



RESEARCH ARTICLE

TEACHING VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY AND ANTI-CONSUMPTION: A BASIC FRAMEWORK PROVIDING ORIENTATION FOR THE WORK WITH RECENT RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The phenomena of voluntary simplicity and anti-consumption gain increasing awareness in the light of post-CoV debates on climate change and degrowth. Yet, the field lacks clear definitions and categorizations that make the vast amount of research hard to abstract for academic teaching purposes. This paper aims to bypass definitional shortcomings by introducing a meta-theoretical framework based on the three classic paradigms of sociology. Applying this framework shows that (1) the functionalist perspective provides a theoretical basis for presenting the phenomena as evolutionary adaptations to the need for sustainability or as gradual deviances from mainstream consumerism on a macro level. In contrast, (2) interactionism and phenomenology as the main theoretical and methodological source of sociological research in the field highlight the aspects of personal motivation for consuming less and the subsequent ramifications for individual wellbeing on the micro level. Finally, (3) the disruptive potential of consumer resistance associated with voluntary simplicity and anti-consumption can be theoretically visualized through the lens of conflict theory and postmodern perspectives.

KEYWORDS

Voluntary simplicity, anti-consumption, structural functionalism, symbolic interactionism, conflict theory

1. THE PROBLEM OF MAPPING VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY AND ANTI-CONSUMPTION

Voluntary simplicity as a social and socio-psychological phenomenon has gained increasing scholarly attention from the 2010s onward, while in the interrelated field of anti-consumption, research flourished even since the turn of the millennium (Rebouças and Soares, 2020; Lee et al., 2020). In the light of climate change and a very likely acceleration of social transformations in the wake of the CoV pandemic, the awareness for a trend that combines curbing consumption with a more content and balanced lifestyle might even increase in the near future (Kasser, 2017; Cambefort, 2020; Diesendorf, 2020; Ferguson, 2020; Houssaini et al., 2020; Mehtha et al., 2020; Tiwari and Herstatt, 2020; Touchette and Nepomuceno, 2020).

Sustainability as a generic umbrella term has long reached the higher education sector in general (Kanashiro et al., 2020). While trends promoting scepticism towards consumption obviously contradict the dominating social paradigms of growth maximization and consumerism, nevertheless they are progressively seen as essential for business schools and marketing study programs alike (Bierhoff, 2013; Gollnhofer and Schouten, 2017; Heath and McKechnie, 2019; Leal Filho et al., 2019). However, apparently a fully-fledged higher education pedagogy introducing a critical perspective on said contradiction is yet to emerge (Pena-Cerezo et al., 2019; Bobulescu, 2022).

In regard to voluntary simplicity, anti-consumption and related

phenomena, the lack of a meta-level framework and agreed vocabulary appear to pose an inhibiting factor for a holistic understanding (Makri et al., 2020). This proves challenging for communication among scholars as well as for finding common ground in the theoretical foundation of larger studies (Aidar and Daniels, 2020). It is safe to assume that it might thus also negatively affect coherency when teaching on the subject. However, a purely analytical approach of mapping the vast field of research strands and different approaches by defining and logically arranging the key terms appears problematic in the light of sometimes mutually inclusive sets of terms and meanings that are in fact determined by a situational, pragmatic understanding rather than semantic unambiguity (Johnston and Burton, 2003; Shaw and Moraes, 2009). Rudmin and Kilbourne even deem it potentially "[...] unreasonable to strive for a decisively inclusive definition of voluntary simplicity" for the same reasons (Rudmin and Kilbourne, 1996).

A similar level of ambiguity and semantic confusion seems to plague anti-consumption research, respectively (Basci, 2014). It is thus questionable whether it is useful to set the two obviously closely related terms apart for the sake of formally unambiguous definitions (that seem to be out of reach in a practical sense anyway) while at doing so missing parallels and common threads in research potentially pursuing the same goals in all but the keyword. Consequently, in the course of this paper, voluntary simplicity and anti-consumption are collectively referred to as "the field" or "the phenomena" whenever an explicit distinction between the two doesn't fit the purpose.

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2. AIMS AND SCOPE

Taking these issues into consideration, the objective of this paper is to review the multiple strands of research in the field in terms of their underlying sociological paradigms. The result of this review is a simple theoretical framework that can help lecturers (and researchers whose core expertise lies otherwise) to synthesize common threads and themes in the field independently from the multitude of contradicting and overlapping definitions that can constitute a considerable barrier particularly for a first approach on the topic. Consequently, only topic-related research that incorporates sociological theory or methods in the widest sense is considered as core material for the review.

