and exercise of autonomy, and democratic legitimacy in liberal democracies, introducing upper limits may indeed hit harder boundaries – boundaries that sufficiency approaches to reducing consumption (and production) levels increasingly face in the current political landscape. Sharing the normative horizon of a good life for all, we propose that for CCs to become a viable lever for transformative change, a deeper analysis of existing barriers may be in order.

#### Keywords

autonomy, consumption corridors, economic growth, legitimacy, liberal democracy, reconciliation

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Against the backdrop of the ongoing transgression of planetary boundaries (Rockström et al. 2009), the question of how to define and implement societal boundaries considering ecological limits has come to the fore in environmental social sciences (Brand et al. 2021). One suggestion has attracted particular attention: the introduction of consumption corridors (CCs) that differentiate between necessities and luxuries. By means of democratic deliberation (e.g., in citizen assemblies), the suggestion goes, citizens come to agree on how human *needs*, which proponents of CCs conceive of as universal (e.g., Doyal and Gough 1991, Max-Neef et al. 1991), should be met by culturally variable *satisfiers* (Fuchs et al. 2021). In this context, needs are framed as irreducible minimum standards for a flourishing well-being (Fuchs et al. 2021, p. 13). They are contrasted with *desires*, which are understood as subjective wishes that often correspond with *high-consumption satisfiers*. Although proponents of CCs acknowledge that the satisfaction of desires also brings pleasure and joy, these desires are, as Fuchs et al. (2021, p. 14) argue, “not crucial to an individual’s ability to live a good life”. In fact, Fuchs et al. (2021, p. 18, 47) point out, desires are often an effect of the advertising industry. Based on the distinction between universal needs and subjective desires, CCs imply the definition of minimum and maximum standards for consumption – a floor and a ceiling (Gough 2020). Such minimum and maximum standards, CCs advocates suggest, could form the basis for policies that ensure access to need satisfiers while preventing excess consumption that threatens the very possibility of a good life for present and future generations within planetary boundaries (Di Giulio and Defila 2021, 2020).

In anticipation of potential objections to the concept of CCs, proponents have identified possible strands of critique and sought to preempt them (Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014, Gumbert and Bohn 2021). Di Giulio and Fuchs (2014) named, among others, the following anticipated objections to CCs: the *liberalist argument* and the *argument of lacking acceptance*. Both critiques focus on CCs’ interference with liberal freedoms (Gumbert and Bohn 2021) and the feasibility of CCs as a policy instrument in liberal democra-

cies. The liberalist argument is as follows: CCs – even if defined through deliberations – imply state interventions that may remain at odds with liberal core principles such as the primacy of individual life plans, consumer sovereignty, and individual freedom (cf. Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014, p. 188). The argument of lacking acceptance raises doubts about citizens' acceptance of maximum consumption standards, both nationally and internationally, given the curtailments of *individual* freedoms inherent in CCs (Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014, p. 190).

In response to these anticipated objections, Di Giulio and Fuchs (2014) as well as Gumbert and Bohn (2021) emphasize that civil law codes *always* require the political community or the state to introduce limits to individual freedom whenever commons (such as natural or social resources) are overused (Rousseau 2018), or when the freedoms of some harm the freedoms of others (Locke 1988). In a similar vein, Fuchs et al. (2021) underline a social norm, which they regard as universally shared within liberal democracy: that individual freedoms can only be enjoyed because there are collectively defined limits to those freedoms, making self-imposed rules and limits “the very essence of autonomy” (Fuchs et al. 2021, p. 69).

Against the backdrop of this co-dependence of freedom and limits, Gumbert and Bohn (2021) argue that giving citizens the *freedom* to negotiate CCs is a measure of granting *green-liberal freedom* rather than limiting freedom. Thus, while recognizing that limits are not a highly valued concept in liberal societies, proponents of CCs stress that limits are de facto an omnipresent aspect of daily life “to protect individuals from each other or to allow the pursuit of communal interests where they conflict with individual ones” (Fuchs et al. 2021, p. 4). “Simple examples are alcohol levels when driving or maximum speed limits” (Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014, p. 190).

Although we share the normative horizon of a good life for all within planetary boundaries, for which CCs are suggested as a lever, we remain unconvinced by the given responses to the anticipated objections. While we agree that the deliberation and implementation of CCs should not be dismissed *on grounds of liberal thought* per se (Gumbert and Bohn 2021), we argue that the barriers to introducing CCs in contemporary liberal democracies may run deeper than their proponents suggest. This is increasingly evident in the current political landscape – including the success of right-wing actors' “defense of growth society” (Reitz and Jörke 2021, p. 296) against climate policies or sufficiency demands.

