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**SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION: DEVELOPMENTS,
CONSIDERATIONS AND NEW DIRECTIONS**

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Introduction

In the first edition of this handbook, Redclift & Woodgate (1997) provided a comprehensive overview of the sociological implications of the recently emerging policies for and the need to understand what has become known as ‘sustainable consumption’ (hereafter ‘SC’). Yet much has changed since then, not least in the fact that a number of academics from across the disciplines of human geography, environmental psychology, industrial ecology and ecological economics have undertaken a wealth of new research and writing in this field. Moreover, there have been novel developments in international and national policies surrounding SC, in practitioner-based approaches to various forms of advocacy, and in global political economies that have the potential to greatly alter the SC playing field. In short, consumption as a growing form of ‘green governmentality’ (Rutherford 2007)—in addition to how SC itself is and should be governed—has become a key interest throughout much of the relatively well-off ‘society of consumers’ (Bauman 2007) in the industrial North.

This chapter focuses on describing many of these developments, beginning with a brief contextualising review of international and UK policy surrounding SC. Two sections follow from here; the first is on the incredibly important but contentious role that ‘information’ plays in SC networks and how this supports the ‘responsibilisation’ for sustainability onto the figure of the consumer in the spaces of the ‘everyday’. The second section explores the links between SC and ecological modernisation and the associated product-focused pathways to SC that constitute much of the current policy focus. Next, we discuss several important ‘alternatives’ to these more mainstream approaches in the discourses around voluntary simplicity, (re)localised economic systems and the emerging concept of ‘hedonic’ consumption, the latter building on

consumers' self-interests in developing more environmentally- and socially-friendly lifestyle choices. We then consider several different ways designed to quantify the progress to SC through, for example, the vastly popular processes of carbon 'footprinting' of one's personal consumption and lifestyle behaviours. We conclude with a short consideration of the current and impending economic recession in the context of SC; here 'simplicity' might become less voluntary and more a product of necessity. At the same time, this new economic climate, coupled with increasing popular concern for climate change and peak oil, in combination with renewed policy commitments in support of sustainable consumption, could open up new opportunities for the discourses around SC to be re-focused onto the continuing multi-scale inequalities of lifestyles and livelihoods across the globe.

Considering Sustainable Consumption

Yet, what *is* SC? Is it choosing to purchase fair trade coffee and bananas? Is it about installing compact florescent lightbulbs to reduce energy usage and, as importantly, household bills? Is it about buying recycled paper and recycling your glass and food tins? Is it perhaps about riding your bike to work instead of driving *even* that hybrid car? Is it about buying 'local' foods that support your 'traditional' butcher, farmers' market or farm shop? Or maybe it's about buying carbon-offsets for your flight to your favourite vacation spot. Or, could it perhaps be about the purchase and consumption of fewer things or even *no-thing(s)* as a wider lifestyle choice?

In many ways, SC is about all of these practices and approaches—and many more—in that it criss-crosses and works through a multitude of consumption-related behaviours and scales; this is particularly true given the rather 'slippery' and open nature of what has counted as 'sustainability' over time. In essence, however, SC might be regarded, on the one hand, as the attempt to *reduce* the enviro-social impacts of

consumption through, for example, less or 'different' forms of consuming or more efficient use of what one already consumes. On the other hand, SC can also be about *increasing* the impacts of consumption through the support of environmental and socially-related 'alternative' causes such as fair trade. In some cases, the rationale for SC encapsulates both desires: shopping for locally produced foods is about both avoiding/reducing the carbon footprint of internationally-sourced supermarket foods but also supporting local businesses and local farmers in order that they stay in business. Furthermore, the scale of SC activities can incorporate entities from whole economic sectors, to corporations, to municipalities, to communities, all the way down to the level of individual consumers on their way to becoming 'responsible' (Hughes et al 2008; Lawson 2007; see also Rughuram et al 2009) 'ecological citizens' (Seyfang 2005, 2006) through their now altered (non)buying habits.

Yet, one of the overarching components of SC is that of its (purported) ethical character and characteristics. Thus, SC might be seen as the desire to do 'good' or 'right' by the environment, others and even one's self by doing less, 'differently', and/or more through the act of *consumption* and as *consumers*. Contextualised in the midst of the wider 'moral' turn in Geography and the social sciences (e.g. Held 2006; Smith 2000; Whatmore 2002), several have commented on the role of consumption in working to develop a more 'moral economy' (Goodman 2004) and/or an 'ethics of care' in various economic networks (Popke 2006; Kneafsey et al 2009), and doing so for quite some time now (Trentmann 2007). In this and other work, specific attention has been paid to the mechanisms, practices, implications and limits of how the 'ethical' (Barnett et al 2005; see also Harrison et al 2005) or 'radical' consumer (Littler 2009) is able to overcome the spatial 'problems' of the extended production/consumption networks of a globalised economy in order to, for example, help support the livelihoods of marginalised Caribbean banana growers or 'save' a particular part of the Amazonian rainforest to—more often than not now—combat climate change. Thus, overall, from

the 'alternative economic spaces' (Leyshon et al 2003) and 'diverse economies' (Gibson-Graham 2006) of small-scale, NGO-driven 'activist' businesses such as fair trade to the largest globalised corporations such as Wal-mart/Asda, the tag line of *doing well by doing good* has the processes of SC and the figure of the sustainable consumer entrenched at its very core.

