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Forthcoming chapter in 'Critical Environmental Politics' Carl Death (Ed), Routledge, London.

Andrew Brooks and Raymond Bryant

Department of Geography, King's College London

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Introduction

The subject of this chapter, consumption, is a most paradoxical of concepts. It is intimately and inescapably individual even as it is quintessentially social. Some see it as a celebrated arena of human agency while others consider it a disingenuous guise for powerful structural forces that crush or manipulate agency. It is simultaneously an exemplar of human ingenuity in transcending nature while being a testament to human folly in despoiling nature. In short, consumption is a concept central to understanding critical environmental politics.

Yet it is a sorely contested one. It has long been defined in popular and physiological terms as a matter of life and death. Thus in everyday conversation, consumption (usually) implies imbibing life-giving substances while, more darkly, it is an archaic name for pulmonary tuberculosis. Here is an 'embodied' concept irreducibly associated with rhythms of individual life. Within ecological economics consumption is conceptualised as a measure of the aggregate throughput and the 'using up' of natural resources such as oil, soils or fossil water frequently measured at the planetary scale and categorised as a threat to all life (Royal Society, 2012). This formulation of consumption considers both the commoditised constituents of the natural environment as well as all human usage outside of market exchange. More narrowly, political economists describe it as the moment of exchange between vender and buyer in capitalist relations – a society-centred definition, which we broadly follow in this chapter.

Scale is important to consider in definitions of consumption and we privilege individual consumption for discussion and the role of the consumer, rather than considering the consumptive activities of businesses or states. Of particular interest is how shopping, hiring or renting connects people to environmental politics, as consumption-based relationships interweave nature, culture and political economy. Two key insights emerge: (1) consumption

is a critical pathway connecting people directly and indirectly to human modification of the environment – buying things changes nature; and (2) in a world in which most people are embedded in the market, we are nearly all consumers now as consumption is a foundational and 'normal' part of everyday life – I consume, therefore I am. For many environmental writers who aggregate individual acts and discuss societal level consumption, this combination has been lethal for the planet, such that they view consumption negatively – equating it with excessive and unsustainable living in the global North (Stiegler, 2011; Wackernagel and Williams 1998). Yet this argument is easily overegged. We can no more choose to stop consuming than elect to live without eating, drinking or finding shelter – essential life requirements presently subject to market exchange. The practices which operate across the social system can also be characterised as *infrastructures of consumption*, as non-individual actors like banks, corporations or militaries both directly consume and structure the consumption of individuals and institutions, for example through the provision of consumable credit or the building of road infrastructures (Fine 2002; Paterson 2007; van Vliet et al. 2005). At the same time, and as the sorts of social science literature discussed in this chapter underscore, *how* consumption is to be understood is as important in many ways as ascertaining *what* impacts this process has on society and nature. While our approach herein is critical in tone, even as it is broadly sympathetic to a political economy perspective, we seek to provide a selective survey of multifaceted academic understanding of this much debated concept.

The chapter begins by discussing key thinkers in and/or inspirations for consumption studies. Here, two overarching approaches (and associated figures) are identified. The one is structural in tone drawing inspiration notably from Karl Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, while the other is post-structural in outlook emphasising the role of the individual and cultural perception in the meaning and practice of consumption. The discussion then considers selected core facets of the 'consumption problem' (Maniates 2001: 50). This is done with an eye to the ethical consumption of socio-environmental goods that holds particular implications for environmental politics occurring as it does against a backdrop of intensifying ecological crises and a new global politics of 'foreboding' (Abélès 2010). The shortcomings of ethical consumption as a neo-liberal and individualized form of politics are canvassed before the need for a post-consumption agenda is asserted that re-integrates consumption with production as part of de-fetishist radical politics (Soper 2000). We end by

underscoring the importance of consumption to other processes in critical environmental politics.

