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Review: The Logic of Sufficiency

By Thomas Princen

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Thomas Princen. *The Logic of Sufficiency*. Cambridge, Mass. and London:
The MIT Press, 2005. 401pp. ISBN 0-262-66190-X (pbk) US \$ 29.00.

Thomas Princen's environmentalism is based on a breathtakingly simple yet crucial principle: "enoughness." What happens when a culture, an entire civilization, declares that it has enough to eat, drive or live, and that it does not need *more*? Princen's book sets out to explore this theory of sufficiency. Princen's definition of sufficiency is built out of a kind of home-grown philosophy: "it is the sense that, as one does more and more of an activity, there can be enough and there can be too much" (6). The problem, the book demonstrates, is that human beings generally are unable to acknowledge that they have 'enough' of some things, and proceed to demand/produce/consume more (what he calls "too muchness," where the principle is excess).

Princen argues that it is time to move from the *idea* of sufficiency to an *organizing principle* that informs society itself. The factory, the laboratory, the market – the three major institutions that govern a society's production and consumption – must be reorganized around this principle so that critical environmental threats may be addressed. We need to turn away from the efficiency principle to the sufficiency one.

Calling for an "ecological rationality" – which assumes that the common good, especially with respect to climate, clean water, fertile soil, biodiversity cannot be achieved by merely aggregating individual private "goods" (25) – as the governing motif of social decisions, Princen proposes that collective choice about farming techniques or technology might shift the balance. Using a variety of examples of such collective choices from around the world, Princen shows how the sustainability approach to environmental problems often includes practices of self-management and mechanisms of restraint. Ecological rationality, a concept he adapts from John Dryzek, accounts for an intersection of the biophysical and the social system, focusing on material life-support systems and regenerative capacities. Restraint, which involves "using less of a resource than is possible in the short term in exchange for tangible and intangible benefits in the long term," as Princen defines it later (280), could become an "efficient" principle rooted in sufficiency philosophy.

Princen next provides a brief history of how efficiency has emerged as the single most important principle of social (including, among others, industrial, economic, financial and technological) organization. He traces how saving time, improving productivity, smoothening the consumer experience in order to minimize time-energy-money loss has become the central theme of the twentieth century especially in the USA. Princen goes on to show how numbers, central to the efficiency principle, which relies on ratios to demonstrate how much time/energy/money has been saved, has consistently ignored the environmental impact of processes and techniques. In order to show how the ratio of useful work to energy expended has improved, statistics in the efficiency principle produce, upon scrutiny, environmentally "ambiguous" equations. That is, an efficiency gain need not necessarily translate into environmental gain (107). No doubt, these figures look wonderful in short-term analysis. But, as Princen demonstrates, the moment one incorporates *long timeframes* by bringing in the sustainability factor (which is the ecological rationality principle, taking into account the time frame of life on earth, global climatic change and such), the efficiency argument makes no (environmental) sense.

The efficiency principle has adopted specialization and massive scales of operation as its driving forces, while "serving the consumer" is often the third force. Producers produce because consumers consume/buy – this principle of modern day political economy has played havoc in terms of its "too muchness." Princen proposes another logic here: "enough work and enough consumption." If the organizing principle is sufficiency rather than "biggering" (Dr Seuss' term in *The Lorax*, which Princen adopts (155) to describe expansion and unlimited consumption) we might yet have a different vision of production. Princen asks for a return to older notions of work, where work is defined and treated as a "calling" and principles like fit (individuals seek work that fits their skills), service to one's community through production and a vision of long-term service to future generations.

The second part of the book is made up of three empirical studies: a lumber company, a lobster company and Toronto Island. In each of these cases Princen shows how self-management, collective decisions on restraint and sustainability-principles have made for different kinds of production, consumption and rationality. Thus Toronto Island's decision to make theirs an automobile-free community is an example of how people band together, often sacrificing comforts (such as quicker mobility) in favor of ecologically sensible acts (the community has fought builders and economically alluring development schemes).

Princen concludes with a prognosis: that efficiency-based industrial society will no longer be able to sustain their excesses in the face of climate change,

species extinction and bioaccumulation of toxic substances. The option of ecological rationality may be idealistic, as he admits (360), but may rapidly become the *only* option.

Princen's is a thoughtful and closely reasoned book. Opting out of the industry-bashing environmental brigade, the author is able to calmly muster up more than adequate evidence to show how faulty industrialism's "efficiency" philosophy has been. Alternate philosophies (and philosophers) often run the risk of appearing foolish, eccentric, anti-progress (whichever way you define it) and reactionary. Princen is careful to articulate his vision as formative, optimistic and provisional, based as it is on contemporary trends and developments. However, that does not make the commitment to 'theory' or different views of life any less valid. What starts off as eccentric behavior – imagine, who would want to refuse car purchases, especially in "addicted to oil" USA! – may well be the only hope for a beleaguered planet, as Princen demonstrates with his empirical studies.

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