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## Managing the transformation of the global commons into luxuries for all

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## **Managing the transformation of the global commons into luxuries for all**

### **ABSTRACT**

In less than a century, mass industrialization and consumption have altered the Earth's ecosystem and its resources. The elementary resources of the global commons—namely, air, water, and land—have been depleted, and human beings are increasingly suffering of various negative harms as a result of poor air quality, undrinkable water, and food contamination. Through the lens of the waste and scarcity of these elementary global commons, this study argues that luxury may relate to access to the elementary global commons and their resources. In doing so, this study introduces a new aspect of luxury and an alternative perspective to the prerequisites for human existence—namely, human needs of air, water, and food by reconsidering their existence in contemporary society. It explores the transformation of those human needs to becoming luxuries that goes beyond expensive products and services, and human yearning. The study contributes to current understandings of unconventional luxury.

**Keywords:** global commons, human well-being, natural resources, unconventional luxury, scarcity, waste and shortage

## **Managing the transformation of the commons into luxuries for all**

### **1. Introduction**

It is widely acknowledged that the existence and well-being of human beings are based on some basic needs, including air, water, food, and shelter (e.g., Maslow, 1943). The Earth and its atmosphere play an essential role in providing the means for some of these basic needs, including the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the land we use to grow crops and for livestock farming. As such, air, water, and land are integral elements of the Earth's ecosystem and are expressed by scholars as common resources that are part of the global commons (e.g. Hardin, 1968; Kalair, Abas, Kalair, & Khan, 2019; Ostrom, Burger, Field, Norgaard, & Policansky, 1999). As they are part of the global commons, all human beings should have access to them and enjoy the rights to breathe, drink, and eat (e.g., Ostrom et al., 1999).

However, it is implied that people have taken these resources for granted (Adger, Butler, & Walker-Springett, 2017; Brown, Adger, & Cinner, 2018; Hardin, 1968; Ostrom et al., 1999; Summers, Smith, Case, & Linthurst, 2012; Wilk, 2001). Hence, in the failure to recognize the benefits of these resources for the Earth's ecosystem as well as the reluctance to acknowledge the importance of their preservation to ensure the well-being and existence of human beings and society, we are currently witnessing their depletion and contamination (e.g. Brown et al., 2018). Human beings are increasingly suffering, for example of lung cancer, heart diseases, respiratory diseases, and food poisoning, as a result of poor air quality, undrinkable water, and food contamination, for example (e.g., Guo & Lu, 2019). Urbanization, industrialization, and capitalist consumption are viewed as the principal causal factors of the depletion and contamination of the resources (Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018; Rosa, 2013; Tomlinson, 2007; Wilk, 2001, 2006). In addition, state industries are to blame: The Tropical Forest Alliance

2020 (2018, p. 6), claims that “current Chinese and Indian import demand for soy, palm oil and beef, combined with domestic consumption from Brazil and Indonesia, contributed to approximately 855,000 hectares of deforestation in 2015.” and have also worsened the problem.

Thus, one may argue that certain resources are not respected for the value they provide. Instead, they are instrumentalized and misused, thereby complicating the distribution of their benefits to the Earth’s ecosystem and decreasing their contribution to human life and well-being (e.g., Summers et al., 2012). Consequently, many experience scarcity of clean air and water, and safe and nutritious food, whereby these necessities are not accessible to everyone and cannot be taken for granted. Today, we not only witness health problems, but the fact is that depletion of the resources like polluted air kills seven million human beings every year (WHO, Air pollution, n.d.). Hence, for many, the prerequisites for the well-being and existence of human beings like breathing clean air, drinking clean water, and eating safe and nutritious food have become rare and exclusive. Instead, they are whittled down to be enjoyed by an increasingly smaller group of elite consumers. In this way, it can be argued that clean air and water, and safe and nutritious food correspond to the traditional definition of luxury goods, yet, by their very nature, they contribute to unconventionally luxurious experiences (e.g., Dubois & Duquesne, 1993; Hudders, Pandelaere, & Vyncke, 2013; Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2016).

