

# THE ERA OF COMFORT, A THREAT TO SUFFICIENCY?

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Stefano Boni is an Italian anthropologist, Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, in the Department of Language and Cultural Sciences. He notably works on power and its adaptation in institutions, questioning its links to hyper-technology, social movements, and mobilizations from below. His research journey began with research on a traditional kingdom in West Africa, followed by a study of consensus-building in socialist Venezuela. He graduated from the University of Siena and Oxford University, where he received his PhD at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, in 1999, under the direction of Paul Dresch. He notably published *Cultures and Powers (Culture et Poteri, in Italian, 2011)* as well as *Homo Comfort (2014)*, questioning comfort from a phenomenological anthropology perspective, which was translated into French (*Homo Comfort, 2022*).

Comfort is an essential part of contemporary life. Born in the 19th century, comfort is now omnipresent in every sphere of our existence, and tends to drastically diminish our sensory experience. This reduction in our sensory experience has numerous consequences for our individual lives, our health, our relationship with nature and the environment, according to the author, – insofar as it stems from an industrial model with harmful consequences (pollution, global warming...). Re-evaluating our relationship with technology and comfort in the light of our real needs, on a community scale, and reinvesting in artisanal techniques, can be levers of emancipation according to the author.

In your book *Homo Comfort*<sup>1</sup> (2014), you write that “comfort is the dominant experiential dimension which has accompanied the rise of contemporary humanity”. Could you elaborate on this diagnosis?

**Stefano Boni:** To comprehend the ascendance of what I have termed "Homo Comfort," it is imperative to elucidate the essence of this concept and differentiate it from other closely related notions.

Comfort constitutes the experiential facet of our senses when they cease to be engaged in intricate, capricious, and taxing stimuli. Indeed, our interactions with the environment have become less intricate because we predominantly engage with objects and materials that transcend the unpredictability of the natural world. Our focus primarily gravitates toward activating our auditory and visual senses. Comfort acts as a shield, insulating our senses and bodily perception from the natural environment. While it does yield pleasurable effects, it is essential to contemplate its imperfections.

Well-being, on the other hand, diverges significantly: it signifies a state of equilibrium and harmony among our physical, emotional, and mental dimensions. It is not intrinsically linked to comfort. One may experience considerable comfort without experiencing well-being. If comfort were synonymous with well-being, it would be challenging to explain the widespread use of psychoactive drugs, such as antidepressants. Conversely, excessive comfort hampers well-being as it eliminates the challenges posed by stimulating interactions with the natural world.

<sup>1</sup> Boni, S. (2014). *Homo comfort. Le superamento tecnologico della fatica e le sue conseguenze*. Elèuthera. (2016), *Technologically-propelled comfort. Some theoretical implications of the contemporary overcoming of fatigue*, Antropologia.

Quality of life is synonymous with the services and daily routines that facilitate the attainment of well-being, such as leading a stress-free life enriched by beauty and the organic elements of nature.

Analyzing the evolution of our senses across historical, geographical, and cultural contexts, it becomes evident that comfort has steadily increased and proliferated across various strata of society since the 19th century, particularly in developed nations.

From a sensory perspective, this entails that our senses are progressively underutilized in interacting with the natural environment (rocks, trees, grass, earth, water...) and are instead becoming increasingly relaxed and disengaged. Interactions with the challenging and unpredictable aspects of our natural environment are becoming less integral to our daily experiences. This transformation underscores comfort as the predominant experiential dimension of contemporary humanity, though it is noteworthy that not all individuals within contemporary society experience the same degree of comfort.

An intriguing development is that comfort, which initially pertained to the simplification of material aspects (cleanliness, food preservation, heating, transportation, etc.), has extended its reach to other aspects of our lives, such as relationships and information. Information is now comfortably accessible, perpetually at our disposal. Online relationships are also becoming progressively comfortable, although it appears that this process has resulted in loneliness, disengagement from long-term commitments, and superficial consumption of others' presence. It can be argued that the ease of accessing information and forming and dissolving relationships has generated negative consequences, such as the proliferation of social networks or virtual love stories that lack face-to-face interaction.

