



Citizens, consumers and sustainability: (Re)Framing environmental practice in an age of climate change

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ABSTRACT

Recent moves by national and local policy makers have sought to encourage individuals to engage in a wide range of pro-environmental practices to address both discrete environmental problems and major, global challenges such as climate change. The major framing device for these developments is the notion of 'citizen-consumers', which positions individual ecological responsibilities alongside consumer choice logics in a Neo-liberal socio-economic framework. In the environmental social sciences, there have been recent moves to interpret the citizen-consumer through adopting a social practices approach, which advances the notion that in understanding environmental commitments, a deeper appreciation of underlying norms, values, identity politics and consumption is required to uncover the complex processes that lead to environmental practices in specific contexts. This paper argues that whilst these approaches have considerable utility in tracing the normalisation of established and discrete environmental practices in particular contexts, the issue of climate change represents an independent and over-arching discursive conflict between new and embedded practices that challenges the ability of citizen-consumers to act as agents for change. Accordingly, the data presented in this paper suggest that climate change can be seen as an unsettling and dynamic issue that generates discursive conflict in its own right around fundamental issues of knowledge, responsibility, scale and place. The paper therefore argues that a new and more critical perspective is required within environmental social science to understand (conflicting) discourses of sustainable living between the 'passive' normalisation of conventional environmental practice and the 'contested' ambiguities of climate change.

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1. Introduction

The growing number and complexity of environmental dilemmas facing nation states in the early 21st century is resulting in a wide range of measures aimed at both mitigating and adapting to new environmental problems. The most complex and wide-spread of these issues is global climate change and this has been reflected in recent attention focused on developing an internationally driven response to global warming through economic, as well environmentally based arguments (Stern Review, 2006). However, although international debates amongst the political community attain a high media profile, they mask the range of measures that governments are implementing at national and local scales. Within this context, one issue has become predominant in discussions of how to mitigate and adapt to environmental

problems; known broadly as 'behaviour change'. This policy discourse places emphasis on the role of consumers as the primary agents of positive change, as the UK's Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs stated in their Sustainable Development Strategy (DEFRA, 2005, p. 25):

"We all – governments, businesses, families and communities, the public sector, voluntary and community organisations – need to make different choices if we are to achieve the vision of sustainable development".

This positioning of consumers as the key reference point for promoting environmental sustainability represents a much wider and underlying socio-political theme in western capitalist democracies (Giddens, 1991) that places greater emphasis on the role of individuals in creating social change through the fusing of consumption and citizenship. Intellectually, political scientists have highlighted the central role of 'citizen-consumers' (Clarke et al., 2007; Spaargaren and Mol, 2008) who have come to embody social responsibilities within dominant consumption logics, using both political and market-based actions to drive change. Accordingly,

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individuals perform dual roles as both citizens and consumers, acting as agents of change within the capitalist economy, using points of consumption as sites of power (Giddens, 1991). This form of reflexive practice has come to characterise the implicit role of individuals in policy discourses, introducing the notion that citizen–consumers are as critical to the Neo-liberal state's governance of environmental issues as state or corporate actors (Barr et al., 2011).

Within the context of this consumption-driven paradigm that has progressively placed individuals at the centre, this paper uses an analysis of qualitative data collected during two research projects to explore the effectiveness of such a paradigm in a period of heightened awareness and debate concerning global climate change. The paper initially discusses the emergence of the citizen–consumer paradigm within the context of Neo-liberal political agendas and explores these through the lens of recent research on social practices within the environmental social sciences, demonstrating the ways in which researchers have come to understand contemporary environmental behaviours in specific social contexts. The paper then explores how these perspectives can be viewed in the light of recent research on climate change, which points to a series of conflicts that emerge when this issue is discussed, often disrupting established understandings of existing and embedded practices. The paper will conclude by exploring the utility of the citizen–consumer approach, calling for a re-alignment of both intellectual and pragmatic approaches in environmental social science, which directly address the potential conflicts climate change can introduce into public understandings of environmental practice.

2. Citizens, consumers and social practices

The growth in attention on individuals as a means of tackling environmental problems in Western democracies is well-documented (e.g. Dobson, 2010; Jackson, 2005; Seyfang, 2005). However, as Clarke et al. (2007) have noted, the outgrowth of responsibility from the state towards citizens is one that represents an important shift in the relationship between governments and individuals. As such, this over-arching paradigm for understanding the role of individuals as agents of change in the environmental realm (Seyfang, 2005) deserves a brief theoretical explanation.