So, given the wide diversity in the origins, praxis and consequences of SC, how should we work to understand it? For us, analysing SC starts from the recognition of its incredibly *cultural* nature, function and make-up in the context of the wider environmental movement and especially its shifts into the 'mainstream' of most Industrial societies. Indeed, as just one form of 'culture', media—from TV and newspapers (e.g. their constant stream of environmentally-related news stories), to movies (e.g. *An Inconvenient Truth*), to the Internet (e.g. www.ecorazzi.com), to pop music (e.g. Madonna's "4 Minutes to Save the World")—have worked incredibly hard to meld sustainability, lifestyles and consumption. For example, the 'Ethical Living' feature of The Guardian's (2009) stand-alone online 'Environment' section of the newspaper is almost exclusively devoted to describing what products consumers should avoid or buy in order to consume more sustainably. And yet, the specifics of what SC is and should be are decidedly fraught and uncertain but no less crucial for building more sustainable futures; thus, the analytical key is understanding and exploring the cultural *politics* of SC. Here, in order to argue for the need to consider the circulating and shifting cultural politics of SC, we draw on the work of Boykoff et al (forthcoming) who, in their specific engagement with climate change 'cultures', suggest cultural politics are

... those politicized processes by which meaning is constructed and negotiated across space, place and at various scales. This involves not only the representations and messages that gain traction in discourses, but also those that are absent from them or silenced (Derrida 1978, Dalby 2007). ... As David Harvey (1990 p. 422) has commented, "struggles over representation are as fundamental to the activities of place construction as bricks and mortar". By examining these features as manifestations of ongoing and contested processes, we can consider questions regarding how power flows through the capillaries of our shared social, cultural and

political body, constructing knowledge, norms, conventions and truths and untruths (Foucault 1980). (Boykoff et al forthcoming, p. 1)

This resonates rather well with what some have called ‘green governmentality’ whereby—as in this chapter—SC produces particular truths, knowledges and subjectivities surrounding ‘sustainability’, ‘consumption’, and ‘consumers’ where power circulates through SC networks, working through and producing different bodies, discourses, institutions and practices in order to pursue certain socio-political ends. Crucially, then, a consideration of the cultural politics of SC must engage with the contemporary processes by which

...the responsibility for the environment is shifted onto the population, and citizens are called to take up the mantle of saving the environment in attractively simplistic ways. This allows for the management, self-surveillance and regulation of behaviour in such a way that lays claim to the kind of subjectivity that those who are environmentally conscious wish to have, and the governing of said subjectivity which does little to address the neoliberal order which contributes to environmental problems. In terms of becoming good environmental citizens, then, we know that there are virtuous and immoral ways to encounter nature, good and bad solutions to environmental problems and the tools for individuals to be responsible for their actions are defined already – we must only seek to apply them to our lives. (Rutherford 2007, 299)

And lest we forget, these cultural politics and forms of governance in SC are firmly embedded in material networks; indeed, much of SC is about *altering* the very materialities of production/consumption networks—the technological as well as environmental/ecological artefacts that construct human societies—for the ‘better’, again, specifically *through* consumption. Thus, SC ultimately involves social and environmental governance through a cultural *material* politics of consumption; and, in particular these days, a *specific* cultural material politics that increasingly rides the tension of how individual consumption choices open up spaces for doing something at the scale of the ‘everyday’ versus *other* action *outside* the realm of ‘shopping for change in contemporary culture’ (Littler 2009). How institutions, corporations, third-sector organisation and activist movements construct and engage with the current cultural material politics of SC forms the core focus of this chapter.

We turn now to a short historical account of the international and national (i.e. UK) policy networks and discourses surrounding SC.

Policy developments

When the first issue of this handbook was published, SC as an internationally stated policy objective was just five years old. One hundred and seventy-nine governments had signed up to the principles of *Agenda 21* (UN 1992) at the ‘United Nations Conference on Environment and Development’ (colloquially referred to as ‘the Earth Summit’) in 1992, officially committing to the need to make consumption more sustainable. Since that time, this political attention has been sustained in the form of a series of further international meetings and renewals of commitment. The Earth Summit was followed in 1997 by the ‘Rio +5’ conference, in 1998 by the *UNDP Human Development Report* (UNDP 1998), which emphasised the link between SC and meeting basic human needs for all present and future generations, and then in 2002 by the ‘World Summit on Sustainable Development’ in Johannesburg, which affirmed international commitment to full implementation of *Agenda 21* and catalysed the ‘International Expert Meeting on a 10-Year Framework of Programmes for SC and Production’ in 2003 in Marrakech. A common theme uniting these international political commitments is a focus on production-side resource efficiency in order to ‘dematerialise’ the economy, coupled with a programme of education and awareness raising to encourage individuals as consumers to purchase these more sustainable products.

