Depths of Sufficiency in Business
Diving Through the Planes of Social Being

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Abstract *This chapter uses Roy Bhaskar's four planes of social being to contemplate what sufficiency in business should entail on each of them for transformations to be serious and holistic. Implementing sufficiency needs to be deep and processual. It is a function not only of business but of society in general.*

1. Introduction

Bringing about a genuinely sustainable society necessitates societal transformations. Contemplating and addressing such transformations seriously requires a holistic approach. A holistic approach would at once capture various domains of social reality, from our societies' material and energy exchanges with nature to the intimate level of our inner being through which we relate with the human and non-human world around us. Focusing on aspects solely in one domain does not suffice. On their own, small-scale individual actions, personal transformations, or policies directed at selected phenomena in society (e.g., education or production) will not result in a genuine sustainable change. Fortunately, one does not have to choose between various domains. It is possible to take into consideration all of them at the same time. One way in which different levels of social reality can be identified and seen together holistically is through the lens of Roy Bhaskar's social ontology (theory of social being). Elsewhere, we have argued for this social ontology to be useful for understanding transformations towards a genuinely sustainable society (Buch-Hansen et al. 2024; Buch-Hansen/Nesterova 2021; Buch-Hansen/Nesterova 2023).

Roy Bhaskar, the founder of critical realist philosophy of science, was deeply concerned with human emancipation (Bhaskar 2009), as well as with ecological degradation (Bhaskar et al. 2010). According to Bhaskar, social being simultaneously exists and unfolds on four interconnected planes. These planes are (1) material transactions with nature, (2) social interactions between people, (3) social structure, and (4) intra-

subjectivity or simply inner being (Bhaskar 2008). This ontology implies that social being is complex, relational and multi-layered. The four planes encompass both the material and the immaterial or spiritual aspects of being, incorporating everything from the depths of individual human's psyche to humans' material interactions with nature. Thus, we can think of this social ontology as deep. Social transformations towards a genuinely sustainable society, which take into considerations this depth, can be called deep transformations (Buch-Hansen et al. 2024).

This conception of social being is useful for reflecting on, and proposing change in, various domains of social existence. It encourages one to remember that when zooming in on any phenomenon, event, or social entity, it is essential not to lose sight of how this phenomenon, event or social entity exists on, unfolds on, affects and is influenced by different levels of social being.

In this chapter, we zoom in on a particular social entity, a business, and view it through the lens of Bhaskar's social ontology. Rather than describing how business in general exists and changes on each of the planes of social being as a social entity, we will focus on the sufficiency aspect of business. Doing so allows us to honor and dive deeper into sufficiency through the four planes of social being. Multiple recent works have called for a careful consideration of sufficiency in relation to business and its practices (Bocken/Short 2016; Nesterova 2020a; Niessen/Bocken 2021; Jungell-Michelsson/Heikkurinen 2022; Beyeler/Jaeger-Erben 2022; Nesterova/Jungell-Michelsson 2023). Sufficiency is argued to be at the core of genuine sustainability and an essential part of the constellation of sustainable business practices (Nesterova 2020a; Robra et al. 2020). As a principle, it proposes a constructive alternative both to harsh and depriving asceticism and unrestrained materialistic growth. In relation to sustainability, sufficiency is understood as "'enoughness' of human doings in relation to ecosystems – an end in itself and a means for sustainable consumption and production" (Jungell-Michelsson/Heikkurinen 2022: 6). Sufficiency has a positive connotation. It creates a space for exploration of non-materialistic pursuits and growth in situations where materialistic growth is unsustainable and undesirable (Buch-Hansen/Nesterova 2023). We contribute to the recent efforts of sufficiency scholars by bringing critical realist philosophy of science and ontological considerations into the conversation. Importantly, we deviate from assuming that a business can be either sufficient or not sufficient (Jungell-Michelsson/Nesterova, this volume; Nesterova et al. 2023). Rather, sufficiency manifests itself in businesses in different parts of their operations, and its manifestation may not be consistent over time (Nesterova/Jungell-Michelsson 2023).