Faced with the growing threat to the environment manifested in climate change, consumers are becoming increasingly environmentally conscious and demanding that more responsible actions be taken (Feinberg & Willer, 2013). There is increasing awareness among consumers of the consequences of urbanization, industrialization, and mindless consumption, and greater consciousness is being called for. Kapferer and Michaut-Denizeau stress that consumers now “look for more sustainable alternatives in their consumption or even

substantially decrease their consumption, cutting down all non-necessary purchases” (2014, p. 7). The savvy, conscientious consumers who have the option to choose are calling for more long-term approaches responding to the current era of sustainable and responsible consumption and production (e.g., Kauppinen-Räsänen, Rindell, & Åberg, 2014). This is supported by the theory of the Environmental Kuznets Curve by Simon Kuznet in the 1950s, whereby, “As income grows, people achieve a higher standard of living and care more for the quality of environment they live in and demand for better environment induces structural changes in economy that tends to reduce environmental degradation” (Dinda, 2004, p. 435). This, in turn, can slowly change consuming habits. To that effect, and contrary to Veblen’s theory (1899) of the ruling class’s taste for conspicuous consumption, a new social status trend toward inconspicuous consumption and conspicuous production of an ecological nature (Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2019) have come to the fore.

Polanyi (1945) argues that the growing depletion of common resources in a mindless and overly consuming society has provided the means to that to occur. He argues further that in this consuming society market forces have organized all elements of society and neglected to incorporate its people and their well-being as well as the benefits provided by Earth’s ecosystem into the economic system. Hence, within this system, unrestrained consumption and acceleration, led by an economic model of growth (Rosa, 2013), have led to a depletion, but also shortages of common resources (Ostrom et al., 1999; Widlok, 2016; Wilk, 2001).

In this regard, the basic premise of the present study is the environmental degradation caused by capitalism, which has entailed the tragedy of waste and shortages of the commons. The study is inspired by three elements. First is Hardin’s tragedy of the commons (1968), which refers to the exploitation and degradation of the Earth’s resources to serve human needs without considering the consequences or negative outcomes of such actions. Second is the notion of unconventional luxury, which holds that luxury goes beyond human desires of

artifacts, and consumption of conspicuous products and brands, and is shifting from owning and displaying luxury to something conveying meaningfulness and prudential value for improving the quality of life and human well-being (Cristini, Kauppinen-Räsänen, Barthod-Prothade, & Woodside, 2017; Kauppinen-Räsänen, Gummerus, von Koskull, & Cristini, 2019). Third is the belief that the meaning of luxury depends on its context like commercial or non-commercial context (e.g., Cristini et al. 2017; Llamas & Thomsen, 2016). The present study introduces an alternative perspective to human needs of air, water, and food by reconsidering their existence in contemporary society (e.g., MacInnis, 2011; Wilk 2001). By viewing these needs through the lens of a socio-historical perspective, the study argues that for many the necessities of clean air and water, and safe and nutritious food are rare, unique, and exclusive, thereby meaning that by definition, they can be perceived as luxuries. Furthermore, the study holds that they are unconventional luxuries, as they go beyond human desires and deal with human needs.

In view of this, the study explores the transformation of human needs to becoming luxuries. In doing so, the study contributes to the discussion on luxury's transformation within the era of unconventional luxury (e.g., Cristini et al., 2017; von Wallpach, Hemetsberger, Thomsen, & Russel, 2019). The focus is not so much on luxury's transformation from the *desire* to have, own, and use luxury to the *search* for being, sharing, and experiencing it (e.g., Cristini et al., 2017). Rather, it focuses on the *need* to experience and live from luxury.

