

'ENOUGH' AS NEITHER MORE OR LESS, BUT BETTER!

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The two authors cowrote a book called *Enough!* in 2023 claiming that our future is not about producing more neither living with less.

Thinking about 'enough' can help us structure our thoughts about sufficiency and sustainability. Authors offer several ways a word of enough can materialize. A Universal Basic Income can prove to be a solution to both crisis of unemployment and unsustainability. Consuming in a world of enough would be shifting from the quantity that we consume to the quality of life we experience. Those solutions would require changing the systems toward embedding markets and more diverse economies, allowing for new forms of organizations to appear.

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world caught between twinned narratives. One is that people are insatiable consumers, always wanting more. Capitalism and modernity presume that human history is a journey of continual progress, where we are always improving and heading 'forward' towards a higher quality of life with ever greater quantities of stuff. The other narrative is that of ecological limits. Here, the story is one of the failings and fall of humanity, as human action pushes up against, and at times beyond, the limits of a finite planet. This is a moral clarion that humans need to make sacrifices and consume less.

What if both of these narratives are wrong? What if the human drive to more is neither innate nor necessary to counter with moral prescriptions for less? What if thinking differently opened political and economic possibilities to build a world that was both improved and sustainable? What if we started with a society structured on sufficiency?

How might thinking about 'enough' change how we see and live in the world?

Enough is an amount or particular quantity, but its meaning is also qualitative. Invoking a classic children's tale, Goldilocks found one dish excessively hot and another too cold, but the middle ground was just right. Similarly, having enough food is better for us than consuming either excessive or inadequate amounts. Sufficiency is the sweet spot, better than the excess of more or the inadequacy of less.

Just saying 'we should aspire to enough' is a nice sentiment. But our world is built on narratives of more and less; the economic, political, and ecological systems we have tend to focus on and incentivize more and less. Trying to get beyond this binary is difficult, requiring a complex mix of broad ideas and concrete interventions to shift systems, thinking, and practise from the logic of more and less to that of sufficiency. Beginning to untangle this knot and tease out some key threads, we wrote a book, aptly titled *Enough!*¹

It is a big picture argument with a lot of pieces, to be sure! Certainly, we cannot cover every detail nor make our fullest case in this short piece. Instead, in this brief provocation, we hope to grab your attention and inspire you to think more about 'enough'.

¹ Lawhon, M. and McCreary, T. (2023). *Enough! A Modest Political Ecology for an Uncertain Future*. Agenda Publishing.



WORKING IN A WORLD OF ENOUGH

Work might seem like a strange place to start a conversation about sufficiency, but for ordinary people as well as public discourse about ‘the economy’, work is so very important. As long as livelihoods are tied to work, people need jobs to provide for themselves and their families. A lack of jobs is conventionally a crisis, personally, regionally, nationally, or globally. However, the abundance of work and productivity has also long been a problem for people interested in sustainability. Simply expressed, producing and consuming ever greater quantities of goods presents an ecological crisis.

Plus, the last few decades – and even the last few months with the arrival of new forms of AI – have made clear we have entered a new phase of the automation of work: the world simply does not need the labour of everyone to produce enough for everyone.

Without some creative thinking, this is a problem for everyone. It is obviously a problem for those without work. But it is also a problem for those with work: as radical inequality creates highly unstable societies, inequality is worse for everyone.²

Some have suggested the resolution is green jobs. They insist that a green transition will produce jobs, and there is truth to this. But the jobs associated with building things are necessarily always temporary. And sustainability

We need to shift the conversation from the quantity that we consume to the quality of life that we experience

means both making fewer things, and producing things that will last longer. Thus, longer-term questions about sustainability remain unresolved.

But, perhaps, the seemingly separate looming crises of unemployment and unsustainability might be redressed, in part, through a common political solution.

Specifically, we suggest that a Universal Basic Income (UBI) may be key to addressing both. The idea of UBI is old, but it is taking on renewed urgency in light of concerns about automation and sustainability.

There are clear reasons to think UBI might help us address our quagmire. To be clear, this is not to say it *will*. Social scientists have time and again insisted that there is a politics to social and environmental change: political and economic structures organise how change unfolds and cultural narratives shape how we interpret change. Effective change requires altering structures and rewriting our stories. But this does not make change impossible; it means we have to think about what stories we tell.

UBI advocates have long argued that such income would create greater economic stability. It would help address the problem of surplus labour. Simply put, UBI would delink our livelihoods from paid work, and thereby resolve the issue that there are more workers than jobs.³

² Pickett, K. and Wilkinson, R. (2010). *The spirit level: Why equality is better for everyone*. Penguin UK.

³ Stern, A. with Kravitz, L. (2016). *Raising the Floor – How a Universal Basic Income Can Renew our Economy and Rebuild the American Dream*, PublicAffairs, New York.

But why might a UBI help with sustainability?

We suggest two reasons it might. First, it could rupture dominant ideas about our personal responsibility to work hard. In a world that is stressful and uncertain, people are driven to work and to consume. Simply stated, when people work hard, they often are stressed! Consumption relieves some of this stress, albeit temporarily. Uncertainty is also very important here. It makes us more competitive with each other. When not everyone can succeed, it raises the stakes to be among those that do. Moreover, associating moral value with economic success means that those who fail deserve their fate. In a world of inequality, we want to be among those with more. Many people work far beyond what is needed to provide for themselves, to build savings and ward off future risks, as well as to achieve status and prove their moral worth.