2. Depth ontology and sufficiency in business

2.1 Material transactions with nature

The plane of material transactions with nature concerns humanity's exchanges with nature in terms of both matter and energy. It concerns, for instance, the resources humans use to sustain life and their economic activities, the waste resulting from these activities, which goes back into nature, and carbon emissions. For a genuinely sustainable society to come about, humanity's material transactions with nature need to improve drastically on the global scale. In this context, sufficiency needs to manifest in the form of producing mostly for genuine human needs rather than wants (Buch-Hansen et al. 2024). This is challenging to translate directly into individual business practice, not least since the boundary between needs and wants is often blurred. For instance, a business can produce food (in principle, a human need), which satisfies a desire (e.g., game meat or chocolate, see Nesterova/Jungell-Michelsson 2023), or is an important part of culture, tradition, or a ritual. Outlining precisely what constitutes genuine human needs and then tightly controlling production for genuine needs would require bureaucratic if not authoritarian overseeing. Such an approach is not one we advocate. However, businesspersons can still contemplate production for genuine and diverse needs, first and foremost by choosing to operate in the sectors of the economy that aim at satisfaction of needs (food, shelter, energy, education, transport, medicine) rather than hedonic wants.

A business can implement sufficiency not only by operating within a sector that aims to satisfy human needs but also by limiting the variety of products it produces. This allows it to focus on quality, durability and knowledge of the individual product and its components, the aftercare and receiving feedback from consumers, allowing the business to improve its product.

Sufficiency can also be manifested in considerations of the local nature and its resources, i.e., seeing the location as sufficient and developing responsibility towards the place which houses the business. Sufficiency of location (Nesterova/Jungell-Michelsson 2023) relates closely to the call for localization within the sustainability discourse (Trainer 2012) and the call for an increased sensitivity towards local nature and places (Nesterova 2022a, 2022b, 2023). In this context, it is important to acknowledge that in many (if not all) instances, localization still entails long supply chains.

Sufficiency manifests in production processes and in handling of materials and energy by producers and service providers. In the situation of unfolding ecological degradation, such processes are something businesses are often expected to engage in, in a more ecological manner so as to play their role in sustainability transformations. However, it may be that a more sustainable implementation of sufficiency practices results from deeper, underlying principles. That is, for businesses to imple-

ment sufficiency practices in terms of their material transactions with nature some guiding principles beyond sufficiency itself may be necessary. Elsewhere, we propose that gentleness and care may constitute such principles (Buch-Hansen 2021; Buch-Hansen/Nesterova 2023). These principles can become part of reflection and a constellation of principles and values which shape a gentler way of being in the world, including the practices we manifest in business. Other principles and values in such a constellation may include human scale and simplicity (Schumacher 1973), non-violence (Naess 1989), awe (Schneider 2015), wildness (Leopold 1949) and perhaps especially the unity between an individual human being (and thus their actions) and the rest of the world (Steiner 2011).

2.2   Social interactions between people

It is a condition of human existence that humans are in the world with other humans (Heidegger 2001; Steiner 2011) and thus engage in social interactions. Considerations such as what to produce and how, how to use resources sufficiently and how to take the location into account require collaboration. A business is a community of humans who may choose to implement sufficiency into business operations, naturally within the constraints imposed by the social structures within which the business is embedded. Essentially, it is via social interactions that sufficiency gets a chance to manifest itself in business. Apart from ongoing dialogues on implementation of sufficiency in business operations concerning material transactions with nature, the principle of sufficiency can be applied to social interactions within the internal social dynamic of the business. For instance, our own interactions, as researchers, with businesses in Sweden reveal that some businesspersons apply the sufficiency principle to the number of meetings, aiming for it to be lagom ("just right" in Swedish) rather than too many or too few. Too many meetings could indicate micromanaging and a lack of freedom, while too few create a sense of loneliness and indifference. The same principle of "just right" applies to the duration of meetings. Contemplating what is just right allows businesses to create an organizational culture where sufficiency is explored.