Based on a multidisciplinary review, the study uncovers a puzzling issue in luxury discourse—as well as being something creative and magnificent that is displayed for others (Husain, 2009; Lipovetsky, 2003; Michaud, 2003) and desired by the common person and the elite (Chandon, Laurent, & Valette-Florence, 2016; Cristini et al., 2017; Kapferer & Laurent,

2016; Shukla, Banerjee, & Singh, 2016), luxury relates to elements that are prerequisites for human existence.

In the following sections, the transformations of the three basic resources are discussed. The paper then goes on to discuss how air, water, and food have transformed from been taken for granted due to economic growth, to the direction in which they appear to be moving—namely, as unconventional and new luxuries.

## **2. The transformation of air, water, and food**

### *2.1. The scarcity of clean air*

Air is the general name for the mixture of gases that make up the Earth's atmosphere. Pure air has no discernible scent or color, while the term "clean air" denotes the air's quality as being free from pollution and other harmful substances (Guo & Lu, 2019; Kelly & Fussell, 2015). Breathing is fundamental to our existence, and breathing clean air offers several health benefits, including improved blood pressure and a strengthened immune system (Kelly & Fussell, 2015).

Concerns over air quality are not recent but date as far back as the thirteenth century, when the harmful effects of coal were acknowledged by the people living in the industrialized urban centers and showed by epidemiological studies (Costa, 2018). Polanyi (1945) argues that with the great transformation of society due to the rise of the "market" during and after the Industrial Revolution, market values (i.e., land, labor, and money) took precedence over other values (i.e. environmental, human, and moral). In this way, people and the commons were treated as commodities that were instrumentalized, thus exacerbating economic inequality and status distinctions while also depleting the resources of the commons (Polanyi, 1945).

Evidently, the quality of air has degraded, and today, many suffer from a lack of breathable air. Hence, for many, clean air has become rare, unique, and exclusive, and by definition, breathing such air would lead to a luxury experience (e.g., Dubois & Duquesne, 1993; Hudders et al., 2013; Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2016). In this way, it can be argued that clean air as a “good” correspond to the traditional definition of luxury goods, yet, by its very nature, clean air contribute to unconventionally luxurious experiences (e.g., Dubois & Duquesne, 1993; Hudders et al., 2013; Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2016). Air quality has deteriorated to the extent that over 90% of the world’s population is breathing air that exceeds pollution limits set by the World Health Organization (WHO, Air pollution, n.d.). Polluted air is the single largest global environmental health risk—a modifiable burden that causes 6.5 million premature deaths annually, comprising one-ninth of the global population (Guo & Lu, 2019).

According to Cai et al., “The causes of air pollution are simple [...] inefficient transport, coal-burning power plants, industrial incineration, industrial production and household energy use” (2018, p. 125). Pollution levels are increasing, particularly in emerging economies such as India, where rapid industrial growth has occurred at the environment’s expense (Ellis-Petersen, 2019; Moshakis, 2018). In China, air pollution and smog have also substantially increased and represent a significant challenge not only to China’s public health but also to its socio-economic development in terms of medical resources and urban planning (Cai et al., 2018; Liu, Xu, & Yang, 2018; ). Shu and Gang (2013), Ostrom et al. (1999), and Wilk (2006) agree that economic growth accelerates air pollution and ultimately, damages the health of an increasing number of people. According to Rosa (2013), the heightening pace of modern life along with the acceleration of technology and social change—propelled by the economic motor of capitalist logic—have destabilized the environment by devastating and degrading the commons.



The aggregate national industries acknowledge that people are suffering as a consequence of the air that they breathe. As a result, numerous countries have set environmental regulations to limit pollution, and products and technologies have been innovated to diminish pollution and remove toxins from the air (e.g., Ben-David, Kleimeier, & Viehs, 2019). For example, an increasing number of the fashion industry's most illustrious conglomerates, such as Kering (owner of several brands, including Alexander McQueen, Balenciaga, Brioni, Gucci, and Puma), have collectively committed to reduce their carbon footprint, lower their greenhouse gas emissions, and thus improve the quality of air and water (Russel, 2015).

