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CONSTRUCTING SUSTAINABILITY

A PROBLEMATIZING INQUIRY INTO SDG12: SUSTAINABLE
PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION PATTERNS

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Abstract

In 2015, the 193 UN member states launched the Sustainable Development Goals which aim to guide developmental and environmental work worldwide. The SDGs have stirred up a lot of interest and engagement for climate change and poverty reduction, although opinions of their approach widely differ. This thesis critically engages with SDG12: Sustainable Production and Consumption Patterns by drawing on Bacchi's *What's the Problem Represented to Be?* approach. Through engaging with SDG12 the aim is to better understand how the UN constructs the problems facing unsustainable production and consumption patterns. The problem representations contained within the goal are scrutinized, drawing on theories from environmental sociology and beyond. Treadmill of production, the degrowth paradigm, technological fix, ecological modernization and ethical consumerism are all used as typologies in the analysis of SDG12. It is argued that the problem representations in SDG12 align with ecological modernization and eschew any contradictions between economic growth and environmental protection. There is no mention of any systemic shortcomings inherent in the capitalist-consumerist model. Instead, the way in which SDG12 approaches sustainable production and consumption is through ecological modernization, with references to ethical consumerism and technological fixes.

Keywords: SDG12, sustainability, Bacchi, treadmill of production, degrowth, ecological modernization

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Abbreviations

NASA – National Aeronautics and Space Administration

NCEI – National Centers for Environmental Information

SDG12 – Sustainable Development Goal 12: Sustainable Production and Consumption Patterns

SDGs – Sustainable Development Goals

UN – United Nations

WMO – World Meteorological Organization

WPR – *What's the problem represented to be?* approach

WWF – World Wildlife Fund

1. Introduction

In 2015, the 193 member nations of the UN officially launched the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. The agenda is put forth as a transformative and universal set of goals which are to be implemented on a global scale. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been described as a “promise by leaders to all people everywhere [...] to end poverty in all its forms – an agenda for the planet, our common home” (UN, 2017).

This thesis focuses on *SDG12: Ensure Sustainable Production and Consumption Patterns*, and seeks to critically inquire problem representations, underlying assumptions and potential contradictions. In scrutinizing how the UN constructs sustainability in SDG12, this thesis draws on Bacchi’s *What’s the problem represented to be?* (WPR) approach, a critical approach aligned with the discourse analysis tradition. Using this a point of departure, theories from environmental sociology and beyond are used in the analysis. The SDGs seek to tackle a great number of challenges, such as poverty, peace and climate change. A necessity for transforming our world, the agenda claims, is to build inclusive, sustainable and resilient societies, as well as to harmonize economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection (UN, 2015b). Thus, environmental protection and poverty reduction are two of the cornerstones of the agenda.

On the topic of environmental protection, there is virtually consensus within the scientific community that global warming is occurring, and risks causing detrimental damage to our planet. Today, humanity is said to be at a critical juncture, as it “currently needs the regenerative capacity of 1.6 Earths to provide the goods and services we use each year” (WWF, 2016, p. 13). The years 2014, 2015 and 2016 were all three the hottest years on record thus far (NASA, 2017; World Meteorological Organization, 2017). Extreme weather events are already wreaking havoc on socio-economic and ecological systems, causing large wildfires, melting ice, setting new record temperatures in countries already ravaged by high temperatures, causing droughts and substantial agricultural losses (NCEI, 2017). Not only do scientists claim that global warming is taking place, but environmental degradation in the forms of polluted water, habitat loss and the degradation of forests, jungle and soil is also an increasing issue (WWF, 2016).

Amid sobering prospects of climate change and environmental degradation, the global development community also faces vast challenges with poverty. Although the incidence of extreme poverty has dropped off significantly, from the vast majority of people during the 19th century, around 836 million people were estimated to suffer extreme poverty in 2015 (UN, 2015a, p. 4). Following this, many of those whom have gotten out of poverty continue living slightly above the poverty line, risking to fall down into precarity in the face of challenges, as social protection remains weak in many countries in the global South (ILO, 2016, p. xiii). It is against the backdrop of this twin challenge of poverty and climate change that the Sustainable Development Goals seek to unite the world under a common agenda to transform our world. Providing full context is an exhaustive endeavor, and for this thesis a short introduction of the challenges facing the SDGs will suffice.

2. Background

This section briefly sketches out some of the processes that led to the sustainable development paradigm and ultimately to the launch of the SDGs, and briefly reflects on some of the debates surrounding the goals. Du Pisani (2006) argues that the seeds for the SDGs were sown sometime between the late 1960s and the early 1970s, when the previously competing theories of economic development took a new turn, that of sustainable development. In the preceding decades, the two main explanations of economic development were modernization theory and dependency theory.

Modernization theory was rooted in liberal values, and claimed that developing countries ought to copy the Western model of development and the features of economically advanced nations. In such a view, development meant adopting rationalization, the market and setting mass consumption as a high societal goal. The dependency school, on the other hand, linked poverty to modernity and peripheral countries' colonial experience. Conversely, development meant severing the exploitative economic ties set during colonialism, in favor of adopting an independent, socialist path of development (Elliott, 2013; Greig et al., 2007; Du Pisani, 2006; Potter et al., 2008).

During the late 60s and early 70s, Du Pisani (2006) claims that the concern with the environment became far more salient, as the endangerment of the entire planet was increasingly recognized. The modernizationists' optimism for world-wide economic growth and its ability to solve problems had faded, and a new paradigm for development was emerging. Du Pisani (2006) suggests that sustainable development sprung out of the realization that exporting the industrialization and mass consumption of the Western world would put the planet under severe pressure. Development theorists were confronted with the failure of growth to deliver on wealth distribution and environmental maintenance. Sustainable development emerged from the scene, as

“a compromise between growth and conservation. It was not ideologically neutral, because it was intended as an alternative for the zero growth option and was therefore positively inclined towards the growth and modernization viewpoints” (Du Pisani, 2006, p. 94)

Thus, the paradigm retained many of the ideas from modernization theory. Economic growth had to take on a new shape, covering the needs of the people while being sensitive of the environment. This new paradigm was popularized in 1987 when the Brundtland Commission published their report *Our Common Future*. The report highlighted the need to reconcile social equity, economic growth and environmental maintenance for development to be sustainable. Their definition of sustainable development put forth is the one used by the UN until this day:

“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” (WCED, 1987, no pagination).

Nevertheless, sustainable development remains a highly contested and debated concept. Given the vague language used, no common philosophy has emerged from the debates surrounding sustainable development. Critics have suggested that although this has led to sustainable development being endorsed by big business, government and social and environmental movements alike, the term can also be used to “mean almost anything that anyone wants” (Giddings, et al., 2002, p. 188). However, notwithstanding diverging opinions, sustainable development “has been brought into service in the absence of agreement about a process which almost everybody thinks is desirable” (Redclift & Woodgate, 2000, p. 56).

Briefly put, these were some of the processes that led up to the sustainable development paradigm, and ultimately the SDGs today, which are now in focus. In their entirety, excluding sub-goals, the SDGs read:

- “Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere
- Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
- Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
- Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
- Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
- Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
- Goal 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
- Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
- Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
- Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries
- Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
- Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts

Goal 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development

Goal 15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development” (UN, 2015b, p. 14).

These goals intend to guide development work for 15 years, and were signed by the 193 member countries in 2015. Thus the SDGs are widely endorsed, and much praise has been levelled at the inclusive consultative process for drafting the goals, in which many actors from the private sector and civil society have been participating. Determined to strengthen the legitimacy and effectiveness of the goals, the UN included many different interests during the drafting of the goals, with civil society, private interests and other stakeholders being part of the negotiations as to ensure representation of the interests of the poor (UN, 2015b). With this in mind, their “universal” character is one of the declared strengths of the SDGs (UN, 2015b, p. 1). The SDGs provide a framework for global cooperation to cope with the issues of the current predicament.