As a prerequisite, the usefulness of different approaches on sociological meta-theory is discussed in order to define a framework suitable for the task. In that regard, both the degrees of complexity as well as a desired commonality with textbook knowledge are taken into account, leaving the three classic paradigms of sociology (functionalism, conflict theory and symbolic interactionism) as the theoretical frame for the subsequent review. In a next step, the most recent research in the field is reviewed in regard to its theoretical underpinning. The sources employed are supplemented with classic (thus: less recent) studies and standard works as supportive material where it is necessary to outline the historical or methodological context of the different approaches in question.

The findings are supposed to provide lecturers or scholars who are experts on sustainability or consumerism issues but not on sociological theory in its entirety with different problem dimensions and theoretically infused perspectives on voluntary simplicity and anti-consumption as a field within the sustainability discourse. In accordance with the increasing importance that Bahishti assigns to review-based scholarly work as a means to deal with the ever-growing quantity of empirical data in general, the intention of this paper is to introduce a simple means of structuring the way knowledge in the field can be presented and incorporated into pedagogical concepts (Bahishti, 2021). Without expanding further on epistemological issues, this agenda is not intended as a means to describe any purported objective “reality” but again as a pragmatic framework to help make findings so far accessible to students and provide them with a big picture beneath selective outtakes (Feyerabend, 2010; Rockmore, 2020; Walshe, 2020).

3. THE THREE PARADIGMS AS A PROVEN FRAMEWORK

In the given context, using sociological paradigms as a framework of structuring knowledge serves a threefold purpose. It allows for highlighting generic structures in the field that might otherwise get buried in detail, it promotes theory-backed reflection among learners, and it implicitly introduces students from other disciplines to sociology proper. The latter aspect is even more relevant given that while the majority of 21st century findings in the field in question stems from marketing- and consumer-oriented research, the very same mostly employ methods that are basically sociological – as to be demonstrated in this paper (Hogg et al., 2009; Galvagno, 2011; Rebouças and Soares, 2020). Thus, working with research findings in the field will often require some basic understanding of sociological theory and methodology.

First and foremost, there is again no unambiguous definition or taxonomy of the paradigms of sociological work throughout history and across sometimes fundamentally different epistemological and methodological backgrounds (Mahlert, 2020; Rusu, 2020). Scholars either differentiate between positivism and functionalism or interpret them as one coherent string of sociological theorizing; some split conflict theory into radical humanist and radical structuralist strands, while others deem utilitarian ideas significant enough to postulate as a paradigm of its own right while at the same time conceiving the variety of conflict theories as one tradition (Romani et al., 2018; Ardalan, 2019; Günbayi, 2020; Ritzer, 1990; Wielecki and Leonarska, 2020; Martindale, 2013; Collins, 1994). Common ground becomes apparent only when further generalizing these diverse and sometimes conflicting classifications, leaving the three major paradigms that are also used to describe the theoretical foundation of sociology in many basic textbooks: *Structural functionalism*, *symbolic interactionism* and *conflict theory* (Stolley, 2005; Manza et al., 2010; Mahlert, 2020). This three-pronged interpretation of the foundations of sociology seems to entail an adequate level of abstraction for mapping actual and potential strands of research problems and research strands since it outlines the respective foci and underlying questions without particularizing to a degree unsuitable for the task. In the light of a perceived lack of sociological imagination in environmental and climate change issues, making the vast amount of recent research on voluntary simplicity and anti-consumption exploitable for study purposes by way of theoretical generalization seems even more advisable (Norgaard, 2018).

4. FUNCTIONALIST PERSPECTIVES: ADAPTATION AND DEVIANCE

Although structural functionalism (for short: functionalism) as a coherent school of thought and project to strive for a “grand theory” has long been challenged by competing traditions and subsequently diffused into many different middle range approaches, it nevertheless still contributes valuable viewpoints which can be used to contextualize findings in the field within wider concepts (Jackson, 2002; Turner, 2017; Foy et al., 2018). While there is discrepancy among scholars even on a textbook-level on whether functionalism is outdated as a whole or can still be a valuable tool for explaining social phenomena, the very same agree on its fundamental outlines, namely the emphasis of harmony over conflict, and the focus on the function of particular elements and their respective role in stabilizing social structures (Giddens and Sutton, 2017; Mahlert, 2020; Ballantine et al., 2017; Chambiss and Eglitis, 2019).

In any case, functionalism maintains a place in recent contemporary sociological discourse even outside the Anglo-American academic sphere (Albrecht, 2021). The question whether functionalist approaches are appealing to scholars might also bear a cultural dimension in itself, with structural functionalism arguably more suitable for research within social environments where harmony is valued over overt social discourse (Zhou and Chen, 2019). At first glance, these factors do not promote functionalism as an ideal candidate for illustrating sustainability issues in general (Wellstead et al., 2013). De Nardis cautions that classical functionalism inherently measures stability in terms of materialism and political potency rather than in dimensions of balancing interests and equality – the latter playing an important role in most comprehensive models of sustainability (De Nardis, 2020; Haynes and Murray, 2017).