In addition to innovations that diminish pollution and remove toxins from the air, the industry has innovated clean-air products. The luxury industry—characterized by innovation, exclusive pricing strategies, inherent scarcity, and “its ability to sell dreams” (Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2016, p. 110; Bian & Forsythe, 2012)—sell pristine mountain-compressed air in bottles for up to \$100. The consumers who can afford such products have made brands such as Vitality Air, Aethaer, and Swissbreathe success stories in the world's most polluted areas (Moshakis, 2018), regardless of the fact that the benefits of canned air are as yet unproven. Business opportunities are also recognized by the hospitality industry, where meeting the desires of elite consumers who are more demanding uncontaminated basic necessities as a luxury service. In the article, “How clean indoor air is becoming China's latest luxury must-have,” Roxburgh (2018) explores the upscale Cordis hotel in Shanghai, where the indoor air is cleaner than the air outside. Due to two types of air filters and double-glazed windows that are permanently shut, the quality of the indoor air is 10 times better than that outside.

Clearly, air is a common resource that is a human necessity in terms of living (Alessi & Bologna, 2015; Wilk, 2006). The recent blazing wildfires in the Siberian, Amazonian, and

Congolese forests have raised serious concerns about common resources (Pierre-Louis, 2019). The Amazon forest produces a significant amount of oxygen for the Earth. However, the acceleration of economic growth, epitomized by deforestation, has not only resulted in ecological and environmental devastation but has also exacerbated economic inequalities with respect to health. Deforestation induces fires, and those already vulnerable (i.e., those who do not have the option to choose) are the ones suffering the most from the wildfires that damage the air. These wildfires damage the Earth's ecosystem and affect millions of humans, especially those in Novosibirsk, Puerto Vello, and Brazzaville, and even those hundreds of miles from the epicenter of the wildfires. Hence, Brown et al. (2018) stress that the Earth's atmosphere and by extension the air cannot be enclosed, efficiently managed, or reserved for a just a handful of people.

The air and the atmosphere are perceived as common resources, as they do not have any natural boundaries, and Alessi and Bologna (2015) and Wilk (2006) claim that breathing should be seen as a human right. In this regard, and echoing Ostrom et al.'s (1999) theory of governing the commons through collective actions that incorporate governments, institutions and collectivities, and local stakeholders and local people (1999), some recent statements have raised discussions about how the Amazon should be approached, including as an international common natural resource that should be governed by the United Nations (de Clercq, 2019). Such a proposal would overturn the Westphalian system, where states exert their sovereignty over territories and spaces, which has prevailed for over three centuries (Descola, 2013). Such an attempt to change the juristic personality of a space to protect and preserve the vital spaces of humanity may well embody the air—the most precious and “luxurious” resource for humanity and the living environment. Severe air pollution, such as that experienced in New Delhi in November 2019, when the quality of the air dropped to the

most hazardous levels on the air quality index (Air pollution in Delhi, 2019), also epitomizes the extremity of waste and shortages.

The examples above show how a basic human need has become a luxury for many—not only is breathable air unavailable, but clean air is also rare, unique, and exclusive. The examples also illustrate how such a basic need can trigger conspicuous desire. As such, clean air has become an unconventional luxury good—available to and afforded by those who have the option to choose. However, with the availability of designer masks to avoid polluted air and devices that provide clean air, we are on the way toward accepting the unacceptable (Cox, 2012). Evidently, this fragmented approach to clean air is symptomatic of modern society, and the current era’s paradox—namely, clean air for sale—distracts us from the larger issues at stake.

## *2.2. Shrinking clean water*

Water covers more than two-thirds of the Earth’s surface. This multipurpose element is one of the Earth’s most vital resources, and its quality deteriorates as a result of certain organic and chemical elements, including the presence of bacteria, viruses, heavy metals, and plastic. As the WHO cautions safe water supplies and clean drinking water comprise core issues for global health (WHO, Water sanitation hygiene. (n.d.).