The debates surrounding the SDGs have come at the goals from diverging points of view. Scheyvens et al. (2016) suggest that one of the most noteworthy aspects of the SDGs is the level of trust put in the private sector for pursuing the goals. Worried about the private sectors capacity to effectively pursue the goals, they note that out of the 55 corporations represented in the process, 26 were from Europe, 6 from the US and 3 from Japan. Thus, given the dominance of the Global North’s transnational corporate interests in the drafting process, there are important questions to raise surrounding the claimed universality of the goals and the way in which the goals can move from business-as-usual to a transformative agenda (Schevyens, et al., 2016).

The Economist called the targets the “169 commandments”, criticizing them for being messy and too plentiful, making the case that they were “worse than useless” (The Economist, 2015). Others have raised concerns surrounding the weak accountability of the goals, worrying that their effectiveness will be compromised as a result (Donald & Way, 2016). Nevertheless, most people agree on the SDGs being an important call to arms on behalf of governments across the world to

battle poverty and climate change. Sustainable development can mean many things and although the diverging views and their pros and cons could be elaborated, this thesis specifically aims attention at what is written in SDG12.

3. Aims

Being virtually agreed upon as an urgently needed call for action, the SDGs intend to be greatly influential and to guide developmental work for 15 years. However, in uniting the world under a “universal” and “transformative” agenda (UN, 2015b, p. 3), it remains instrumental to be cognizant of the agenda promoted, and to scrutinize the favored interests, ideological underpinnings and problem representations (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). The need for such an analysis and critical inquiry into the purportedly neutral, universal and transformative agenda provides the rationale for this study.

Specifically, the aim of the analysis centers on SDG12, which seeks to “[e]nsure sustainable consumption and production patterns” (UN, 2015b, p. 22). To briefly present SDG12, some of the things aimed for are reducing food waste by half, using natural resources efficiently and reducing waste generation. Further, companies are encouraged to adopt sustainable practices, scientific advancements are promoted alongside sustainable tourism and a reconsideration of inefficient fossil-fuel subsidies (UN, 2015b, p. 23). SDG12 will be discussed more extensively in the analysis section.

Following this, the research question is:

- How does SDG12 represent problems of sustainable consumption and production patterns, how can these be problematized and what problem representations are left out or ignored?

The ambition is to develop an understanding of the problem representations espoused and the assumptions underlying the goals, and to analyze them in light of the chosen theoretical and conceptual framework. All in all, this study seeks to participate in the academic discussion surrounding the SDGs, and to critically examine the agenda proposed. The analysis takes the shape of a constructivist examination of SDG12, problematizing the ideas and problems within and the discourse put forth. By doing so I hope to be able to contribute to the discussion on the SDGs and sustainability in any minor way possible. The means for doing so are discussed next.

4. Methodology

4.1. Ontology and Epistemology

This thesis is a qualitative study and departs from the ontological position of critical realism. Critical realism holds that there is an external reality, simultaneously as there are many events and discourses of the social world. In an endeavor to fully understand the social world, then, it is necessary to study and understand these discourses (Bryman, 2012). Nevertheless, human experience of the world remains limited by our five senses, and the material world does not change according to the way we think about it. By subscribing to a critical realism ontology some of the criticism towards constructivism is alleviated, as the material world – nature and its forces – is acknowledged alongside the constructed character of reality.

The way in which this thesis conceives the nature of knowledge is rooted in the epistemology of constructionism. The fundamental idea of constructionism is that knowledge is socially constructed and continuously being accomplished and reformulated by social actors (Bryman, 2012, p. 33). The researcher is seen as presenting a specific point-of-view on social reality, rather than contributing absolute truths about it. Under constructivism, knowledge is constituted in the process of people interacting, talking and writing about the world.

From a constructionist position, environmental issues are by no means asocial and fixed to certain criteria, but are socially constructed, like all other social problems. The degree to which a certain environmental condition constitutes a problem varies in response to various actors making claims. Such claims are effectively grounded in specific conditions that the members of a group find undesirable (Hannigan, 2006, p. 64). To illustrate, deforestation itself is not necessarily a problem. Nature has been changing since the formation of the planet, and will continue to do so. Deforestation becomes a problem when claims-makers (e.g indigenous people or activists) manage to popularize their claims about deforestation threatening their livelihoods, since they depend upon the ecosystem services of that forest.

In saying that environmental issues are socially constructed is not to say that there are no real powers of nature. Instead, by such claims what is asserted is that the magnitude and the way in which natural powers impact on us is socially constructed (Hannigan, 2006, p. 31). By asserting

this position, constructivism allows for analysis of how a certain discourse can become hegemonic, and to demonstrate how various actors develop strategies to make claims over environmental issues (Hannigan, 2006).

4.2. A Study of Problem Representations

The specific method for this study draws on the *What's the problem represented to be?* approach developed by Carol Bacchi (2009). The WPR approach intends to explore the role of policy, arguing that we are governed by problematizations, focusing on the ways in which these problematizations are central to governing processes. "Problem" under the WPR approach refers to the kind of change that is implied in a policy (ibid).

As such, the WPR approach shifts away from a "problem-solving" paradigm, opting for a "problem-questioning" paradigm. Essentially, conventional thinking around policy holds that policy fixes something, that it makes things better. What follows is that there is something that needs to be fixed, i.e. that there is a *problem*. In many policies, the problem is not explicitly stated but can only be understood implicitly in the solution (i.e. the policy) to that problem. Thus, how issues are problematized becomes central to governing processes, and we are effectively governed by problematizations.

What follows is that the WPR approach holds that it is inappropriate to think of problems as something existing exogenous to policy. This is not to say that there is a conspiracy behind this, but rather that it is a necessary part of policy-making. To be sure: there are a wide range of troubling conditions that should be dealt with. Nevertheless, calling these conditions problems makes them seem absolute and fixed in a way which the WPR approach contests. On the contrary, it is argued that "[p]olicies *give shape* to 'problems'; they do not *address* them" (Bacchi, 2009, p. x; emphasis original).

In this process of shaping what a problem is, the role of experts and professionals is emphasized. This makes it a suitable method for an inquiry into the SDGs, which are pre-eminently the product of experts and professionals. It is crucial to critically interrogate the problem representations within the SDGs, "in order to see what they include and what they leave out"

(Bacchi, 2009, p. xii), as these are intended to direct developmental work worldwide. The need for such an analysis is even more important in the light of the SDGs promises of being universal and transformative. For this, the WPR approach provides a systematic method for analysis where taken-for-granted assumptions within are interrogated, problematizing the problem representations found within them. Bacchi (2009) offers six questions for analysis, out of which questions 1, 2 4 and 5¹ form the backbone of my analysis, effectively posing sub-questions to my research question. Bacchi's questions in their entirety are the following:

- “1. What is the ‘problem’ (...) represented to be in a specific policy?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the ‘problem’?
3. How has this representation of the ‘problem’ come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the ‘problem’ be thought about differently?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the ‘problem’?
6. How/where has this representation of the ‘problem’ been produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced?” (Bacchi, 2009: 2)

It should be said that the WPR approach is a critical mode of inquiry which aligns with the tradition of discourse analysis. Discourses are seen as “socially produced forms of knowledge that set limits upon what it is possible to think, write or speak about” (Bacchi, 2009, p. 35) Scholars working in this tradition often serve a common interest in “de-mystifying ideologies and power through the systematic [...] investigation of semiotic data” (Wodak and Meyer, 2008, p.