As Spaargaren and Mol (2008, p. 354) note, the 'citizen–consumer' is the post-modern alignment of two fundamentally modernist concepts "...[that] used to delineate different sets of responsibilities, practices and identities, which under the present conditions can no longer be analysed in isolation". In line with Giddens' (1991) notion of reflexivity, Spaargaren and Mol (2008) argue that conventional modes of exercising citizenship through the nation state have become decentralised and distributed into alternative sites of power that act above and below the state, creating new opportunities for citizen activism from the international to the local level. In tandem, many of these sites of power for citizenship politics are also sites of consumption (Livingstone et al., 2007), where the traditional modes of economic exchange are being transformed into sites of ethical, moral and economic discussion (Clarke et al., 2007). As Scammell (2000, p. 351) notes:

"The act of consumption is becoming increasingly suffused with citizenship characteristics and considerations. Citizenship is not dead, or dying, but found in new places, in life-politics".

Accordingly, the citizen–consumer discourse seeks to conceptualise new modes of citizenship within a market-oriented perspective and thus views consumers as agents of power, envisioning a new politics of consumer activism. Using this new

'life politics' approach (Giddens, 1991), Clarke et al. (2007) and Keum et al. (2004) have charted how the citizen–consumer logic has been applied widely in socio-political contexts as a way of characterising late modernity's 'privatised' society within the context of New Right policies emphasising choice and consumer power. This is most notable in social and welfare policy but can also be observed in the wider privatisations of public utilities and services. Indeed, within the environmental field, commentators such as Dobson (2010) and Seyfang (2005) have offered critical accounts of the role of this approach in centring efforts to reduce environmental degradation on individuals as consumers and citizens. Dobson (2010) highlights the ways in which the rising profile of environmental citizenship, as conceptualised in a market-orientated paradigm, is able to 'crowd out' other ways of viewing both society's and individuals' approaches to environmental and social change. Such a reliance by policy makers on individualistic notions of change therefore reinforces the governing of the environment at the 'citizen–consumer' scale, viewing points of exchange and discussion as those between individual consumers and producers, rather than deliberation between citizens as part of a collective movement for change.

In the light of this political background, the citizen–consumer perspective has been operationalised in a number of ways to explore how individuals are being encouraged to act as agents for positive environmental change (Spaargaren and Mol, 2008), but predominant within disciplines such as anthropology, geography and sociology has been the emergence of what Verbeek and Mommaas (2008, p. 634) term a 'social practices' approach to environmental behaviour research, where social practices:

"...are conceived as being routine-driven, everyday activities situated in time and space and shared by groups of people as part of their everyday life".

The origins of this perspective emerged in sociology from the arguments of Macnaghten (2003), Spaargaren (2004, 2006), Spaargaren et al. (2000) and Shove (2003), all of whom have advocated a re-focusing of environmental behaviour research to focus on the everyday and 'mundane' practice of daily life. As Shove (2003, p. 9) argues:

"What counts is the big, and in some cases, global swing of ordinary, routinized and taken for granted practice. This requires an upending of the social environmental research agenda as conventionally formulated. Only by setting 'the environment' aside as the main focus of attention will it be possible to follow and analyse processes underpinning the normalisation of consumption and the escalation of demand".

This particular viewpoint, advocated by Shove (2003) as a way of re-framing the social science of the environment, has provided a broad (though not totalising) focus for researchers interested in understanding the ways in which social practices can uncover the underlying processes that lead individuals (or households) to consume in different ways and thus to reveal the underlying demands that individuals make on the use of culturally significant products such as energy or water (Southerton et al., 2004). Such consumption is not only to be conceived as pro- or anti-environmental but part of everyday, embedded practice. Thus, seeking to explore why certain individuals do or do not 'commit' to environmental practices is concerned with coming to an understanding about the very basis of consumption itself.

The social practices perspective has been applied in a range of behavioural domains, notably with regard to waste management (Gregson, 2006; Gregson and Crewe, 2003; Gregson et al., 2007; Bulkeley and Gregson, 2009), water use (Shove and Warde, 2002), energy (Shove et al., 2007) and wider issues of consumption

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