Even bearing in mind this potentially problematic influx of an underlying conservatism, functionalism might still offer a quite extensive point of view that could easily be disregarded under different theoretical lenses and thus can provide valuable macro-level insights on voluntary simplicity. Indeed Rebouças & Soares claim that most of voluntary simplicity research focuses on the micro level, leaving a gap when it comes to the role and potential impacts of voluntary simplicity on the level of the social or political system (Rebouças and Soares, 2020). For anti-consumption, the implementation of the environmental issue also on a macro level has already progressed further, yet arguably not on the scale of comprehensive functionalist thinking (Ortega-Egea and García de Frutos, 2013; Lasarov et al., 2019).

In Parsons' AGIL model as the epitome of functionalist theorizing, *adaptation* is an instrumental function of any given social system, dealing with external problems such as exploiting natural resources and producing commodities (Parsons, 1951; Parsons, 1970). Presupposing climate change as a threat for the stability of the social system, both voluntary simplicity and anti-consumption can indeed be interpreted as a function of adaptation in this regard (Depietri, 2020; Upadhyay, 2020). Associated research might deal with the actual long-term effects of simplifying, consumerism-avoiding behaviour on both markets and sustainability policies as well as the interaction of these dimensions (Georgantzis Garcia et al., 2021; Kang et al., 2021; Krpan and Basso, 2021; Pecoz et al., 2021; Celep and Diktaş, 2021; Thøgersen, 2021).

Again, in terms of the AGIL model, on the level of the general action system, the focus would thus be on the behavioural aspect, while on the level of the social system, particularly the interpenetrations of the economic sub-system (as the one providing the adaptive function) with the respective other sub-systems would be within the scope (Parsons, 1970; Münch, 1982; Münch, 1994). A group researchers identified social, environmental, and ethical concerns as drivers of anti-consumption from a collective perspective, with anti-consumption also being able to impact these fields on a macro level (Makri et al., 2020). Applying the AGIL model on voluntary simplicity, anti-consumption and their relation to sustainability discourses would thus generate fundamental research questions like: “Does the quota of anti-consumption adherents have a measurable impact on the respective consumer market?”, “Does the emergence of a voluntary simplicity movement have effects on the political agenda?”, “Can anti-consumption indirectly contribute to a reduction of global warming?”. These problems are deliberately phrased as closed questions since the functionalist approach would inherently tend towards quantitative research methods (Günbayi and Sorm, 2018).

Amine and Gicquel offer a different perspective when they propose conceptualizing anti-consumption behaviours as a form of *deviance* (Amine and Gicquel, 2011). While it is not the main concern of functionalism, the paradigm has also produced valuable views on the violation of *informal* social norms (Zhao and Cao, 2010; Ziyanak and Williams, 2014). Merton's strain theory constitutes deviance as an

incongruity of social goals and the legitimate means to achieve them (Merton's, 1938). While this theory has long been broadly challenged and mainly focuses on deviance in the narrower sense of criminal behaviour, it nevertheless offers a coordinate system that could be revised as a means to contextualize voluntary simplicity within a broader consumerism vs. sustainability discourse (Thio, 1975). Employing the strain theory under the presumption of consumerism as a cultural goal and capitalist wealth accumulation as the means to achieve it, a theoretical framework of the condition of possibility of voluntary simplicity and its associated phenomena as a deviance from consumerism can be inducted (Harmanci, 2017).

While the acceptance of both goals and norms can be assumed as the "mainstream" of consumerism, the remaining windows offer a set of alternatives for both identifying fields of research and contextualizing studies already conducted. Neither of these approaches necessarily has to be of functionalist orientation in itself, but structural functionalism in terms of the strain theory could be used in order to provide a better theoretical fit between findings on the micro level and their respective meaning for the macro level. Indeed all of the remaining combinations of deviant behaviour bear items that can be interpreted as elements of either or both voluntary simplicity and anti-consumption. A rejection of consumerism while retaining the premise of capitalism as such is congruent with a notion of voluntary simplicity as focused on inner-worldly asceticism in terms (Weber, 1968). Cross-references to asceticism and related religious values have indeed been established in many different research approaches on voluntary simplicity (Balsa-Budai, 2019; Suddaby, 2019; Boutroy, 2020; Kuanr et al., 2020). At the same time, anti-consumption within the propositions of capitalism could also be interpreted in other ways, like non-voluntary anti-consumption or the rise of new forms of precariat (Leipämaa-Leskinen et al., 2016; Summers, 2021; Milkman, 2020; Neimark et al., 2020).