Key thinkers

The study of consumption did not begin with the birth of consumption studies but rather has been a recurrent feature of scholarship going back at least to the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Thinkers like Karl Marx and Walter Benjamin tackled its social and economic import, especially as the stirrings of modern consumer society – mass produced goods, elaborate retailing outlets (arcades, department stores), consumer 'education' notably via advertising – became visible, underpinning the very idea of progress itself. Since the 1980s though, multi-disciplinary consumption studies has taken off with an array of topics, debates and scholars. Thinkers such as Ben Fine, Daniel Miller and Rick Wilk have pushed the field forward in various ways.

The role of consumption certainly figures in work by Karl Marx, being integral to his path-breaking analyses of capitalism. Above all, and central to critical studies of consumption ever since, is his work on commodity fetishism (Fine 2002). Notably in *Capital*, Marx (1976) illuminated how consumers are distanced from the social and environmental relations that constitute production by the veil of market-exchange. Both producers and consumers are thereby alienated. As Fine (1976: 25) succinctly puts it, 'whilst capitalism organises production in definite social relationships between men, these relationships are expressed and appear as relationships between things'. Because consumers buy things ignorant of conditions of production, the fetishism of the commodity is such that it even appears as if things exert control over people and environments rather than control being central to social relations under capitalism.

Two implications are of interest here. First, commodity fetishism is ideally suited to the concealment of unsavoury relationships of exploitation of both people and environments, especially when allied to the doctrine of freedom of exchange: a license to exploit. Second, it facilitates the production of goods well beyond base necessities by inculcating in the consumer via advertising 'false needs' (Marcuse 1964): a license to over-produce. The combination of these two processes has been simply catastrophic – encouraging a 'fast capitalism' (Agger 2004) based on a turbo-charged consumerism (Schor 2008) that is 'wasting' the environment across the planet (Dauvergne 2008; Redclift 2000) – reflecting

what the ecological Marxist James O'Connor (1996) dubs the 'second contradiction of capitalism'.

Not surprisingly critical scholars have pursued a de-fetishism agenda in their work thereby heeding the call of David Harvey (1990: 422) to investigate connections between consumers and producers so as to 'get behind the veil, the fetishism of the market'. For example, research by Hartwick (1998) on gold, LeBillon (2006) on diamonds, and Bryant (2010) on teak, travels along the commodity chain exploring the bloody conflict and ecological devastation that connects production, consumption, politics and ecology. Such research reflects diverse influences including work in sociology on commodity chains (e.g. Gereffi 1999; Hopkins and Wallerstein 1986), in political ecology on chains of explanation (Blaikie 1995), via political science on consumption and environment (Princen et al 2002), and in anthropology on multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995; Mintz 1986).

The study of global chains has proliferated becoming notably a preoccupation in business studies and economic geography alike. Ever more sophisticated and quantitative analyses trace precise economic and material flows over time and space (Dicken 2011). Case studies often stretch between the developing and developed economies explaining globalisation in terms of Global Commodity Chains, Global Value Chains and Global Production Networks (Coe et al, 2008; Gereffi 1999, Kaplinsky 2000). Yet such work often tends to be Eurocentric insofar as consumption in the global North is the entry-point for most research, thereby rendering marginal the consumer in the global South and associated environmental impacts (Brooks 2013; Hassler 2003). Furthermore, Fine broadens this vein of research and argues for a *systems of provision* approach which explores 'the inclusive chain of activity that attaches consumption to the production that makes it possible' (2002: 79). The spheres of production and consumption influence one another and the provision of what is socially useful, rather than all consumption occurring through the market. Individual consumption is shaped by cultures and a 'variety of institutional, organisational and technical regimes that may potentially influence the way demand is constructed and managed' (Chappelles 2008: 263).