The continuing engagement of this international policy focus on SC is ostensibly encouraging. Yet despite naming the changing of unsustainable patterns of production and consumption as one of the top three priorities for the next two to three decades, the relevant sections of the Johannesburg *Plan of Implementation* (UN 2002) have been criticised for only paying scant attention to SC, for having it phrased in the

weakest possible language and for emphasising energy efficiency over alternative approaches. Further, these sections of the Plan were apparently only included after controversial discussions about any reference to SC at all (Fuchs & Lorek 2005). Whilst NGOs have been involved at the international and the national level, some argue that they have failed to bring about commitments to 'strong' interpretations of SC (that is, interpretations that prioritise environmental and social wellbeing over those of economic 'health') as a result of their relative weakness as actors in global environmental governance regimes (Fuchs & Lorek 2005).

These international policy commitments and the product of negotiations between governments around the world go on to shape domestic policy. The UK government was involved in each of the previously mentioned agreements, and since that time has created a suite of domestic policies and administrative bodies to support their delivery at a number of scales. Several new policy bodies have been created for this purpose including the Carbon Trust (2001), the Sustainable Development Commission (2002) and the Sustainable Buildings Task Group (2003). The Carbon Trust, created as an independent not-for-profit company, was charged with taking the lead in low carbon technology and innovation in the UK by promoting sustainable energy technologies and practices, thus focusing on resource consumption at the aggregate level. The remit of the Sustainable Development Commission has been to act as a 'critical friend' to government, advocating sustainable development and SC across all sectors, reviewing progress and building consensus. Finally, the Sustainable Buildings Task Group brought together builders, developers, planners and environmental advisers with a focus on improving the resource and energy efficiency of buildings. For Hobson (2004), this kind of approach which emphasises the role of established policy networks in steering SC is 'sustainability at arm's length' and a demonstration of overtly weak political leadership.

In 2003, the UK government launched its SC first strategy, known as '*Changing Patterns*', in response to the EU's commitment at Johannesburg to develop a 10-year environmental policy framework. Yet, *Changing Patterns* inherits its definition of SC and production directly from the previously developed UK Sustainable Development Strategy, *A Better Quality Of Life* (TSO 1999). In both these policy documents, SC and production are claimed to 'exist' when economic growth has been decoupled from environmental degradation, realisable through a suite of primarily market-based measures including green taxes, innovation and green public procurement in tandem with an civil society-directed awareness-raising information campaigns. This interpretation takes as a given that stable, continued economic growth is both necessary and compatible with 'responsible' resource use; the potential contribution of *reduced* levels of total resource consumption is quickly and thoroughly marginalised and/or dispensed with in these policy discourses.

Furthermore, even this 'weak' interpretation of SC has not been easy to implement in the UK, where implementation has been hampered by inconsistency in definitions, fluctuating political backing and poor integration of administrative mechanisms such that it fails to compete with the dominant, traditional economic concerns in UK policymaking (Russell 2007). The mainstream approach, consisting of modest policy changes that fail to question prevailing lifestyles and consumption expectations, has been referred to as 'sustainability by stealth' (Robins 1999). An alternative to the kind of policy-led focus on matching 'responsibilised' individuals to the production and consumption of 'green' products now in vogue in the UK, Hobson (2004) argues, is a strong political commitment to other normative and economic policy alternatives that *do not* cut out scales of action other than at that of the rational individual. The two pillars of this mainstream policy approach to SC—that of encouraging individuals as consumers to purchase 'sustainable' products and the emphasis on these products themselves—are the focus of the following two sections.

Information and the individualisation of responsibility

The UK government has embraced public information campaigns as a strategy to generate pro-environmental behaviour change at repeated intervals since the Earth Summit in 1992. These national campaigns have included 'Helping the Earth begins at home', 'Going for Green' and most recently, 'Are you doing your bit?'. Each of these campaigns called for individuals to learn about how to be a responsible consumer in their everyday lives, covering a range of topics including water and energy use, or the consumption of particular products marked out as more sustainable by the presence of particular 'ecolabels'. Despite several of these attempts at awareness raising, wide-scale behaviour change has not noticeably manifested as a result of the inadequacy of broad-brush, information-based approaches to bringing about behaviour change (e.g. Collins et al 2003, Hounsham 2006).

Ecolabels have regularly featured in both international and domestic policy as important means of guiding individuals to consume more sustainable products by providing them with what is considered to be the most important information about a particular good to enable us to judge whether or not it is a 'sustainable', 'ethical' or 'green' product. Technically, these labels work on the premise that (1) consumers will learn that the values embedded in a particular 'unsustainable' product conflict with their own broader environmental and social values, (2) that an ecolabelled substitute product will conflict less with those values and, indeed, will support consumers' values, and (3) that the consumer will therefore choose the second, ecolabelled product over the first (Gale 2002; see also Barham, 2002). Whilst increasing the consumption of such 'sustainable' products must surely contribute to the wider SC project, many commentators have taken a more critical approach to assessing the processes and promises of green labels (e.g. Guthman 2007). Ecolabels applied to agricultural commodities have been described as representing simplified narratives of a specifically narrow ordering of eco-social relations (Goodman & Goodman 2001), where the

checklists and codes of practices that sit behind the label potentially mystify the geographies of alternative commodity chains, 'refetishising' consumption processes (Eden et al 2008) and effectively suspending the need for consumers to develop other forms of environmental consciousness or critical ecological reasoning (Luke 1997). Others have challenged the role of ecolabels in driving SC: for example, Grankvist, Dahlstrand & Biel (2004) argue on the basis of experimental data that ecolabels only affect the consumption decisions of individuals with an existing interest in environmental issues, thus not influencing the consumption choices of what is still the majority of consumers.