Furthermore, ideas of maintaining some hedonistic elements of consumerism while abandoning the primacy of unlimited growth-driven capitalism have been conceived as well (Varul, 2013; Varul, 2015; Alemany Oliver and Kramarczyk, 2016; Soper, 2020). In terms of voluntary simplicity, this would be consistent with emphasizing the element of degrowth on the macro level over the notion of asceticism on the micro level, which eventually equals the concept of downshifting (Alexander, 2017; Singh, 2019). Arguable, these notions might be related to voluntary

simplicity or even describe what it actually means for some of its proponents while not encompassing the full gamut of conceivable nonconformity. Indeed, in a more fundamental sense, voluntary simplicity might be conceptualized as a deviance from mainstream consumer culture by practicing personal minimalism *and* pushing for decoupling individual consumption from capitalist structures as a political statement in the widest sense (Blühdorn, 2017; Meneley, 2018; Rodriguez, 2018).

Lastly, the research horizon could be further broadened by contemplating on what the aspect of rebellious deviance – again in terms of Merton – would mean if applied to voluntary simplicity. Concepts of voluntary simplicity as a rejection of the goals and means of a capitalist-consumerist world will still differ significantly in scope and radicalism from concepts that imply *new goals and means* in the first place – for the sake of brevity, this discussion must be waived here. Furthermore, it is worth noting that of course the adaption of the strain theory employed as a theoretical tool is merely one of several plausible propositions since consumerism and capitalist wealth accumulation have been neither diligently defined within this inquiry nor are they the only preconditions conceivable for applying this framework.

To summarize, structural functionalism as an instrument of voluntary simplicity and anti-consumption research helps attaining a perspective as a function of adaption in the social system that can be used to theoretically link voluntary simplicity to other social discourses like sustainability or climate change. Construing the phenomena at hand as an evolutionary development would also help in identifying potential functional changes that their widespread adoption would entail – a take that is not embraced in its entirety by the other paradigms. Furthermore, voluntary simplicity can be conceptualized within the framework of the strain theory as a deviance from mainstream consumerism, emphasizing either asceticism or degrowth or proposing it as a combination of both. Taking it one step further, within this theoretical framework, voluntary simplicity could also be envisioned as a rebellion completely transcending the frame of reference of consumerism and capitalism, aiming for whole new answers to the question of economic existence as such. For both the "adaption" and the "deviance" notion it is worth mentioning that while there are indeed some strands of research pointing in the respective directions, literature *explicitly* referring to classical structural functionalism is nevertheless scarce.

Table 1: Deviant Behaviour Under the Presumption of Consumerism as A Societal Goal and Capitalist Wealth Accumulation as The Institutionalized Means of Pursuing Societal Goals (Merton, 1938):

	Accept institutionalized means of capitalist wealth accumulation	Reject institutionalized means of capitalist wealth accumulation
Accept cultural goal of consumerism	Mainstream consumer culture	Downshifting aspect of VS: Re-defining consumerism as non-material hedonism
Reject cultural goal of consumerism	VS as asceticism (AC) (Also: <i>Involuntary</i> AC as a form of Precariat)	VS as AC with the intention to change the economic realities
		VS as rebellion: Inducing completely new societal goals as well as alternative means to achieve them

5. PHENOMENOLOGY AND INTERACTIONISM: MAKING SENSE IN A WORLD OF DECEPTIVE ABUNDANCE

While functionalism can provide a framework that helps *explaining* how voluntary simplicity and anti-consumption serve a purpose in a wider social system, a need remains for *understanding* the motives and attitudes associated with the phenomena from a less generalized, more phenomenological standpoint (Walther et al., 2016; Demmer and Hummel, 2017; Lorenzen, 2018). For the purpose of introducing students to the sociological micro perspective on the field, it seems permissible to omit an explicit distinction between the phenomenological and the symbolic interactionist paradigm since – as even theorists concede – the two share quite essential properties in terms of scope and methods (Wallace and Wolfe, 1995).

There has been arguably more research in the field on the micro- than on the macro level; in a survey of 120 journal papers concerned with anti-consumption, some researchers found 63 qualitative and 32 quantitative designs (the rest being mixed, theoretical or editorial formats), the former featuring ten ethnographic and two grounded-theory-based papers and thus highlighting the influx of phenomenology and symbolic interactionism (Galvagno, 2011; Rebouças and Soares, 2020; Makri et al., 2020). For voluntary simplicity, Rebouças and Soares identified 66 studies related to identity, values, practice or narratives as opposed to 40 which set voluntary simplicity in relation to associated constructs (Rebouças and Soares, 2020). Taking into account that while differing in focus, also the

critical theory-based inquiries encompassed in this majority draw from symbolic interactionism in terms of methodology (as expanded on in the next section), it is thus safe to say that symbolic interactionism in the widest sense is the most influential of the three paradigms in regard to voluntary simplicity as well.