Economic security – which could be provided through a genuine UBI – is key to reducing stress and uncertainty. The many ongoing UBI experiments show what a difference even a small, regular cash transfer makes for people.⁴ Providing a UBI is also a way of changing the moral story: it says that all people deserve a livelihood, even if they do not

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work for an income.⁵ This does not write off the possibility that some people, and perhaps most, will work! UBI trials have indeed made the counterpoint, showing people get work skills and education with UBI. Having economic security actually enables people to be better prepared to do the work they want to do (whether the work is paid, or not).

The second reason why a UBI might support sustainability is that it enables us to build the economy differently. At present, the demand for jobs creates pressures for economic development, making it hard for governments and voters to say ‘no’ to any proposed project. Greater economic security for everyone would make it easier to say ‘no’ to unsustainable development.

It also makes it easier to invest in, and support, businesses that have a sustainable ethos.⁶ Again, ongoing UBI experiments here cannot be read as definitive, but already indicate that people spend money differently with small, regular cash transfers, than, for example, if their salaries were raised. Not all incomes – even incomes of the same amount – are spent the same.

⁴ Wilson, N. and McDaid, S. (2021). *The Mental Health Effects of a Universal Basic Income*. Glasgow: The Mental Health Foundation.

⁵ Hanlon, J., Barrientos, A. and Hulme, D. (2010). *Just Give Money to the Poor: The Development Revolution from the Global South*, Kumarian Press.

⁶ Lawhon, M. and McCreary, T. (2020). Beyond jobs vs environment: on the potential of universal basic income to reconfigure environmental politics. *Antipode* 52, no. 2: 452-474.



CONSUMING IN A WORLD OF ENOUGH

What would it mean to rethink ‘limits’ and abandon the idea that we should pursue sustainability by consuming less? Limits are, of course, shorthand in environmental thought for a wide set of ideas that pushed against the presumption of progress – the expectation that the world would always get better and that nature could always produce more. Many environmentalists have long insisted that the way to be sustainable is by living with less. Environmentalism has long been associated with a romanticization of low tech lives close to nature and a fundamental challenge to cultural narratives that technology needed to improve.

However, many environmentalists have also begun to realise that this vision of less has limited appeal. Further, thinking about sustainability in more open-ended ways meant moving past a story of sustainability as sacrifice, towards thinking sustainability could also mean ‘living better’.⁷

This means asking what sustainability would *feel like* for most people. Here the point is not that technology will solve our problems and allow us to live the same way, only with electric cars and organic vegan burgers. The point is that a sustainable world will *feel* more safe, secure and materially comfortable than the world we have today. We need to shift the conversation from the quantity that we consume to the quality of life that we experience.

This narrative flips classic environmentalism on its head. Instead of making individual sacrifices, we can pursue sustainability by creating systems that enable us all to live well. For example, we know that *everyone* would be able to get around the city more quickly and efficiently if we had good mass transit; reducing traffic would increase average speeds, allowing people to move faster than cars do on clogged roads. It would also increase urban density by reducing the need for parking.

Environmental economists have repeatedly shown that a green transition makes economic sense. For instance, the costs of lead exposures to society are higher than the cost of removing lead from urban environments. Similarly, fossil fuels and climate crises do not come cheap. We collectively subsidise fossil fuels with billions of dollars a year, while trillions more are spent in disaster recoveries with intensifying storms, floods, and fires. This is money that could be used in all kinds of ways to fund cheaper, greener sources of energy.

For many of us, making changes like this would mean that we have fewer materials flowing in and out of our day to day lives. We would have fewer items which would last longer, we would share more and perhaps individually own less. These changes are big. But it matters, in terms of how we think about building sustainable futures, to grapple with both what we would lose – and crucially, shed light on the many, many things we would gain.

CHANGING THE SYSTEMS FOR A WORLD OF ENOUGH

The kinds of changes described above cannot be achieved through changes to individual consumption. Businesses can play a role, but there is a need to shift wider systems to enable pressures and outcomes to better match. Making these kinds of changes happen requires us to take a different approach to the economy, to focus on the question of distribution. Old distinctions that focus on capitalism, socialism, growth and inequality matter, but may be less important than whether everyone has enough. Again, this is not a moral call for us to be more virtuous and self-sacrificing. It is a call for us to follow our collective self-interest by changing systems to make it so that we, together, do the things that make the world better.

Some argue that enough for all might be best pursued through a big state that owns and distributes things; enough for all could be centrally provided. Yet the histories of big states give us reason to be cautious here.⁸ Instead, there is reason to consider *embedding* markets and creating *more diverse* economies, while also increasing redistribution through taxes, as a strategy to create enough for all. Diversity enables experimentation in ways that are difficult to achieve through centralised authorities. Rather than asking shareholders to value things other than profits, we need a system that re-embeds economic activities in social relationships. Companies need to be subject to social pressure and government regulation, and there needs to be greater possibilities for other kinds of enterprise, from co-operatives to small entrepreneurs. Redistribution of income allows people greater control over the economy. A UBI can be an important piece of the puzzle here, even if it, alone, will not directly create all of the desired changes.⁹

CONCLUSION

Words and narratives matter, and so do systems. The last forty years have shown us that sustainability requires more than tweaks to the world we have. Advances in recent years have also shown us that sustainability is not centrally about individual sacrifice, but about collective improvement. Sustainability is in line with some parts of our long history of a collective narrative of progress, but also a break in our understanding of what progress means and how it can be achieved. It means working together, but not necessarily centralising power and authority over the economy. It means redistribution and embedding the economy, creating systems that make it serve people, and enable a world of enough for all.

⁸ Lawhon, M. and McCreary, T. (2023).

⁹ Lawhon, M. and McCreary, T. (2023). Making UBI radical: On the potential for a universal basic income to underwrite transformative and anti-kyriarchal change. *Economy and Society* 52, no. 2: 349-372.

⁷ Schor, J. (2010). *Plentitude*.