Similarly, reifying the wider role of information—in the form of public service campaigns as well as through ecolabels—in bringing about behaviour change, commonly referred to as the 'information deficit model', has also been widely critiqued. At its heart, the model assumes that individuals are rational actors that make decisions solely on the basis of available information, one of the cornerstones of wider micro-economic theory. This formulation has two main difficulties: first, it ignores the often unequal structural, institutional and cultural frameworks within which we make our consumption decisions, and, second, it assumes that information is necessary but also—more importantly—sufficient to generate change. Overall, as Dolan (2002) suggests, by placing individuals and their needs and wants at the centre of policy constructions of SC as is done in the information deficit model, the actual praxis of consumption is decontextualised *as an* everyday practice to be abstracted as merely a set of micro-economic interactions devoid of their cultural, economic, and political contexts and relationalities.

Thus, merely providing individuals with information relating to SC fails to tackle the roots of our society's lock-in to high consumption lifestyles in terms of its economic, technological and cultural groundings (e.g. Michaelis 2003). A significant body of work in environmental psychology identifies a increasing range of factors that affect whether

or not we demonstrate pro-environmental behaviour; for example, personal moral and social norms, attitudes and behavioural control directly influence environmental behaviour whereas problem awareness (presumably through more and better information streams) is only indirectly implicated (Bamberg 2003, Bamberg & Moser 2007). In addition, pro-environmental behaviour change is only durable if it is rooted in meaningful experience (Maiteny 2002). A focus on generic, consumer-oriented information through impersonal media designed to engage contextualised, socially embedded consumers and issues often only serves to alienate individuals from SC, where 'doing more with less' may be less meaningful than 'making the most of what we can potentially all share' (Hobson 2002). Thus, Hobson's (2003) argument for the need to *co-construct* SC knowledge, i.e. linking 'expert' knowledge with that of everyday consumers' experiences, is quite prescient and suggests that in order to be effective in generating behaviour change in consumers, a new cultural politics of SC might need to be on offer in future mainstream policy approaches. In parallel to these academic critiques, third-sector critics (e.g. Collins et al 2003, Hounsham 2006) of government-run broad-brush awareness-raising campaigns drawing on conventional social marketing techniques have argued that tailored messages for different segments of the public would be more effective in getting the SC 'message' out and about.

Building on this critique of unsophisticated, blanket approaches to information dissemination, the newly formed UK Roundtable on Sustainable Consumption identified in its report, *I Will If You Will: Towards Sustainable Consumption* (SDC 2006), that awareness raising should involve what it terms 'community learning': informing people in groups about SC in order to cultivate new group-level social norms. A second key proposal in this document was the development of a standard social marketing approach to promoting particular behaviour change goals, which has been taken up in Defra's 2008 *A Framework for Pro-Environmental Behaviours* (Defra 2008a). This framework identifies five particular behavioural goals associated with SC (e.g. personal

transport, waste, energy, water and consumption of products) and then divides the public into seven segments according to their ability and willingness to act on these issues. This framework is intended to inform the segment-tailored social marketing approaches to support SC, with a particular focus on reducing future contributions to climate change, and could be potentially far-reaching given that it will inform future SC policies in the UK. Encouragingly, these newer approaches do recognise that the public and their everyday practices are heterogenous, where individuals are conceptualised as having a variety of priorities and understandings rather than as a homogenous mass of (un)enlightened shoppers. And, yet, in the end, the ‘knowing expert/ignorant public’ dichotomy is still at the core of this framing of SC and the recipients of SC information, while a bit more disaggregated, are still lumped together, albeit in smaller, generic categories; and—most importantly—individuals are still very much held responsible for acting on this information once it is delivered to them.

Products and the production of ecological citizenship

The information circulating in SC networks encourages individuals to shift their consumption practices to include the purchase of particular kinds of ‘sustainable’ products often in support of the *dematerialisation* of the economy championed in policy. Individuals, through their more conscious purchases, are hereby *responsibilised* as ecological citizens working towards a more sustainable future. A common conceptualisation of ecological citizenship seeks to reembed individuals in ethical relationships with producers of the products that they seek to consume. This approach argues for the need to socialise people as global citizens first and consumers second, constructing a particular kind of cosmopolitan or global citizenship that seeks to unveil the oppression of consumers and producers alike, tackle market myths around ‘choice’ and position justice at its axis (Valencia Saiz 2005, McGregor 2001, Luque 2005). Echoing the discussion above, constructions of just what an ecological citizen should

be are, according to Hobson (2008), politically motivated and tend to be situated in modified 'business-as-usual' models that foreclose more 'radical' approaches to sustainability and SC in particular.