The basic assumption for all symbolic interactionist reasoning on voluntary simplicity is that just like consumption, also anti-consumption cannot be explained solely in terms of economic rationality but has to take into account the symbolic constructions beyond the sheer structural and procedural dimensions (Nixon and Gabriel, 2016; Çinar, 2021). There is indeed already a wide range of research available on how consumerism shapes identities and contributes items to the reflection on how others might perceive the self (Zuchowska-Zimnal, 2018). The interest in the same role played by anti-consumption, while increasing within the last two decades, is still far from the attention consumerism itself enjoys (Hogg et al., 2009; Özçağlar-Toulouse, 2009). The obvious notion that in the light of consumerism as a source contributing to the self-concept, also the respective counter-behaviour can be interpreted in the same way, has been pursued at least since the turn of the millennium (Zavestovski, 2001). At the end of its first decade, as noticed, a "[...] recent explosion of theory linking consumerism and anti-consumerism to identity construction [...]" could be observed (Isenhour, 2010).

In sociological terms, all research in the field that focuses on the struggle of establishing, maintaining and expressing identity in an environment

where the symbolic functions of consumption far outweigh its material necessity can be traced back to the fundamental notions of symbolic interactionism in the sense of Mead, as collected and complemented by (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1986). Generic examples for research questions derived from these notions might thus be: “What role can voluntary simplicity play in the struggle for meaning in life?”, “How do adherents integrate practices of anti-consumerism into a daily life embedded in a materialist environment?” or “How do people establish voluntary simplicity as a means of self-empowerment?” etc.

The symbolic interactionist perspective on voluntary simplicity and anti-consumption is also defined by its methodological approaches, arguably to an even higher degree than it is the case with the other paradigms. While questions on how social structures work and evolve – which inherently rather presume determination and causalities – can rely on quantitative methods to a wide extent, for understanding the process of individual sense-making, in most cases only interpretive research is applicable (Günbayi and Sorm, 2018; Salvini, 2019). The concepts of symbolic interactionism and grounded theory as a broad research paradigm are connected both historically and ideationally (Chamberlain-Salaun et al., 2013). Consequently, wherever the field is to be understood in terms of meaning, identity and their manifestation in action, research methods derived from grounded theory might be more adequate than approaches trying to find “objective” evidence. Grounded theory has indeed been explicitly employed in studies oriented towards a sociological understanding rather than marketing practice (Goulding et al., 2005; Özçağlar-Toulouse, 2009; Walther and Sandlin, 2013; Nazarian et al., 2019; Lloyd and Pennington, 2020; Sandikci, 2020).

Apart from the broad range of instruments provided by grounded theory, also the adaption of the ethnographic methodology for sociology and its associated disciplines as a development closely related to the Chicago school has been applied extensively on voluntary simplicity and related subjects (Reyes, 2019; Isenhour, 2010; Bettany and Kerrane, 2011; Anderson et al., 2018). The influx of phenomenological thinking on research occupied with voluntary simplicity and anti-consumerism contributes to the selection of fields of inquiry as such and to the theoretical groundwork. Ethnomethodology as the interpretive study of social order as something not predefined but presenting itself as a subtle symbolic equilibrium that becomes visible only when disturbed has also been introduced into the phenomenology-oriented discourse within the field, yet only on a scale surprisingly small given the importance attributed to (anti-) consumerism as a source of creating identity as mentioned above (Garfinkel, 1984; Heath et al., 2017; Denegri-Knott et al., 2018).

In that regard, also Goffman's impression management theory has been discussed as a framework for understanding the workings of consumption under a dramaturgical-inspired lens (Goffman, 1978; Schulz, 2012). This dramaturgical analogy has been employed as a means of understanding ethical consumerism and the practice of “greenwashing”, but also to interpret non-consumption as a form of role distance more closely to Goffman's terms (Jones, 2019; Nixon, 2020). While symbolic interactionist-inspired approaches on anti-consumption and voluntary simplicity cover a huge variety of individual personality factors like identity construction, self-actualization, self-esteem, self-control, self-expression and self-definition in regard to the drivers as well as personal well-being, happiness and satisfaction in regard to the consequences of behaviour, potential impacts of the two phenomena on environmental and economic concerns are to be found on the macro level still (Makri et al., 2020).

All considered, the symbolic interactionist and phenomenological paradigm had a great influence on most scholarly efforts of understanding both the causes and implications of the phenomena on a micro level. Even when individual identity-related research does not explicitly refer to the underlying pragmatic philosophy of symbolic interactionism, it might more often than not use methods inspired by the same. However, the multitude of findings derived by interactionist studies in the widest sense still needs to be introduced more broadly into wider discourses on climate change and economic alternatives (Chatzidakis et al., 2014; Lorenzen and Harvey, 2017).

