AIMING FOR REAL TRANSITION OR "GREENING" THE IMPERIAL MODE OF LIVING? REFLECTIONS ON THE ROLE OF MEDIUM CLASSES IN PROMOTING SOCIAL INNOVATION FOR SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

1 INTRODUCTION

Contemporary societies face encompassing challenges toward sustainable development, which include the role of national states in regulating the spheres of the globalized production and trade as well as the role of individuals in making choices and living their lives in hyper-consumerist contexts. The current guises of sustainable development have intricate relations with the market, in such a manner that the need for changes towards sustainability-oriented practices is more and more attributed to the patterns of production and consumption (Roy and Singh, 2017; Tukker *et al*., 2008).

Social innovations for sustainable consumption (SISC) have been increasing worldwide on the political and research agenda, and it seems to be common sense that the associated initiatives and projects, like sharing communities, housing or energy cooperatives or initiatives, which address natural resources' saving and waste reduction, can make a valuable contribution to sustainable development (Boyko *et al*., 2017; Martin, 2016). SISC can play an essential role in alleviating consequences of high-income differences and unemployment rates as well as an inadequate social security system and public services, acting as "gap fillers" for specific issues (Schäfer et al., 2019). However, there is a danger of the initiatives to become overstrained by these tasks, which ought to be dealt with on a national scale and a variety of far-reaching political measures (Jaeger-Erben et al. 2015; Howaldt et al. 2016).

Some SISC strive to improve living conditions of societal groups that are affected by the social-ecological consequences of the current unsustainable modes of production and consumption (unfair global value chains, health risks because of toxic waste/ polluted cities, no access to the affordable transport, healthy food, etc.). Others try to establish alternatives to features or elements of the resource-intensive lifestyles of (mainly) middle-classes (Schäfer et al. 2019). While it seems somewhat plausible that those SISC, which are addressing middle-classes, can be established as business models with services that are paid for (e.g., rent a bike, car-sharing, co-working spaces), this is more difficult for those that are addressing socially deprived groups (Martin, 2016).

SISC are challenging current ways of production and consumption (Jaeger-Erben et al., 2015), and they hold the potential to contribute to environmental and social alternatives. However, it is questionable if (and to what extent) some of them contribute to all dimensions of sustainable development if their primary focus is on "greening" market-based social acting. That is especially the case for SISC, which closely relate to some lifestyles, notorious for externalizing their demand for working force and resource use – the so-called imperial modes of living (IML) (Brand and Wissen, 2017; 2018).

In this paper, we critically examine the role of the middle class in promoting social innovations for sustainable consumption (SISC). We propose a theoretical framework that explores how the middle class, despite their resource-intensive consumption patterns, can play a dual role in fostering sustainable consumption. On one hand, their higher consumption levels may pose challenges to sustainability due to greater resource use and environmental impact. On the other hand, the middle class is well-positioned to initiate and sustain social innovations through their economic capacity and ideological commitment to sustainability. By developing this theoretical proposition, we aim to deepen the understanding of how middle-class behaviors and values intersect with sustainable development goals, highlighting both the potential and the limitations of this demographic in driving meaningful change.

2 LIFE STANDARDS AND MIDDLE CLASSES

In the globalization era, the idea of development has integrated the world market and spread Western material culture, creating uniform patterns and normative assessments of a good life in modern democratic states. Standard of living, measured by the quantity of goods and services consumed, was initially associated with improvements in the working class's life in industrialized countries. Western consumption patterns, centered on standardized housing and automobile transport, became the hegemonic concept of the "good life" (Brand and Wissen, 2012:549), despite its ethnocentric and classist underpinnings.

These living standards are linked to the dominant modes of production and consumption in the Global North (Brand and Wissen, 2012:549). Rigid class divisions became less relevant as post-1945 affluence and welfare state policies led to mass consumption and the embourgeoisement of the working class (Rhineheart, 1975). This gave rise to a new middle class in industrialized countries, characterized by higher material expectations, family-oriented lifestyles, and improved domestic comfort.

As globalization advanced in the late 20th century, Western standards of living—defined by high consumption, material comforts, and constant entertainment—became global benchmarks (Latouche, 2019:283). This spread reduced diverse notions of well-being to a single collective project (Latouche, 2019:284). The market, through production and consumption relations, now centralizes everyday practices for a growing number of people, with global middle classes sharing values and habits that reinforce market-based social membership (Berthour, 2019).