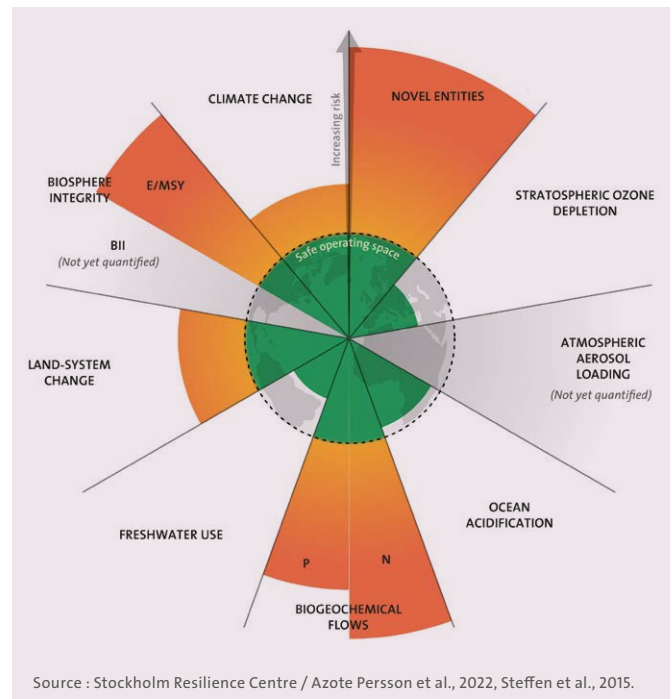
Indeed, comfort yields detrimental consequences in at least three distinct spheres:

- Individual Health: Comfort tends to alienate us from our natural physiological environment, rendering us more susceptible to harm. Some analyses suggest that our proclivity for excessive cleanliness contributes to the rise of autoimmune diseases. When we isolate our bodies and senses, they become less adept at recognizing and combatting invading pathogens, hindering the activation of our immune systems.
- Autonomy: In the past, many human cultures sustained themselves through social and communal networks, within defined territories, by passing down skills that allowed individuals to produce their necessities for living. This is no longer the prevailing paradigm; we have become reliant on external expertise and actors to fulfill our needs, making self-sufficiency a challenging goal to attain. From economic and ecological standpoints, individuals pay for increasing comfort by relinquishing autonomy and self-determination. Philosopher and advocate of degrowth, Serge Latouche,

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aptly encapsulates this evolution by describing how "the useful becomes the ultimate criterion of the good, and the useful is perceived as material 'improvement.' We progressively transition from happiness to well-being, and from well-being to well-having"<sup>2</sup>

- Our Environment: Lastly, considering that comfort is intricately woven into the major industrial transformations of the past century, it exerts adverse effects on our environment, including pollution and the accumulation of toxic materials.



Paradoxically, despite the ubiquity of "green" initiatives in our society, our way of life has never been more disconnected from nature itself. Upon closer examination, our interactions and understanding of the fauna and flora in our vicinity are exceedingly limited. Instead, we tend to distance ourselves and employ screens (air conditioning, plastic gloves, etc.) as barriers from the natural elements and processes. For example, we willfully ignore and forget the conditions under which the animals we consume meet their demise.

Another salient point to bear in mind is that comfort enjoys a high degree of consensus: it is challenging to envision any political party or figure, regardless of their stance, openly criticizing comfort.

<sup>2</sup> Original quote in French : « L'utile devient le critère par excellence du bon, et l'utile est conçu comme « l'amélioration » matérielle. On glisse successivement du bonheur au bien-être, et du bien-être au bien-avoir. », in Latouche, S. (1995), *La mégamachine. Raison technoscientifique, raison économique et mythe du progrès* [The megamachine. Technoscientific reason, economic reason and the myth of progress], La Découverte, p.173.

## Would there be a distinction to make between essential and non-essential needs for comfort?

**S.B.:** As an anthropologist, I believe that all requirements are shaped by cultural contexts. The assertion of the "original affluent society," as proposed in a paper authored by anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, stands that the existence of hunter-gatherer communities can be interpreted as encompassing a sufficient degree of material comfort and security to be deemed "prosperous." Residing within a culture characterized by limited desires, Sahlins contended that hunter-gatherers were capable of leading an "affluent" life through the relatively straightforward fulfillment of their material necessities. Reflecting upon more recent times, our perception of what constitutes a "necessity" in terms of comfort and technological support, to cite just one example, has undergone an extraordinary transformation over the past decade. Smartphones have transitioned from being a superfluous and flexible gadget to one of our utmost indispensable requirements in the present day.