6. CONFLICT THEORY AND POSTMODERNISM: CHALLENGING THE STRUCTURES OF CONSUMERISM

Other than conceptualizing it as a function (or functional deviance) or a means of making sense and creating identity, voluntary simplicity and anti-consumerism alike can also be interpreted as a challenge to consumerism and the material and mental structures of capitalism as such. A skeptical stance towards material consumption as the unquestioned and primary goal in the pursuit of happiness is kind of an original quality of the critical

tradition. Marx' notion of commodity fetish and its ties to reification and alienation laid the groundwork for subsequent intellectual attacks on consumerism (Marx, 1887; Blinky and Litter, 2014). Proponents of the Frankfurt school like picked up, modified and to some extent also popularized the original Marxist theses and thus helped introduce them into a broader discourse including critical positions on contemporary consumerism practices (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2020; Fromm, 2013; Fremaux, 2014; Champagne-Ardenne, 2018).

While for the idea of hegemony as broader, less materialistically construed concept of power struggle its intellectual connections to anti-consumerism are not as intuitive, Gramsci is nevertheless among the most cited classical thinkers in anti-consumption literature (Rumbo, 2002; Galvagno, 2011). The concept of hegemony is deemed particularly important for understanding the cultural domination perpetuated by images and signs the advertising industry provides (Hall, 2011; Lekakis, 2020). Despite the fact that the more subtle differences and congruities between Gramsci and Foucault still occupy theoretical scholars, still the latter plays a role similar to the former when it comes to providing the frame to post-materialist ideas on power and ideology for voluntary simplicity- and anti-consumption related reasoning in the critical tradition (Daldal, 2014; Tarascio, 2018; Sandlin and Walther, 2009; Kala et al., 2017; Valor et al., 2017). Strictly speaking in terms of the history of ideas, the structuralist and post-modern thinkers in the French tradition – like Foucault and Derrida – are not to be accounted as “critical” thinkers in a Marxist sense, of course. Yet, in terms of scope and practical impact, the postmodern view is indeed closely associated with critical conflict theory, so it again seems permissible to merge the two positions for the purpose of a theoretically informed illustration (Wallace and Wolfe, 1995; Aldana, 2021; Garlitz and Zompetti, 2021).

Voluntary simplicity seen through the lens of conflict theory produces two main focal points: Firstly, the individual emancipation from an economic system putting consumption above all competing personal interests and secondly, criticizing the idea of unlimited economic growth as such on the scale of social systems (Kilbourne, 1992; Gunderson, 2018; Alexander, 2017; Alexander and Gleeson, 2020). The concept of consumer resistance which plays a key role for the critical approach can be seen as a moderator between these two levels (Cherrier, 2009; Heath et al., 2017). For both the personal, emancipatory perspective and the macroeconomic notion of the limits of growth, the acknowledgement of the phenomena as forms of political activism in the widest sense is much more pronounced than it is through a phenomenological, interactionist or functionalistic lens (Blinky and Litter, 2014).

When identity and expression are examined in the context of anti-consumerism, there tends to be a reference to political commitment, and the main interest is not focused on functional logic but rather on related social discourses and power relations (Portwood-Stacer, 2012). In that regard, voluntary simplicity is often addressed by critical theorists as a “movement” rather than an individual trait (Cherrier, 2009; Walther et al., 2016). The conflict perspective might be inclined to focus on anti-consumption as the broader concept and see voluntary simplicity as a particular phenomenon within. In contrast, arguably an identity- and sense-constructing bias in the tradition of symbolic interactionism would choose exactly the opposite hierarchy.

Conceivable examples for generic research questions from the perspective of conflict theory might thus be: “In which aspects does voluntary simplicity challenge the principles of capitalist accumulation?”, “How can consumer resistance challenge the hegemony of marketing-driven consumerism or “How does everyday language structurally privilege consumerism over frugality?”. In conflict theory, changing consumption behavior is conceptualized as potentially constituting an act of subversion against mainstream consumer capitalism on a macromarketing level and a device against the cultural hegemony of the advertising industry (Papaoikonomou and Alarcon, 2017; Lekakis, 2020). Thus, the concept of consumer resistance is paramount for understanding social change in that regard. Consumer resistance can be described as an active, directed and politically informed way of anti-consumption that ranges from boycott through protest to appropriation and re-definition of marketing symbols (Cherrier, 2009; Lee et al., 2009; Mikkonen et al., 2011; Epure and Bondrea, 2016).