Thus, for CCs to take off as a promising lever for a good life for all within planetary boundaries, a deeper engagement with barriers may be in order. To this end, we draw on the CCs literature not in spite of, but because of its analysis of the role of consumption and freedom in contemporary liberal democracies – an analysis we wish to develop further:

- From a political economy perspective, we argue that it is important to see that consumption continues to operate ideationally as a means to appease social and political discontent, which CCs would interfere with, thereby triggering resistance.

- From a subject-theoretical perspective, we further argue that the formation and exercise of autonomy in late modern democracies are so deeply enmeshed with resource-intensive consumption that it should not come as a surprise that CCs may be perceived as a threat to autonomy.
- And from a democratic theory perspective, we show that introducing CCs would mean re-politicizing depoliticized market logics and forms of exclusion on which the stability of liberal democracies structurally relies. Re-politicizing these foundations may mean political instability.

The thrust of our historical and socio-theoretical arguments is *neither* to naturalize liberal democracies as they are, *nor* to call into question the very possibility of their transformation. Starting from the assumption that “only what has been understood” – such as the role of (high) consumption in liberal democracies – “can be transformed” (Graefe 2016, p. 201, own translation), our goals are twofold: to push the CCs literature towards greater analytical depth regarding hurdles of transformation, and to broaden the understanding of why sufficiency approaches such as CCs, which aim to reduce and maintain consumption (and production) levels within planetary boundaries, remain not only marginal but also fiercely opposed in current political landscapes.

## Consumption corridors and the political economy of social reconciliation

Proponents of CCs stress, as mentioned above, that limits on individual freedom are commonly embraced collectively “via formal law or societal norms, to protect individuals from each other or to allow the pursuit of communal interests where they conflict with individual ones” (Fuchs et al. 2021, p. 4). From a legal and social customs point of view, this is certainly correct: individual freedom can only be enjoyed because collectively defined limitations to these freedoms are in place. Yet, is the argument of legal self-constraint strong enough for liberal democratic societies to agree on introducing upper limits to consumption in light of planetary boundaries? We doubt this, given the cast of mind that has reigned supreme since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century: the framing of economic growth as panacea for appeasing political and social conflicts (Schmelzer 2015). Closely and actively linking individual freedom with the right to consume has been a core element of this panacea. “Prosperity for all” was a common argument in the US in the 1940s and in Europe in the 1950s, hinging on the unfolding of consumer societies for which the state provides framework conditions but does not intervene (figure 1). As West Germany's famous minister of economic affairs and “architect” of the West German “economic miracle”, Ludwig Erhard (1957, p. 14, own translation) put it:

*[Citizens have a] democratic, basic right to consumption that must find its logical complement in the freedom of the entrepreneur to produce and sell whatever he deems to be*

*necessary and commercially promising, depending on market conditions and people's needs. The freedom of consumption and the freedom of economic enterprise have to be anchored in civic consciousness as inviolable basic rights.*

For this to be possible, Western governments liberalized economies (in some contexts, against fierce resistance), introduced competition as a core feature of the provisioning of basic goods and services and stipulated economic growth as the panacea for social and political challenges (Schmelzer 2015). As Erhard (1957, p. 10, own translation) argued, “[e]xpanding rather than redistributing the GDP” is the best approach to turn difficult social and political conflicts into technical, non-political management questions. Or, in the words of Henry Wallich, advisor of President Eisenhower and governor of the Federal Reserve Bank, economic growth operates as “a substitute for equality of income” leading to a collective belief that “as long as there is growth there is hope” (Wallich 1972, see Schmelzer 2015, p. 266) – hope that makes inequalities tolerable, because everyone’s material condition is improved.

While there is no doubt that economic growth, and with it increasing quantities of goods and services, often served primarily as an “imaginary [emphasis added] resolution of real contradictions” (Eagleton 1991, p. 77), there is also no doubt that in-

creases in consumption played a key role in producing relatively stable post-war conditions, at least for a few decades. To this day and even though real contradictions often cannot be solved by economic growth and consumption alone, the “overarching priority of economic growth” (McNeill 2000, p. 236) continues to be prominent. Equally prominent is the belief that individual freedom is closely related to the right to consume – beliefs that the introduction of upper limits to consumption would clearly challenge.

