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The Sustainability of Sustainable Consumption

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ARTICLE

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Abstract:

This article examines the limitations of the concept of sustainable consumption in terms of the inadequate attention given to the social, cultural and historical contextualization of consumption. I argue that Macromarketing should adopt modes of inquiry that more fully engage with this contextualization. The implicit assumptions of 'sustainable consumption' center on the rational individual and his or her needs and wants, and neglect the significance of consumption practices as embodying the relations *between* individuals. Acts of consumption are not in opposition to, and prior to, macro structures and processes, they *are* macro processes at work. Consumer practices are cultural and social practices that have historically developed, and are manifestations of both local and global linkages of social interdependencies. To continually look at the consumer as the cause of the ecological problem effectively decontextualizes consumption from such interdependencies. It posits a macro problem onto a micro situation and seeks the solution there.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the inadequacy of contemporary accounts of sustainable consumption in terms of their static, individualistic and rationalistic tendencies. This is not an endorsement of a postmodern approach, but rather an attempt to stress the need for accounts of consumption, and therefore of the possibility of achieving sustainable consumption, within the historical flow and flux of social and cultural processes. Such processes encompass their own shifting power relations and struggles, which enable alternative visions of society to emerge. Every national society has its own history, though such histories are inevitably intertwined with others. Therefore, when we seek to develop solutions towards sustainable development in terms of sustainable consumption, we need to attempt to trace particular histories of consumption, in their changing form and function, in order to identify culturally specific modes of intervention; in order to make change more likely. This means definitions of 'sustainable consumption' must be multiple and fluid. Existing definitions are prescriptive. They do not describe what consumption is, but what it should be. It is precisely the assumptions of these universal prescriptions that are contested here.

I use the concept of 'sustainable consumption' within quotation marks to connote its status as a discourse that seeks to present a solution to the ecological problems associated with industrial economic production. In this respect this paper addresses the theoretical idea of the unidirectional causal relation between sustainable consumption and sustainable development. This relation is precisely the purpose and rationale of 'sustainable consumption' as a theory and concept. I argue that this is not merely a discursive or philosophical question. Discourse and practice are not wholly independent entities but overlapping and mutually constitutive processes. We can examine the assumptions underlying 'sustainable consumption' by addressing the way other discourses, such as sociology and anthropology, understand and explain consumption as a social practice. I argue that the largely implicit assumptions of 'sustainable consumption' center on the notion of the rational individual and his or her needs and wants, and neglect the significance of consumption practices as embodying the relations *between* individuals.

This has serious Macromarketing implications. By reframing our conceptions of the purposes and social context of consumption, we must address the question of this relation between sustainable consumption and sustainable development, which is the premise of 'sustainable consumption' as an academic discourse. We must accept that the development of sustainable consumption as a widespread practice within societies is more complex than a change in individual values and practices. We must more fully question the possibilities of sustainable consumption. In doing so, not only does the discourse of 'sustainable consumption' become more sustainable or tenable but we will actively bring in the consumer and consumption practices as the space within which solutions to increasing production are formed, rather than simply the source of the problem in the first place (see Heiskanen and Pantzar 1997 as an example of the approach which places responsibility for ecological degradation onto the consumer).

Viewing consumption as *simply* the problem follows a somewhat etic and positivistic perspective – an aerial view of sustainable development. We must seek to develop understandings that also incorporate the meanings and practices of consumption. It is vital to understand it as a cultural process from within as well as without. It is only in this way that the external view that sees the ecological and long-term effects of increasing consumption can be translated through the meaning complexes of consumers, individually and collectively. Without such translation the etic and emic lines of enquiry never intersect. The different ways of knowing do not overlap and interpenetrate one another, and if we accept that knowledge and action are intimately related, the scope for positive action is limited. This focus on consumption practices is not simply a micro problem. I argue this not because individual acts of consumption have wider ecological implications, which of course they may. Such an argument would, ironically, place the macro level as determined by the micro level. Normative discourses of 'sustainable consumption' may seek to reverse this causal relation by, for example, recommending legal frameworks to constrain excessive consumption, but this would miss the point. Individual acts of consumption are not in opposition to, and prior to, macro structures and processes, they *are* macro processes at work.

Consumer practices are cultural and social practices that have historically developed, and are manifestations of both local and global linkages of social interdependencies. To continually look at the consumer as the cause of the ecological problem effectively decontextualizes consumption acts from such interdependencies. It posits a macro problem onto a micro situation and seeks the solution there.

My focus on consumption may be seen to neglect the nature of global capitalism and its inherent logic of the increasing production of both commodities and desires. Such logic may indeed have its own teleological inevitability towards increasing consumption and subsequent ecological damage. But logic does not exist in a cultural vacuum. Values and symbols permeate the global competitive order. These are not *simply* subservient to the logic of capital, nor are they unitary and homogenous. The purely production perspective neglects the cultural meaningfulness of consumption activities, and assumes that consumers are merely slaves to their whims and impulses or easily manipulated through such symbolic mechanisms as advertising. While systems and structures of production and competition are important in understanding consumption they are not our only interpretive lens.

On a practical point, if the logic of global industrial capitalism obeys an inevitable course, what scope is there for our interventions? Must we wait for the displacement of this order before sustainable development (and sustainable consumption) can become a reality? I argue not. Power is not a possession of producers or consumers but emerges in their mutual relations. Micro approaches tend to look for answers in the spaces *within* social actors (whether producers or consumers) in terms of their supposed inherent psychology or motivation. I contend that a macro approach should address the spaces *in between* actors in terms of their relations and interdependencies. This is because our actions, dispositions, lifestyles, and even our identities are transformed through such social relations. For example, though some may feel that they can use nature (or objects as transformations of nature) as a resource to satisfy their wants and desires, this feeling is not the result of some inherent, unchanging psychological trait. Rather it follows from the location of those people in relation to cultural space and time – the very intersection of multiple values that have developed in specific societies over time. Feelings of superiority over nature are not simply the product of the individual imagination, but are the outcome of changing interdependencies, both between people and nature, and between different social groups within society.