Consequently, consumer resistance has gained some attention within the paradigm of conflict theory, particularly by proponents of cultural studies (Sandlin and Callahan, 2009). In terms of the paradigmatic meta-theories discussed in this inquiry, cultural studies can be contextualized as the convergence of micro-level cultural understanding and applied critical theory, and an understanding of consumer resistance indeed needs to take into account both the broader aspects of hegemony as well as the self-

regulating construction of sense within deviant co-cultures, again reflecting the foci of critical theory and postmodernism, respectively (Denzin, 2008; Lee et al., 2011). It is worth noting that at the same time the lens of conflict theory provides an alternative perspective very much contrasting the notion of subversion and resistance: Not everybody might boast the economic opportunities for certain behavioral changes, and thus, being able to *afford* a simpler life can also be seen as a privilege in itself (O'Brien, 2007; Alexander, 2013; Cockman and Pyke, 2020).

Scholarly work on anti-consumerism theoretically imbued in conflict theory in the widest sense often draws from other sources in terms of methodology, most notably grounded theory which is ideationally linked to symbolic interactionism (Walther et al., 2016; Papaoikonomou and Alarcon, 2017). As a methodic approach that is arguably closer to conflict theory itself if not directly associated, again Foucault is to mention (Foucault, 1981). His discourse analysis is used as a theoretical setting in many critical pieces questioning how power relations structuralized in language determine consumption patterns and how anti-consumerism can pose a symbolic disruption of these structures (Littler, 2005; Barnett et al., 2008; Caruana and Crane, 2008; Yngfalk, 2016; Cockman and Pyke, 2020).

With its critical position towards unquestioned materialist foundations and its focus on the formation and institutionalization of discourse, conflict theory-inspired research on consumerism and voluntary simplicity will likely a priori regard sustainability issues, e.g. in the wider context of degrowth, sustainable consumption or discourses on climate change (Middlemiss et al., 2019; Alexander, 2011; Romano, 2012; Alexander, 2017; Pfeifer et al., 2020; Ferguson, 2019). From a meta-theoretical perspective, there nevertheless remains a caveat in regard to the potential conflict theory might have in linking both anti-consumption and voluntary simplicity to (global) sustainability issues: As apparent in the theoretical backgrounds discussed in this section, a majority of the critical scholarship on voluntary simplicity and anti-consumption appears to draw from postmodern rather than classical materialist concepts (Merton's, 1938; Rudmin and Kilbourne, 1996; Basci, 2014). Postmodern thinking as such implies some anti-enlightenment sentiments challenging universalism and the foundations of rational science (Linker, 2005; Rasmussen, 2014; Mihailescu, 2017; Mead, 1934). Especially in terms of climate change, any scholarly contribution that casts doubt on the legitimacy of scientific findings or particularizes global problems in favor of applied intersectionality might pose an obstacle to the development of a critical, yet empirically fact-based discourse and is thus problematic for teaching purposes (e.g. Parsons, 1951, 1970; Münch, 1982; Jackson, 2002; Blumer, 1986).

7. CONCLUSION

Bypassing the struggle for unambiguous definitions that plague the subject, a step back to the meta-perspective provided by the three paradigms offers a way to present research strands and common threads within a simplified framework that is nevertheless not ad hoc but founded in sociological theory. Again aligned with the respective paradigms, different research perspectives and with them, the different social properties of voluntary simplicity and anti-consumption can be envisaged:

Functionalism: Even though classic, "grand theory" structural functionalism has fallen out of favor in most of the sociological mainstream, it is nevertheless useful to borrow its theoretical lens in that regard. While there are many examples for research embracing the role of voluntary simplicity and anti-consumption as a contribution to the organic functioning of social (sub)systems, it is worth noticing that classic functionalism has rarely been *explicitly* employed in associated research.

Yet, the functionalist view indeed encompasses more than just the macro perspective in general: Since it is arguably the most abstract paradigm discussed here, different settings of what "functioning" means are conceivable. When declining natural resources are *presupposed* as the given environment (which is allowedly a quite creative suggestion from the perspective of classic structural functionalism), it opens possibilities to operationalizing practices and attitudes in the field as modes of adaption in order to maintain a functioning system. However, this view implicitly interprets any reduction of consumption as a means of otherwise maintaining the status quo, creating a sharp contrast to the notion of change inherent particularly to the conflict perspective's take. Such structural-functionalist concepts would thus be ideal candidates for presenting the presumption that sustainability and qualitative economic growth are not an antithesis at all.

They might also prove helpful as a means to logically arrange propositions

on voluntary simplicity and anti-consumption (that are not necessarily the outcome of functionalist research themselves) by aligning them with sub-systems or organic functions within a wider system. The second take on structural functionalism in this paper focuses on anomy and the application of Merton's strain theory. Using the frame of acceptance / rejection of both goals and means, voluntary simplicity can be theoretically conceptualized within various accentuations of deviance from mainstream consumer culture. Within these variations, aspects of either asceticism or more hedonistic downshifting can be contrasted to voluntary simplicity as a way of employing anti-consumption in order to change the economic realities and finally, as transcending the system by inventing completely new means and ends. Apparently, many different modifications and interpretations are conceivable for this (exemplary) frame of reference.

