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Laying the foundations for a collective eco-sufficiency policy

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From a little-known and poorly understood concept, eco-sufficiency has gained traction in recent months to the point where some now regard it as an “[unavoidable debate](#)”. While the issue still has the potential to polarize, the fact that it is being cited by an increasing number of actors, including at the highest governmental levels, is opening a new arena of political debate. But what exactly should be debated? And how can we build the political foundations of a collective eco-sufficiency project?

What should be debated?

The concept of eco-sufficiency refers to the idea of reassessing our needs and the ways in which they can be met, that would reduce our (over)consumption of energy and resources, without having a negative impact on our well-being¹. For example, moderating the use of heating in winter and of air conditioning in summer, choosing vegetable protein over meat, and maximizing the lifespan of our clothing. All of these actions, alongside efficiency efforts and technological innovations, would strengthen our ability to stay within planetary boundaries.

So why can't an eco-sufficiency policy focus solely on the call for individual action, and why does it need to be a subject for debate?

i) An eco-sufficient individual in unsustainable infrastructure. It is difficult for an individual to adopt an eco-sufficient lifestyle within a framework of unsustainable technical systems: for example, we depend on many digital services whose practices in terms of storage, design and promotional content are not eco-sufficient; we also depend on a mobility infrastructure and an employment and housing market framework that have implications in terms of car use. It is society as a whole, including its technical systems and diverse actors, and not only individuals, that must move towards eco-sufficiency.

ii) An eco-sufficient individual in a consumerist society. We are social animals: our wishes, needs and representations of what is necessary and desirable are part of the fabric that binds us together. In our modern States, this social cohesion, also shared with economic actors, is the promise of access to material abundance². Therefore the rationale of moderation is not self-evident and requires a real debate, even if it has always existed in society, driven by different principles (withdrawal from the consumer society, adoption of so-called alternative lifestyles), different beliefs (religious, spiritual) and different practices (anti-waste, re-use).

iii) Inequality and eco-sufficiency. We are not all equal in relation to the objective of eco-sufficiency. Some people are more limited than others in terms of their material or geographical situation. More affluent households have a larger ecological [footprint](#) on average. While for a major proportion of the poorest households, greater consumption means greater access to the consumption trends of the middle class, the standard of success that our society has established. The question of effort sharing and the pace of change, according to the limitations and capacities of each individual, therefore requires organization. Regarding [food](#), for example, should we not exploit the potential desire and economic capacity of more affluent classes to be a driver of the transition?

In this context, the democratic/political debate would have several objectives:

The first objective would be related to the State discourse

Acknowledging the collective responsibility to act and to avoid the over-accountability of individuals, which can discourage, in particular the most financially constrained individuals or those who have built their life on material abundance. The State must explain how it can be exemplary in implementing eco-sufficiency. It is also important to go beyond the preconceptions about what changes are necessary: can the State legitimately interfere with our lifestyles? Would this be a restriction of freedoms? Is it possible to change lifestyles? (See [article \[in French\] published by Mathieu Saujot on bonpote.com on 10 misconceptions on eco-sufficiency](#)).

The second objective is planning the evolution of our technical systems

Technical and production systems must evolve to enable greater eco-sufficiency. The consideration of the joint evolution in terms of supply (e.g. less car mobility and a move towards a fleet of smaller, lighter electric cars that are accessible to all; agricultural production focused on less but better, and agro-ecology for meat) and demand (e.g. increasing valorization of alternative modes of transport; a more sustainable food supply that valorizes less but better) requires unraveling of connections between a diversity of private and public actors as well as consumers and citizens. These connections can be financial (e.g. making electric vehicles accessible to all), related to

synchronization (e.g. a decrease in livestock farming and an increase in quality, in parallel with a change in food demand), or related to the invention of new economic models. Planning, as a complement to the market, therefore takes on its full meaning as a tool for the coordination of action to be taken. In addition, it should be made tangible, for example, in the future French Energy-Climate Strategy (SFEC), and in the roadmaps of various ministries.

This work must mobilize government and administrations—in particular the new French General Secretariat for Ecological Planning—but can also be based on citizen participation (for example, through the *états généraux sectoriels*). The [Citizens' Climate Convention](#) (CCC) has clearly shown the usefulness of mobilizing citizens to debate changes in our mobility, agriculture and food systems, to deliberate on what is desirable, the speed of change, the need for support, etc., [in a way that complements](#) the work of experts. We are not therefore starting from scratch, as the CCC has initiated the work. It should be noted that the final report mentions the word “*sobriété*” (eco-sufficiency) 31 times, in the context of the digital world, energy, responsible production and the future of work. The principle is also present in the proposal to reduce the speed limit on French motorways to 110 km/h, the proposal for penalties on heavy vehicles, and proposals for the stronger regulation of advertising.

The third objective is to lay the foundations for a new social contract to achieve this transition

Our lives and our thoughts on progress and achievement are framed by the terms of a type of implicit contract³ that links access to material abundance, political rights, the sharing of effort and economic and social value, and the ability to emancipate oneself within society. Today, this contract is undergoing a double crisis: firstly through the social dynamics of inequality, distrust and abstention, but also because material abundance is no longer a sustainable source of human progress in developed countries ([Jackson, 2017](#)); and secondly because basing (the promise of) social harmony on ever more material abundance is simply no longer possible within planetary boundaries.

There is therefore an urgent need to re-examine this package, which goes well beyond the scope of climate change and requires a broader debate. Indeed, if this was partly initiated by the CCC—the proposal, which was not retained following the final vote, to reduce working hours was presented in a rationale of eco-sufficiency, social justice and citizenship—the work could not be carried out because of its much wider ramifications going beyond the roadmap set out by the Prime Minister. Proposals for [social food security](#) or universal income, experiments such as [territories with zero long-term unemployment](#) or a reduction in working hours will all be elements in the discussion; as well as the reflections that link trade deficit, eco-sufficiency and relocation. This would also be a form of response to the [democratic crisis](#) we are undergoing and to the feeling of [division within society](#), to which ecological issues may constitute a way out (see the [recent survey by Destin Commun](#)). Discussing the modalities of sharing efforts towards eco-sufficiency in a logic of equity will be a central dimension (we will revisit this issue soon in a second eco-sufficiency blog post).

¹ See the definition in the recent IPCC report, AR6 WG3: “avoid demand for energy, materials, land and water while delivering human wellbeing for all within planetary boundaries”.

² For an in-depth analysis, see: *Abondance et liberté*, P. Charbonnier, 2020, La Découverte.

³ In *Abondance et liberté*, P. Charbonnier traces the joint construction of our political “software” (freedom, equality, etc.) and our economic system based on the consumption of material resources. If we are to radically change our relationship with these resources to remain within planetary boundaries, then our political software must necessarily evolve: “the transformation of our political ideas must have a magnitude at least equal to that of the geo-ecological transformation”.