While a complete analysis of the possibility of sustainable consumption would incorporate both production and consumption processes this is beyond the scope of this article. I emphasize consumption because I believe it is a relatively neglected perspective within discourses of sustainability.

THE CONCEPT OF 'SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION'

Is the concept of 'sustainable consumption' sustainable? In other words, is it theoretically coherent, empirically verifiable, and practically actionable on the part of consumers either as a collective or as individuals? If there are problems with 'sustainable consumption', can they be overcome? This article addresses these questions. My aim is not

to definitively verify how we, as a consumer society, can reach a state of sustainability, but more modestly to point to alternative perspectives which I believe will make a process of sustainability more likely.

While the viability of 'sustainable consumption' appears to have been given little examination within a Macromarketing context, there have of course been references to the role played by consumption in terms of environmental implications (Leigh, Murphy, and Enis 1988; Droge et al 1993; van Dam and Apeldoorn 1996). Leigh, Murphy, and Enis (1988) seek to explain 'socially responsible consumption' by measuring the socially responsible traits of consumers. While there is a danger of tautology in this account, it also attempts to construct an explanation of a process – 'socially responsible consumption' – by labeling the supposed properties of isolated individuals, thus missing the inherently social and dynamic nature of consumption. This is an example of looking for the problem in the space within the social actor – his or her immutable and situationally consistent psychological traits. Van Dam and Apeldorn (1996) address the role of marketing theory in sustainable economic development, within which consumer demand might be tempered by the ethos of the 'conserver society movement'. However, they stress the need for regulation in light of the overwhelming consumption ethos. Droge et al (1993) draw on Schudson in elaborating the forms of critique of the consumption culture, yet these critiques do not incorporate the positive social and cultural meaning of consumption practices. In short, these studies do not fully engage in the sociological and anthropological significance of consumption, which is necessary if we want to examine the possibility of 'sustainable consumption'. While these forms of theoretical exposition are limited in Macromarketing literature (Venkatesh 1999), if we accept that much of modern consumption appears symbolic and social, rather than limited to basic 'needs', then it is imperative to draw on theories which seek to explain symbolic and social practices. As well as exploring how ecologically benign production can be incorporated into marketing practice, Macromarketing needs to highlight that production depends on consumption, and vice versa, and, therefore, an understanding of the meaning of consumption in contemporary societies is crucial.

Recently, in an effort to pinpoint a potential area of praxis, or transformative action, for the discourse of Sustainable Development (particularly of an ecological kind), the concept of Sustainable Consumption has been presented. Discourse is used here to refer to a system of language encoding specific forms of knowledge (Tonkiss 1998). As such it organizes how we might speak and write about particular phenomena. The concept of sustainable consumption itself was given political voice at the 1992 Earth Summit, where there was broad "political consensus of the fact that major changes in the present consumption patterns are necessary in order to solve the global environment and development problems" (cited in Reisch 1998,1). A common definition of sustainable consumption would be that "sustainable production and consumption is the use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimizing the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations" (Oslo Symposium on Sustainable Consumption cited in Reisch 1998, 9). Underlying definitions of sustainable consumption is the concept of basic needs. The

assumption is that once people consume beyond these needs they are being irrational, greedy, immoral or manipulated. I would argue that needs are not so simply defined and located outside of their social and cultural contexts of enactment. Consequently, 'needs' are an unstable ground on which to found the prospects of sustainable consumption.

Another approach to 'sustainable consumption' connects the prospects of sustainable consumption with the need to communicate the link between ecological degradation, modern hyperconsumption and prevailing economic and political institutions - the Dominant Social Paradigm (DSP) (Kilbourne, McDonagh and Prothero 1997). Within this analysis, hyperconsumption connotes consumption where the ecological referent is obscured - consumers are no longer aware of the natural resources utilized in the manufacture of goods. *Hyperconsumption* occurs where "there is no logical connection between the thing consumed and the consumption act itself – it is consumption for its own sake…[there is a] total separation of the object of consumption from nature: the image is being consumed, rather than the object. Within the natural law of value, the purpose of consumption is need satisfaction from use value in nature…Within hyperconsumption…the sign value, or image, eclipses the commodity referent and simultaneously negates the ecological referent of the commodity as a product of nature" (Kilbourne, McDonagh and Prothero 1997, 8).

The explanation for such hyperconsumption is located within the DSP, which includes ideologies of progress and rationality. Yet 'consumption for its own sake' would seem to subvert notions of instrumental rationality and purpose. Such notions seem to be elements of the DSP. There are other problems. How could consumer objects be completely separate from the images of such objects? Why are natural needs considered more valid or truer than symbolic needs? How are commodities simply the product of nature? Are they not also the products of culture? Are products imagined symbolically - in thoughts, feelings and language - before becoming 'actual' products in material form? Is the meaning of such material form independent from the culturally given symbolic form? If not, then we cannot point to an object prior to and outside of its image. I do not contend that nature is not really involved in processes of production. There is an interaction between culture and nature. We should not view them as opposites.