Most often, the kinds of consumption included in ecological citizenship involve the simple shifting to the purchase of 'green' products, many of which have been produced through the deployment of environmental technologies as part of what has become known as the paradigm of *ecological modernisation*. Ecological modernisation emerged from supply-side debates and has only relatively recently been extended to the sphere of consumption by focusing on domestic routines and lifestyles across different social and environmental characteristics (Murphy 2001, Spaargaren 2000). The strongly productivist orientation associated with ecological modernisation has been criticised for failing to challenge overconsumption and related overproduction (e.g. Carolan 2004). In other words, critics argue that a reliance on green products alone cannot bring about SC and that, instead, technological innovation needs to be deployed in combination with other approaches such that sustainability is designed directly *into* systems of provision, social arrangements, sustainable home services and cultural attitudes *as well as* into green products (e.g. Green & Vergragt 2002, Halme, Jasch & Scharp 2004).

Research in the field of industrial ecology, particularly relating to lifecycle analysis, is very much linked to that on ecological modernisation. Product lifecycles affect both efficiency and sufficiency (Cooper 2005). Combining SC—in its guise as product purchasing, use and disposal—and more sustainable resource management—including resource extraction, transformation and managing materials—is said to, even with its limits, support consumers in evaluating the impacts of their purchasing decisions, helping to tackle the international distancing of production and consumption and reduce environmental impacts across a commodity's entire lifecycle (Mont & Bleichwitz 2007). Alternatively, applying lifecycle analysis to systems of needs

fulfilment could provide an innovative approach to rethinking production/consumption networks, potentially enabling a move away from the sole reliance on consumerism to fulfil the needs of individuals and, indeed, societies more generally (De Leeuw 2005).

The consumption of particular products deemed in some respect to be more sustainable has potentially interesting impacts on the formation of people's identities as 'sustainable consumers'. For example, the consumption of refillable glass milk bottles in the UK has been linked to resistance to supermarkets and disposability, as well as the construction of individual and collective identities relating to narratives of community, sense of place, convenience and nostalgia for old England (Vaughan, Cook & Trawick 2007). Similarly, Hobson (2006) argues that domestic technologies like recycling bins, low energy lightbulbs and shower timers are not only integral to what she calls the 'eco-modernisation project' but that these material 'moralising machines' embody a kind of 'techno-ethics' that work to facilitate the creation of self-identifying sustainable consumers and citizens.

In addition to the purchase of such green products, consumers are encouraged to address social concerns through the consumption of particular kinds of ethical or fairly traded products in order to become even more well-rounded ecological citizens. Ethical consumption campaigns seek to articulate people as political agents by tapping into their so-called 'ordinary' and 'everyday' moralities which are then channelled through consumption and the desire to 'perform' these (purchasing) acts as (self)identified 'ethical' consumers (Clarke et al 2007). Fair trade has been hailed by some as having a counter-hegemonic character that, at its more radical edges, goes beyond the current discourse of shopping for a better world and into the realms of collective decision-making about consumption and about new producer/distributor relationships challenging the distribution of value along the commodity chain (Low & Davenport 2007).

And yet, critics have charged that the fair trade approach is decidedly and narrowly market-based as it places limits on who can partake in fair trade networks—at both the consumption and production ends—in order to create value through the ‘preciousness’ of these quality-driven markets (Goodman, 2009; Guthman 2007; see also Freidberg 2003; Hughes 2004). Moreover, as Low and Davenport (2005, 2007) argue, the current *mainstreaming* of fair trade runs the risk of re-shaping the movement at the expense of its more radical and politicised edges and so far has failed to lead to the ‘slop-over’ of its principle tenets into conventional trade systems as many in the fair trade movement would like to see happen. And, while ethical consumption through fair trade networks may constitute new networks of global solidarity, these depend on abstract understandings where ethical consumption remains a form of Northern benevolence, reproducing oppositions between *active* consumers and *passive* recipients and so flattening out what are already unequal power relations (cf. Barnett et al 2005; Varul, 2008). Furthermore, a limited focus on fair trade in the context of SC may run the risk of excluding individuals’ other ethical concerns, and complicating the business of ecological citizenship. Moore, Gibbon & Slack (2006) note that supermarkets have requested a broadening of fair trade to include environmental as well as its predominantly anthropocentric concerns around the socio-economic situation of marginalised producers in developing countries as a means of bridging this gap, with understandable resistance from the fair trade movement. Here, Hailwood (2005) argues for a combination of anthropocentric and ecocentric ideas in SC to instead develop a model of ‘reasonable citizenship’, which considers the ethics of our relationships with the environment and nature as well as with other people. Thus, there are some calls to widen our conceptualisations of SC and sustainable consumers, since many may be simultaneously concerned with fair trade, ethical products, green products, voluntary simplicity and even ethical investing (Connolly & Shaw 2006, McDonagh 2006, Carter & Huby 2005).