3). On that note, it can be said that

“[a] critique does not consist in saying that things aren't good the way they are. It consists in seeing on what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established, unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based” (Foucault, 1994, p. 456, in Bacchi, 2009, p. 39).

On that note, what motivates this analysis is, to reiterate, the need to be cognizant of the supposedly universal agenda that seeks to take on a global scope to “transform our world” (UN, 2015b, p. 1).

¹ The reason for excluding question 3 is that the limited space does not allow for a fruitful discussion on such an extensive topic as the history of sustainable development, which would be a thesis in itself. For extensive writing on the topic, see e.g Du Pisani, 2006. As for of question 6, the points to be made there fit better into other parts of the thesis, such as the concluding discussion, which allows for a more flexible discussion.

4.3. Empirical Selection and Proceedings

For answering the research question, two official documents published by the UN form the empirical foundation of the analysis. The first document is *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN, 2015b), which lists the UN's vision and the full set of 17 goals. The second document is the *10-year framework of programmes for sustainable consumption and production pattern* (UN, 2012). The 10-year framework is referred to in SDG12 sub-goal 1, and it intends to construct a common vision surrounding consumption and production patterns, which supports “sustainable, inclusive and equitable global growth, poverty eradication and shared prosperity”, and which “protects and restores the health and integrity of the Earth's ecosystems” (UN, 2012, p. 3).

The practical way in which I go about this analysis is that I have carefully read the documents on SDG12, and I have tried to inquire the assumptions and problem representations espoused within by drawing on secondary sources. In the process of doing so I have identified some interesting themes which I wish to analyze further. It is important to emphasize here that this approach offers by no means an objective or absolute analysis of SDG12. Rather, in line with the constructivist position, what is offered here is an interpretation of SDG12 from my chosen perspectives, taking environmental sociology as a point of departure and synthesizing it with other concepts and ideas found in the wider literature.

4.4. Limitations and Delineations

With the practical considerations in mind, a limitation can be that there are alternative ways of interpreting the text, which I have overlooked. This problem is always going to be present in an analysis such as this one, and to overcome it I try to support my arguments by referring to the text. A similar issue is that given the broad implications of the SDGs, many arguments and points can be made from the same material. Thus, I limit myself to what can be said using the chosen method and framework.

Further, one could criticize this methodology for separating the interlinked goals. This is a legitimate concern. The reason for my interest in SDG12 is that I believe it concerns an instrumental aspect of sustainability. It is an exhaustive topic, and arguably many other of the

goals² can to some extent be subsumed into sustainable consumption and production patterns. Therefore, I remain centered on SDG12 (and the 10-year framework) alone³, as I find it substantive enough to provide material for analysis alone, although I try to recognize the interlinked nature of the goals. The WWF's Living Planet Report of 2016 put it best:

“If current trends continue, unsustainable consumption and production patterns will likely expand along with human population and economic growth. The growth of the Ecological Footprint, the violation of Planetary Boundaries and increasing pressure on biodiversity are rooted in systemic failures inherent to the current systems of production, consumption, finance and governance” (WWF, 2016, p. 13).

Another concern is that the 2030 agenda is not formally a policy. However, the WPR approach is “not intended as a one-off exercise” (Bacchi, 2009, p. 21). On the contrary, questions can be reformulated to better fit, and an “almost endless variety and numbers of texts” can be selected (Bacchi, 2009, p. 20). The SDGs essentially function as goals for national policies, and in doing so they still contain the problematizations that the WPR approach aspires to study.

Finally, it should be said that Bacchi explicitly calls the approach post-structuralist. Nevertheless, I find that there are no substantial obstacles for using this approach as a constructionist. In arguing that the way issues are problematized under the SDGs (constructed by powerful social actors) and that this shapes political thought and political action, this may well be done from a constructivist position. I contend that it is an epistemology suitable for problem questioning and inquiry into problem representations. What can be said to change by adopting a constructionist as opposed to a post-structuralist position is that my analysis is less centered around language per se. I want to distance myself from the radical post-structural emphasis on language and meaning, and I am not primarily focused upon how language in itself shapes the world, but rather how the UN has chosen to construct these goals, with the specific inquiry following Bacchi's approach. Conclusively, the limitations notwithstanding, it is my contention that this methodology is suitable for inquiry into SDG12.

² E.g.:

“Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth [...]

Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts

Goal 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development

Goal 15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests[...] (UN, 2015b, p. 14)

³ An alternative, very interesting project would be to do a similar analysis but on the SDGs in their entirety, although this remains beyond the scope for a bachelor's thesis.

5. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Thus, having presented the methodology, this section presents the theoretical and conceptual framework. In scrutinizing how the UN constructs the problems facing consumption and production patterns, this thesis draws on environmental sociology, in addition to some complementary concepts. It should be said that the theories and concepts presented here do not explain the same phenomena, instead they are used as typologies of different intellectual traditions and how they approach matters of sustainability.

5.1. The Treadmill of Production

The treadmill of production is one of environmental sociology's most influential explanations of the relationship between capitalism, the state and the environment. Drawing on the Marxist tradition, the treadmill of production is a theory on economic change by Allan Schnaiberg (Hannigan, 2006). The word "treadmill" essentially refers to the need for continuous expansion inherent in capital, and the ever-increasing demand for natural resources for a given level of social welfare (Gould et al. 2004). This inherent need to expand brings about that producers must continuously create high consumer demand, notwithstanding ecological considerations or carrying capacities.

The theory arose from the observation that in the post WWII-era more capital was being accumulated in Western economies, and to increase profits this capital was invested in new technologies that replaced labor. These new technologies required far more energy and chemicals, putting the environment under greater stress. Intent on increasing profits, each round of investment in productive technology weakened the employment situation for workers, while simultaneously threatening environmental conditions. Paradoxically, as industrial workers were increasingly thrown off the treadmill, their main concern was to speed up the treadmill and increase investments to absorb more workers. This despite that investments in technology being the very reason they were laid off in the first place (Gould et al. 2004). Thus, there is both an ecological and a social side to the treadmill model, as workers help "sow the seeds of their own displacement" (Schnaiberg et al., 2002, p. 20).

Meanwhile, states find themselves in a position of having to play the double role of facilitating economic growth vis-à-vis being an environmental regulator (Hannigan, 2006). They find their

hands tied, caught in the dialectic tension between growth and environment, as workers are compelled to support speeding up the treadmill to increase the numbers of workers, despite the demise of the environment. Following this, politicians must support economic expansion, as this sentiment is shared by both investors and workers. What follows is that the environment always becomes a secondary concern, subservient to any economic considerations.

Thus, it is “increasingly true that any *environmental policy-making* is subject to more intensive *economic* scrutiny, while economic policies are subject to less and less environmental assessment” (Schnaiberg et al, 2002, p. 21, emphasis original). Economic criteria always remain at the foundation of decision making processes, and companies which do make ecological improvements are either forced to, wait until their economic bottom line is secured, or make sure to have the *appearance* of ecological improvements. Fundamentally, the treadmill theory shows “an image of a society running in place without moving forward”, locating the problems in the shortcomings of our humanly constructed economic and political system (Gould et al., 2004, p. 297). Growth ultimately means ecological degradation, as the treadmill accelerates and depletes one resource, to then move on to the next, instead of resolving the conflict of having infinite growth with finite resources.