The globalization enabled people and societies to live together in local, provincial and national realms, and also subsist in transborder spaces (Scholte, 2005). In practical terms, it broadened and diversified the world trade between nations and increased the mobility of capital and work, the two main forces shaping capitalism. The market practices of offshoring and outsourcing in global levels have amplified consumption possibilities while also have decreased the cost of buying industrial goods for the medium-classes in northern countries. In southern countries, it meant a new flow of circulation of wealth, the inclusion of many workers in the formal labor market and the increase in urban population. In a model known as middle-class oriented development (Mead and Schwenninger, 2002), the middle-classes around the world connect in a project of extending mass affluence found in the advanced industrial economies into developing world as rapidly as possible as key to global political stability and economic growth. In such an integrated middle-class oriented development, the global expansion of the middle-class comes from the rise of the working poor through the increasing creation of work opportunities, prompted by a financial architecture that promotes capital flows from advanced industrialized countries to emerging economies. The cross-border economic transferences of capital intensified the offshoring of manufacturing and services from high cost to low-cost destinations, particularly from the global North to the South.

While global middle classes share similar aspirations for living standards and development dynamics, there are still contextual differences in consumption patterns, with the middle class in Northern countries benefiting from greater economic power. The concept of Imperial Modes of Living (IML) (Brand and Wissen, 2017; 2018) describes how capitalist core countries exploit an unjust international order that grants them access to natural resources and cheap labor. Initially limited to the upper and middle classes in the early 20th century, IML has since expanded across both class and geographical lines. IML connects global labor forces unequally, enabling a high standard of consumption in the North, driven by economic growth and increased labor productivity (Brand and Wissen, 2017).

As IML becomes hegemonic through globalization, they extend from the Global North to the Global South. Individuals involved in IML do not consciously choose to exploit

resources; rather, these practices are tied to power dynamics in production and consumption. As Brand and Wissen (2017) note, workers in core countries do not intentionally support the subordination of their Southern counterparts. However, the persistence of these inequalities is influenced by the Northern middle class's need to sell their labor and maintain their living standards, despite stagnant wages. In the Global North, IML has kept reproduction costs low, stabilizing society, while in the Global South, it has shaped a dominant development model (Brand and Wissen, 2017).

3 MIDDLE CLASS AND SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION AND GREEN LIFESTYLES

Consuming is fundamental to all forms of existence within ecological relationships. In the market system, it defines the existence of certain types. For the middle class, the market is a social institution that connects individuals to the goods and experiences necessary for existence and self-expression. In industrialized Northern countries, the emergence of a new middle class has pacified class struggles through consumerist identities (Brand and Wissen, 2017). A similar process is occurring in developing countries, where new middle classes are adopting consumption patterns akin to those in industrial societies (Kuhn, 2009). As incomes rise, consumption increases, leading to higher fossil fuel use. The environmental impact of spreading Northern middle-class consumption patterns is significant, contributing to ecological collapse in the 21st century. The combined effects of global production and consumption have already exceeded sustainable limits, and the likely growth of middle classes in developing countries will intensify the environmental crisis.

The persistence of IML in the global North and its spread to the emerging countries of the South have accentuated a severe crisis in environmental politics, evincing that humanity as a whole is not equally responsible for environmental depletion. Social power relations and structures indicate different consumption potentials and carbon footprints. It features inequalities between North and South toward the implications on phenomena such as climate change. It also highlights disparities within national realities, as deprivileged social classes do not follow the consumerist lifestyles of the middle-classes. Under this prism, the politicization of the ecological crisis “reveals a comprehensive quest to reorient the existing production and consumption patterns in their entirety, in the context of a transformation toward the *green economy*” (Brand and Wissen, 2019:39). Greening economies and lifestyles means making consumption and production practices more sustainable (Spaaragen and Korp, 2009).

However, the *greening* imperative does not challenge the premises of Western developed societies in what comes to define standards of living according to high consumption patterns, nor in redefining the meaning of “good life” toward alternative patterns. Greening lifestyles as a strategy for tackling sustainability problems, weather as individual consumer’s orientation or mor deep institutional commitment, is questionable because some lifestyles related to consumption patterns of rich countries have strong impact on the degradation of nature, and the extension to the inhabitants of underdeveloped countries – even in the greener version – could accelerate environmental collapse.

4 SOCIAL INNOVATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

Worldwide, the realities of environmental degradation and social erosion clash with the weakened resilience of the public sphere (Klein, 2014), whether in countries with robust welfare states or those with limited government presence. These crises stem from sustainability being framed within development imperatives since the 1980s, reflecting a shift towards global neo-liberalism (Berthour, 2019). Today, the failure to address sustainability is evident: CO2

emissions continue to rise globally when they should be decreasing, and social inequalities are increasing, even in wealthy OECD countries. In many areas, market logic increasingly dominates state functions, as "the elements constitutive of the market principle are no longer confined within the well-defined time and space of the marketplace" (Berthour, 2019:82).

The neo-liberal development agenda, which gained traction after the Cold War, emphasized market competition and comparative advantage, while shifting the role of government from national planning and state services to facilitating market operations and involving 'non-governmental' actors. "It envisaged a new enabling role in which the function of government was to secure the conditions in which markets could operate more fully across a range of areas of social and economic life" (Lewis, 2019:205). This agenda, alongside critiques of traditional international development practices, highlighted the potential of non-governmental approaches to 'alternative development'. Such perspectives emerged from the recognition that states and markets alone are insufficient for addressing poverty and environmental challenges. Alternative development strategies sought to transcend mainstream development models, proposing different approaches based on new ideological foundations for understanding nature, society, and institutions (Gudynas, 2013).