But the obscured ecological referent of products is not the only problem. This approach presupposes that if only consumers could have our macromarketing insights, and be able to see what we see - the true meaning of objects as products of nature - then sustainability would follow. This 'true' meaning is only one meaning. While it may sometimes be the most important meaning for those concerned with the environment, it may not ever be for others. Consumers not only need to think about this ecological meaning, they also need to care about it. If the environmental meaning can be connected, as opposed to being set in opposition, with alternate meanings then there will be a greater likelihood of a cultural shift towards consuming sustainably. In this context, I argue that the prospects of sustainable consumption must be connected to the cultural frameworks of consumption, and it should be acknowledged that modern consumption is rational within those cultural frameworks. I will attempt to outline some prominent theories purporting to explain such

consumption, and the difficulties they present for the possibility of sustainable consumption. However, firstly, we must examine the inherent tensions of the concept of sustainable consumption within the lexicon of ecological sustainable development. In view of the fact that sustainable consumption has been positioned as the solution for sustainable development it is important to briefly examine the conceptual and empirical problems of this discourse.

THE NATURE OF NATURE
Constructivism v. Realism

It would appear that Social Constructionism has extended its influence to include the emerging discourse of ecological sustainable development (Hannigan 1995). Ecological crises are presented as socially constructed, meaning that though ostensibly objective conditions such as the depletion of the ozone layer, the destruction of the earth's rain forests, or the shrinkage of the earth's resources, may not have substantially changed in recent decades (insofar as these destructive processes were long under way), the public imagination of such problems does appear to have changed:

> ...environmental problems do not materialize by themselves; rather, they must be 'constructed' by individuals or organizations who define pollution or some other objective condition as worrisome and seek to do something about it.... From a sociological point of view the chief task here is to understand why certain conditions come to be perceived as problematic and how those who register this 'claim' command political attention in their quest to do something positive. (Hannigan 1995, 2-3)

Consequently, and ironically, discourses of ecology can be seen to *transform* (in the ideological sense) situations of technological and creative utilization of resources into destructive practices. This perspective occurs due to the availability and sustainability of an alternative discourse to that of man's use of nature towards the 'progress' of humanity. An exploration of the social conditions which permit the articulation of alternative concerns is not the premise of this article, but is nevertheless absolutely necessary to any convincing account of the social construction of ecology.

We need to unravel precisely how ecology has been socially constructed and sustained. What is equally vital is an account of the social and cultural structural development of the discourse of progress and modernity within particular social contexts which so dominates the citizen worldview. This necessity has been recognized by authors on the environment in terms of the Dominant Social Paradigm (Kilbourne, McDonagh and Prothero 1997), but it is important to acknowledge that as a cultural phenomenon, 'ideology' is never an all-encompassing, complete, and closed system. The Gramscian use of the concept of hegemony is arguably a better descriptor of the many interconnected ideological systems that co-exist in related power positions within any particular social system, and the social processes by which certain ideologies gain dominance over others (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Holub 1992). In this way we can attempt to understand how contesting discourses, symbolic orders and normative orders jockey for position in the public imaginary.

Conceding or indeed highlighting a constructionist position raises tensions for ecology. If modernity and technological progress as ecologically unbounded are socially constructed (and therefore open to criticism on the basis of sectional interests), and if modernity as necessarily bounded by nature is also socially constructed (though interests may be less identifiable), on what grounds can we say one discourse is inherently superior to another? In an intellectual field of relativism, how can we say ecology is right? Of course, we can point to scientific knowledge regarding quantities of resources remaining or the dangerous emissions of pollutants into the atmosphere, but such knowledge would also have to be accepted as socially constructed (if one wanted to remain intellectually consistent).

Also, such scientific knowledge has been the basis for modernity and progress. Its essence and purpose has been the transformation of natural resources, and in its applied guise, engineering, to meet and possibly create ever expanding consumer needs. Either way, a resort to the objective conditions of the world as the moral force for sustainable development logically defies the acceptance of a social constructionism of nature. As Murphy (1995, 690) has stated:

> ...most contemporary studies in the sociology of science have focused solely on how scientific knowledge is socially constructed and neglected the role of nature as a source of that knowledge... Even the sociology of environmental issues has often not investigated the relationship between the processes of nature and social action. Instead much of it has interpreted environmental issues as socially constructed 'social scares' and has deflected attention away from their connection to changes in ecosystems.

Murphy (1995, 693) goes on to draw parallels with the philosophical debate between materialism and idealism - "Sociologists who construct theory as if nature did not matter are like the Berkelyian philosopher sitting under a tree in a storm, meditating on the idea that reality consists of what humans construct conceptually, unaware of the lightening bolt about to strike." Beck (1996, 2-3) also seems aware of these difficulties for environmental discourse:

> If someone uses the word 'nature', the question immediately arises, what *cultural model* of 'nature' is being taken for granted?... nature itself is not nature: it is a concept, a norm, a recollection, a utopia, an alternative plan... Nature is being rediscovered, pampered, at a time when it is no longer there... In the ecological debate, attempts to use nature as a standard against its own destruction rest upon a *naturalistic misunderstanding*.

The above quote obviously demonstrates a constructivist sensibility, but Beck seems to propose the 'science of nature' as a means of justifying the ecological critique of industrial society. But such 'science of nature' is positivism writ large. As he admits,

> Of course, everyone has to think in the concepts of natural science, simply to perceive the world as ecologically threatened. Everyday ecological consciousness is thus the exact opposite of some 'natural' consciousness: it is a totally scientific view of the world, in which chemical formulae determine everyday behavior. (Beck 1996, 4)

Beck goes on to suggest that any engagement with the notion of 'real' would be a wholesale adoption of a simplistic and deterministic materialist philosophy. His anti-realism seems to stem from a readiness to distrust and be sceptical of any representations of 'reality'. However this scepticism does not warrant the adoption of realism's antithesis, extreme social constructionism. What appears to be required is a critical interpretive approach which aims to demystify the obscuring processes of the reality-makers or to trace the development of, for example, a materialistic ethos, which may have occurred unintentionally. In other words, there is a more significant reality beneath the superficial or present realities. However, within this approach there is no need to forego the notion of reality altogether. Ecological issues, while obviously socially constructed, also need to uphold the axiomatic truism that the earth's resources are depleting. The epistemological security of that argument logically relies on the ontological security of natural resources as, at least in some sense (even though such resources are only knowable in the symbolic sense), beyond the merely symbolic.