5.2. Degrowth

In addition to the treadmill theory, another perspective that takes transformation rather than reform as its point of departure is degrowth, an emerging paradigm with its roots in ecological economics, social ecology and environmental activism, that argues for a rejection and replacement of the capitalist-consumer society (Kallis, 2017; Sekulova et al., 2013; Trainer, 2012). Degrowth

“...calls for a future where societies live within their ecological means, with open, localized economies and resources more equally distributed through new forms of democratic institutions. [...] Material accumulation will no longer hold a prime position in the population’s cultural imaginary [and] [t]he primacy of efficiency will be substituted by a focus on sufficiency,” (Research&Degrowth, 2017)

A central idea to degrowth is “limits to growth” analysis, where degrowth finds inescapable contradictions between economic growth and the environment, calling for an urgent transition to a non-affluent lifestyle (Trainer, 2012). The ecological, resource and cohesion problems of our

time cannot be solved within consumer-capitalist society, as problems are simply generated by systems and processes that are built into the foundation of it. According to degrowth proponents, the fundamental problem is over-production and over-consumption, which has surged material affluence to a level that cannot be sustained, nor spread to the rest of the world without devastating consequences (Trainer, 2012). Rich world living standards are severely unsustainable and technical solutions (see 5.3) are not radical enough to be able to achieve ecological sustainability with an infinitely growing economy (Sekulova et al., 2013). Although arguing for renewable energy, Trainer (2012) is skeptical that renewable energy resources will be able to sustain a capitalist-consumer society, as they cannot (yet) compete with the abundant energy in fossil fuels. Thus, the scale of the economy must decrease.

Another argument made for abandoning the capitalist-consumer society is that the current global economy has produced gross injustices, where the Global South effectively uses their natural resources to export to rich countries rather than sustaining their own populations. For example, meanwhile a third of the worlds grain is fed to animals in rich countries, roughly a billion people go hungry (Trainer, 2012).

Ultimately, the degrowth paradigm argues that the many issues of our time are inherent in the structures and commitments in a capitalist society geared toward consumerism, creating a lock-in toward problems of unsustainability. Capitalism cannot stop growing without collapsing, and thus it must be scrapped, as it is fundamentally incompatible with degrowth. Naturally, the degrowth paradigm is radical and requires nothing short of a cognitive revolution, changing values from the bottom up. What must be nurtured instead of a capitalist-consumer society is one based on notions of collectivism and cooperation for the greater good of the local community (Kallis, 2017; Sekulova et al., 2013; Trainer, 2012).

5.3. Technological fix

Another concept useful for discussing how SDG12 constructs sustainable production and consumption is technological fix, which to some extent figures in the way the problem is represented. It is the notion that many issues facing us, be it climate change or inequality, can be

fixed through technological progress (Huesemann & Huesemann, 2011). The idea is that faced with vast challenges, human ingenuity and innovation will overcome the challenges at hand.

Fundamentally, technological progress has done many beneficial things, and technological fixes are inevitable in modern society. There are no doubts that technological progress has introduced previously unimaginable things into our lives, as people are wealthier and live longer than ever before. This, however, has come at a price, as scientists worry that our living standards and industrial activities now exceed the carrying capacity of the planet.

Huesemann and Huesemann argue that “we often find expressions of the most rampant technological optimism among people who are scientifically illiterate” (2011, p. 186). This optimism tends to disguise that technological development has produced many unintended consequences. They claim that under the imperative of growth, technological development mainly takes the shape of profit-making, undermining its potential benefits for the environment and people (Huesemann & Huesemann 2011). Despite this, Huesemann and Huesemann conclude that our current predicament is entrenched with a techno-optimism that is hardly justified, noting that

“Although many contemporary problems were created by earlier applications of science and technology, there is nevertheless a very strong belief that more science and technology will be the solution” (Huesemann & Huesemann, 2011, p. 181)

Thus, faced with a challenge, technology can be deployed as a counter-technology. Nevertheless, by doing so, the symptoms rather than the causes for the problem are addressed. Similarly, Harvey (2015, p. xii) argues that although “new technologies [...] always played an important role in facilitating an exit from crises, it [...] never played a determinate one”. Going further, one of the benefits of technological fixes is that they factor out the human element, effectively excluding the complexity of dealing with social issues and the unpredictability of human behavior. On the other hand, the notion of technological fix has been criticized for not getting at the roots of the problems, as fundamentally social and political problems can be reframed as technological (Scott, 2011). In focusing on problem representations in SDG12, this is the way in which technological fix is a useful concept.

5.4. Ecological Modernization

Ecological modernization is a theory of social change that is more oriented toward reform, purporting that capitalist liberal democracy carries the institutional capacity to further develop, or modernize, in a way that can salvage ecological issues (Hannigan, 2006). It rests on four main themes, the first being the synergy between economic growth and environmental protection. Second, environmental policy is needed to integrate with government activity and third, the development of new environmental policy instruments is required, such as taxes that benefit ecological issues. Last but not least, ecological modernization takes place in sector-specific activities: in industry, for example, as innovation and its potential for creating new technologies and techniques to operate industrial processes is emphasized (Baker, 2007).

Through these four themes it is argued that the economy will be “ecologised”, where technologies are swapped and clean production processes emerge (Hannigan, 2006). Innovators will reap market advantages that will help shift to sustainable practices, which will ultimately reconfigure production-consumption patterns for the better (Redclift & Woodgate, 2000). It can be said that the notion of technological fix fits into the paradigm of ecological modernization, and so does ethical consumerism, which is presented in the next section. Ultimately, under ecological modernization is argued that given the direness of the situation, human resourcefulness will find ways to overcome the issues, shifting to a greener form of capitalism. It has been an influential paradigm in the policy arena, arguably partly because it corresponds to the gradualism of *realpolitik* (Hannigan, 2006).

5.5. Ethical Consumerism

A concept that can be linked to ecological modernization’s idea of transforming to a greener capitalism is the notion of ethical/critical/political/sustainable consumerism⁴. It is the idea that social change can be directed by knowledgeable consumers critically considering what and how to consume (Gjerris, et al. 2016). Consumption is ethical when it considers the conditions in which a good or a service has been produced. Critical consumers may for example abstain from consuming industrially produced meat, clothes produced in sweatshops or goods from conflict

⁴ Although there are many variations, I choose to stick with the term ethical consumerism; with the rationale that political, critical and sustainable consumerism can all be subsumed under an ambition to do good in ethical terms.

areas, as these may be found to have environmental, ethical and political repercussions. Thus, consumers eschew buying goods and services that they consider unethical, and resort to buying from producers deemed ethical (or less unethical). The rationale behind ethical consumerism is that as products deemed unsustainable are consumed less and less, producers are forced to turn to more sustainable practices. Thus, ethical consumers change production processes through market mechanisms as producers sense changing consumer attitudes and therefore shift to “better” practices.

Notwithstanding the intuitiveness, some scholars point to a vast difference between people’s ethical consumer mindset and their ethical consumerism in practice. Given the difficulties in establishing new habits and changing mindsets, and many diverging motivations such as ethical vis-à-vis economic or pragmatic considerations, few consumers tend to become ethical consumers in practice, despite their ethical intentions (Gjerris et al. 2016). As consumers, people are willing to engage in economizing behavior that compromises their beliefs as *citizens* (ibid). For example, consumers knowing that less meat ought to be better for the environment nevertheless choose to eat meat because of it being cheaper, easier to cook, or more accessible. Thus, there may be a contradiction between the ethical and the practical-economic side of the consumer’s choices.

6. Analysis

Finally, having presented the theoretical and conceptual framework, this section deals with the analysis of SDG12. Again, what is offered here is not any objective assessment, but my synthesis of different theories and ideas surrounding sustainability which I use to examine SDG12 critically. This section follows the questions posed by Bacchi, with each question functioning as its own sub-heading.

6.1. What's the problem represented to be?

As sketched out in the introduction, today scientists claim that we are facing great challenges with environmental degradation, global warming, inequality and poverty. These are the problems the SDGs must address, and this section deals with what the problem facing sustainable production and consumption patterns is represented to be in SDG12. Arguably, SDG12 covers many aspects of issues that are complex and mutually reinforcing. Thus, the problems represented within are plenty, and this section seeks to spell them out.