### Consumption corridors and late modern autonomy

A core element of the concept of CCs is the distinction between *universalist needs* and *subjective desires*. Definitions of both, as noted above, suggest that those who adhere to high-consumption satisfiers are primarily influenced by “the media or what we might have been brought up with or taught to believe” (Fuchs et al. 2021, p. 47). This argument implies that people can emancipate themselves from this imposed “endless creation of artificial desires” (Brand et al. 2021, p. 276) towards “the very essence of *autonomy*”, that is, “exercising restraint by imposing rules upon ourselves” (Fuchs et al. 2021, p. 69). In liberal thinking, self-



**FIGURE 1:** Summer sale at the Oberpollinger department store in Munich, 1950s: In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, consumption became a key economic driver. Economic growth was seen as a solution for political and social conflicts, closely linking individual freedom with the right to consume. Given this mindset and the reality of planetary boundaries, the question is whether liberal democracies can thrive with limits on consumption.

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determination signifies a core element of autonomy, one that does go hand in hand with limits (or universal laws) that guarantee the autonomy of others. A prime example of the latter is the Kantian categorical imperative (Kant 2008), which suggests acting according to universalizable maxims. Yet, this normative *ideal* has always been a *necessary illusion* (Meyer-Drawe 1990) for critical theories, since what it means in concrete terms to be capable to act autonomously depends on the social conditions of contemporary society (e.g., Graefe 2019, pp. 69–71).

In this regard, rising prosperity and democratized mass consumption during the stable post-war consensus served not only as a panacea for social reconciliation, but also as a basis for the subsequent conditions that were – and still are – constitutive for what it means *to be autonomous* in contemporary liberal democracies. Against the backdrop of material security and rising education, parts of the new social movements of the late 1960s and 1970s strove for greater autonomy in their ways of living, against the mass obedience to hierarchies and authorities of Fordist societies. The managerial response to this revolt, in the form of numerous strikes and sabotages in the workplace, was the disciplinary promise and demand for individual self-realization of the self-responsible subject within a dynamic working environment (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). Since this neoliberal turn, autonomy as *individual self-realization* hence turned from an emancipatory aim to the disciplining and often constricting of everyday life by the *entrepreneurial self* (Bröckling 2016).

Importantly, to succeed in the neoliberal meritocracy, one must sell one's subjectified labor power as a unique commodity (Bauman 2007), which includes one's competencies that fit into the diverse (project) team, as well as an outstanding identity and authentic personality that must be consistently *performed*. This *performance of singularity* (Reckwitz 2020) exceeds the objective output of an employee and includes criteria such as appearance and character. Consumption is key in this process: engaging in consumption "is the task of lifting themselves out of that grey and flat invisibility and insubstantiality" (Bauman 2007, p. 12). The consumptive subject not only depicts its pre-existing identity but (co-)creates it (Blühndorn 2013). Consumption is thus a vital tool for the constant self-development and self-invention needed to perform and compete as a unique commodity under the condition of dynamic markets. It also enables ways to recover through sensation, adventure, and pleasure.

This is to say that the agency of subjects of contemporary liberal democracies is more entangled with (high-)consumption practices than the CCs literature suggests. Rather than merely satisfying subjective desires that "are not crucial to an individual's ability to live a good life" (Fuchs et al. 2021, p. 14), high consumption practices can be *crucial* to becoming and remaining autonomous. For this reason, consumption practices are ambiguous in their meaning as they are both, a necessity to fulfill neoliberal disciplinary demands and a source of pleasure. We agree with the CCs literature that consumer pleasures are spiraling because they arise from (as yet) unattainable fantasies that lose their initial shine once achieved (Swyngedouw 2022). To find

new fantasies, consumer pleasures are thus tied to constant self-development and growth. From a socio-ecological perspective, this is disastrous. Yet, as Graefe (2016) puts it, polarizations between "real" and "artificial" acts of consumption – however normatively undesirable some acts may be – fail to provide an analytical lens for the multiple meanings of consumption for the autonomous subject. In her words (Graefe 2016, p. 206, own translation):

*[...] whoever is unable or unwilling to name what is "awesome" [geil]<sup>1</sup>, in the original sense of the word, about the infinite variety of options that the world of goods in advanced capitalism offers to solvent buyers, will hardly be able to understand why people always demand more goods, better goods, more individual goods – and will thus actively reproduce growth on a daily basis.*

This is not to downplay the power of the advertisement industry or the detrimental effects of pathological shopping for mental health. However, we believe it is crucial to acknowledge and take seriously that (high) consumption is not only an *effect* of artificial desires, but also *constitutive* of acting autonomously in late modern liberal democracies. This constitutive function of (high) consumption may make the emancipation from unsustainable desires much more challenging than the CCs literature implies.