Downshifting, voluntary simplifiers and other challenges to consumerism

Whilst it is fair to say that most effort in delivering SC focuses on the role of products and their purchase(r)s, counter-hegemonic discourses and advocates of alternative approaches—many of which challenge consumerism more broadly—do exist. These approaches might be construed as being located on a spectrum of pathways to change, moving from moderate and reformist in character on one end to more radical on the other. For example, at the moderate end there is what could be called ‘alternative ownership’ arrangements (e.g. car sharing, communal washing/cooking centres and tool sharing) which unfortunately—because of existing regulatory and normative institutional arrangements—have so far received a low profile in SC (Mont 2004). For those at the more radical end of the spectrum, consuming particular sustainable products is simply another form of *greenwashing* and instead, deeper changes are required through the development of alternative economic relationships and spaces (Leyshon et al 2003), culture jamming (Klein 2000; Littler 2009), and even more fundamental changes to mainstream lifestyles and livelihoods (Ross 2008).

Voluntary simplicity, or downshifting, is an example of a non-product-oriented approach to SC, and, in and of itself might be placed on a moderate-to-more radical spectrum. Thus, there is a range of activity included here, from beginner voluntary simplifiers who might support some aspects of lifestyle changes based around shopping choices and limited green activities (e.g. buying fair trade products or recycling waste) to much more established voluntary simplifiers who freely choose a frugal, anti-consumption lifestyle featuring low resource use and minimal environmental impacts (McDonald et al 2006); the contemporary phenomenon of ‘freeganism’, where ‘freegans’ only consume things that they *don’t* buy, fits on this latter, more ‘radical’ portion of the spectrum. Voluntary simplification has Greek and Roman roots in hermits and ascetic religious orders, though as a set of practices in modern society, it has always occupied a marginal position and of necessity tends to be practiced by those

who have the socio-economic capacity to 'overconsume' in the first place (Librova 1999).

The growth of what are called New Consumption Communities (NCC) is a recent focus of research into voluntary simplicity. NCCs comprise alternative communities where individuals embrace alternative consumption and production, resituating SC in a structural, embedded context to bring in elements of self-provisioning and alternative normative arrangements. These more radical voluntary simplifier groups are able to achieve partial autonomy from hegemonic market forces through forms of resistance, empowerment and reconnection to and rescaling of production networks (Bekin, Carrigan & Szmigin 2006). Many of these downshifters have exhibited higher levels of happiness and enjoyment because of their lifestyles (Bekin, Carrigan & Szmigin 2005), feeding into debates linking SC to increased wellbeing. It has been argued (Bekin, Carrigan & Szmigin 2005) that NCCs have been able to influence other, 'non-sustainable' consumers and their relationship to consumption through educational links with local communities and volunteers.

NCCs are often involved in developing alternative economic structures, but such structures are not limited to these communities. As Curtis (2003) has highlighted, local or regional self-reliant community networks may constitute a key means of developing economic sustainability, incorporating local currencies, community corporations and regional food economies and reducing the negative externalities of long-distance trade. Yet, economic geographers like Hudson (2005) argue that small-scale experiments to create sustainable economies such as local exchange trading schemes (LETS) are significant but ultimately occur within the existing capitalist framework, which limits sustainability unless they satisfy normal profitability criteria and fall within socially and politically acceptable limits for institutions. Similarly, Aldridge & Patterson (2002) have found that despite their potential, LETS often have only a tiny economic role that is complicated by low participation and structural constraints;

members typically require significant financial resources and the scheme seems to work best specifically at small scales with predominantly middle class groups.

One interesting, emerging direction in research on alternative forms of SC is what Soper (2007, 2008) calls 'alternative hedonism'. This theory posits that consumerism ultimately creates environments that are socially and personally repressive leading to an overall level of disenchantment in the sense that we can never satisfy our desires by just consuming more (see also Bauman 2007). Thomas (2008) argues that this kind of disaffection or 'ambivalent consumerism' Soper refers to is already present and being acted on in the mainstream media in the form of UK lifestyle television programmes that incorporate narratives linking downsizing, downshifting and 'the good life', where alternative hedonistic activity supports a domestic, local version of citizenship in the face of political disenchantment. Thus, by capitalising on this disenchantment with consumerism and re-directing people's desires towards the cultural and artistic aesthetics of 'anti-consumption consumption' (Bryant and Goodman, 2004), SC could be much more effective at motivating societies beyond moral concerns alone and work towards a more holistic vision of sustainable living that *has room* for self-interest rather than centring on a kind of moral superiority.

What gets measured counts: footprinting, indicators and redefining prosperity

Measuring progress towards SC is an important means of judging the effectiveness of its different approaches. In general, there are thought to be two main levels at which progress towards achieving SC may be measured: at the individual level, through 'footprinting' and pledging, and at the national level via indicators and indices.

Footprinting and pledging are two techniques that are increasingly being encouraged by third-sector advocates as a means of measuring individual consumption against particular ideals, which of course have been constructed by particular government and advocacy groups (Hinton, forthcoming). Both pledging and footprinting

tools are primarily administered through Internet advocacy spaces (e.g. <http://www.carbonfootprint.com>), where resultant scores are stored and can be used as a measure of how sustainable each individual's consumption practices are, or will be over time.