The first target of SDG12 is to implement the *10-year framework of programmes on sustainable consumption and production*, which argues that

“[f]undamental changes in the way societies produce and consume are indispensable for achieving global sustainable development. All countries should promote sustainable consumption and production patterns [...]

[which should be] based on life cycle approaches, including resource efficiency and sustainable use of resources, and related methodologies, including science-based and traditional knowledge-based approaches, cradle to cradle and the 3R concept (reduce, reuse and recycle)” (UN, 2012, p. 2, 8)

In line with this quote, the main “problems” put forth in SDG12’s sub-goals 12.2 through 12.5 is that natural resources are used unsustainably and inefficiently, with food being wasted at various levels, chemicals being dealt with in an unsustainable manner, and waste levels being too high, demanding sustainable use of resources and reduced waste generation (UN, 2015b, p. 22). Going further, SDG12 envisions to:

“12.6 Encourage companies, especially large and transnational companies, to adopt sustainable practices and to integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle

12.7 Promote public procurement practices that are sustainable, in accordance with national policies and priorities

12.8 By 2030, ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature

12.a Support developing countries to strengthen their scientific and technological capacity to move towards more sustainable patterns of consumption and production

12.b Develop and implement tools to monitor sustainable development impacts for sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products

12.c Rationalize inefficient fossil-fuel subsidies that encourage wasteful consumption...” (UN, 2015b, p. 22-23)

Working through these sub-goals one by one, it seems that in seeking to encourage companies to become more sustainable, the problems surrounding unsustainable production patterns are conceived as a lack of motivation on part of companies, which can be overcome by encouraging them. By aiming to promote sustainable practices for public procurement it can be made out that public administrations tend to buy unsustainable goods and services, which needs to change. Going further, in ensuring information and awareness for a lifestyle in harmony with nature, the “problem” is that people do not know how to consume sustainably, which can be solved through increasing accessible information on sustainability. In seeking to strengthen technological capacities for sustainable consumption and production, the problem of unsustainable practices is represented to partly stem from a technological incapacity to do otherwise. Finally, for tourism to be able to be sustainable there is a need for monitoring tools, and inefficient fossil-fuel subsidies are to be rationalized, since they in part contribute to wasteful consumption.

All in all, although the problems facing sustainable consumption and production patterns are represented as anchored in excessive waste, poor technological capacities, poor consumer information et cetera, there is no reference to any systemic problem. The problems are constructed as various issues that can all be solved within the broader structure of consumerist-capitalism.

6.2. What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the problem?

At a higher level of abstraction, these representations of what the “problems” are fit into an underlying narrative of ecological modernization. To be sure, SDG12 does argue for the fundamental aspects of ecological modernization, namely, for a synergy between growth and environment, integration of environmental considerations in government practices and policy, and emphasis on sector specific innovation. This is reflected in the following aims:

“Promoting the engagement of the private sector in efforts to achieve a shift towards sustainable consumption and production, particularly sectors with a high environmental and social impact, including through corporate environmental and social responsibility” (UN, 2012, p. 5)

“Fostering of increased cooperation and networking among all stakeholders, including public-private partnerships” (UN, 2012, p. 4)

“[Promoting] public procurement practices that are sustainable” (UN, 2015b, p. 22)

“Fostering innovation and new ideas, while increasing recognition of traditional knowledge” (UN, 2012, p. 5)

With these quotes in mind, in SDG12 it is assumed, much like Scheyvens et al. (2016) point out, that private interests have a strong role to play in the developmental agenda in a way that can benefit both companies and the public. Little is said of any conflict between companies and environment or workers, which a Marxist or a treadmill analysis would emphasize. There is also a strong belief in rational consumers’ ability to drive change through consumption, given that they can access reliable information. Add to this a reduction in waste on multiple levels and “encouraging” companies to adopt sustainable practices.

While claiming that fundamental changes in consumption and production are needed, the problem is constructed to be anchored in excessive waste of resources, lack of motivation on part of companies, poor consumer information, poor technological capacities and poor monitoring tools. Thus, the overarching political and economic imperatives of the capitalist-consumerist society are overlooked. These assumptions and problem representations are indicative of an ecological modernization perspective, in which environmental degradation and climate change are anomalies that can be corrected by modernizing to a “greener” form of capitalism.

Be that as it may, it should be stated that sustainable development is not synonymous with ecological modernization, a conceptual confusion that has struck many a scholar (Baker, 2007). What can be said to separate the two is that sustainable development is more concerned with the issue of North-South relations and social equality, nevertheless they both hold a strong optimism toward the private sector’s capacity to take on a new environmentally friendly type of growth (Hopwood, 2005). Baker (2007) argues that sustainable development under the devise of the Brundlandt report did challenge the traditional growth paradigm and the overconsumption of

Western lifestyles, although in the next section I find that this does not necessarily hold for SDG12.

6.3. What is left unproblematic in this representation of the problem?

Having argued that the SDG12 approach to sustainability aligns with ecological modernization, this section deals with the issues that the SDGs do not problematize and where the SDGs remain silent. Sustainable development may have established a hegemonic position as of 2015, although these supposedly universal⁵ goals are by no means uncontroversial. The task at hand in this section is not necessarily to suggest how the goals could have been drafted, but rather to interrogate the goals proposed, problematize what has been left unproblematized and to look for contradictions (Bacchi, 2009, p. 13). This section is split into four separate but interlinked sub-sections, which reflect on some of the ideas unproblematized or excluded in SDG12.

6.3.1. The Growth-Environment Dilemma

Perhaps one of the most fundamental insights in the treadmill theory, also recognized by degrowth, is the conflict between economic growth and environmental degradation. Concerned with consumer information, reducing waste and promoting technological development, the SDG12 largely eschews the topic of a contradictory relation between growth and environmental protection. To be sure, several of the sub-goals address the excessive waste of natural resources, chemicals and food. Nevertheless, any larger contradiction between growth and the environment is left largely unproblematic, such as that of pursuing infinite growth with finite resources.

Part of the suggested antagonism between economic growth and environmental sustainability is the need to speed up turnover times to allow for accelerating the treadmill. By speeding up the turnover time, consumer demand is kept high which is needed for increasing production (Hannigan, 2006). Harvey (2015) argues that the means for doing are several, and it is often done through planned obsolescence, meaning that products intentionally wear out before their potential

⁵ A point to raise is to what extent this agenda, or indeed any agenda, can be “universal”? Arguably this is an ideological assertion if there ever was one. Any commitment to resolving social issues ought to live through differences of opinion, tradeoffs and discontent as social actors seek common ground. Nevertheless, although interesting, a discussion on universality and what it means is beyond the scope of this thesis.

life-span, or through fashion trends and advertising that make goods seem obsolete. From the perspective of environmental protection, planned obsolescence can be argued to be inherently unsustainable and arguably not within the ambition achieving “sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources” (UN, 2015b, p. 22), as consumers continuously dispose artificially “old” products and try to keep up with a changing fashion. On these grounds, arguably there are some conceptual contradictions in the ambition to “encourage companies [...] to adopt sustainable practices” (UN, 2015b, p. 22.), given that companies’ interests in pursuing profits and growth may stand in contrast to what would be characterized as sustainable practices.