Missing from much of this research on commodities has been the role of culture and language as diffuse yet powerful forces that surround the production of distinctive textures of value in different commodities and acts of consumption. Richard Wilk (2010) has explored how the linguistic definitions of consumption are based on the use of metaphors as consumption is

variously analogous to fire or eating, and includes disparate activities which may or may not be environmentally destructive. For Wilk consumption is an unbounded category performed not for its own sake rather 'to achieve some other end, but those ends are not necessarily connected to one another except in a metaphorical way' (2010; 9). To appreciate the full implications of consumption, then, is to investigate what Arjun Appadurai (1986) dubs 'the social life of things' – and specifically, the changing nature of consumer culture and associated identity politics. Pioneering work in the early twentieth century by the German cultural philosopher Walter Benjamin that culminated in his fragmentary magnum opus *The Arcades Project* (posthumously published in English in 1999) explored the cultural meanings and transformations associated with the development of the Paris shopping arcades in the nineteenth century as centres of the luxury-goods trade. Such analysis has become de rigueur in recent post-structural times with social science research, notably in cultural geography and social anthropology, privileging the realm of the individual consumer (Cook and Crang 1996; Crang et al. 2003; Miller et al, 1998). Thus, scholars such as Ian Cook (Cook et al, 2004), Peter Jackson (1999), and Daniel Miller (2008) 'follow things' and trace commodity cultures exploring the shifting cultural and personal meanings of commodities as well as experiences of shopping.

This cultural turn in consumption studies shares with postmodern thinkers such as Jean Baudrillard a fascination with signs. Social relations are mediated through 'signifying culture'; as such the signs of commodities and what they represent within society have frequently attracted more attention than the matter of material goods (Featherstone 1991: 6; see also Luke, this volume). Other strands of work have investigated if, or how, global flows of commodities transmit culture(s) across space and supplant local forms of culture (Miller 1998). Debate here assesses whether the spread of standardised goods to different localities erodes local norms, or if the broadening of consumption opportunities allow for re-imagined cultures in diverse places (Mansvelt 2005). For some, such as Baudrillard (1998), this process entails a nightmarish version of consumption, relating notably to cultural currents in the global North. Such processes feed through complexly to the representation of peoples and environments in the global South – for example, in the use of representations of indigenous people and tropical forests to sell breakfast cereal and sorbet to affluent Northerners (Bryant and Goodman 2004).

Whether dissecting commodity fetishism or unpacking commodity cultures, key thinkers past and present have oscillated between cultural and political economy explanations in understanding consumption. In the process, they have generated much debate as to what trends and ideas are and ought to be central to its appreciation.

Core ideas

Consumption has been a rather slippery concept in practice belying its ostensibly obvious meaning. Scholars have sought to render it tangible by examining its socio-ecological impacts, main driving forces, and uses of place. Such concerns have crystallised of late around the notion of ethical consumption – where debate over its critical potential as a force for political and environmental change is fierce (Carrier and Luetchford 2012).

The idea that turbo-charged consumption today reflects and reinforces socio-economic inequality even as it degrades the environment is an axiom in consumption studies (Redclift 2000). For one thing, such consumption – and its intertwining with social aspiration and class advancement through the distinction-making strategies of individuals – has prompted an array of practices that drive inequality. Thus, the quest for 'cheap' but serviceable commodities by consumers has led to the migration of industries from (more expensive) North to (less expensive) South and/or the inexorable depression of inflation-adjusted wage rates for many workers (Shell 2009) – with the result that inequality in the 'developed world' has sharply widened (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). At the same time, a growing premium on consumption as *the* defining trait of modern social identity has placed enormous (financial and psychological) pressure on individuals to participate in a 'consumption arms race' – more distinction-making consumption notably via ubiquitous brands (Lury 2004) including in the environmental sector where 'going green to be seen' is a growing phenomenon (Griskevicius et al. 2010).