Nevertheless, needs encompass more than just material aspects. As humans, we require social interactions, emotional experiences, a sense of belonging and purpose, challenges, unpredictability, and physical demands, to name but a few. These needs have, in my view, been partially eroded by the rationality of modernity, and we ought to redirect our focus towards them. Material needs can, in my perspective, serve as a diversion when compared to the more foundational human necessities such as relationships, emotions, and spirituality.

## How do you view the idea of sufficiency considering these remarks?

**S.B.:** I believe the concept of sufficiency holds relevance when addressing contemporary challenges, as it entails both personal and collective awareness regarding patterns of consumption, prompting a critical examination thereof.

While opposing narratives continue to exert dominance, there is an observable shift in mindsets, with individuals beginning to recognize the shortcomings inherent in incessant economic and technological accelerations. A segment of humanity is of the opinion that we are, to some extent, on a trajectory toward a form of "collapse", which stands in stark contrast to the idea of sufficiency, and I tend to concur with this perspective.

I posit that a potential avenue for solutions lies in the refocusing on our communal needs and the rediscovery of simple artisanal skills and practices. Examples include crafting wooden furniture, cultivating family and neighborhood gardens, or promoting decentralized bread production. Such small-scale initiatives can instill within us a sense of agency and capability, countering the feeling of helplessness. The profound sense of meaning, purpose, and fulfillment derived from witnessing the direct results of one's actions is immensely potent. In a way, this stands in stark contrast to the sentiments expressed by David Graeber (1961-2020) in his renowned work on "Bullshit Jobs" (2018). An intriguing trend is emerging, where in several European countries, well-educated young individuals are choosing to pursue careers in farming. Similarly, engaging in activities like long-distance walking or bicycling can reconnect us with nature and yield spontaneous and gratifying effects. The challenge lies in transforming these isolated behaviors into societal norms.

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Sufficiency serves as a criterion to guide us in determining which technologies are genuinely essential. As previously mentioned, I hold that a pivotal dimension involves shifting our perspective from global corporate entities to decentralized production. Simple technologies tailored to the needs of local communities can prove more beneficial than large-scale industrial counterparts when prioritizing sufficiency and ecological stability.

Global awareness regarding sufficiency and the imperative to restrict excessive consumption remains relatively limited, although there are promising emerging trends. We find ourselves at a crossroads, where we must decide whether to continue down a path that risks dehumanizing humanity, eroding its autonomy, sensorial richness, and self-determination. Developed societies, logically, should be the first to relinquish what is often referred to as the "western way of life," characterized by an excessive pursuit of comfort when compared to developing nations. Without introspection and transformation of our production and consumption models, we are ill-positioned to offer lessons on sufficiency and the reduction of needs to countries in Africa or Asia. This is particularly crucial, considering that the universal adoption of our lifestyle could precipitate an environmental catastrophe.

As previously mentioned, we stand at a pivotal juncture, and it remains within our capacity to reverse prevailing trends and take meaningful action. In this regard, I hold the belief that social movements and heightened awareness stemming from individuals can exert more potent influence than top-down approaches. The ongoing climate crisis underscores the limitations of state-led transitions.

## Does anthropology have a specific view to bring to current debates on transition?

**S.B.:** I believe that it indeed does, as anthropology fundamentally serves as a discipline that engenders a sense of potentiality.

The primary endeavor of anthropology is to comprehend and portray the diversity of human forms and experiences, all of which are subject to transformation over time. In numerous cultures, their unique way of existence is perceived as the optimal mode of living. Anthropology, in contrast, adopts an inverted perspective, scrutinizing how various historical, cultural, geographical, and contextual factors contribute to diverse human configurations. Much like other social science disciplines, anthropology elucidates the possibility of change. Furthermore, in conjunction with anthropology, phenomenological approaches and studies focused on the evolution of our physical senses play a pivotal role in unraveling concepts such as comfort and deciphering the ramifications of our modernity.

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This process of "de-naturalization" of our current way of life is more imperative now than ever before. Our manner of living is by no means immutable, and we have the potential, and perhaps even the obligation, to draw inspiration from other human cultures that prioritize sufficiency and embrace a simpler material existence. For instance, what is commonly referred to as "indigenous people" are frequently lauded for their pioneering efforts in the preservation of nature and biodiversity, even acknowledged by international organizations such as the United Nations. However, the territories they have been permitted to inhabit have been steadily diminishing for centuries, and this trend persists. This sense of possibility is of paramount importance, serving as an indispensable prerequisite. Fostering an appreciation for sufficiency could offer a path

to dispel the notion that the present world represents the pinnacle of human existence.

