

Confronting Consumption

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In affluent societies, consumption and consumerism have long been consigned to the edges of polite talk. How much, and of what, do we consume? Why? How much is enough? How much is too much for the social fabric or the health of the planet? It is no wonder that these questions are addressed only obliquely, if at all. They are hard to answer, and when answers emerge they have an awkward tendency to challenge deeply-held assumptions about progress and the good life. They also challenge prevailing distributions of power and influence and often smack of hypocrisy, coming as they so often do from those who consume the most.

Perhaps it is no surprise, then, that comforting terms like “sustainable development” have come to frame environmental discourse in the United States, the paragon of the consumer society and the place where we three authors live and work. Following the Brundtland Commission, sustainability is widely understood as those actions that meet the needs of current populations without endangering the prospects of future generations. Just what constitutes the needs of today’s people remains blurred, out of focus, even usefully ambiguous: we have become adept at talking about sustainability without having to wade into the treacherous waters of consumption. Consequently, much that is said today in the name of sustainability continues to stress familiar themes of population (too large), technology (not green enough), and economic growth (not enough of it in the right places). Consumption tends to enter the discussion only obliquely, as in calls for “green consumption” or the moral imperative of recycling.

Until now. Evidence is mounting that frank talk about “the consumption problem” is surfacing across everyday life in America. Books such as Juliet Schor’s *The Overconsuming American* and Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin’s *Your Money Or Your Life* have proven surprisingly popular. *Affluenza*, a film produced for public television and chronicling the “epidemic of stress, overwork, waste and indebtedness caused by dogged pursuit of the American Dream,” has become something of a cult classic. Remarq, a major provider of public access to USENET discussion lists, reports that the USENET list on “responsible consumption” and frugal living ranks twentieth in terms of activity among the more than 15,000 discussion lists it monitors.¹

1. See <http://www.remarq.com>

Indeed, aided by the Internet, practices such as green consuming and socially responsible investing have seen a resurgence of interest. Organizations such as the Center for Civic Renewal and the Center for the New American Dream have seen heavy demand for their materials on reducing consumption and exiting the “rat race.” Even the distinguished pages of *Science* magazine hosted a debate between a prominent biologist and two leading economists on whether a consumption problem exists.² Scores of local communities have launched “Agenda 21” initiatives that examine questions of growth, planning, sustainability, and the quality of life.³ A growing cultural backlash against gas-guzzling sport utility vehicles and intrusive cellular phones—symbols of the frenetic, overconsuming society—is evident. Anti-sprawl movements are springing up all over.

Although these emerging concerns about consumption have an environmental dimension, they transcend narrowly biophysical considerations to embrace issues of community, work, meaning, freedom, and the overall quality of life. For some, the concern is consumerism, the crass elevation of material acquisition to the status of a dominant social paradigm. For others it is commoditization, the substitution of marketable goods and services for personal relationships, self-provisioning, culture, artistic expression, and other sources of human well being. For still others it is overconsumption, in the popularly understood sense of using more than is necessary. For most, these themes converge in a troubled, intuitive understanding that more of the same rhetoric, action, and inaction will not reverse the trends. Tinkering at the margins of production processes and purchasing behavior will not get society on an ecologically and socially sustainable path.

How might ordinary people living in high-consumption societies begin to clarify and act on these unsettling intuitions? Where can they turn for insights, systematic analysis, support, intervention strategies, or hope of effective action? Certainly not to the policy-making arena. There one finds processes of thought and decision dominated, perhaps as never before, by two forces: a deeply seated economic reasoning and a politics of growth that cuts across the political spectrum. According to prevailing economic thought, consumption is nothing less than the purpose of the economy. Economic activity is separated into supply and demand; and demand—that is, consumer purchasing behavior—is relegated to the black box of consumer sovereignty. The demand function is an aggregation of individual’s preferences, each set of which is unknowable and can only be expressed in revealed form through market purchases. Thus analytic and policy attention is directed to production, that is, to the processes of supplying consumers with what they desire. Getting production right means getting markets to clear and the economy to grow. If a problem arises in this produc-

2. Myers 1997; Vincent and Panayotou 1997. See also Kates 2000; and Holdren 2000.

3. See Bernard and Young 1997; Mazmanian and Kraft 1999; Prugh, Costanza and Daly 2000; and Shutkin 2000.

tion-based, consumer-oriented economy, corrections are naturally aimed at production, not consumption.