For another thing, frenetic consumption directly underpins the rapid despoiling of the Earth's environmental systems. Much evidence is now available charting the myriad ways in which consumption destroys the environment. For example, a recent report by the Royal Society (2012) gives ample quantitative evidence of how such key things as fresh water, food and mineral usage has grown exponentially since the Industrial Revolution – much of that time linked to development in the global North but increasingly in recent decades reflective of accelerated growth in the global South too. Here we see the aggregate effects of countless

practices of consumption around the world – giving rise to strident calls for 'sustainable development' and a 'sustainability' agenda on the international stage. Yet often the very complexity of consumption today, reflective of a global marketplace that is inhabited by myriad goods – all of which have different 'biographies' and that involve a near infinite array of ecological impacts – stymies effective collective action. Thus, efforts to chart consumption patterns through the 'ecological footprints' of individual consumers have been ineffectual (Wackernagel and Williams 1998). In the penultimate section of this chapter we introduce the idea of 'post-consumption', which seeks to stretch environmental politics beyond this impasse.

Scholars find that attributing causation has proved just as difficult as untangling and measuring the socio-natural impacts of consumption. What drives consumption? Two views stand out: (1) production-stimulated demand, and (2) consumer-led demand (Fine 2002). The former stresses the role of the capitalist in not only anticipating but even creating the bases for consumption. Thus, Henry Ford's infamous (and possibly misattributed) quip that 'If I'd asked my customers what they wanted, they'd have said a faster horse' illuminates how capitalist production could bring new types of commodities to the market, thereby driving forward consumption while transforming human-environmental relations. The automobile is indeed the iconic example – a case of 'creative destruction' (Schumpeter 1975) resulting in the creation of new patterns of consumption and associated environmental politics and establishing new infrastructures of consumption (van Vilet et al, 2005). The rise of what Paterson (2007) terms 'automobility' prompts the spread of a car culture with manifold implications – ranging from massive ecological destruction to create infrastructure, to rapid suburbanisation and associated commuter living; from the accelerated and wider circulation of goods and services to the easier extraction of natural resources; and from the nurtured imaginaries of the car-fixated consumer to the ironic rise of car-enabled nature tourism (Sutter 2002). Automobility is directly linked to toxic political ecologies along the commodity chain – to take one example, rubber plantations which degrade tropical landscapes due to demand for tyres (Hecht and Cockburn 1989; Peluso 2012) – even as it is central to wider processes of capitalist accumulation and pollution (Paterson 2007).

In a contrasting view, consumer-led demand through the market is largely deemed responsible for consumption trends. With roots in economic liberal doctrine on freedom and choice in society, the consumer here is viewed as a rational individual who freely chooses

what s/he wants to buy in the marketplace subject to available resources (Bauman 1992). While reflecting differing intellectual lineages, much post-structural research also tends to privilege the autonomous role of the individual, whereby the production of the 'self' continues to be prioritised and the desire for 'signs' (linked notably to advertising) catalyses consumption. As Stuart Hall characterises it, '[e]verybody... knows that today's "goods" double up as social signs and produce meanings as well as energy' (1989: 131). This explanation, which Lodziak critically defines as a false 'ideology of consumerism' (2000: 112), also casts the individual consumer as being responsible for the environmental impacts of their shopping, rather than corporations. 'Everybody' is primarily motivated to consume without accounting for the ecological impacts. For instance when buying a child a gift of replica British Olympic sportswear the giver is not only expressing their emotional attachment, but also acknowledging how the recipient can build their identity through establishing a shared and symbolic solidarity with other 'Team GB' supporters. The emotional connection with the child and nation overrides concerns for the environmental and social impacts of the production of sports goods, such as controversy over GB-branded Adidas products (ITGLWF 2012). Even in the niche market for ethical clothing individual desires for 'style and image' as well as 'value for money', compete with environmental and ethical concerns (Jägel et al, 2012: 386).