Footprinting tools tend to follow a questionnaire format, where individuals' responses to questions on aspects of their individual consumption of various resources and commodities are translated into one's ecological 'footprint'. Answers to these questions are often converted into numerical values representing either the number of global hectare equivalents this kind of consumption would require, how many planets of resources would be required if everyone was to consume in this way, or in terms of carbon equivalents in order to describe an individual's responsibility for climate change. These precise, numerical values conceal the various debates over what should and shouldn't be measured, how it should be measured and even if it is measurable. The lack of a uniform approach to footprinting (Weidman & Minx 2007)—despite the UK government's encouragement that initiatives should utilise their 'Act on CO₂' calculator as a means of standardisation—inevitably leads to some degree of variability in footprint size, even when the same questions are asked and the same answers provided to different footprinting tools. Indeed, the premise of footprinting is that it is possible to objectively know and quantify what makes our consumption unsustainable, across various parameters including the amount of carbon (or CO₂) associated with certain activities, as well as water and other resource use. By including only certain activities, and within these activities including only limited aspects of their associated resource use—for example only considering carbon dioxide emissions and not, say those of the 'Other' greenhouse gases like methane (CH₄)—these tools seem to inevitably reify certain consumption actions and their particular aspects.

Where footprinting takes into account prior consumption practices, pledging focuses on future consumption and (hopefully) emissions reductions. Pledging systems

ask individuals to pledge to commit certain kinds of SC practices in the future, where individuals can pledge to carry out either one or several such actions in a range of different categories. Conceivably there may be a degree of kudos associated with making certain pledges, or making a certain number of pledges, such that pledging may stand as a kind of conspicuous SC that may be entirely unrelated to actions that individuals may actually undertake. Another potential downside of pledges is their reliance on deferred action, which suffers from the problems of hyperbolic discounting such that individuals are required to weigh up whether it is worth acting now for benefits that may or may not emerge in the future.

Moving from the individual to the national level, statistics have been collected in the UK for several years across a range of different criteria, which collectively represent 'sustainable consumption and production indicators' (e.g. Defra 2008b). Sustainable consumption and production (SCP) is identified here as one of four priority areas, where the relevant indicators mainly cover emissions, resource use and waste. However, it may not be immediately straightforward to ascertain just how (un)sustainable domestic consumption and production *is*, since, for example, individual commodity chains are often global in their spatial reach, blurring the geographical locations of their ecological effects (Andersson & Lindroth 2001; see also Peters & Hertwich 2006).

Presently, national economies are judged according to their levels of production in the form of the GDP. Alternatives to this means of evaluating progress have long been considered a potential means to support SC, which was notably included as a recommendation in Agenda 21 back in 1992. GDP tends to be considered a proxy for national welfare, yet its focus is on economic growth and recession and it excludes the benefits of goods and services produced and used *outside* the marketplace (Michaelis 2003) and it is a rather poor measure of wellbeing (Jackson, Jager & Stiglitz 2004, Boulanger 2007). Consequently, alternatives to GNP and GDP have been proposed—

for instance the Indicator of Sustainable Economic Welfare, Gross National Happiness or Measure of Domestic Progress scores—of which SC could form an integral component (e.g. Jackson 2005, Michaelis 2003, SDC 2006). The measurement of the newer category of people's 'wellbeing' has been linked to SC, notably in the Human Development Report (UNDP 1998). Instead of focusing on the micro-economics of SC products and purchases, the concept of wellbeing suggests the need to shift to thinking instead in terms of 'more units of happiness with less damage' (De Leeuw 2005). Wellbeing may have more cultural salience for many and so be more likely to elicit behavioural changes in people and communities; for example, Cohen, Comrov & Hoffner (2005) found that emphasising the negative effects on wellbeing related to working hours, leisure time and family life generates support for SC in the US by linking to existing public concern about these issues. In a positive recognition of the importance of this concept in the context of SC, since 2008, the UK government has measured wellbeing in its set of indicators for sustainable development (Defra 2008b); yet it is doubtful how meaningful comparisons of 'life satisfaction'—Defra's analog for wellbeing—are between different people and over time and the extent to which these can be tied directly to issues of sustainability and SC. In addition, life satisfaction is surely closely tied to cultural norms and expectations, and thus, such a measure would inevitably go to support mainstream, product-based SC and fail to disentangle SC from continued economic growth within our contemporary 'society of consumers' (Bauman 2007). Whilst individual systems of monitoring such as the Defra suite of SCP and wellbeing indicators may go some way to observing whether SC is being achieved, such an approach remains at the periphery and is unlikely to significantly influence policy and practice.

The 'credit crunch': threat or opportunity?

At the time of writing, the UK economy is experiencing a recession as a result of the phenomenon colloquially termed 'the credit crunch' (e.g. Mizen 2008). Whilst initially the flow of credit was restricted in 'virtual' money markets, this eventually spilled over into real markets and has led to a restriction in the amount of credit available to both industry and consumers. In turn, this has led to increasing levels of unemployment along with an increase in the cost of living, leaving increasing numbers of people with reduced disposable income, and potentially a reduction in marketplace-based consumption.