Running in tandem with this reasoning is a simple but compelling political fact: expanding the stock of available resources and spreading the wealth gains among everyone carry a much lower political price tag than trying to redistribute resources from the haves to the have-nots. Economic growth, facilitated at every turn by public policy, becomes the lubricant for civic processes of democratic planning and compromise. The dominance of economic reasoning and the pragmatism of growth politics conspire to insulate from scrutiny the individual black boxes in which consuming is understood to occur. As a result, no one in public life dares—or needs—to ask why people consume, let alone to question whether people or societies are better off with their accustomed consumption patterns.

One might think that environmental activism would offer a different logic, a new way of approaching problems related to throughput, growth, consumerism, or the “more-is-better” trap. But in fact many mainstream environmentalists—especially in the United States and, it seems, increasingly elsewhere—have embraced this production-oriented logic. Consumption, if addressed at all, is raised only obliquely. Because production is the problem, regulation of producers becomes the answer. Producers must internalize the cost of pollution or simply cease their abusive activities. Forests are overharvested because timber companies are shortsighted, greedy, or ignorant of proper management techniques, all warranting a change in incentive structures via laws and regulations. When these don’t work, forests must be set aside from production. If such measures push production offshore, then environmentalists must go offshore, too, helping other countries to develop their regulatory apparatus or promoting international environmental law and organization. In mustering their energies for these campaigns, the largest environmental organizations have spent considerably less time and effort questioning the forces that compel those ever-larger harvests, the ever-more-intensive use of a tract of timberland, and the unending search for new forest frontiers. They tend not to challenge whether society really “needs” more paper (let alone more paper per capita) or the lowest possible prices on wood products. That, once again, would be to enter into the forbidden territory of consumer sovereignty.

An illustration comes from the 1999 annual meeting of the Governing Council of Resources for the Future (RFF), a U.S. natural-resources think tank staffed largely by economists. A member of RFF’s board of directors suggested that the size of new houses and the number of miles people drive daily are, as indicators of sustainability, moving in the wrong direction. “The environmental movement is very middle class,” she observed, “and its organizations do not challenge middle class values.” A deputy director of Environmental Defense—an influential American environmental NGO that works with business to achieve market solutions to environmental problems—replied to the effect that “while few environmentalists were willing to dispense with, for example, air

conditioning, they are receptive to producing it with the least damage to the ecology." She then observed that "everybody in China wants a car."

The statement is telling. When consumption concerns are raised in mainstream environmental circles, they are too often dismissed on their own terms, readily converted to questions of production and technology, or shunted off as someone else's problem in the form of looming developments in far away places. Perhaps for reasons of political calculation, perhaps for fear or inability to challenge mainstream consumer values, there is a much greater willingness to examine the way things are done, especially the way things are produced, than to question the purposes served or not served by the doing of those things.

Nor will a citizen or student of environmental affairs find much guidance on consumption in the academy. Like the policy realm, much of the social sciences has come under the sway of economic reasoning. Economics is almost universally treated as the most scientific—and, thus, most advanced—of the social sciences. A large body of economic literature exists on "consumer theory," but its analytic goal is to better estimate demand curves, not to ask whether and how consumption patterns contribute to or solve social and environmental problems. Mainstream political science, preoccupied as it is with sorting out struggles over the division of spoils and burdens in a growing economy, is similarly blind to the consumption question.⁴ Sociology and anthropology have taken questions of consumerism more seriously—shedding much light, for example, on the status and meaning of consumption in modern society. But the message of much of this work seems to be either (a) that we are what we consume, in the sense that consumption is a critical aspect of giving meaning, status, and identity; or (b) that consumption is manufactured by structural forces that create a "consumption trap" beyond the control of the individual and the community.⁵ Both of these conclusions push the act of questioning or controlling consumption beyond the grasp of academic insight. Psychology likewise has a tradition of examining sources of satisfaction and linking it to work and income. But much of this work tends either to further a critique of materialism or to support product marketing.⁶ Little attention is paid to externalities, social or environmental.⁷

Political economy, a diffuse field aimed at bridging the behavioral and institutional aspects of material provisioning, may be better situated to examine consumption critically. Again, however, a production-sided logic often prevails. At the international level, most analysis focuses on shifting modes of production, new international divisions of labor, the increasing role of finance, and the impact of all these on international security and the stability of the state.⁸ Consumption enters, if at all, primarily in the "everyday life" variant of political

4. Political science may be showing renewed interest. See Sandel 1996; and Putnam 2000.

5. See, for example, Miller 1995; and Warde 1992.

6. De Young 1996; Ger 1997; Richins 1994; and Scitovsky 1992.

7. A notable exception is Stern et al. 1997.

8. For an important exception, see Gale and M'Gonigle 2000.

economy. But even here the central concern has been to capture individual- and household-level expressions of these larger, often global, forces. If one such expression is, say, debt-driven or status-driven purchasing to the detriment of self-provisioning, community integrity, and environmental services, then this purchasing and its effects are understood as the inevitable manifestation of global trends.