Interactions between people also occur outside the internal world of businesses. They occur between businesses and their customers, local communities, municipalities, universities and activists. Sufficiency will not become a genuine and sustainable feature of societies if only one group of humans is willing to engage with it. Participation of civil society, businesspersons and humans working for state apparatuses is necessary (Buch-Hansen et al. 2024). It is necessary to create spaces where different groups of people can come together and explore opportunities to implement sufficiency as a principle in their own organizations. Importantly, in such spaces imperfection of the practice of sufficiency needs to be celebrated rather than seen as a failure. A meaningful benchmark for sufficiency (e.g., what sufficient

production may be, what is the right number of employees or the perfect company size) hardly exists in practice. That is, while it is possible to theorize such benchmarks, the practice of business itself is always imperfect and processual. Critical realism emphasizes the need to bring together theory and practice (Hartwig 2007). Further to this, any theory of limits should be put in (empathetic) dialogue with the unfolding of the lives of real businesses.

Communicating with customers to figure out what is sufficient is necessary. Above we noted that production for needs is important to take good care of nature's resources and to honor nature's limits. What constitutes needs can be understood via a dialogue between businesses and customers. Naturally, for sufficiency in business to be a sustainable practice, customers should likewise have embarked on sustainability journeys, and businesses can help customers embark on such journeys. Working with activists (e.g., climate activists, zero waste and voluntary simplicity practitioners) who already find themselves on sustainability journeys can help sufficiency-orientated businesspersons understand more sustainable modes of being and patterns of consumption, and what products can support sufficiency efforts of consumers. Working with activists entails inter-personal interactions. Small-scale, local businesses are perhaps best positioned to engage in such interactions. Moreover, conversations about sufficiency may start at various events organized by local municipalities and universities.

2.3 Social structures

On the plane of social structures, businesses as organizations can work together with other organizations to collectively transform the current system of 'the more, the better' towards one where sufficiency becomes desirable and a value in itself. One group of actors with whom businesses can work together, for instance, are higher education institutions. The system of education plays an important role in challenging the dominant (capitalist and unsustainable) logics and creating spaces for new imaginaries (Kaufmann et al. 2019). In business schools, it is often the case that growth in business, rather than sufficiency, is highlighted as a crucial goal. This is done without bringing into focus the severe downsides which come with the pursuit of growth, such as the involvement of investors (venture capitalists, angel investors, banks, see Parker 2018) who may and do impose their own desires and pursuits for profit onto the businesspersons, thus alienating them from their initial idea, conception, or plan of how to develop their business. In other words, the business is no longer theirs. At the same time, businesses that have sufficiency at the heart of their operations are overlooked or may even be seen or presented as unsuccessful and compared in an unfavorable manner to businesses which pursue growth. However, for genuine sustainability, a new approach to the study of business is needed (Nesterova 2021). This implies a different definition of success and acknowledge-

ment of diverse ways of doing business. In the practice of education, learning about businesses to which sufficiency is central may imply including post-growth business literature in curricula, facilitating exchange between sufficiency businesses, students and educators, listening to the stories of relevant start-ups and providing opportunities for students to do their internships in businesses orientated towards sufficiency.

2.4 Inner being

We pay particular attention to the plane of humans' inner being since this is a plane which has often been overlooked in the business sustainability discourse (Buch-Hansen/Nesterova 2023). For sufficiency to be desirable and possible, a significant shift in humans' worldviews, modes of being and ways of relating with the world is necessary. And while implementing sufficiency in business cannot be reduced to any one plane of social being, the plane of inner being has a causal effect on the unfolding of sufficiency-orientated pursuits on the other planes of being. This is so because it is human beings who practice: only humans can act (Danermark et al. 2002).

To suggest that humans have a desire and potential to transform their businesses towards genuinely sustainable models necessitates a certain (positive) view of human nature. Further to this, we rely on the humanistic tradition, which highlights humanity, humanness and the potential of our species (Moss 2015). This tradition focuses on human qualities and abilities, such as creativity, love, fellow-feeling, freedom, growth, concern, care, kindness, awe, consciousness, awareness, self-transcendence and self-actualization. And while it is impossible to claim that human nature is indeed inherently good (it is easy to find examples of the contrary), the humanistic tradition points out that presenting humans in either a pathological or a mechanistic manner, as done respectively by psychoanalysis and behaviorism, entails "the risk of harming humans by inviting them to lower their expectations of what is humanly possible" (Moss 2015: 4). This view also finds resonance in the field of moral philosophy: while humans are indeed animals with instincts and bodily needs, we also have natural capacities for gentleness, care, solidarity, compassion and love, and these attitudes and feelings affect our decision-making and our being in the world in general (Midgeley 2003; Sayer 2011). Moreover, the "way in which we think of ourselves – the picture we form of our essential nature – directly affects the way we live" (Midgley 2003: xvi). Here, we assume that businesspersons themselves are essentially human and thus good (but not perfect) and have a potential to develop their human qualities even further, which opposes Perlman's assumption that businesspersons are beings "whose living humanity has been thoroughly excavated" (Perlman 1983: 31). We also suggest that humanness and growth therein is likewise

manifested in society at large. This is significant inasmuch as sufficiency requires participation of society in general, not only of businesspersons.