Going further, the 10-year framework promotes that

“[e]fforts to promote sustainable consumption and production should be pursued in a manner that supports new market development opportunities [...] the implementation of [sustainable consumption and production] programmes, [should take] *into account* available information on *the root causes of current consumption patterns*” (UN, 2012, p. 4-5, emphasis added)

It is interesting to note that while arguing for recognition of the root causes of current consumption patterns, SDG12 says very little about the way in which market-driven economic development and consumerism has contributed to the current predicament. There is no mention of economic incentives and their potential role in establishing unsustainable practices. On the contrary, market opportunities are emphasized as the way forward. The ideas gathered from the treadmill and the degrowth analysis remain unrecognized in favor of an ecological modernization interpretation, arguing for sustainable use of resources, ethical consumerism and the like. Naturally, providing a causal explanation for root causes is a difficult task. Nonetheless, with a determination to “protect the planet from degradation, including through sustainable consumption and production, sustainably managing its natural resources and taking urgent action on climate change” (UN, 2015b, p. 2.) it can be argued that the way in which mass consumerism and the pursuit of economic growth relates to environmental degradation ought to be recognized. The critical perspectives put forth here make a strong case to think that as companies continuously expand, they work toward speeding up turnover times, notwithstanding the alleged overconsumption of a consumerist lifestyle. From the treadmill perspective, the problem of continuously increasing production is that sooner or later the ecological constraints will be confronted, as resources are depleted or pollution causes severe environmental degradation.

Constraints are not handled through reduced consumption nor a change in lifestyles, but by finding new areas for exploitation, as to continue growing (Gould et al., 2004; Schnaiberg et al., 2002). This begs the question whether infinite growth and environmental protection can be reconciled.

6.3.2. Decoupling Growth?

The contradiction between the environment and economic growth is thus one of the problems left unproblematic in SDG12, although it is not ignored altogether. The 10-year framework promotes

“economic development within the carrying capacity of ecosystems by addressing and, *where appropriate, decoupling economic growth* from environmental degradation” (UN, 2012, p. 2, emphasis added)

and similarly, in SDG8 there is an ambition to

“endeavour to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation” (UN, 2015b, p. 19).

Although this idea is characteristically (arguably intentionally) vague, it is an interesting goal. Fundamentally, de-coupling is about establishing a way in which economies can grow without a corresponding ecological degradation. Some of the ideas conforming to this notion are promoting “resource efficiency and sustainable use of resources” and “repair and maintenance as an alternative to new products” (UN, 2012, p. 5, 8). Nevertheless, referring to decoupling may well be argued to be an attempt to circumvent the critique regarding the growth-environment dilemma. In a similar vein, in referring to the strengthening of “scientific and technological capacity”, “lifestyles in harmony with nature” and efficient use of resources, the problem is constructed as separate from economic growth (UN, 2015b, p. 22-23).

Jackson (2009, p.67) calls this the “conventional response to the dilemma of growth”. Given the pragmatic and familiar aspects of claims that efficiency and entrepreneurship is what will overcome ecological confrontations, it is a convenient way of constructing the problems concerning sustainable production and consumption. Jackson (2009) emphasizes the need to separate relative and absolute decoupling, which in practice are very different things. Relative decoupling is about having more economic activity with relatively less environmental damage, in short: being more efficient. Absolute decoupling, on the other hand, is about reducing

environmental degradation in absolute terms while having a growing economy. Throughout his analysis, Jackson finds some evidence of relative decoupling but little to none evidence of absolute decoupling, concluding that “[a]s an escape from the dilemma of growth it is fundamentally flawed. Ever greater consumption of resources is itself a driver of growth” (Jackson, 2009, p. 76). Similarly, Chang (2014, p. 297) claims that it is easier to raise productivity in manufacturing, since agriculture is dependent upon the physical environment and services are “inherently impervious to increases in productivity”⁶, suggesting that an increased consumption of manufactured goods ought to be inherent the consumerist-capitalist model⁷.

Nevertheless, the reason for making these points is not to say that the idea of decoupling is impossible – that is for economists, entrepreneurs and politicians to work out. I merely want to direct attention to the way in which SDG12 constructs the problems facing sustainable production and consumption, and problematize them and their potential contradictions. Fundamentally, considering challenges like soil and resource depletion, and the claimed need for the regenerative capacity of 1,6 planet Earths, the claims made by the limits-to-growth analysis cannot be ignored. Given the exclusion of the conflict between economy and ecology, it seems that the notion of decoupling is summoned to smooth over any critique on these grounds. No distinction is made between relative and absolute decoupling. The growth dilemma remains, and I contend that is an important one which must be addressed for a sustainability agenda to be both legitimate and effective.

6.3.3. Ethical Consumerism and Consuming Less

On the topic of consumption, there is an ambition to

“ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature” (UN, 2015b, p. 23).

⁶ Since they are dependent on time, for example. The idea is that a concert, elderly care or a guided tour cannot endlessly increase in productivity without destroying or fundamentally changing the service.

⁷ Here one might disagree and argue that the information economy with its immaterial labor carries a potential for de-coupling growth from environmental degradation. Harvey (2015) argues that this is not necessarily the case, as “information workers” too depend on a lot of material labor and material infrastructure, e.g. computers and server halls, to perform their “immaterial” labor. Again, this point merely serves to illustrate out how “decoupling” is not as straightforward as it seems.

This quote clearly resembles the notion of ethical consumerism mentioned in 5.5. Naturally, continuously discovering issues resulting from various industries, such as polluted drinking water, deforestation and unethical treatment of animals, this is an intuitive solution. The argument goes that changing consumer demand can, at least to some extent, change production practices. Nevertheless, scholars have pointed out many limitations for ethical consumerism, such as the contradiction between ethical and economic-pragmatic considerations, which SDG12 effectively leaves unproblematized in its representation of the problem.

Taking the critiques further, tying ethical consumerism into the treadmill analysis, a problem with ethical consumerism is that it never considers the goal of treadmill – to continuously expand and conquer new markets. It can be argued that even if a consumer boycott succeeds in terminating a specific form of production, it does not determine how the alternatives will be produced (Gould, et al. 2004). The link between consumers and the environment is an indirect one, as opposed to the producers whom directly extract natural resources for production. How alternatives are produced will thus depend on the producer's access to capital, labor and their assessments of profitability and marketability. What follows is that environmentally conscious individuals whom recycle their waste, or buy less wooden furniture, have little impact if timber companies continue to harvest increasing amounts of timber, as the recycling effect is offset by the production (Gould, et al. 2004).

Moreover, given that there is a certain space for maneuver, simply establishing what is ethical is troublesome. To be sure, the “maze of information and the interdependent effects of different production systems, foods and diets [...] make the life of the critical consumer a tough one” (Gjerris, et al. 2016, p. 97-98). Even a seemingly uncontroversial thing such as Fair Trade – who could oppose *fair* trade? – is criticized for using a poor model (Bacon, 2010; Fridell, 2007; Haight & Henderson, 2010). Along these lines, it can be argued that companies have every incentive to portray their operations as more sustainable than they are. On this topic, the term greenwash frequently figures, as companies create a symbolic rather than substantive commitment to environmental issues (Harvey, 2015). Thus, there may be conflicting interests for providing “the relevant information” (UN, 2015b, p. 23) on part of some companies, as they rather wish to conceal their practices from the public.

Following this, if the UN commits to take “into account available information on the root causes of current consumption patterns” (UN, 2012, p. 5), one would expect some problematization of the way in which market forces drive producers to the most efficient and profit-generating practices, occasionally to the detriment of ethics and ecology. On the contrary, a focus on consuming sustainably is an easy path as it eschews state responsibility and confrontation with market forces. By pointing toward consumers’ inability to consume ethically, current (or increasing) consumption levels are inadvertently supported, without addressing deeper social and environmental issues (Gjerris, et al. 2016). Thus, in pointing toward the need for sustainable consumerism, the difficult questions asked by the treadmill theory and the degrowth paradigm are averted.