Water is essential to life and is a human necessity (Hassan, 2011). Its role in human life is especially evident when one examines it from a socio-historical context: Humans have typically settled in locations that are near water (Hassan, 2011), and Butler, Scammel, and Benson stress that “a characteristic of any successful society throughout history has been its ability to supply water to its citizens” (2016, p. 93). Initial developments of engineered infrastructures that provide drinkable water to society have been found in the Neolithic period (Ashkenazi, Avni, & Avni, 2012). Such civilizational achievements imply that water was

elevated as a luxury good—something that “should be shared for the means of the common good” (Cristini et al., 2017, p. 102). In the West, water had the power to connect people “through the contagious magic of baptism, libation, bathing and drinking, both in pagan and Christian traditions” (Wilk, 2006, p. 215). However, with the onset of modernity, a different meaning was attributed to water (Hamlin, 2000), as efficiency and productivity was increased by the use of canals for faster transportation, development of better water vessels, creation of effective hydropower watermills, location of factories along riversides, and construction of ports began to alter the landscape of Western countries and their water resources (Hassan, 2011). Hence, if water had united people together in ancient times, in the modern age due to the competition that stimulated the struggle over other, it began to divide people (e.g. Hassan, 2011). In the twentieth century and more specifically, in the neo-liberal period, water became a commodity due to the hegemony of the market and in accordance with the neoliberal worldview of ceaseless progress, thus leading to a degradation of its quality (e.g., Polanyi, 1945).

Numerous events have transformed water as a natural and common resource into something that is now rare, unique, and exclusive for many. However, we must note that water pollution is not a new phenomenon—it has been implied that environmental pollution “started with the appearance of humans” (Borsos, Makra, Béczi, Vitányi, & Szentpéteri, 2003, p. 5). For example, the quality of the water in the River Tiber degraded in Ancient Rome due to the popular Roman baths and the dumping of waste on streets and roads, where it later drained into the river (Vuorinen Juuti, & Katko, 2007). The problem worsened with the Industrial Revolution, as factories began to discard chemical waste in rivers and seas (Vuorinen et al., 2007). Awareness of water depletion rose in 1969 as chemical waste was released into Ohio’s Cuyahoga River, causing it to burst into flames. As such, the burning river embodies the consequences of water pollution (Markham, 1994). During the 1960s, the

first ecological incentives were introduced to initiate change. Nevertheless, water pollution, caused by the robust momentum of productivity and spurred by modernization, has increased considerably in the last 50 years (Cosgrove & Loucks, 2015; Haie, 2016), particularly in developing countries of which some only treat 5% of their released wastewater adequately (Collins-Kreiner, 2015; Postel & Thompson, 2005).

Access to water has long gone unquestioned (Kalair et al., 2019). Today, one-third of the world's population suffers at least occasionally from water scarcity. Severe water crises caused by polluted water are regularly reported. In 2018, India experienced the most severe water crisis to date that threatened millions of lives (Shah & Narain, 2019). Water, for many cultures, has represented well-being, sanctity, and healing (Strang, 2004; Wilk, 2006). In India, water also carries a culturally symbolic value, epitomized by the holy city of Varanasi, where the water is sacred. Tourists and pilgrims flock to Varanasi to visit the Ganges and perform rituals of ablution, drink the holy water, and take sacred baths in the hope of attaining *moksha* or liberation (Das & Tamminga, 2012; Sharma, 2016). The Ganges occupies an iconic cultural status associated with its properties of spiritual purification (Singh, 1994; Parry, 1994). Today, however, the Ganges illustrates the tragedy of waste and shortage. Although initiatives have been launched to restore the river, which provides drinking water to over 400 million people, it remains disastrously polluted today (e.g., Ahmed, 1994; Das & Tamminga, 2012; Sharma, 2016; Shah & Narain, 2019).