While there is no one true way of knowing nature, or knowing the meaning of nature, we should accept the fact of nature and its finite resources. This 'fact' cannot rely on certain scientific knowledge (as such knowledge is contested and therefore ultimately uncertain) but on a cultural and moral commitment to the connection and interdependency between humanity and nature. This implies an epistemologically interpretive and ontologically realist position. Philosophically this is not a contradiction (Crotty 1998). The fact that the meaning of nature is open to interpretation should be considered an opportunity to construct alternative meanings – of nature as more than a mere material resource for the use of humanity.

Sustainable Measures

Another problem with sustainability, whether conceived as socially or naturally constructed, is, to use a positivist phrase, the operationalization of the concept. We can attempt to conceptually understand the notion of sustainable development, but how do we empirically state the precise level of development which is sustainable, i.e. the level which if maintained in terms of a constant growth rate will ensure the indefinite supply of petroleum or coal or gas, or the slowing of the depletion of the ozone layer, or the regeneration of the rainforests, or the preservation of species around the world. We can, pointing to objective conditions (scientific geo-indicators of the ecological status of the planet), say we are developing too much, but when will we know that we are developing to just the right extent or just the right way? The question is probably empirically unanswerable.

This brings us back to the related issue of sustainable consumption. As Salzman (1997, 1255) states: "Unlike sustainable production's straightforward goal of minimizing pollution, sustainable consumption's ultimate objective remains indistinct, blurred by disagreement over appropriate measures, issues of international and intergenerational equity, and, most important, implications on individual lifestyles."

The Question of Needs

At what level of consumption are we consuming too much? Or, alternatively, are there certain consumption practices that are altogether unnecessary to human life? Do we have to agree upon the types of commodities or leisure pursuits that are superfluous to humanity, superfluous to our needs as human beings. This raises two issues - how do we define proper needs (real needs) from false ones, and who will provide the definition? Within these issues are a range of epistemological and ontological difficulties. The ontological question requires that human activity around the world in all its diversity must be classified in a universal way, so that we can connect such activities to a binary opposition of real/false, necessity/luxury, sustainable/non-sustainable. It is only through this way that we can identify unnecessary consumption. There must be agreement on basic needs in order to identify the various human activities that are not connected to the satisfaction of such needs.

The related epistemological question is how do we achieve this? How will we identify reality? On what basis do we classify a need as real or false? These bedrocks of reality are of course various and contesting, and would doubtless be connected to the articulations of various social groupings in various cultural and geographical contexts. Therefore, we can see that power relations are at the centre of these discourses. This would represent disciplinary power according to Foucault (1986), in the sense that certain cultural discourses would, in effect, be controlling the body in terms of the consumption practices of the body, in much the same way that medical and religious discourses have throughout history attempted to control and incite the sexual practices of the body (Foucault 1990 [1978]). If we accept a positivist scientific discourse as our episteme and biological functionality as our ontology, whose culture do these predominantly represent - a male North axis? Naturally, we could present such certainties in the interests of all humanity and all life, but that would leave us open to the dangers of ethnocentrism. As Geertz (cited in Rose 1997) noted our Western conception of man as a unified, coherent and essentially rational self appears extremely peculiar to other cultures. To frame our prescriptive analysis of appropriate action for ecological salvation with the concept of rational, unified man at its center displaces other non-Western cultural models.

Needs are mediated by the prevailing symbolic order, which is part and parcel of the cultural system. Consequently, needs can only be recognized and identified culturally (Slater 1997a). Given that there are many cultural formations within any national society, any attempt at universalizing a set of human needs is immanently and unavoidably ethnocentric. A discourse of sustainable consumption would, in such a scenario, be attempting to *speak for* other people in divergent cultural positions.

Slater (1997b) points out that statements of need are bound up with questions of how people should live - they are social and political. Needs are not absolute or mere individual preferences, "they are very serious political statements which are not made on the wing in a shopping mall or in a mad consumerist moment of impulse buying, but rather arise from core values of historically and collectively evolving ways of life..." (Slater 1997b, 57). The constructivist position on needs is also acknowledged by Philips (1997,114) - "The most

basic human needs are socially constructed" - and he cites Jhally (114-5) in defense of the notion of the symbolic use of products:

> The contention that goods should be important to people for what they are used for rather than symbolic meaning is very difficult to uphold in light of the historical, anthropological and cross-cultural evidence. In all cultures at all times, it is the relation between use and symbol that provides the concrete context for the playing out of the universal person-object relation.

It is this question of the cultural meaning of goods that is now addressed.

THE NATURE OF CULTURE
Consumer Culture

The implications of the historical development of consumer culture is the very real difficulty, from the position of prescribing programs of action, of bringing about the cultural shift which would be required to achieve sustainable consumption. This historical development in Europe and North America entailed the emergence of a new ethic of self. Giddens (1991) refers to this as reflexive self-identity, a modern project of the self, whereby the self is perceived as something to be honed, perfected and completed. However, the crucial point is that this is an ongoing project that never reaches completion - the essence of modern selfhood is to be self transforming, to be amorphous, to seek ever new experiences, and to continually reinvent oneself. It entails the desire for the unearthing of our potentialities. The irony of course is that such a project is never complete, as the ethic is based on change and desire - desire for the sake of desire. As Campbell (1987) points out, modern consumption is about wanting to want. Its essence is insatiability.