Finally, sustainable products are likely to cost more, rendering consumers with lower purchasing power forced to resort to less sustainable choices. A socio-demographic study found that wealthy and well-educated women between 35 and 54 were the ones with the highest propensity to consume responsibly (Pedrini & Ferri, 2014). In a similar vein, Devinney et al. (2012, p. 234) find that ethical consumerism has been and will continue to be contained to small and sporadic consumer groups, with occasional examples where influence is more palpable, arguing that the results imply the need for increased responsibility of companies. On that note it should be said that SDG 12 has little to say regarding increased responsibility of companies, apart for encouraging sustainable practices.

These are a few problems facing ethical consumerism, problems which SDG12 overlook in arguing for information and awareness for people to live “in harmony with nature” (UN, 2015b, p. 23). Arguably, ethical consumerism is not only about social responsibility but about protecting the right to consume, thus excluding any analysis of the challenges of overconsumption which the degrowth analysis finds inherent in the hyper affluent lifestyles of consumer capitalism. From this perspective, focus should be not only on consuming better but on consuming less, which SDG12 has very little to say about. The topic is mentioned briefly in the 10-year framework, in seeking to

“affirm a common vision that [...] [s]upports sustainable, inclusive and equitable global growth [and] sustainable use of resources, as well as [...] the 3R concept (reduce, reuse and recycle) [...] [and to encourage] the 3R concept through, inter alia, the promotion of repair and maintenance work as an alternative to new products” (UN, 2012, p. 2-5).

In this manner, there are minor references to consuming less. In the degrowth paradigm, there is an ambition to reduce consumption on a household basis and shift to an economy based more on sharing. However, from the degrowth point of view it is argued that such a shift challenges the increase in consumption needed for economic growth to be sustained. Thus, this begs the question whether reducing consumption in favor of repairing products is fundamentally incompatible with the imperative of economic growth? Growth, of course, remains at the foundation of sustainable development. Taking the treadmill and degrowth critiques as a point of departure, there is a case for making this argument.

Instead of the SDG12 fully endorsing the idea of consuming less, it is mentioned almost in passing. There is virtually no problematization of highly affluent lifestyles, and ethical consumerism is the preferred goal as it does not question any deeper issues in the consumerist-capitalist model. This despite the abundant criticism levelled at ethical consumerism as a transformative force. Perhaps it can be argued that this focus on consumption and individual action is indicative of the dominance of neoclassical economics today, which largely neglect the sphere of production, which other economic schools (e.g the classic and the Marxist) hold up as the most important part of the economy (Chang, 2014, p. 88). Ultimately, although environmentally powerful, the idea of consuming less appears as a marginal remark in SDG12, perhaps because of the potential contradiction in arguing for reduced consumption alongside sustained and increased growth.

6.3.4. Technological Capacities

Going further, in SDG12 there are strong sentiments to

“Support developing countries to strengthen their scientific and technological capacity to move towards more sustainable patterns of consumption and production” (UN, 2015b, p. 23)

“[and facilitate] access to technical assistance, training, financing, technology and capacity-building, in particular for developing countries [...]

[and foster] innovation and new ideas” (UN, 2012, p. 5)

As mentioned earlier, there are certain caveats to the notion of fixing problems using technology and innovation. Huesemann and Huesemann (2011) argue that technology rather has tended to create unintended consequences and has been mainly used as a tool for increasing profits, as technological development too is guided by the imperative of profit.

Considering the treadmill analysis, it is understandable why strengthening technological capacity and innovation is a preferred objective, as the interests of workers and investors alike lay in increasing production. Thus, promoting the development of clean technologies as a response to environmental problems is a far easier task than challenging the lavish consumer lifestyle or the market logic, which treadmill and degrowth proponents see as the root cause.

Of course, it would be counterfactual to make an argument that technology cannot fix some of the issues of our current predicament. Technological optimists see a bright future with for example solar panels made out of Graphene, biofuels from algae or technologies that remove carbon from the air (Norberg, 2016). Nevertheless, from the non-reformist perspectives raised here, strengthened technological capacities do not necessarily change the need for capital continuously speed up the turnover time of consumer goods, nor do they resolve the contradiction that ecological constraints set to pursuing infinite growth with finite resources.

In that sense, from the treadmill and degrowth perspectives, focusing on innovation and technological capacities can be argued to frame social and political problems in a technological way as to reduce their complexity and make them seemingly apolitical. Instead of confronting the issue of overconsumption, the problem is constructed as being technological. Overall, while it is a minor point in SDG12, this emphasis on innovation and technological capacity feeds into the narrative that minor tweaks and changes are sufficient for achieving sustainable production and consumption patterns.

Conclusively, this section has tried to put forth some of the issues SDG12 leaves unproblematic or does not acknowledge. When it comes to problematizing what is unproblematized in the SDG12, the treadmill theory and the degrowth school has a lot to offer. Most fundamentally, they question the possibility for reconciling growth and environmental protection. From the treadmill perspective, as the industrial complex has the inherent drive to accelerate, it often turns producers to unsustainable practices such as planned obsolescence to increase turnover times. All in all, SDG12 aims to decouple growth from environmental degradation, and whether that is possible or not is something for the future to decide. The critical perspectives put forth here argue that it does not necessarily resolve the foundational growth-environment dilemma, nor does technological progress.

6.4. What effects are produced by this representation of the problem?

The WPR approach argues that the way issues are problematized may produce uneven effects for some groups. This section does not intend to evaluate or measure the outcomes of the problem representations scrutinized, but the purpose of this section is to critically inquire and rethink the effects of certain problem representations. This section allows for an analysis of who benefits from the “problem” representation, and what is likely to change or remain the same with this representation of the “problem”. At this point it is crucial to reflect once again upon the sheer breadth and influence of the SDGs, signed by 193 countries and which aims to set the agenda for international development for 15 years.

The way in which SDG12 approaches the challenges for sustainable consumption and production shapes the problem as rooted in various shortcomings but not in any systemic shortcoming of the capitalist-consumerist model. The many problems identified in SDG12 ultimately fit into bigger narratives such as the limits to growth and the treadmill of production. From these non-reformist critiques one could go so far as to suggest that constructing the problem as exogenous to the inherent failures of consumerist-capitalism is effectively taking place at the expense of true environmental progress. Fundamental change is called upon, although it is questionable to what extent the problem representations in SDG12 actually reflect fundamental change, as the modernization project carries on albeit veiled in green. When SDG12 eschews the uncomfortable questions asked by treadmill and degrowth proponents, in favor of tinkering with the details, all the violations of people and nature can be dismissed as “unintentional collateral damage in an economic system motivated by the best of ethical intentions” (Harvey, 2015, p. 284)

Following Harvey’s poignant statement, it can be said that the discursive effect of more-or-less ignoring the contradictions of the capitalist-consumer society is that it effectively limits “the kind of social analysis that can be produced” (Bacchi, 2009, p. 16). For example, in emphasizing

“[that] sustainable consumption and production should be pursued in a manner that supports new market development opportunities [...] the engagement of the private sector in efforts to achieve a shift towards sustainable production and consumption, particularly [in] sectors with a high environmental and social impact, including through corporate environmental and social responsibility... (UN, 2012, p. 4-5)

the private sector is held forth as a strong actor, notwithstanding any reflection on the contradictions discussed in the previous section. On that note, it can be argued that if sustainability is conceived of as minor lifestyle changes and a product to buy in the market, efforts are diverted from addressing larger contradictions. Following this line of thought, Žižek makes an interesting point in saying that “the multiplicity of choices with which the market bombards us only serves to obfuscate the absence of any really radical choice concerning the fundamental structure of society” (2009, p. 63). By having a highly influential actor such as the UN promote this discourse, transformational ambitions spelled out by the treadmill and degrowth are marginalized in favor of discussions on “public-private partnerships”, “innovation and new ideas” and “sustainable lifestyles” (UN, 2012, p. 4,5,9).