It can thus be helpful to illustrate the different ways and aspects in which forms of consumption-critical behavior deviate from any proposed normal economic state.

Symbolic interactionism and phenomenology: Both symbolic interactionism rooted in the fundamentals outlined by Mead and further pursued by Blumer and the closely associated paradigm of phenomenology have contributed directly or indirectly to the majority research in the field. Phenomenological methodology is also frequently employed by researchers in the field who are otherwise referring to conflict theory, like cultural studies or critical theory. A simpler life and reduced consumption are conceptualized not so much in terms of their macroeconomic functions and ramifications, but as a source of identification and meaning. Both drivers (identity construction, self-actualization, self-esteem, self-control, self-expression and self-definition) for and consequences (personal well-being, happiness and satisfaction) of voluntary simplicity and anti-consumption are well-documented on the micro level, but these findings often miss the effects on higher-level elements of the social system.

Phenomenological, interactionist approaches thus seem the ideal candidates for questions revolving around how to motivate people to sustainable behavior, but lack the scope to provide answers on how such a shift in motivation may contribute to issues of sustainability on a communal, national or global scale.

Conflict theory and postmodern perspectives: The viewpoint of conflict theory tends to conceptualize anti-consumption as an act of subversion in a more political sense and thus understands voluntary simplicity also as an (informal) movement rather than solely an individual aspect of identity. Still, classic Marxist approaches on the field are relatively rare, and a considerable proportion of research refers to the concept of hegemony and to critical theory in the widest sense. In research practice particularly on anti-consumption, these theoretical frameworks are often employed alongside postmodern theory, which stems from a different historical strand of ideas yet provides similar concepts of symbolic dominance.

While research rooted in either or both conflict theory and postmodern theory is often drawing from symbolic interactionism in terms of methodology, its focus lies on the way consumer culture and marketing shape public discourses. This sets it apart from phenomenological approaches that are more interested in the personal experience of curbing consumption rather than the resulting social activism. Consequently, the complex of consumer resistance as an explicit challenge to market structures on a meso or macro level is typically within the central focus of critical takes on consumerism. These properties implicitly put concepts based on conflict theory closer to discourses on climate change and sustainable economic activity.

Furthermore, the paradigm of conflict theory can be used as a theoretical frame where the aspects of disruptive change and a challenge to the symbolic dominance of marketing are to be highlighted as a property of voluntary simplicity and anti-consumption. This again sets a stark contrast to perspectives of evolutionary adaption in an organic system or to individual identity construction as alternative ways of approaching the field. All considered, the view from the meta-theoretical perspective proposed in this paper supports the stance taken by regarding the problematic nature of universal definitions for voluntary simplicity and anti-consumption, respectively. There appear to be more substantive distinctions between the ways voluntary simplicity and anti-consumption are conceptualized within the respective paradigms (functional elements vs. symbolic sources of identity vs. ways to alter economic realities or discourse) than there are unambiguous elements setting the two apart a priori.

LIMITATIONS AND OUTLOOK

First and foremost, the selection of voluntary simplicity and anti-consumption as key terms for this paper has been rather pragmatic. Other items like e.g. "downshifting" would have been conceivable as well but were disregarded simply because they enjoy less scholarly attention in terms of papers published and database entries. Furthermore, the framework presented in this paper is allowedly painted with a broad brush. While for symbolic interactionism and phenomenology as well as conflict theory, the history of ideas and methodology could be set into the context of the field at hand with relative ease, the connections to the structural-functionalist paradigm are less obvious. The adoptions elaborated for the latter are to some extent creative or even speculative and might thus be limited to the use for an audience already familiar with theoretical basics. Likewise, in regard to conflict theory, an even clearer distinction between classic Marxist and post-structuralist / postmodern influx on research in the field would be desirable but would have exceeded the scope of this paper.

While emphasize was put on the most topical literature available, nevertheless in some areas only slightly outdated material came up. That is particularly true for reflections on the meta-theoretical foundations of voluntary simplicity and anti-consumption alike and in turn underwrites the need for an updated revision in this regard. Furthermore, the type of accumulating desktop research utilized in this paper obviously does not meet the standards of a systematic, exhausting bibliographic study. Taking into account both these limitations and the value of the generic perspective provided by this paper all the same, a more detailed bibliographic approach might offer a better overview on research conducted so far and how it can be presented in a manner that fosters an understanding of the underlying structures. It could also provide the means to define sub-categories while still maintaining the helpful generalizations introduced through the three paradigms.

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