Within the North, we are arguably in the midst of an explosion of consumer "needs", and, according to Giddens (1992), an explosion of the human propensity for addiction, whether that addiction be food, alcohol, gambling, shopping, and even sex, which has become increasingly commodified in modern consumer culture.

Michael (1998) emphasizes the ability of consumer culture to fold into existing cultures in ways that do not overwhelm them. While he is not specific on the reasons for this, one could speculate that consumerism is not an essential culture in itself, but provides a means for cultural materialization and reproduction. In other words, it is an accessible way of making existing cultural values and orientations, Bourdieu's habitus (1984), visible. Viewed in this light, consumption is not a culture per se, nor is it an end in itself. It becomes a cultural strategy. Through the process of consumption people are able to make visible the social and cultural differences between people. In turn such consumption practices can come to constitute such differences. Consumption practices are thereby framed, limited or enabled by cultural and social complexities, and reciprocally act back on those complexities. If needs and wants have grown as societies became more complex and denser in terms of interdependencies and role specializations, a process with a long historical genesis, then the materialization processes and requirements become more complex in turn. We need more objects to communicate more subtle, nuanced differences in identities, social statuses, roles,

subcultural allegiances and subjective dispositions. Following Elias (1978b; 1982) one could posit that these long-term social processes are as much responsible for growing consumer desires as the promotional capabilities of Ford or McDonalds.

Critical accounts of consumer culture (Adorno 1991; Tomlinson 1990; Schudson 1993; Ewen 1976) adopt a production of consumption perspective (Featherstone 1991) - consumer culture is reduced to an effect of capitalism as a mode of production. In such explanations, the agency of consumers is minimized or denied, and consumer culture is rather unproblematically built by capitalists and is all encompassing and all transforming in its embrace. Of course certain producers may be more persuasive than others in establishing their products as more accurate or refined cultural objectifications, but similar products are open to diverse consumer interpretations and the activities and strategies of producers are prone to unintended or unforeseen consequences. However it is vital to avoid a zero-sum game in relation to power. Neither producers nor consumers *have* power, as power is contingent upon and only present within the functional relations connecting both. Producers need consumers and consumers need producers. That power is relational rather than a possession does not mean that within the circuit of production and consumption certain social groups at certain times are not likely to occupy a position with an unbalanced power ratio (to use Elias's [1978a] term).

But the exclusive power to control resources, material or symbolic (insofar as we can separate these terms), or the exclusive power to create needs (usually deemed superficial or superfluous within critical accounts of consumer culture) is not something to be given up by the capitalists, simply because they do not *own* such powers. Nor do consumers *own* such powers. Power, in whatever guise, is manifested in the social relations connecting people and groups together (Elias 1978a). Power has no center in that its source does not originate in those that control the means of production or those that control the means of spending. Power is diffuse and can emerge in all social relations – it has many sources (Foucault 1997). It is through this realization that we need to avoid the tendency to identify the owner of power in terms of ecological responsibility (cf. Heiskanen and Pantzar 1997) and concentrate on the relational aspect of power – as a force emerging through the relations and interdependencies between producer and consumer.

Consumer Power?

Debates about the location of power as either in the hands of producers or consumers tend to reduce explanations of the growth of consumer culture to this specific form of power. The discourse of 'sustainable consumption' gives this static object called power to the consumers, while critical accounts hand it to the captains of consciousness, the producers. We need to move beyond conceptions of power as static objects to be possessed towards a conception of power as a dynamic process that reflects the multiple and ever changing relations in *particular* societies. Once we see consumer practices as social practices embedded in social relations we open up the complexity and possibility of moving towards consuming more sustainably. Even where consumption is seen as a purely selfish and individualistic pursuit, seemingly devoid of social considerations, we should recognize that

such individualism is itself an outcome of historical and social processes (Elias 1991 [1987]; Graham 1997; Arvidsson 2000). My point is not to highlight complexity for the sake of it. A richer understanding of consumption provides a sounder basis for proposing environmental action. The development of consumer culture was and remains a long-term process. The development of a 'counter-consumer' culture is likely to be a long-term process also. It is this neglect of process and time which hinders the potential of presentist solutions.

The micro perspectives on consumer culture, particularly in audience research (Nava 1991), are limiting in the sense they follow the postmodern problem of concentrating on the present. These do not necessarily focus exclusively on the symbolic, but nevertheless espouse the power of the consumer to resist the preferred meanings of advertisers. While this is undoubtedly possible, simply because consumers *can* resist does not mean they always *do*, and even if they do, surely it is on the basis of some alternative cultural meanings. Such approaches tend to have a limited conception of power relations and, as stated previously, underemphasize the circuit of production/consumption. For example, Nava (1991, 168) focuses on the power of the consumer in effecting global change: "Green consumerism has clearly captured the popular imagination to an unprecedented degree. This is because it offers ordinary people access to a new and very immediate democratic process: 'voting' about the environment can take place on a daily basis. People are not only not duped, they are able through their shopping to register political support or opposition." Similarly, Beck (1996, 21) introduces the concept of subpolitics, which he believes to be a modern phenomenon: "The activity of world corporations and national governments is becoming subject to the pressure of a world public sphere. In this process, individual-collective participation in global action networks is striking and decisive; citizens are discovering that the act of purchase can be a direct ballot which they can always use in a political way. Through the boycott, an active consumer society thus combines and allies with direct democracy - at a world level."