In constructing sustainability along the lines of ecological modernization, the UN contributes to consolidating a discourse on sustainable production and consumption and sustainability disguised as capitalist development. What is needed is a matter of doing things more efficiently, increasing technology and supporting “new market development opportunities” (UN, 2012, p. 4). Or to

“substantially reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse [...] achieve [...] environmentally sound management of chemicals [...] implement tools to monitor sustainable development impacts [...] rationalize *inefficient* fossil-fuel subsidies [...]” (UN, 2015b, p. 22-23, emphasis added)

All in all, given the influence of the UN, being the closest thing to a global governance structure there is, this further consolidates and reproduces a discourse of economizing and modernization. Davidson and Frickel (2004, p.478, in Hannigan, 2006, p. 54) argue that controlling discourse production has the power to “delimit both the actors that can legitimately engage in politics and the issues that are subject to debate”. From the degrowth and treadmill perspectives this is worrisome given the acute need to reconsider whether the current global consumerist-capitalist model truly does carry the capacity to “go sustainable”, and what the alternative will look like if it cannot.

Not only do problem representations set strains on what social analyses can be made, but there are also material consequences. On the topic of environmental degradation, there are many examples of the dire material effects that people face, particularly in the Global South. Examples

of issues argued to result from the continuous increase in natural resource extraction (speeding up the treadmill) are plenty; degradation of both terrestrial and marine eco-systems needed to sustain human livelihoods, industrial pollution and smog, de-forestation of rainforests and boreal forest, land-grabbing and displacement for industry (WWF, 2016). How these issues are addressed may come to be highly influence by the SDG agenda. Thus, it must be emphasized that way the “problem” surrounding sustainable consumption and production patterns is presented not only has discursive but also lived effects, especially in terms of the response (or lack thereof).

7. Concluding Discussion

Ultimately, in this thesis I have tried to problematize the construction of the problems facing sustainable consumption and production patterns in SDG12. The problem representations in SDG12 approaches sustainable consumption and production from the perspective of ecological modernization, and it has been argued that it effectively excludes many critical ideas from its narrative surrounding sustainability, leaving important criticisms unproblematized.

Taking the treadmill of production theory and the degrowth paradigm as points of departure for the analysis, one of the main criticisms is that SDG12 does not address the potential contradiction between economic growth and environmental protection. Little is said about reducing consumption levels despite claims that current lifestyles necessitate the carrying capacity of 1,6 planet Earths. There is a minor reference to an ambition to de-couple growth from environmental degradation, which some claim does not change the fundamental critique. Instead, efficient use of resources and reduced waste is emphasized, along with expecting consumers to make their own sustainability agenda through consuming ethically. Companies are encouraged to adopt sustainable practices, and whether this is against their profit interest is not considered, as climate change is something “universal” which everyone must fight for. There is also a minor reference to strengthening technological capacities for sustainability. Fundamentally, SDG12 excludes the potential contradictions of the capitalist-consumerist society.

Naturally, given how the UN works – 193 countries effectively signed off on the agenda – this is possibly the best the UN could do. With so many diverging interests and perspectives, it would perhaps be naive to assume that the UN could agree on an agenda for radical transformation. Writing about the conflict between ecological modernization and the treadmill model, Hannigan (2006) suggests that one’s preference may well reflect one’s position in the conflict between gradualism and radical transformation. Naturally, given that the UN depends on nation states for funding which in turn are dependent upon private companies for tax money, radical transformation does not come easy. Thus, although the degrowth and treadmill perspectives offer valuable ideas, there is no institutional space for enacting such ideas and thus ecological modernization-interpretations of sustainability become dominant.

Nevertheless, in 2015 the SDGs enrolled on the “world’s biggest advertisement campaign” (Monllos, 2015), and they continue to be promoted under the banner of fundamental change, universality, and transformation of the world. Although most people agree that the SDGs have done a good job in raising awareness and uniting people in fighting climate change, the problem representations in SDG12 do not problematize the dominant economic motives, which from the treadmill and degrowth narratives certainly contributed to establishing hyper-affluent material lifestyles that some argue threaten ecosystems worldwide.

This is somewhat contradicting considering claims of “taking into account available information on the root causes of current consumption patterns” in pursuit of “[f]undamental changes” (UN, 2012, p. 5, 2). On that note, Lidskog and Sundqvist (2002) argue that science is by no means an apolitical endeavor used in environmental regimes. Rather, drawing on the sociology of scientific knowledge, they argue that the way science is summoned in environmental regimes highly depends upon a social order and political negotiations. Thus, in line with Scheyvens et al.’s (2015) concerns about the Global North’s corporate interests in the drafting process of the SDGs, there are important questions to raise on how this has influenced the agenda. Given the political nature of scientific knowledge, science can always be used in a way that strengthens one actor’s narrative while weakening competing narratives. Perhaps this has contributed to constructing the problems facing sustainable consumption and production patterns in a way that does not question the imperative of economic growth, instead focusing on ethical consumerism and technological development.

To be sure, from the perspective of degrowth paradigm, the ambition to “encourage companies, especially large and transnational companies, to adopt sustainable practices” (UN, 2015b, p. 22) is not only weakly phrased but fundamentally contradictory. Given that transnational companies are primarily concerned with growing, they will strive to do so and if that comes at the cost of environmental degradation, encouragement from the UN will not stop them. Companies will continue to strive for increased consumption levels and higher turnover to be able to grow.

Perhaps it can be said that the ideational calls for universal transformation have been confronted by *realpolitik*. The way in which documents such as these documents are written is an unforgiving format for critical reflection and discussion, as clear objectives and powerful goals are pursued. Be that as it may, the contradictions in the goals may threaten both their

effectiveness and legitimacy. Using “transforming our world” as a slogan is arguably a good marketing strategy, although given that I find SDG12 to largely reflect business-as-usual with minor tweaks. Along these lines, there is reason for concern that the uncritical acceptance of the problem representations in SDG12 risks understating the gravity of the social, political and environmental issues of our time. In that sense, Escobar’s poignant problematization of the sustainable development discourse seems equally relevant today:

“This reconciliation of economy and ecology is intended to create the impression that only minor corrections to the market system are needed to launch an era of environmentally sound development, hiding the fact that the economic framework itself cannot hope to accommodate environmental concerns without substantial reform.” (Escobar, 1996)

Ultimately, the aim here has not been to make any realist propositions, but to direct attention to the UN’s construction of the problems facing sustainable production and consumption. Having scrutinized the problematizations internal to SDG12, and pointing toward some points where they can be challenged, new questions emerge for guiding further research. The treadmill model and the degrowth paradigm effectively see many issues and shapes of environmental degradation and unsustainable practices as natural consequences to the way in which the global market functions. Although these are uncomfortable questions to ask, I contend that researchers ought to continue to question the cognitive authority of the SDGs, as the agenda is further consolidated. Global leaders are meeting in 2018 to review SDG12 at the High-Level Political Forum (UN, 2017). Although many argue that it is the best agenda thus far, conflicts remain.

In line with the analysis done here, there are some critical questions that ought to be discussed. To start with, notwithstanding vague references to decoupling, how is the potential contradiction between infinite growth and finite resources resolved? Can growth remain the foundational imperative for our societies? Given many claims of a tradeoff between environmental protection and economic growth, how does this affect the private sector engagement with the SDGs? And to what extent can individuals be trusted to make ethical choices in their consumption? Finally, it should be considered whether overconsumption is a problem. If so, how is a reduction in consumption levels unified with a growing economy?

8. References

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