None of this is meant to denigrate the many important accomplishments of individuals and groups in the policy-making, activist, and academic realms struggling to put issues related to consumption, throughput, scale, and patterns of resource use on the table for discussion.⁹ Our point is not to deny the existence of these important efforts but to point out their fragmented, isolated character and the tough upstream journey they face. Small wonder, then, that individuals looking into these realms from outside see little being accomplished.

Our own professional experience reveals a similar disconnect between mainstream approaches to environmental problems and concerns about consumption. A small example: In 1996 a handful of scholars, including the three of us, launched the first in a recurring series of panels on the political ecology of consumption at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association. Over the next few annual meetings these panels attracted several scholars working on a range of linkages among consumption and ecology. We quickly discovered that we shared a yearning for a fresh analytic perspective. We also found that our panels fell well outside the mainstream of “environmental” topics at the annual meetings, which emphasized interstate cooperation, sovereignty issues, links between environmental damage and violent conflict, political controversies such as NAFTA, and problems of global governance. More than once we found our panel scheduled for a small room far from the center of conference activity. One year we met in a converted hotel room several floors removed from the conference center, with the panelists squeezed between the minibar and the bathroom.

Nevertheless, we were struck by the size of the audience drawn to these panels and the shared frustration of audience and panelists alike with the failure of the social sciences to grapple seriously with problems of consumption and environmental degradation. We were also struck by the recurring tendency of the panel discussion to return to a few key themes: the unsustainability of current trends; the enormous political obstacles to placing consumption-related concerns on elite agendas in the governmental, NGO, corporate and academic worlds; and the need to see consumption not just as an individual’s choice among goods but as a stream of choices and decisions winding its way through the various stages of extraction, manufacture, and final use, embedded at every step in social relations of power and authority. As these panels proceeded, we found a strikingly similar response from students in the courses we teach (at

9. See, for instance, Hubbard and Fong 1995; Roseland et al. 1998; Sachs et al. 1998; and Shuman 1998.

three very different American institutions). We realized that a realm of scholarly, civic, and activist concerns was not being met by courses on environmental law, science, economics, regulation, and policy.

These experiences in the conference hall and the classroom alerted us to what many others had already discovered—that a significant portion of American society yearns for a less harried, less materialist, less time-pressed way of life, and that many know that their individual consumption and the consumption of their society as a whole is threatening environmental life-support systems.¹⁰ Under these circumstances, troubling, problematic issues of consumption and consumerism can no longer be swept under the rug. Now is the time, we believe, to follow that troubled intuition and break from the norms of polite political, economic, and environmental discourse to raise a set of tough questions: How much is too much? How much is enough? Who decides? And who wins and who loses in the process?

A Provisional Framework

Given our dissatisfaction with prevailing, fragmentary approaches to thinking about and confronting consumption and its externalities, we highlight in the accompanying research articles a few themes that underpin our own approach. Our provisional framework has three elements: emphasis on the social embeddedness of consumption; attention to the linkages along commodity chains of resource use that shape consumption decisions; and emphasis on the hidden forms of consumption embedded in all stages of economic activity.

The Social Embeddedness of Consumption

The first step in developing a more ecologically and socially attuned framework for studying consumption is to recognize, as many sociologists clearly have, that a consumer's choices are not isolated acts of rational decision making. Rather, such choices are often significant parts of an individual's attempt to find meaning, status, and identity. Moreover, far from being autonomous exercises of power by sovereign consumers, such choices in modern political economies are heavily influenced by contextual social forces (notably advertising and media images of the good life) and subject to structural features that often make it convenient, rewarding, or even necessary to increase consumption. Embedding consumption in a larger web of social relations leads us to ask about the influences on consumption choices, including the location of power in structuring those choices.