In reality these two views represent extremes, prompting calls for greater nuance (Trentmann 2006). For instance, it is well known that industrial production and the generation of markets through advertisers' manipulation of consumer behaviour is notably associated with producer-stimulated demand. However, advertising practise is itself influenced by broader societal and geo-political changes (Domosh 2006). Hence, adverts themselves may be thought of to some extent at least as mirrors of shifting popular cultures. Ben Fine is amongst those who reject the two poles noted above. Thus, in discussing the fashion industry and clothing consumption, he illuminates how the construction of identity is indeed manipulated by enterprises which bring products with a stimulated demand to market, whilst also acknowledging the role of choices made by consumers as well as the complex impact of broader social change on demand for commodities (Fine 2002; also Lodziak 2000) – including pressure for a 'sustainable' political ecology of design and technology in consumer products (Petrina 2000).

Scholars have also sought to explore consumption empirically through attention to the role of place as a key generator of ideas and site of retailing. Geographers have been particularly prominent here (Gregson 1995). One focus is the shopping mall – in an elaboration of pioneering work by Walter Benjamin – those mega-cathedrals to contemporary consumption (Staeheli and Mitchell 2006). Shopping malls are located in the context of a retailing history of the twentieth century that broadly reflects and reinforces both Fordist and post-Fordist political and cultural economies (Harvey 1990; Shell 2009). As Goss (1999) illustrates, the mall (like the automobile to which it is connected) is at the heart of modern capitalism being a prime site where globalisation, consumption, identity and cultural politics collide. These distinctive places of and for consumption are simultaneously prime examples of how place is a source of potent imagery imbuing commodities with imagined values (cf. Cosgrove 2008). Nature has been one such prominent value in what Bryant and Goodman (2004: 355) term a 'conservation-seeking commodity culture' – a commercialised environment in which 'nature' is literally and figuratively consumed and market logic and economic growth are promoted as means of preserving the environment within tourist-friendly landscapes (Goss 1999; Igoe 2010 Igoe et al. 2010; Kaplan 2007; Price 1995). Such individualised behaviour sometimes feeds into the view that consumer choice in the market-place is *the* contemporary form of environmental politics – a point considered further in the following analysis of ethical consumption.

Ethical consumption

For some, to consume ethically is to promote social and ecological justice, while for others it is simply a new form of ineffectual feel-good politics that aspires to save the planet one step at a time. Yet the emergence of ethical consumption as one response to gathering social and ecological crises has sparked much scholarly analysis notably focused on gauging whether, if at all, it represents a critical form of environmental and political engagement (Barnett et al, 2010; Carrier and Luetchford 2012).

One thing is clear: there is more at stake here than advertising sophistry. That advertising can shape perceptions that stimulate in turn consumption is not new. As Marx long ago noted, 'The need which consumption feels for the object is created by the perception of it. The object of art – like every other product – creates a public which is sensitive to art and enjoys beauty' (1857: 92). What is important to note here is that the material culture which surrounds consumption is sustained by acts and aesthetics which extend beyond

production/consumption relations, with implications for how environmental and political narratives and practices occur. The rise of ethical consumption epitomises this such that a narrow reading of consumers responding to advertising signs does not account for its growth. As Barnett et al (2005) argue, such consumption is marked by activities and motivations complexly associated with ethics, morality and the politics of responsibility – through consumption, 'moral selves' are co-constructed, alongside other ethical and political activities.

Five points stand out in assessing the critical environmental political import of ethical consumption. First, ethical consumption may be a performance mediated by different 'kinds of cultural-semiotic codes and values' (Popke 2006: 509), but it does not remove the veils of the commodity fetish. Instead, as Goodman (2004) notes, it re-works the fetish in new forms, as 'caring at a distance' consumers draw on fresh imaginaries. Thus, a 'fair trade' cotton t-shirt may be manufactured by 'fairly' paid labour in poor developing countries, but these workers could be stitching together monocropped non-organic cotton produced on ecologically degraded farms in Texas (Rivoli 2009). Worse, ethical consumption feeds off images of pristine nature and worker contentment, but these codes and values are a new fetish rather than an objective record of relations between capital, labour and the environment. In turn, the new fetish simultaneously proclaims an ethos of caring at a distance while in practice often perpetuating production practices that, on balance, undermine other efforts (such as organised movements; see Price et al, this volume) to promote political and ecological justice in producer countries, thereby affirming the adage: 'distance leads to indifference' (Smith 2000: 93). Indeed, what some political scientists call the process of 'distancing' – whereby consumers remain cut off from crucial information about the conditions of production and distribution associated with their purchases – seems to be alive and well here (Princen et al, 2002).

