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Sources of Power for Sustainable Consumption: Where to Look

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While we can notice some positive trends in the sustainability of consumption, an overwhelming number of trends point in the opposite direction. Indeed, we are farther away than ever from achieving strong sustainable consumption (i.e., necessary changes in levels and fundamental patterns of consumption). Why is this the case 20 years after the establishment of sustainable consumption research and policy and 40 years after The Limits to Growth? Differentiating between various drivers of (over)consumption and barriers to change, this chapter argues that we can identify specific forms of power-some exercised intentionally by actors, some of a structural material or ideational nature diffused throughout the current global political economy-which strongly push for unsustainable consumption. In a second step, therefore, the paper asks where power for sustainable consumption may exist. Its answer to this question is twofold. Thus, the chapter highlights the potential contribution that normative foundations of societal cohesion and community, specifically powerful narratives of a good life for all and social justice, make to the necessary transformative momentum. In addition, the paper delineates existing bases for necessary structural reforms in (material) institutions. On both accounts, finally, the paper identifies strategies for the nourishment and expansion of power for sustainable consumption and its translation into pathways towards the sustainability transformation.

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