Evidently, for many, bottled water is a necessity. Yet, bottled water may also be a desirable commodity, as water brands are differentiated by quality promoting luxury through excellence, creativity, and/or exclusivity (e.g., Chapelle, 2005; Cristini et al., 2017; Gleick, 2010; Orsenna, 2019). A study conducted by Zenith Global indicated that “the market for expensive water brands is growing nine percent annually and is currently valued at \$147 billion” (FinancesOnline, n.d.). An example of water as a luxury commodity is Svalbarði

iceberg water, which is melted from icebergs and then sold in award-winning designer bottles as an ultra-luxurious commodity (e.g., Svalbarði polar iceberg water, n.d.).

The pristine water taken from icebergs and sold as a luxury product somehow pinpoints the tragedy of waste and scarcity. The icebergs—natural resources and one of the (oldest) common heritages of humankind—are melting at an increasing rate as a result of global warming. Simultaneously, the seas and oceans are overwhelmed with plastic (Wilk, 2006). In this regard, Parker (2019) explores the puzzling issue of “How the plastic bottle went from miracle container to hated garbage.” Indeed, connoisseurs may be intrigued by the “fine waters” now listed in a manner similar to wines on restaurant menus or in water bars (Wilk, 2006). Yet, conscientious consumers demand more informed consumption, acknowledge water as one of the Earth’s natural resources, and recognize water as a great priority (World Water Council, n.d.). The current era’s paradox—clean water for sale—diverts attention from the core dilemma: If water and clean water have been taken for granted, a critical and skeptical voice can claim that so to have water scarcity and polluted water become the new normality.

### *2.3 Food inequality*

People have traditionally settled in places where they can access food (Hassan, 2011). Hence, land is a common resource used to produce the food we eat. Food serves human needs, and it is stressed that everyone has the right to be free from hunger and have access to adequate food (e.g., Gusmai, 2018). Hunger has severe consequences for humans and, as claimed by Maslow, “For the man who is extremely and dangerously hungry, no other interests exist but food. He dreams food, he remembers food, he thinks about food, he emotes only about food, he perceives only food and he wants only food” (1943, p. 5).

History has witnessed food riots caused by increasing prices, deliverer and dealer malpractice, and hunger (Thompson, 1971). To tackle the problem in Western Europe in the eighteenth century, the collective efforts of local authorities, coupled with local initiatives, empowered local farmers and increased food-production gains by tackling unjust prices and profiteering (Thompson, 1971). By doing so, food was kept at a reasonable price and distribution problems were taken care of (Thompson, 1971). At this time, the liberal order and its guiding principles like open markets, liberal democracy, and security operations also spurred industrial and technological innovations, such as machine-based refrigeration and food preservation techniques, and worked to alleviate hunger (e.g. Ikenberry, 2018).

When Maslow (1943) stated that food was one of humanity's basic needs in the 1940s, people were still dying from starvation and in greater numbers than today (Devereux, 2000; Hasell & Roser, 2017). Yet, hunger remains a global concern and is considered the world's greatest health problem, even though food production now exceeds population growth (Agyeman & McEntee, 2014; Ikerd, 2011; Polanyi, 1945). As well as this, although food developments point to enhanced food safety, nearly half a million people die of food poisoning every year (WHO, Food safety, n.d.). There are also concerns that the degradation of social cohesion like neighborhood trust and willingness to help, and increasing problems with distorted human–food relationships are driving nature and human beings further apart (Calise, Chow, Ryder, & Wingerter, 2018; Kennedy, Nantel, & Shetty, 2004; Sustainable development challenges, 2013). Such distorted human–food relationships are a growing concern, as obesity and premature death occur as a result of increased food intake and insufficient consumption of healthy food (Agha & Agha, 2017). The problem is global, as today, more people are obese than underweight (WHO, Obesity and overweight, n.d.). Thus, today we witness insecurity in the polarized global food system in the form of food shortages, overproduction, and waste. This tragedy comes from treating nature—and what it produces—

as limitless. It is also due to the increased acceleration of modern society induced by capitalism (Agha & Agha, 2017; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018; Polanyi, 1945; Rosa, 2013). These happenings have severe consequences in the form of droughts, floods, loss of biodiversity, and depleted and contaminated soil, freshwater, saltwater, and forests (e.g., Nayak & Waterson, 2019).