Secondly, ethical consumption taps into and reinforces an emotional politics that at the same time serves to promote individual distinction-making and class positioning. Just as middle-class social and environmental activism through social movements and NGOs has long been seen in part as a manifestation of class-based status anxiety (e.g. Eder 1993), so ethical consumption can be seen to serve a similar purpose as the 'personal becomes political' via discrete and repeated consumption acts. Yet the ability to 'save' something – rainforest, polar icecaps, whales, indigenous peoples, etc – via consumption is not universal. Premium prices

on ethical goods exclude poor consumers. Nonetheless, such brutal class dynamics are firmly glossed over through an emotional politics that carefully aligns *some* people with selected objects worthy of an ethical gaze. As Ahmed (2004: 119) notes: 'In such affective economies, emotions *do things*, and they align individuals with communities – or bodily space with social space – through the very intensity of their attachments.' Here ethical consumption is precisely conspicuous as part of a wider public process of class-based identity formation (Griskevicius et al, 2010).

Thirdly, ethical consumption simultaneously helps to create a shared but more diffuse consumer identity in the market-place that may transcend class divisions. Here is a pattern of behaviour akin to some other types of contemporary consumption – think of 'devoted' Apple consumers, pop music fans or football supporters. People can be mobilised in support of an ideal or product such that shared values are formed through buying things and publicly performing the act of consumption. Of course, some consumer identities may come to be viewed negatively by much of the public inasmuch as they are linked to socially or environmentally harmful outcomes – as with, for example, SUV drivers or pornography consumers (Mitchell 2005). In contrast, ethical consumption tends to have a more positive popular reception. Fair trade is exemplary in this regard – standing out for many as signs of a progressive individualised politics that is seen to add up to social and/or environmental improvements. The appeal of this sort of fairly instantaneous and hopeful politics that individuals can 'control' is not to be gainsaid at a time of widespread disenchantment with conventional political processes (Warrier 2011).

And yet, fourthly, ethical consumption is increasingly seen to be quite compatible with if not outright supportive of neo-liberal social and environmental governance today. Indeed, despite its professed 'alternative' status to mainstream capitalism, its form and content tends to be broadly supportive of the status quo. Thus, the individualised and optional nature of this consumption process fits hand-in-glove with neoliberal doctrines about individual responsibility and voluntary action via the market even as it helps to dismantle a sense and praxis of collective responsibility and action (Goodman 2004). As noted, ethical consumption is ultimately in the business of re-fetishism and increasingly reflects the business models and ethos of the mainstream corporate world with which it is more and more intertwined (Barnett et al, 2010; Warrier 2011). The result is, at best, politically-minute change. Thus, for instance, the fair trade network 'rather than presenting a radical challenge to conventional

trade … [only] appears to be assisting certain groups to enter the global capitalist market on better terms' (Fridell 2006: 24). Such action helps to erode support for more radical forms of environmental political action by encouraging producers and consumers to 'buy into' a capitalist system that will set to rights existing inequities. At the same time, ethical consumption represents a new form of capital accumulation – here 'consumption, ironically, could continue to expand as the privatization of the environmental crisis encourages upwardly spiralling consumption, so long as this consumption is "green"' (Maniates 2001: 50).