Such potential activism can spring from several consumer realizations. Consumers may recognize that the loss of sales to the selling company, due to a boycott, will force the company to alter its operations. The company's offense could be due to perceived exploitation in terms of the political climate in which the company operates (e.g. apartheid South Africa), the exploitative work practices within the company (e.g. Nike), or the sensationalist exploitation of emotional and traumatic events through symbolic (mis)representation in advertising contexts (e.g. Benneton). The exploitation could be economic, political or symbolic, or all of these. The enactment of any 'power of the consumer' depends upon consumer subjective knowledge of the exploitative relations, and the likelihood of attaining such knowledge itself depends on other structurally shaped (con)texts, i.e. mass media representations.

In any event, the fact that people 'vote' (buy or do not buy) does not necessarily demonstrate supreme consumer agency within the market anymore than the fact that people vote in political elections is proof of supreme citizen agency within the political system. Individual political votes are shaped by prevailing political discourses. Individual voters

have an influence within these discourses, but it is far from supreme. The irony of consumer activism as a solution is that the richer the consumer the more powerful she or he becomes. Another irony is that eco-politics through consumer boycotts strengthens the significance of consumption practices - not only does it become the symbolic mediator of social and cultural relationships, but also political ones. The commodity, whether consumed or not, would become the totem of the power ratio between consumer and producer, and the commodity would become the site of resolution of moral disputes and dilemmas. Here, again, is an example of how consumer culture embeds itself within existing social and cultural formations, and individual dispositions, without seemingly overthrowing them. This is the very basis of the success of modern consumption.

We do need to examine the position of the commodity in contemporary societies, but it does not follow that, as a means to control consumption, the environment should be identified as just another commodity. The "commodification of the environment" (cf. Connolly and Prothero 2001; Prothero and Fitchett 2000) is unlikely to lead to sustainable consumption. Firstly this solution, following Baudrillard, is based on an analysis of consumption practices as purely semiotic. The flow and flux of consumer meanings are located within a system of signs and not within a network of people as actual embodied actors that use objects for various purposes. This amounts to explaining an historically developed (and developing) social and cultural process by taking a microscopic snapshot. All objects are conceived primarily as signs. The hierarchical and relational organization of objects and of consumers is determined by the totality of the sign system. But objects mean different things to different people at different times in different contexts. As a pure language system its potential for communication is limited (Campbell 1997).

Secondly, the concentration on signs, the meaning of objects, neglects the fact that people do things with objects. If objects are to be seen as elements within a linguistic system of codes, we should focus not just on what language means but on what it does (Rose 1997). The purely semiotic approach, whether of the structuralist or post-structuralist persuasion, misses the embodied, experiential dimension of consumption. We use and consume objects not only to communicate but as an embodied practice to feel our bodies in action - to explore, to excite, to connect with others, disconnect from others. Again the multiple forms of our embodied practices are not psychologically or semiotically determined, though of course they are symbolically mediated. They are shaped by historically developing social and cultural processes which are different for particular societies and nations. As both Elias and Foucault have stated in different ways, our very individuality, our sense of ourselves, is similarly shaped.

Thirdly, any attempt to locate the environment within 'commodity discourse' is likely to be counterproductive – it merely distills the environment as another sign within a total system of signs. As commodities are construed in this perspective as predominantly sign-values, the environment loses its sense of materiality, its naturalness. As a commodity it would become exchangeable and potentially equivalent with any other commodity-sign. Within commodity discourse there is no basis for valuing the environment over any other

commodity, except through money and individual choice. The environment would be sold to a target market, and if people did not buy it, it would simply mean that as a commodity it did not meet the needs of the consumer, as the consumer is always right!

Finally, the semiotic approach says little about social and cultural change. The defining characteristic of any cultural and social formation is that it changes. This is evident in any analysis of consumer culture – it has changed and continues to change. To understand and explain it we must endeavor to present it in its processual form, in its interweavings and interdependencies with other formations over time. Commodity discourse is not a closed coherent system. Prothero and Fitchett (2000, 49) state that "discourses affect the meaning and definition of objects", but this hardly delineates a commodity discourse. We make sense of objects through discourses, and objects traverse different discursive formations (such as economics and ecology), but this does not mean there is an organized, coherent commodity discourse, in the sense that it sets up rules for the transformation of concepts (Foucault 1970) or that it frames the contexts of particular representations and speaking situations (Fairclough 1989). Discursive formations make certain statements intelligible and sayable and others not.

If discourse is to have any social significance it must be socially sanctioned through various institutions and discursive practices. For example, psychiatrists employ a discourse of, inter alia, psychotherapy which has been legitimated through its practice in 'clinics'. Its power lies in its institutionalization and professionalization and the fact that it is put into practice through techniques of inciting confessional talk. Who controls the speaking of commodities in a particular way? Certainly commodities are utilized in discourses such as economics (a professional discourse legitimated in the institution of the university) or marketing (itself a normative discourse developed from discourses of political liberalism and neo-classical economics) and these discourses can permeate popular culture, but commodities themselves do not constitute an organized, prescriptive discourse. Commodities do not tell us what to do, how to feel, or what type of person to be.

In any event purely discursive approaches have little to say about the genesis of such discourses, or the way such discourses can be interpreted in the context of social relations, contexts and processes. One discursive solution to this problem is to constitute such relations and processes as discourses themselves. Everything, including history itself, is conceived only as a text, and we are left only with layers of texts. The difficulty is that once we transform all processes into text we cease to understand them as processes and only as elements within a static, structural, signifying system. There is no social explanation, just textual reconstruction. I will now address some approaches to the problem of understanding consumption which adopt an historical dimension.