As with air and water, food consumption does not merely serve human necessity but also serves human desires—such as those met by slow food. The slow movement advocates downshifting: Slowness does not mean the inability to move faster. It recognizes the desire not to rush time, not to be jostled by it, but also to our ability to greet the world and not to forget us on the way (Sansot, 2000, p. 24). Slow food may imply conscientious food consumption as a reaction to the increased pace of life induced by capitalism and “time sickness” (Dossey, 1982; Bauman, 2007; Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018). It focuses on “preserving distinctive local cultures from the homogenizing effects of industrialization and globalization” (Schneider, 2008, p. 385) by promoting traditional, local, and sustainable food (e.g., Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2019; Husemann, & Eckhardt, 2018, 2019; Petrini, 2005). It prioritizes the time needed to allow crops to emerge from the earth and become food on the plate, focuses on the quality of food, and protects local traditions and practices of cultivation. This is in contrast to such traditional methods of food production, where natural resources are damaged (Petrini, 2005; Schneider, 2008). Hence, slow food is an answer for those who desire luxurious food experiences and look to eat such unconventional luxurious dishes that instead of extravagant foodie experiences provide a sense of meaningfulness, harmony, enlightenment, and even spirituality (e.g., Berry, 1994; Cederström & Spicer, 2015; Hemetsberger, Kreuzer, & Klien, 2019; Kauppinen-Räsänen et al., 2019), thus responding to the desire of consumers to share and experience (e.g., Cristini et al., 2017). Indeed, such food may be defined as precious, excellent, pure, and accepting of a unique cultural food heritage



(e.g., Lumsdon & McGrath, 2011; Petrini, 2015; Simonetti, 2019). Yet, clearly, the slow food movement does not address a long-term solution to food inequality or distorted human–food relationships; rather, it constitutes an assurance.

The tragedy of waste and shortage is also apparent with food. For all humans, food is a basic necessity, which without we cannot survive. However, the cold realization is that food, not to mention safe and nutritious food, is still a luxury for many due to its rarity, uniqueness, and exclusivity (e.g. Kirkham, 2018). This is clear when one notes that hunger continues to be a global concern, at the same time as up to one-third of all food produced is wasted (<http://www.fao.org/home/en/>). Current “Global, national and local food systems are extremely complex and dynamic, evolving over time” (FAO, Climate smart agriculture sourcebook, n.d.), yet they are also polarized, puzzling, and paradoxical, meaning that changes to our current food system are called for (e.g., Nayak & Waterson, 2019).

### **3. Discussion**

The existence of resources that meet basic human needs deserve to be reconsidered within contemporary society. In this study, the common resources of air, water, and land are viewed through the lens of the waste and scarcity of the global commons. In doing so, the study explores how the resources as well as the basic human needs serving human necessities of breathing, drinking, and eating have become luxury.

This type of luxury conceptualization goes beyond products, services, and brands that fulfill human desires, thus implying that they are goods that the consumer does not particularly need, at least not for survival. Instead, within the studied context, the necessities for human survival have become luxuries, and as such, contribute to the trope of unconventional luxury. The study implies that luxury is being transformed from “being and experiencing through luxury”—shared in the public sphere and serving the common good—

to “owing, having, and using luxury”—as epitomized by the conspicuous and democratic luxury of brands in the private and social sphere—and finally to “experiencing and living from luxury”—where the depleted natural resources provide in their purest and excellent form luxury experiences, thus leading to an era of unconventional luxury (e.g., Cristini et al. 2017).

The issues that have induced this transformation are both numerous and intertwined. Yet, if we recapitulate the transformation, the principal causal forces can be found in our accelerated world in the form of increased urbanization, industrialization, and consumption. These practices have increased the Earth’s environmental degradation, and by so doing, have led to the waste and shortage of air, water, and food. This seriously affects the lives of a growing proportion of the world’s population (e.g., Husemann & Eckhardt, 2018; Rosa, 2013; Tomlinson, 2007; Wilk, 2001, 2006).