Fifthly, and for the kinds of reasons noted above, ethical consumption has become the focus of growing critique and resistance in recent years. Thus, and insofar as ethical consumption increasingly becomes a branded phenomenon (for example, see Dolan 2011 on the branding of fair-trade), then the option of an anti-brand consumer boycott campaign has been put on the table. Brands are indeed influential in helping to construct consumer identity thereby allowing people to express themselves, but people then also avoid companies precisely in order to define themselves in opposition to the values associated with a particular product (Klein 2000). Thus, for example, Thompson and Arsel (2004) dissect the fair-trade inflected Starbucks' 'brand-scape' and the anti-Starbucks discourse and movement that emerged in response, which has more recently extended to popular protests over tax-avoidance in the UK and elsewhere. Yet consumer boycotts are scarcely radical in that they are, by nature, usually temporary phenomenon – implying a commitment to return to buying a product, once production conditions have improved. In contrast, what Lee et al (2008: 178) term 'anti-consumption' is a permanent expression of dissatisfaction with a brand emerging from 'unmet expectations', 'symbolic incongruity' or even 'ideological incompatibility'. Here, there is a movement toward a more powerful political response, albeit one still framed in a consumption idiom.

It would seem that ethical consumption does not ever really confront the 'consumption problem' bedevilling the contemporary world. Its utility as a critical source of environmental politics has thus been found wanting – such consumption represents a process that scarcely confronts, and may indeed even reinforce, a business-as-usual approach marked by a 'consumer arms race'. In the next section, we posit how a *post-consumption* agenda can look beyond people's relationships with individual brands and corporations to understand how the

provision of goods and services can exist outside of contemporary capitalist nature/social relations deeply branded by unfettered consumption.

Critical potential

Before turning to post-consumption, we should acknowledge that *sustainable consumption* has previously been offered as a way of forward thinking about the environmental dimensions of consumption at a systemic level, rather than individualistic ethical consumption (Cohen and Murphy 2000). Yet this notion is associated with a contested, uncritical and conformist politics of sustainability which has become a mainstay of market friendly environmental liberalism. In the end, the nature of consumption seems ill-suited to serving as a focus for critical political and environmental action. Zizek (quoted by Aitkenhead 2012) captures the problem: 'Like when you buy an organic apple, you're doing it for ideological reasons, it makes you feel good: "I'm doing something for Mother Earth," and so on. But in what sense are we engaged? It's a false engagement. Paradoxically, we do these things to avoid really doing things. It makes you feel good.' And yet consumption will not go away since to be a (post)modern human *is* to consume – and the consuming human is inescapably involved in political and environmental action. Consumption has become standardised as behaviour that is formatted to manufacture desire (Steigler 2011). For us, then, the challenge is for scholars to develop a post-consumption agenda that takes consumption seriously while critically embedding it in wider political, economic and cultural currents.

The kernels of a post-consumption idea has previously been engaged with in various ways by Kate Soper (2000), but much work still needs to be done and for us such an agenda would likely involve at least three interconnected elements. First, there is need to elaborate de-fetishism scholarship – that is, research that dissects complex commodity chains and cultures. Such work integrates insights from the study of everyday consumer practices and perceptions with attention to how 'the generalized compulsion to consume' is based in 'the general alienation of labour and the complex phenomenon of the fetishism of commodities under contemporary capitalism' (Goss 2004: 376). This step re-integrates consumption with production even as it acknowledges the wider totalising nature of capitalism in the regulation of people's everyday lives.

Second, a post-consumption agenda ought to feature space for 'spirited debate and animated conversation' (Maniates 2001: 50) by concerned citizens and social justice organisations about both the causes and implications of contemporary consumption (be it ethical or not) as it relates to social and environmental practices. Following the 'deliberative turn' in theorising on democracy (Dryzek 1990), there is scope here for 'deliberative environmental politics' (Baber and Bartlett 2005) in which calculations on environmental sustainability move to the political centre-stage. While such a scenario seems remote in these austere times, widespread pressure on household budgets in the global North in particular might provide an opportunity to ratchet up the debate on over-consumption, thereby promoting a more collective sense of understanding as to how to proceed in challenging the status quo: consuming less, consuming differently, consuming reflectively.