The Romantic and Consumer Ethics of the Self

Campbell's (1987) approach follows Weber's explanation of the rise of capitalism, using the flipside of the Protestant work ethic to account for the rise of the Romantic ethic, and hence the desire to transform and celebrate the self through the potential experiences offered by commodities. His analysis though only addresses Protestant, middle and upper

class cultures in England, relies heavily on psychologistic assumptions, and lacks a social explanation of change. Lalvani (1995) argues that the West, caught up in the new Romanticism, with its ethic of projecting the self onto the world and of experientialism, sought to embrace Oriental eroticism through commodification. Commodities offered ideal vehicles for the vicarious consumption of the erotic and the exotic, and hence self transforming experiences, through the use of early advertising:

> ...I wish to demonstrate that this (the Romantic construction of the Oriental woman) is finally recuperated in hegemonic fashion by utilizing a discourse of the Other to promote a commodity fetish and an alternative space of consumption that conceals the contradictions posed by the emerging order of capitalism. I will argue that this recuperation was made possible because Romanticism, besides being responsible for constituting the discourse of orientalism, also ironically advanced a psychology that directly functioned to legitimize the emergence of a consumer culture (Lalvani 1995, 265).

The central point is that commodity consumption came to offer opportunities for self transformation, for the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of personal identity. The problems of self-identity have become progressively more acute in the twentieth century. The construction of identity became a modern cultural imperative. The massive growth in self-help discourses extolling us to find ourselves, get in touch with our real selves, to be true to our selves, to learn to love our selves, reflects the existential preoccupation with self-realization and self-construction, and the communication of that self-project to others. Commodities and other consumption practices offer the most accessible means of identity construction and expression. The point of historical sociological approaches is that modern consumption, and by implication imagined alternatives to modern consumption (such as sustainable consumption), must be understood as a largely unintended, though structured, outcome of long-term social processes within specific nations (though nations are themselves connected in moving relations of interdependencies). Consumer culture takes different forms in different countries precisely because it develops through different social and cultural trajectories. Though actual empirical analysis of specific histories is beyond the scope of this article, this is what needs to be done to identify scope for change and intervention.

Acknowledging Consumption

Of course, there are other ways to conceptualize consumption. Baudrillard (cited in Featherstone 1991) focuses on the implosion of the social and the heightening of the cultural (purely in the symbolic sense). Yet, the symbolic and malleable codes of commodities remain central to this implosion. The increasing individualization of society inevitably leads to a greater reflexive embrace of the sign, as a means of building oneself, expressing what one is not, and to which cultural bias one belongs (Douglas 1992). Commodities are the greatest and most pervasive sign systems of them all in modern society.

Alternatively, we could follow the anthropological approach of McCracken (1988), who stresses the role of commodities to mark social boundaries and hierarchies within any social system, and the potential of commodities to reflect cultural principles. Then again, we

can adhere to the adage of Levi-Strauss, followed by Douglas (1992), that goods are good to think with, in the sense that they represent the materialization or visual manifestation of prevailing value and symbol systems. This occurs in 'premodern' as well as 'modern' societies. Miller (1998) focuses on shopping and consumption as social markers between emotional relationships - goods come to reflect love or sacrifice. While such anthropological theories stress the continued sociality of modern life, those that emphasis the postsocial nature of contemporary society (see Knorr Cetina 1997) conclude that the person-object relation becomes increasingly meaningful compared to the person-person relation.

The one thing unifying all these divergent theories of consumption is that consumption matters and it matters far beyond the "logical functionality" of the commodity. In other words, whether you see modern consumption as the materialization of social and symbolic structures, the effect of the ethic of the self, the manifestation of cultural values, the manipulation of advertising's captains of consciousness (Ewen 1976), or the opportunity for subversion and resistance to advertiser's preferred meanings (Nava 1991), consumption matters. To summarize, the ecological discourse of consumption underestimates the significance of consumption practices on a social and cultural level, and their historical development. It fails to see the role of such practices as mediating and transformative mechanisms involving the materialization and embodiment of cultural modes of thought and feeling on an individual and collective level. While the effects of such practices may have devastating consequences ecologically, consumption remains meaningful and meaning-making for social actors.

THE QUESTION OF PRAXIS

So, from the perspective of sustainable development, what is to be done? Can sustainable consumption be achieved? These questions are asked of us initially not as consumers, but as researchers. Firstly, perhaps the discourse of 'Sustainable Development' needs to take a less constructionist position and move closer to a more critical realist social philosophy. Needless to say, this has its own problems, but perhaps there is no need for a zero-sum game. After all, social constructionism is immanently anthropocentric. The prospects for sustainable development require the acceptance of a reality beyond the symbolic, even though such reality is only knowable symbolically through social processes of communication.

Secondly, we need to recognize that the above analysis of consumption theories are just that – theoretical and contingent. The Romantic ethic as conflated with the consumer ethic is not necessarily permanent and is possibly confined to particular regions. We do, however, have to recognize the cultural and social development of modern consumption, variously traced back to the French court society or the emergence of the Romantics as a reactionary force to the hegemonizing potential of industrial capitalism (Corrigan 1997). Maybe for the first time, but certainly not the last, the industrial-symbolic complex of capitalism had co-opted the potentially subversive discourse of Romanticism. According to this view, we are all now Romantics and Bohemians (Wilson 1998), though nowadays our self celebrations and transformations are mediated and facilitated by the market. When we

seek to contest modern consumption, we must recognize its sociogenesis over hundreds of years, and, following Elias (1978b, 1982), we must recognize the accompanying psychogenesis - the significant change in the way human beings see themselves, at least in the North regions. We must recognize the modern obsession with continual identity construction, reconstruction and projection (Chaney 1996). That obsession could of course change, but perhaps a more likely scenario is that a growing number of people seek alternative means of cultural identity formation. That means there must be an available and accessible alternative means, which necessarily implies alternative discourses and cultural resources. Those discourses could represent ecological sustainable consumption, which brings in the importance of 'sustainable communication' (McDonagh 1998). For it to have any cultural resonance it must attach itself to a broader symbolic order. It must interweave its purpose with the emotive meaning of prevailing cultural formations within any specific social formation. Douglas (1997) citing Thompson, identifies four cultural types - individualist lifestyle, hierarchical lifestyle, enclavist (egalitarian, intimate friendship and spiritual values), isolate (eclectic, withdrawn and unpredictable). Each of these types corresponds to various myths of nature - nature is robust; nature is unpredictable; nature is robust, but only within limits; nature is fragile and pollution can be lethal:

> ...there is no way of demonstrating that one or other myth of nature is the right one. At some point the summoning of evidence becomes unnecessary; more evidence will not settle the divergence of opinion. Somewhere along the line the debaters realize that they are facing infinite regress, more explanations calling forth more counter-explanations, and when this happens, theorizing has to end. In a debate about what to do with the environment, explanations come to rest on their appropriate myths of nature. The task of cultural theory is to decompose the elements of the argument, and to show how each vision of nature derives from a distinctive vision of society, individualist, isolated, hierarchical or egalitarian. (Douglas 1997, 21)

Douglas (1992) suggests that to reduce environmental risk what is required is a shift in cultural orientation, from individualist to reflexive hierarchical. While some writers on sustainable development stress the need for more information for consumers about ecological dangers (Hansen and Schrader 1997), or highlight the need for greater awareness of the relationship between political and economic institutions and environmental degradation (Kilbourne, McDonagh and Prothero 1997), others (van Dam and Apeldoorn 1996) doubt the adequacy of informed, rational consumers as the basis for sustainability. We must realize that rational argument and scientific evidence will only get us so far. Ultimately people have to *feel* culturally aligned and connected with the meanings of nature. Since people's feelings and rationalities are prone to change we must seek to understand the nature of the change. Since change can be understood as somewhat patterned, though not necessarily planned by anybody, we must examine this complex structuring of change in specific societies, particularly in terms of how such change is manifested in different ways, meanings and purposes of consuming.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MACROMARKETING

  This article suggests that Macromarketing as a discourse needs to acknowledge the connection between any individual action, including consumption or nonconsumption, and the consumer's cultural bias. If the aim is to change modes of consumption, it is not enough to tell consumers of the dangers, or of the connection with industrial capitalism, a cultural shift is required, because consumption is largely a cultural process. Basic needs can only be identified in the context of specific cultures – even the basics of eating carry cultural significance. Just as the romantic and consumer ethic were conflated through the symbolic system of advertising, the ethic of sustainability needs to be conflated with another ethic that possesses emotional and actionable force, from a reflexive and collective perspective. This seems an impossible task, but we must remember that no social system is culturally integrated (Archer 1988), which is the dynamic that allows cultural change. Rather than simply focusing on sustainable consumption, we need to be aware of the (re)production of culture as well as commodities, and as everyday life becomes more aestheticized, the everyday commodity becomes more a cultural and symbolic artifact. Macromarketing discourses can examine how alternative cultures can be reproduced and modified, and how these alternative meaning, value and ethical systems are connected to particular social groups and alliances within larger social formations. This would encompass the inevitably dynamic nature of social and cultural processes, their contradictory and complex character. In other words historical change within specific societies should form an important basis of our theoretical developments.

  As both Featherstone (1991) and Slater (1997a) have commented, there is still a need to locate changes in the nature of consumption practices in the politics of social alliances, oppositions and struggles. There is a need to contextualize consumer practices and desires in terms of social relations, structures, institutions, and systems (Slater 1997a). Essentially the goal of sustainable consumption needs to seen as a political project, recognizing the power relations between social groupings (capital and labor; the state and sectional interests and alliances; business and consumers) and between cultural value systems (environmentalism and consumer sovereignty; capitalism and socialism; collectivism and individualism). This is the context within which the idea of sustainability will stand or fall. However, it is vital to be aware of the present space of consumption as identity shaping. This is particularly important in the light of the ethic of the self. The cultural desire to be 'free' will not be served simply by regulatory frameworks seeking to structure consumer action. This will only lead to alienation of the self, and will leave no space for self morality. As Bauman (1998, 22) states:

> Ambivalence is the only soil in which morality can grow and the only territory in which the moral self can act on its responsibility or hear the voice of the unspoken demand. In its unstoppable search for the meaning of unspoken demand and unconditional responsibility, the moral self will never reach the certainty it aims at; yet only while seeking such certainty can the self become and stay moral.

  Morality must be a reflexive decision in the modern times of selfhood. Indeed in Miller's (2001, 228) discussion of the 'poverty of morality' in studies of consumption, he admits:

I would consider myself a hypocrite if I saw the aspiration of any other person to at least the same level of consumption that I enjoy with my family as anything other than reasonable. And I have never – and I really do mean never – met an academic carrying out research on the topic of consumption who appeared to practice for their own family this substantially lower level of consumption.

Environmentalism can become a cultural force, but only if it remains cognizant of the cultural spaces within which it operates, and seeks to embed itself within those spaces, by demonstrating an alternative means of self-realization, and by seeking to re-energize alternative cultural forms which are not merely individualistic. If I have appeared ambivalent in this analysis of consumption it is because our future research needs to be so. We must move between positions of involvement and detachment while taking a long-term historical view. Involvement helps us understand the fascinations of consumption activities. Detachment gives us the distance to see their dangers. History can show us the complex development of the social processes that strengthen the attraction of the consumer experience. It also shows us the possibility of social and cultural change. If we are to fully understand consumption we must see it within a changing social context, not as a static fact.

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