First and foremost, stepping on the path of sufficiency requires assigning a positive value to it, rather than seeing it as a sacrifice. This means stepping away from materialistic pursuits and instead valuing, anticipating and pursuing growth in creativity, love, fellow-feeling, empathy and other human qualities. Elsewhere (Buch-Hansen et al. 2024), we adopt Erich Fromm's (2013) terminology to highlight the distinction between materialistic and non-materialistic pursuits. Fromm (2013) distinguishes between two modes: of having and of being. The mode of having signifies attachment to material goods and status, possessiveness and ownership of goods and humans. The mode of being signifies the opposite: non-attachment to the material and exploration of one's own humanity. Critical realism, which provides philosophical grounds for our work, sees the mode of being as essentially human, i.e., in line with our nature. For instance, Hartwig (2001: 140–141), relying on Roy Bhaskar's theorizing of humans, notes that humans are "both essentially one or united as a species and with the rest of the pluriverse; essentially creative; oriented to being, not having or 'attachment'; enlightened, not ignorant; disposed to engage in 'spontaneous right action'; and, above all, free." Essentially, the mode of being needs to prevail for sufficiency to become an important part of humans' set of values and a desirable practice. It is often the case that the businesspersons who implement sufficiency practices into their business models also incorporate sufficiency, one way or another, in their personal lives via practicing, e.g., mindfulness, spirituality, a minimalist lifestyle and voluntary simplicity (cf. Elgin 2013; Elgin/Mitchell 1977; Schmid/Nesterova 2023). Such personal practices can, and in practice appear to, spill over into the way business as an entity relates with the world/acts therein. In our own conversations with businesspersons, we often notice how the implementation of sufficiency by businesspersons is a result of their own willingness to do so rather than an imposition from the world around them. Indeed, the (capitalist) system typically incentivizes growth rather than sufficiency. Values adopted freely by businesspersons may be the most sustainable or life-long ones, finding their way into businesses and their operations.

Hence, sufficiency needs to become an inherent and valued part of a worldview and morality of individuals, arrived at via their personal development journeys and implemented, in the words of Steiner (2011: 138), "out of love" rather than out of a sense of duty or even worse, fear of authorities. Yet, various social systems can support (as well as discourage or constrain) such journeys of personal development and self-transformation, and this is what we turn to next.

3. Systemic constraints and policies

It would have been a welcomed unfolding in the social reality if implementing sufficiency in business was simply a matter of knowledge about various practices of sufficiency and having one's heart in the right place. However, in reality, implementing sufficiency on each of the four planes is immensely challenging. This is so because implementation is always constrained by the conditions of the capitalist system, to which sufficiency is alien and detestable, and the fact of humans' thrownness into the world with its existing and sustained structures and systems (Heidegger 2001). That is to say that the capitalist system pre-exists businesspersons and their businesses rather than being something of their own choosing and creation. Due to its pre-existing the businesspersons, they are forced to face the ways the system operates while often having little say (but not no say) in how the system works.

Running a business to which sufficiency is central may sound like a good idea not only to sustainability scholars but also to businesspersons. However, despite its appeal, many may find themselves in situations where the pursuit of growth is imposed due to the way financing works. Self-funding or financing a business with the help of friends and family (though not without its own challenges) is a privileged situation, which is not accessible to many. For those who cannot self-fund or acquire the necessary funding via friends and family, or where the business idea necessitates large amounts of funding, looking for other options becomes necessary (Nesterova 2020b). Other options include, for instance, banks, venture capitalists and angel investors (Parker 2018). Yet, as indicated above, such financing means giving up a share of the business and its profits as well as alienation of the businesspersons from their business due to the involvement of other actors. These actors may not share the same ideas about sufficiency and sustainability, thus imposing their own logics of, e.g., growth and profit seeking. Such constraints to sufficiency are thus structural rather than individual. Borrowing and external financing may be seen as a compromise by a businessperson: they get an opportunity to pursue their business idea while giving up a share and opening up their project to external influences. Thus, it is not necessarily so that the businessperson her/himself is a greedy and egocentric profit-maximiser as neoclassical economics suggests. Rather, they are constrained by the system in multiple ways: this concerns financing as well as fear of stepping on a path different to the norm.