## Consumption corridors and democratic legitimacy

Proponents of CCs question "the potential lack of acceptance, particularly of maximum standards" and instead emphasize that "[i]n fact, numerous examples of societies democratically agreeing on and accepting such maximum limits exist" (Di Giulio and Fuchs 2014, p. 190). We concur with the CCs literature that democracy requires the observance of limits of many kinds, beginning with the very fact that liberal-democratic constitutions set some of the limits within which human happiness can be individually pursued (Holmes 1995). However, the limits of liberal constitutions typically prevent citizens (and institutions) from encroaching on each other's private pursuit of happiness, often expressed in terms of consumer choice and the freedom to spend one's income as one pleases.

In contrast, we argue that setting maximum consumption standards creates substantial legitimacy problems for governments, as it politicizes the very domain that liberal democracies are at pains to keep private and thus apolitical in order to stabilize the liberal-democratic order. This very stability of liberal democracies, we argue, rests on what Hausknost (2023) has described as their *passive legitimacy* – a set of mechanisms that reduce the need for political authorities to actively legitimize so-

<sup>1</sup> The meaning of "geil" can also be translated as "effervescent, intense, boisterous, exuberant, funny" (Graefe 2016, p. 206, own translation).

cial reality by confining the scope of reality that can be problematized and contested. There are three such mechanisms, which together contribute to an order's passive legitimacy: *reification*, *exclusion*, and *performance*. All types of social order (ancient, feudal, and modern) depend on specific configurations of these three mechanisms to limit internal strife.

Liberal democracy, as the only modern form of democracy that has proved stable over a longer historical period, has mastered a particularly powerful mechanism of *reification*: that of the market economy as a highly dynamic “black box” (Deutschmann 2015, p. 381), which generates the phenomenal core of liberal democratic reality in terms of goods, services and their prices. *Reification* here means “the apprehension of the products of human activity as if they were something else than human products – such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will” (Berger and Luckmann 1990, p. 89). The function of reification is to allow authorities (such as governments) to renounce their authorship of, and thus their accountability for, social facts. It allows them to adopt a *reactive* stance and a managerial role towards a reality that is perceived as exogenously generated. In practical terms, the difference for governments is between being held accountable for unpleasant price hikes and shortages, or being perceived as keen managers of (and protectors from) “natural” perturbations in the global market. Price increases attributed to external sources like world market dynamics or geopolitical conflicts (as in the current Ukraine war) typically do not lead to internal legitimation problems, if governments successfully present themselves as zealous managers of the situation *on behalf of* citizens. Briefly put, governments can *side with* citizens in a joint attempt to manage the exogenously given situation.

It is this bond between representatives and represented that is torn once the representatives openly produce burdensome facts *for* citizens as would be the case with CCs. The “yellow-vest” protests in France in 2018 are but one example of this fundamental difference between authoring an increase in petrol prices in the name of climate protection and reacting to hikes in gas and petrol prices generated elsewhere (Mehleb et al. 2021). Defining CCs – even if set through citizen assemblies, the constructive potential of which is undoubted (Defila and Di Giulio 2020) – would amount to the internal and therefore political generation of delicate and conflictual social facts by public authorities, forfeiting an essential pillar of their passive legitimacy. Telling citizens that they are now on an imposed (even if publicly deliberated) diet would probably not go down well with many of them, as empirical evidence has shown (Lee et al. 2023). Thus, and paradoxically, while capitalist market structures may destabilize societies in the long run due to their catastrophic ecological effects (Spangenberg and Kurz 2023), they play an important role in stabilizing liberal democracies in the short run due to their reifying capacities. There is no easy way to resolve this paradox.