The new roles of the state in the realm of neoliberal politics emphasize individual responsibility, which implies that effective changes for sustainability may come directly from consumer's acts of sustainable consumption (Grabs *et al*., 2016). In the face of the social, economic, political, and environmental challenges of the 21st century on a global scale, SI phenomena have often been mentioned as a new approach to the framing of problems and the elaboration of solutions. Policy actors on different governance levels have become interested in the potential of social innovations to introduce or enhance change towards sustainable consumption and seek ways of promoting these initiatives and enlarging their sustainability effects (Barroso, 2011; BEPA, 2010).

The need to address societal challenges or local demands is a primary driver for initiating social innovations (SI) (Howaldt et al., 2016). Social innovations are defined as "alternative practices or new variations of practices, which differ substantially from established or mainstream routines" (Jaeger-Erben et al., 2015: 785). These innovations often arise from consumers' initiatives, suggesting that consumers are key agents in fostering social change (Trukker et al., 2017; Seyfang and Smith, 2007). The emphasis on consumers highlights the failure of public and corporate governance to implement effective sustainable development changes (Stevens, 2010). Social innovations are often seen as grassroots phenomena (Smith et al., 2017), with social movements playing a crucial role in shaping socio-ecological issues and driving social change (Givan et al., 2010).

SISC comprise a great variety of bottom-up initiatives, organizational settings, as well as innovative services. They are alternatives to the focus on economic and technological solutions to social and environmental problems and challenge the role of for-profit organizations by providing a broader view of the phenomena of value creation (Tracey and Stott, 2017). The challenge of established practices mostly comes from specific, dedicated groups, often described as agents of change (Seyfang and Smith, 2007). SI also often disseminate in social networks, for what they may obtain high levels of acceptance (McMichael and Shipworth, 2013). Such initiatives focus on the local community level and are opportunities for a collective reframing of problems and solutions (Grabs *et al*., 2016).

SISC also places issues about the legitimacy of environmental claims that may further interact with classist claims in shaping the public opinion about fundamental collective issues concerning changes in the ways contemporary societies produce and consume to achieve sustainable development. Besides consumption habits (as, e.g., mobility by private car, consumption of high quantities of meat, touristic trips by plane) being taken over from the global south, the global discourse on sustainability problems (as climate change) also leads to

global awareness of sustainability problems in part of these middle classes. Middle-class environmental activism is often belittlingly portrayed as an elitist worry that may elude some social groups from the fight for social justice through broadening state participation (Klein, 2014).

In another derogative examination, the conscientious ‘call to action’ among this group may even be considered some form of patronizing (Porritt, 2019) social movements born from below, from the grassroots acting toward environmental concerns. For instance, there is some criticism about the role of SISC that turn into players on the sharing economy. As Martin (2016) puts it, although a critique of hyper-consumption was central to the emergence of the sharing economy niche, it has been successfully reframed by regime actors as purely an economic opportunity. If the sharing economy follows this pathway of corporate co-option, it appears unlikely to drive a transition to sustainability, and it can even bring more distressing features to already problematic scenarios, as creating unregulated marketplaces, reinforcing the neoliberal paradigm; and, becoming an incoherent field of innovation.

Mindful of debates of this kind, the paper aims at a systematic reflection on which role social innovations for sustainable consumption can play for a transition towards global "solidary modes of living" in contrast to stabilizing imperial modes of living. It takes up the tension of middle classes being the primary beneficiaries of the current unsustainable ways of consumption and production on the one side as well as representing the group of actors, which question these modes of living and experiment with alternatives on the other side. It also takes a closer look at the different organizational forms of those social innovations (e.g., market-based business models, associations, cooperatives, municipal measures) and the implications regarding their degree of innovativeness.

3 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In conclusion, the interplay between globalization, market dynamics, and middle-class consumption patterns highlights both opportunities and challenges for sustainable development. The spread of Western consumption ideals and the adoption of Imperial Modes of Living (IML) have intensified environmental and social pressures, illustrating the unsustainable nature of current global practices. While the middle class in both industrialized and developing countries increasingly embraces these consumption patterns, this growth exacerbates ecological and social inequalities. The persistence of these issues underscores the need for a critical reassessment of development models and consumption norms. To address the environmental crisis effectively, it is crucial to rethink the hegemonic definitions of a “good life” and develop alternative frameworks that prioritize sustainability and equitable resource distribution. By recognizing and addressing the limitations of current consumption practices and their global impact, there is an opportunity to foster more sustainable and just approaches to development that align with the pressing challenges of the 21st century.

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