

Book Reviews

Cohen, M.J., and J. Murphy, eds. 2001. *Exploring Sustainable Consumption: Environmental Policy and the Social Sciences*. Amsterdam: Elsevier Science (Pergamon).

*Reviewed by Ian Thomas
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This book is a result of a series of seminars, sponsored by the UK Economic and Social Research Council, bringing together social scientists concerned about the environmental implications of consumption, and scholars from the fields of anthropology and cultural studies. Academics and researchers are the authors of the thirteen chapters, so some concepts require thought, but to the credit of all concerned, the writing is accessible to a range of readers.

The focus of "Exploring Sustainable Consumption" sits somewhere between other recent books.¹ Its themes show that the authors understand that consumption is a key issue, yet they emphasize the historical and social contexts of a range of public policy options, as distinct from an assessment of the experience of policy implementation and what is needed to achieve sustainable consumption.

Their beginning point is that policymakers and the community have been content to accuse corporations and industry generally for environmental problems. Yet the consumption patterns of the richest nations are mainly responsible for the creation of environmental impacts. In essence the editors make the case that to make any headway in moderating the environmental impacts of consumption, we cannot leave it to the technicians—rather, social processes have to make a substantial contribution. Overall their argument is that technological approaches, be they from economics or science/engineering, emphasize the supply side of society's activities, rather than tackling the important consumer side. While the technological approaches have some contributions to make, tackling the consumption side is long over-due.

The individual contributions have been grouped into eight parts. Following the Introduction, two chapters make up the "Politics of sustainable consumption." These provide the context for sustainable consumption, by discussing the evolution of environmental issues since the 1970s, and discussion of consumption and its management in the environmental policies of the European Union (indicating that these policies do little more than encourage techni-

1. Woollard and Ostry 2000; and Conca, Princen, and Maniates 2002.

cal approaches). This review is put in the context of “eco-modernism theory,” or the argument made by the editors that the understanding of management of environmental impacts has moved from a focus on technology to a realization of the need to refocus on social approaches.

In the second part, “Politics of Sustainable Consumption,” the role of liberalism in society and its relation to consumerism, by establishing consumer sovereignty, are explored. The conclusion of one chapter is that so long as we take a “dialogic” view, we can argue for intervention by government to manage the impacts of consumers’ choices, while the other deals with economics and ethics.

“Geographies of Sustainable Consumption” is the category that links the next two chapters. The first contends that ecolabeling that leads to sustainable consumption will need to have a more environmentally directed set of values. Consumption of nature is the topic of the second, which looks at the difficulty of defining sustainable consumption of nature for tourism.

While consumers in established developed economies are already a problem for the consumption of natural resources, new consumers have to be considered also. The fifth part, “Sustainable Consumption: Technology, Culture and People,” helps to identify growing directions of consumption. Firstly, the pressures coming from new consumers in the manufacturing areas of northern Mexico are explored. Rather than perpetuating the assumption that expanding consumption comes from the “wants” of people who are exposed to western wealth and goods, the point is made that moving from a rural lifestyle to an urban one transforms the lives of the migrants. Secondly, water is one utility that is used as a case study to make the argument that the water supply systems actively create the demand for water use. Even “green consumers” are locked into these systems, so moves to sustainable consumption must acknowledge the social construction of demand to advance past a focus on technical solutions to resource use.

The sixth part considers individuals, in “Identity, Behaviour and Lifestyle: the Social-psychology of Sustainable Consumption.” The first chapter contrasts concern related to over-consumption, with general concern about the environment. Its conclusion is that while the search for a simple life-style (usually with reduced consumption) has elements of selfishness, environmental attitudes are generally more altruistic. To pursue this, the second chapter examines communications strategies, proposing a two-way flow of information and ideas, especially discussion that enables consumers to combine environmental behavior with the other pressures on their lives.

“Working towards Sustainable Consumption” is the final part and acts as the conclusion through two chapters. A key point of the first is that the reassessment of needs, which will have to occur over a long time period, is promoted as the most important strategy. This sets the scene for the final chapter, which draws together the key themes of earlier chapters, particularly: society’s influence; the goals of individuals; properties, or status, of objects; relationship

of consumption to environmental impacts; the politics associated with consumption; and the role of public policy in guiding sustainable consumption.

Overall the discussion supports the feelings of many concerned about environmental issues. Technical fixes can make useful contributions, but understanding of social behavior is critical—after all, it is the individuals in society who use the technology. Readers wanting quick answers to the question “how do we make consumption sustainable?” may be disappointed that the answers are not there. This is a book that reports the work of academics, not the actions of activists. Readers who have experience in environmental issues and management may feel that many of the points that have been presented are treading over old ground. For these readers, to dismiss the authors’ work too quickly would be to miss important insights, especially that society is complex, and it is dangerous for us to jump to “solutions” based on our previous experience. This is where “Exploring Sustainable Consumption” is particularly valuable—in identifying many aspects of social and individual behavior that we must consider in planning sustainable consumption approaches. We ignore these aspects to our peril.

References

- Woollard, Robert F., and Aleck S. Ostry, eds. 2000. *Fatal Consumption: Rethinking Sustainable Development*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.
- Conca, Ken, Thomas Princen, and Michael Maniates. 2002. *Confronting Consumption*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Markell, David, and John Knox, eds. 2003. *Greening NAFTA: The North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

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In the fall of 1992, the prospects for the United States Congress’ approval of the proposed North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) looked grim. Environmental groups and labor unions were dead-set against the pact and it looked as if NAFTA’s proponents did not have the votes. Enter Bill Clinton, elected United States President in November 1992. As a candidate, and later as President, Clinton declared that he would not support NAFTA unless and until there were meaningful side agreements on the environment and labor. With this gauntlet thrown down, Clinton then began to seek supporters in the environmental and labor camps for his “NAFTA-plus” agenda.

The NAFTA-plus agenda initiated by Clinton led to the negotiation of two new agreements—the North American Agreement on Labor Cooperation (NAALC) and the North American Agreement of Environmental Cooperation (NAAEC). The cornerstone of the NAAEC was the proposed creation of a new