We see two particularly useful concepts emerge from this focus on the social embeddedness of consumption. Both identify important social processes

10. See Etzioni 1998; The Harwood Group 1995; Rosenblatt et al. 1999; Schor 1998; and Frank 1999. For counter-arguments, see Lebergott 1993; and Twitchell 1999.

that tend to be missed in conventional perspectives that assume atomistic rationality and that privilege power as consumer sovereignty. As Michael Maniates discusses in an accompanying article, *individualization* is the tendency to ascribe responsibility for all consumption-related problems to freestanding individuals. In so doing, the larger social forces that impinge on purchasers' decisions are ignored. A second important concept is Jack Manno's idea of *commoditization*, the tendency of commercial forces to colonize everyday action, converting more and more of life's activities to purchase decisions.¹¹

Chains of Material Provisioning and Resource Use

A second component of our framework is the commodity chain of material provisioning in which consumption consists of a linked stream of resource-use decisions. Prevailing models of economic activity typically focus on the interaction of producers' and consumers' market behavior via the market forces of supply and demand. We take a different perspective, viewing economic transactions as a series of linked decisions running along a commodity chain that begins with primary resource extraction and continues through final purchase, use and disposal. These two ends of the chain are linked by a series of nodes that include investment, manufacturing, processing, distributing, marketing, and retailing. In practice, commodities are produced via a complex, web-like network of relations. But the simple, linear notion of a chain is a useful first-cut approximation that directs attention both upstream and downstream from what is otherwise the conventional emphasis on individual choices of atomized consumers. The commodity chain approach reminds us that consumption decisions are heavily influenced, shaped, and constrained by an entire string of linked choices being made, and power being exercised, as commodities are created, distributed, used, and disposed of.

One critical insight that emerges from emphasis on a linked commodity chain of resource-use decisions is the importance of *distancing*, a term we use to refer to the severing of ecological and social feedback as decision points along the chain are increasingly separated along the dimensions of geography, culture, agency, and power.¹² The concept of distancing highlights the increasingly isolated character of consumption choices as decision makers at individual nodes are cut off from a contextualized understanding of the ramifications of their choices, both upstream and downstream.

A second critical process revealed through the resource-chain perspective is the disproportionate exercise of power and authority at certain critical nodes along the chain. The commodity-chain perspective reminds us that the power to shape consumption choices resides at various nodes all along the chain. In his accompanying article, Ken Conca argues that we are witnessing the *down-*

11. Manno forthcoming.

12. Princen forthcoming.

streaming of economic power in a changing global economy. Across a wide swath of global economic activity, changes in the organization of production and exchange have shifted power away from control of the means of production and toward what we can think of as control of the means of consumption—enhancing the centrality of consumption in environmental regulatory strategies and raising the stakes surrounding consumption for environmental social movements.

Production as Consumption

Combining the elements of socially embedded consumers and linked chains of resource use decisions leads us to a final theme: that “consuming” occurs all along the chain, not just at the downstream node of consumer demand. Nodes of raw material extraction, manufacturing, and so on represent not just production and value added, but also consumption and value depleted. Producers are consumers; production is consumption. An important implication of this idea is that what is being consumed at each node is not obvious. At the node of primary resource extraction it might be the tree or the fish; or it might be the ecosystem integrity of the forest or the fishery. At the node of final purchase it might be an apple, or a person’s attention, or a community’s social fabric.

Another implication of this view is that responsibility shifts from consumers-as-final-demanders to actors at all nodes of the chain. Producers may add value as they satisfy downstream demand, but they also risk value depletion; they *consume* value by producing. In using up resources both natural and social, they impose costs on the environment and on people—be it purchasers, workers, care givers, neighbors, or citizens.

This *consumption angle* on resource use offers a corrective to the production-centered perspective that dominates contemporary discussions of economic affairs, including environmental protection. In that perspective, raw materials feed manufacturing and distribution to produce what people want. From this it follows that, because goods are good and would not be produced if people did not want them, more goods—and more production—must be better. A productive economy is, as a result, one that produces more goods for a given input (thus increasing the economy’s “productivity”), yields more choices for consumers, and increases output. When production creates problems such as pollution, the productive answer is to *produce* correctives such as scrubbers, filters, and de-toxifiers. So goes the logic of production, productiveness, productivity, and products—construing all things economic as producing, as adding value, as, indeed, progress. The consumption angle, as Tom Princen argues in his accompanying article, turns this around to self-consciously construe economic activity as consuming, as depleting value, as risking ecological overshoot and the stressing of social capacity.

Entrenched categories of thinking can create enormous hurdles to viewing the world as it calls out to be seen. Our hope is that the accompanying articles

will stimulate thought, challenge underlying assumptions, and point toward new forms of intervention that confront consumption—a task that scholars and activists in affluent societies have shirked for too long.

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