Third, the post-consumption agenda must use such deliberative efforts to leverage concrete political gains at local, national and international levels. The goal needs to be promoting action in the form of stricter regulation and legal protection to enforce the production of commodities in socially and environmentally responsible ways. No longer left to voluntary interventionism, such regulation would form part of a move toward the 'green state' model based on principles and practices of deliberative ecological democracy (Eckersley 2004) rather than the authoritarianism of earlier 'ecological Leviathan' proposals (e.g. Ophuls 1977).

Stated thus, the elements of a post-consumption agenda may sound incommensurate to the immense task at hand. Yet when seen as concurrent and interweaving phenomenon that build political synergies, they may nonetheless be seen one day as ingredients for a 'post-capitalist *nébuleuse*' (to modify Cox 1997: 59-61): a loose, multi-scale and consensual network of actors and individuals sharing common ideas on political economy, governance, production, consumption and ecology.

Conclusion

The concept of consumption is today at the heart of understanding of both contemporary capitalism and the often toxic human-environmental relations that are its essential attribute. Yet consumption is a rather slippery phenomenon – one superbly adapted to the creative and destructive practices of capital but less so to efforts to build a critical environmental politics. Research in both the political-economic and cultural traditions in consumption studies has

amply documented this, raising thereby questions about the need for a post-consumption agenda of scholarship and action.

In pushing this concept beyond the confines of consumption studies, a post-consumption agenda inevitably engages with other concepts central to critical environmental politics. Thus, for example, the study of consumption sheds light on the contemporary workings of capitalism. It emphasises the ongoing role of the commodity fetish including its discursive malleability in the face of 'alternative' projects such as ethical consumption. At the same time, consumption has become a focus of public and private efforts to promote sustainability, even as those efforts are often articulated in a neo-liberal idiom. While the inescapable human need to consume puts limits on how sustainable we can become, the very contingency of consumption may nonetheless offer encouragement to those who believe that quick but socially diffuse action is the only answer. Finally, work on consumption tends to affirm calls for a deliberative democracy in which citizens engage in debate, reflection, political action, and consumption. Indeed, the democratisation of consumption (with an eye to social and ecological justice) requires the consumption of democracy by a wider citizen base than under many 'liberal democracies'. Here then, perhaps, resides hope for an effective critical environmental politics.

Further Reading

For invaluable overviews on consumption, politics, geography and the environment, see Paul Dauvergne (2010) *The Shadows of Consumption: Consequences for the Global Environment*, Michael Redclift (2000) *Wasted: Counting the cost of global consumption*, and Juliana Mansvelt (2005) *Geographies of Consumption*, while Thomas Princen, Michael Maniates, and Ken Conca's (2002) edited collection *Confronting Consumption* remains a landmark. On the tensions within ethical consumption the edited collection *Ethical Consumption: Social Value and Economic Practice* by James Carrier and Peter Luetchford (2012) provides insightful discussion and *The Politics of Fair Trade: a Survey* edited by Meera Warrier (2010) offers a superior analysis of one of the main ethical consumption projects. For contrasting political economy and cultural explanations of modern consumption, see Ben Fine (2002) *The World of Consumption: the Material and Cultural Revisited* and Daniel Miller (2008) *The Comfort of Things* respectively. Frank Trentmann's (2006) edited collection *The Making of the consumer* offers an excellent historical introduction.

Useful Websites

Adbusters: www.adbusters.org

Brandalism: www.brandilsim.org.uk

Fairtrade Foundation: www.fairtrade.org.uk

Follow The Things: www.followthethings.com

Source Map: www.sourcemap.com

The Story of Stuff Project: www.storyofstuff.org

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