To help businesses engage more seriously with sufficiency as a principle across all the four planes, it is necessary to create spaces and conditions in which such engagements can thrive. We propose a range of policies to actualize sufficiency in business on all the four planes. Though we relate various policies to each of the four planes, it is important to note that each policy is likely to have effects beyond any one plane and that creating space for sufficiency requires implementation of multiple policies (Buch-Hansen et al. 2024). On the plane of material transactions with nature,

governments can create better legislation for instituting exchange of waste between businesses. What constitutes waste for one business is a resource for another. Missing out on the opportunity to use waste as a resource may force businesses to extract more from nature than would otherwise have been necessary. Some businesses note a lack of clarity in terms of dealing with waste infrastructure and a lack of organization of exchange events (Nesterova 2020b). On the plane of social interactions, working time reduction (Spencer 2022) can free up time for businesspersons to engage with other humans such as activists, local communities and researchers – engagements that can result in contemplations of ways in which sufficiency has been and can be implemented. Many policies can and should target the plane of social structure since the change towards sustainability undoubtedly needs to be structural. Here, instituting increased participation is important, so as to ensure that businesspersonshave an opportunity to have a say on the matters which can assist them in practicing sufficiency in business – such as financing, law-making and infrastructure. Universal basic income (UBI) can remove some of the financial worries which businesspersons have in terms of providing for themselves and their families. This can create space for operating business more mindfully via contemplating the principles and philosophy of business (including sufficiency). Moreover, businesses to which sufficiency in its different forms is central are often manifestations of creative efforts by the businesspersons (Nesterova 2020b). Oftentimes, such businesses grow out of a hobby or a passion, a concern about the world or a particular group of people, non-humans, or nature. Starting such a business is a challenging enterprise, both mentally and financially. Free time is needed for humans to contemplate whether starting such a business is a good idea, and if so, how this idea can materialize. A UBI can assist in taking a break from normal commitments to allow space for contemplation. For existing businesses, avoiding venture capitalists, angel investors and banks can help them step on the path of sufficiency rather than growth and profit maximization. Low or no-interest financing can be instituted by governments.

On the plane of inner being, education is important. An education reform would include reconsideration of how microeconomics is taught and what is meant by success. Wider inclusion of sufficiency in business should no longer be a personal choice of individual lecturers but a compulsory part of university curricula. Microeconomics is often taught in combination with other fields of knowledge such as marketing and finance, which serve the interests of capital and contribute to a destructive mode of being. For striving towards sufficiency to replace striving towards (material) growth in society, microeconomics could be taught in combination with, for instance, deep ecology and eco-philosophy.

4. Conclusion

In this chapter, we turned to Roy Bhaskar's philosophy of critical realism to contemplate social being on the planes of humanity's material transactions with nature, social interactions, social structures and inner being. We discussed sufficiency in relation to each of these planes, noting that for it to become a genuine and truly sustainable part of business practice, as well as part of businesspersons' worldviews, it needs to unfold and be supported on all the four planes. We theorize the implementation of sufficiency as deep and processual. It needs to unfold everywhere, from becoming a value for individual humans to becoming a principle in humanity's use of resources on different scales. However, this unfolding is a process, hence our call for avoiding labelling businesses as sufficient or not.

While sufficiency may evoke thoughts related to foregoing and sufficing, it does not have to be related to these terms. Sufficiency in fact may be part of growth, something that we advocate fully even for a post-growth economy (Buch-Hansen/Nesterova 2023). Sufficiency can be part of a growth process for both business but perhaps even more so for businesspersons. It is part of a growth process since it requires shedding the norm of growthism and materialism and developing a completely different way of relating with the world which entails deep respect for nature, fellow humans and non-humans.

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