In addition, CCs would undermine the second pillar of passive legitimacy, that of *exclusion*. *Exclusion* refers to “the effec-

tive limitation of the number of individuals in front of whom social reality is in need of active legitimation” (Hausknost 2023, p. 34). This typically involves the strict limitation of citizenship to a territorially and politically defined inner circle. Since political authorities are accountable only to their own citizens (and not to the children in distant countries who produce the textiles that citizens wear), many unpleasant circumstances – such as humiliating and exploitative labor, the appropriation of external resources and the externalization of environmental pressures – do not require active legitimation. The excluded, who suffer unpleasant circumstances to the benefit of the included, cannot challenge the power of those included. These unpleasant circumstances can only be addressed through an ethical gesture by the included (in terms of, say, establishing voluntary fair trade and environmentally friendly product standards). The imposition of CCs would undermine this logic by *internalizing* unpleasant conditions (such as limiting meat consumption to free up land for populations in the global south currently suffering from a shortage of arable land). Consequently, large parts of the citizenry would perceive CCs as having a negative impact on their lifeworld and thus challenge the powers that imposed them. Our “imperial mode of living” (Brand and Wissen 2021) and the fact that we are “living well at others’ expense” (Lessenich 2019) cannot be remedied without kicking away one of the pillars that has hitherto stabilized the liberal-democratic order.

Subverting the pillars of *reification* and *externalization*, CCs would also undermine the last pillar of passive legitimacy: *performance*. By *internalizing* many of the excluded problems and by lifting the veil of *reification*, the imposition of CCs would arguably reduce the performance of public authorities in providing material wealth, security, consumer choice, and personal mobility, in short, a saturated lifeworld (in the everyday perception of consumers). Even if governments were able to deliver some measure of “sustainable welfare” (Koch 2021), they would be perceived by many primarily as the creators of constraints rather than providers of open-ended opportunities. The installation of CCs, this analysis shows, may be normatively compelling, but it is in tension with some of the key building blocks on which the very edifice of liberal democracy rests.

## Conclusion

Although we conceive of CCs as a desirable normative idea, we consider them to be in severe tension with dominant mechanisms of social reconciliation, the formation and exercise of individual autonomy, and democratic self-stabilization in late modern liberal democracies. The tensions delineated in this article may push proponents of CCs towards a more profound rethinking of existing hurdles to socio-ecological transformation through CCs, limits to consumption, or sufficiency approaches. Moreover, this article may help explain why, in current constellations where socio-ecological crises such as climate change coincide with receding or low growth-economies, calls for sufficiency are



hardly heard. Rather, the new polarization shaping many liberal democracies today is fuelled by a *cosmopolitan-universalist green growth camp* and a *nationalist-exclusionary fossilist growth camp* (Reitz and Jörke 2021). While the former seeks to revive economic growth and its social reconciliation mechanism through ecological modernization (the *Green New Deal*), the latter propagates economic growth and social reconciliation through a prolonged and renewed reliance on fossil-fuel based ways of life for a native in-group, at the expense of migrants and in disregard of human rights (“The boat is full.”). Against this backdrop, the right-wing populists’ call for a return to industrial modernity (“Chimneys must smoke again!”) is more than ecological and social ignorance. It is a belief in a “solution” that worked well for many in the past and that they want to make work in the present.

This means that the CCs narrative is currently being supplanted by two other narratives: one that holds on to the continuous escalation of consumption levels but promises to green and universalize them, and another that cancels universalist obligations (such as human rights) to focus on the fossilist escalation of consumption for the well-being of the few. While those who argue for upper limits in the face of the socio-ecological crisis are certainly right to state that economic growth as a “common good” does not, beyond a certain level of economic development, deliver on its promises of rising standards of living, greater happiness, social peace, and political stability (Schmelzer 2015), the “overarching priority of economic growth” (McNeill 2000, p. 236) as a

panacea for all sorts of ills (including threats to individual autonomy and political stability) seems to have a spell on the 21<sup>st</sup> century, too. That said, our aim is not to dismiss the possibility of CCs entirely. Yet, *within liberal democracies*, we see CCs primarily as a tool for managing conditions of scarcity resulting from an escalating climate crisis, and thus perceived as “objective” rather than politically imposed. In fact, scarcity may serve as a functional precondition for CCs to become acceptable, more so than defining CCs through deliberation. However, as a political instrument for a good life for all within ecological limits, as proposed in the CCs literature, CCs would, in our opinion, require a different social context than liberal democracy. Whether this is actually necessary for sufficiency approaches to become politically feasible is an ongoing debate (e. g., Heidenreich 2022) that undoubtedly deserves further discussion.

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