It is not immediately clear the effect that this recession may have on the SC and its cultural politics. However, it is clear economic growth has relied upon a failure to include so-called 'environmental externalities' in the price of products and other consumables such as energy, where these artificially low prices have encouraged increased consumption and disposal (Schor 2005). Furthermore, it would appear that product-based approaches to SC are not completely compatible with periods of recession since these 'sustainable' products are often more expensive products and less disposable income might be available for consumers to purchase these goods. For example, the price premium associated with many of these 'sustainable' products—such as organic, fair trade or ethical goods—could make them less attractive options when compared against cheaper, less sustainable alternatives, so potentially having a negative effect on the market for these types of commodity. Yet, at the same time, restricted funds could provide greater incentives for the purchase of more durable and less disposable commodities and thus promoting more SC that way.

Our contemporary growth-oriented economy depends upon ever increasing production and consumption. As such, politicians are urging the public to spend more in order to help the economy to recover from this recession. This incitement to spend echoes those calls to combat terrorism following the US and European attacks in the earlier part of this decade by getting people to go out to eat or get back to the shopping

malls. Individuals as consumers are in this way doubly responsabilised with rescuing the economy and with being ecological citizens in the marketplace. Such an approach further marginalises non-marketplace forms of consumption, and reinforces the hegemonic ecological modernisation perspective of product-oriented SC. Yet if consumers really do have the power to either rescue or abandon the economy through their individual consumption choices, then the recession could provide an opportunity for individuals to vote with their money—by not responding to these calls to increase spending and instead meeting more of their needs and wants through non-marketplace consumption or other forms of ‘wellbeing’-oriented behaviours. Perhaps the recession affords individuals as consumers a new kind of consumer sovereignty, not just with regard to choosing between products within the current economic system, but affording us the opportunity to choose what sort of economic system we would like.

What might an alternative, recession-oriented kind of SC entail? At a minimum, there could be at least three key components: downshifting, a reduction in the working week, and alternative community economies. First, the recession may encourage—or even force—greater numbers of Northern consumers to embrace voluntary simplicity and downshifting, reducing the volume of their wants and needs and meeting more of the remainder outside the marketplace. Second, such a reduction in market-based consumption would mean that we would need to work less, challenging the ‘work to spend’ lifestyle. The reduction in available jobs resulting from the recession need not necessarily result in increased unemployment, if many of the full-time jobs were offered part-time instead, or if the working week was generally reduced (e.g. Schor 1991). Third, this increase in leisure time may support participation in alternative and local currencies, e.g. LETS and timebanking, since such alternative money systems have historically arisen in times of recession (Seyfang 2006). Localised economies are already receiving attention at the grassroots level, where the recent Transition Towns

phenomenon is facilitating the emergence of local currencies, community supported agriculture, community food growing projects and timebanks.

In a final point here, what a global economic downturn might signal is actually a need to further redefine SC into a concept that has within it some consideration of the continuing inequalities of consumption at a number of different scales. And here we are suggesting the need to explore the inequalities in the consumption of more sustainable products and commodities such as fair trade goods, *in addition* to the inequalities in access to and consumption of basic items like food and shelter. Furthermore, 'cheap' food and housing might make their way quickly onto the roster of what counts as 'SC' for many people, complicating even more the cultural material politics of what SC actually is. In any case, underscoring the inequalities of consumption through the discourse of SC might work to further situate questions of justice and ethics at its core as well as shake up the contemporary consumerist product focus of SC for the better.

Concluding remarks

Whilst political, academic and indeed practitioner interest in SC has been sustained over the last decade, it is still a rather nascent social movement. The contemporary 'post-ecologist' era and its politics of unsustainability may well necessitate a new environmental sociology that centres on the question of how advanced modern capitalist consumer democracies try and sustain what is known to be unsustainable (Bluhdorn & Welsh 2007). It may be that the very way that we approach the issue, by creating the label of 'SC' as a way to complement 'sustainable production' supports efforts to sustain the unsustainable by disaggregating what are two inseparable processes. Ecological modernisation, information dissemination and the development of markets for SC products form the current hegemonic expressions of SC because these best fit economic understandings of individuals as rational actors and are best-suited to the contemporary growth economy. There is some support within the literature

and indeed in this chapter for broadening our conceptualisations of SC. Mont & Bleischwitz (2007) argue for the integration of sustainable resource management with SC. Princen (1999) posits that SC has come to be conflated with everything from production, overall economic activity, materialism, maldistribution, to population and technology, and could be reclaimed by focusing attention on the everyday sociologies of product use and non-purchasing decisions. Similarly, Gilg, Barr & Ford (2005) argue that green consumerism must be seen in the context of other aspects of sustainable living to provide a more holistic view even beyond that of wellbeing. Perhaps one of the most useful ways forward for the SC project could be a reinvigorated conceptualisation of it as being principally about *sustainable lifestyles* rather than just about the narrow, but important practices of consumption. Whichever way future work on SC goes, it will require further inter- and cross-disciplinary research and writing in order to untangle its complexities in any sort of transition to more sustainable ways of living.

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