The transformation of luxury reveals some puzzling elements. On one hand, within the context of products, services, and brands, luxury has traditionally been defined by its rarity, uniqueness, and exclusivity (e.g., Dubois & Duquesne, 1993; Hudders et al., 2013; Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2016). Yet, within that context, luxury has recently transformed, through the embrace of democratization, into something that many can access (Hudders et al., 2013). On the other hand, common resources have been depleted and contaminated, and human beings are suffering as a result of polluted air and water, and food insecurity (e.g., Guo & Lu, 2019). Thus, within this context, something that used to be more or less ubiquitous is transformed to become rare and unavailable to more and more people—a luxury for many.

Indeed, those occupying the most affluent social strata (i.e., those who have the option to choose) have been able to escape these problems. Within this context, breathing clean air, drinking clean water, and eating safe and nutritious food have become luxurious—

maybe even ultra-luxurious—commodities that convey excellence, creativity, and/or exclusivity according to the recent definition by Cristini et al. (2017).

The intriguing issue in the context of the common resources is whether their rare, unique, and exclusively luxurious meanings are justified. These commons are universal substances (Wilk, 2006) that are intrinsic to our lives. Thus, they ought to be accessible and shared by every individual, irrespective of their economic status. Such a situation not only crystalizes the moral debate regarding the availability of the commons to an exclusive status, thus epitomizing the problem of distributive justice (Butler et al., 2016), but also addresses human survival in an indiscriminate manner. Yet, these problems are often described as “moral issues which are almost always subordinated to economics” (Wilk, 2001, p. 280).

The major concern here is that can the society be content with breathable air, drinkable water, and edible food that is of mediocre quality, or whether it should pursue the ultimate level of luxury—that of excellence (e.g., Cristini et al., 2017) and pureness. As elaborated on within the context of common resources, this study argues that air, water, and land deserve to be viewed as precious, accessible, and shareable by every individual. They should also be valued for their pureness and excellence within their natural environment. Indeed, the sale of air and water divert attention from the core dilemma, and if water, air, and food have been taken for granted, then it can be said that so has their scarcity and pollution. It is likely that heedless industrial growth has diverted attention away from solving the roots of these problems. In the case of water specifically, and like any other common resource, it is not valued for its precious and essential qualities but rather seen as a necessarily profitable commodity. Bottled water also holds a paradox: How can water sold in plastic bottles become a sustainable solution to water pollution when plastic is deemed the scourge of the environment?

Furthermore, within the context of the commons, luxury not only comes from rareness or scarcity but from excellence, purity, and the ability to ensure the well-being of human beings and as a result, society. But shouldn't this luxury be accessible, as when accessible, it can be shared while also being viewed as precious? (Belk, 2014) To that effect, Cristini et al.'s research (2017) is timely, as they stressed that even if ultra-luxury requires all three aspects—excellence, creativity, and exclusivity—to be high, luxury does not. Thereby, extensive exclusivity is insufficient but necessary for ultra-high luxury, but not for luxury.

We may well witness a reversal of luxury tendencies due to changing socio-historical and environmental situations. Slow food and slow movement imply that consumers are becoming increasingly weary of this fast-paced life and its addiction to speed, as well as its effect on their lives and the health of the planet (e.g. Belleza, Paharia, & Keinan, 2016). This study's focus on the commons as an unconventional dimension of luxury—rich and ubiquitous elements of life that should be accessible to all—not only reveals the wisdom and beauty of nature (Cristini et al., 2017) but also evidences what more individuals desperately need or will eventually need. Evidently, this dimension of luxury does not correspond solely to human beings' higher wants (Belk, 1999), but also to lower levels of human necessities—it is a luxury that deserves to be managed and transformed into shared and accessible for all.

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