



Consumer scapegoatism and limits to green consumerism



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ABSTRACT

An axiom that has shaped policy approaches to sustainable consumption has been that if more consumers understand the environmental consequences of their consumption patterns, through their market choices they would inevitably put pressure on retailers and manufacturers to move towards sustainable production. The result is the proliferation of consumption of “green” products, eco-labels, consumer awareness campaigns, etc.

This paper, however, argues that the dominant focus on green consumerism as against the need for structural changes towards a broader systemic shift is unrealistic. Furthermore, promoting green consumerism at once lays responsibility on consumers to undertake the function of maintaining economic growth while simultaneously, even if contradictorily, bearing the burden to drive the system towards sustainability. Given the scope of the sustainability challenge and the urgency with which it must be addressed, this paper argues that the consumer is not the most salient agent in the production–consumption system; expecting the consumer through green consumerism to shift society towards SCP patterns is consumer scapegoatism.

This paper draws on the discursive confusion over discourse and practice of sustainable consumption. It attempts to clarify the differences between green consumerism and sustainable consumption, looking at each concept’s historical development, its perspective on the consumer, and the main approaches to achieving sustainability. It then introduces the Attitudes-Facilitators-Infrastructure (AFI) framework – a framework for sustainable consumption policy design that goes beyond green consumerism, and that enables wellbeing and ecological sustainability without propagating the economic-growth dogma that has a stranglehold on contemporary policy-making.

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1. Introduction

The central premise of this paper is that governments have encouraged policies that foster green consumerism (GC) instead of sustainable consumption (SC); that GC, although incorporates environmental considerations, is at best at the periphery of SC and, even worse, provides an illusion of progress which distracts from the urgent structural changes needed in order to achieve sustainable development (SD). Differences between green consumerism and sustainable consumption might initially seem to be only semantic; the policy propositions however and practical consequences have serious implications on achieving a sustainable civilization.

Green consumerism refers to the production, promotion, and preferential consumption of goods and services on the basis of their pro-environment claims. The popularity of such examples as the

Toyota Prius, a petrol–electricity hybrid car, fair trade coffee, energy efficient TV sets, etc., among green consumers are examples of green consumerism. Among the most visible approaches of promoting green consumerism are eco-labelling schemes for products and services, public awareness campaigns, eco-efficient production standards and process certification (especially achieved through green technology), green public procurement by governments and public institutions, and recycling activities of post-use products (Akenji et al., 2011). This is reflected in the works of international bodies such as the United Nations Environment Programme (see for example UNEP, 2005; UNEP, 2008; UNEP, 2009; UNEP/Consumers International, 2006; UNFI, 2007) and the OECD (see for example OECD, 1997; OECD, 2002a; OECD, 2002b; OECD, 2008a; OECD, 2008c); product labelling codes and standards, and waste recycling policies of national governments, corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies of companies; and shopping and/or domestic waste recycling by households.

To demonstrate eco-efficiency, in the European Union a Directive (European Parliament, 2010) requires that household electrical appliances in the market (including refrigerators, freezers, washing

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machines, dryers, ovens, water heaters and hot-water storage appliances, lighting sources, and air-conditioners) carry a label providing information on energy consumption. Energy efficiency of appliances is displayed on a fiche and rated from A to G, with energy efficiency of A-rated products (and the A+variations) being very high, and very low with G-rated products. The intention is to have consumers choose products that consume less energy and to encourage manufacturers to meet market demands for these efficient products. The EU Action Plan for SCP mirrors the same message of improvements in efficiency of consumer products (EC, 2008). The paradoxical consequence of promoting GC demonstrated by the case of household appliances is the so-called rebound effect (Herring and Sorrell, 2009): although washing machines and television sets have become more efficient, savings per unit have meant that people buy even more – the absolute amount of consumption has increased, outstripping the efficiency gains.

Patterns indicate growing popularity of energy efficient household machines, fair trade chocolate, dolphin-free canned tuna, and organic cotton fashion. While data on these niche initiatives might be promising; data from areas that are central to social, economic and environmental sustainability is less promising. Fisheries and fertility of farmlands are in decline; natural resource stocks, the raw materials for production, are dwindling; inequality is growing in society; many more illnesses related to unsustainable lifestyles are being diagnosed. Jackson (2009) has pointed out that despite declining energy and carbon intensities, CO₂ emissions from fossil fuels have increased by 80% since 1970. Emissions today are almost 40% higher than they were in 1990 – the Kyoto base year – and since 2000 that have been growing at over 3% per year. Global extraction of metal ores – iron ore, bauxite, copper and nickel – is now rising faster than world GDP. Similarly, cement production has more than doubled since 1990, outstripping growth of GDP by 70%. In the case of Asia, as emerging economies build up their infrastructure and a more demanding consumer class emerges, there is increasing pressure on natural and social resources. Observers of these patterns and those making the critical distinction between relative and absolute decoupling of economic growth from environmental pressure – “absolute” being the measure needed to stay within ecological limits – have cautioned against striving for decoupling while ignoring consumerism (ibid).

Future projections hold further demands on the environment, with serious potential consequences on human well-being. By 2050 the planet would have to handle 9 billion people, having lifted almost a quarter of them out of poverty and accommodating a potent consumer class of more than half the global population in cities (Meadows et al., 2004). The International Energy Agency (IEA, 2009) estimates that at the current rates of consumption, global primary energy demand will rise by 40% between 2007 and 2030. The OECD (2008b) projects that in cities, where most people will be living by 2030, there will be further deteriorations to urban air quality with severe health effects from exposure to particulate matter and ozone. Exposure of agricultural crops to ozone cost an estimated 2.8 billion Euros in 2008 (ibid); globally over 2 million people die prematurely each year due to indoor and outdoor pollution (UNEP, 2007).

Ethical and environmental standards have been introduced, but extraction of both renewable and non-renewable resources continues and at an increasing pace.¹ The production process has been “streamlined” and manufacturing “leaner”; with increasing reliance on technology, energy efficiency and resource productivity have improved, but the sheer volume of material production keeps

growing. Eco-labels have been introduced to guide consumers’ shopping decisions, and niche products (such as organic products, fair trade products, etc) have come to the market but the most visible change is a paradoxical trend of increasing consumption; design of systems of provision has hardly changed. Essentially, even with the widely promoted and now accepted notions of green consumerism, production and consumption continue to increase in an unsustainable manner and pace.

Previous literature has similar comparisons, essentially trying to differentiate GC from the transformative potential of SC to deliver the objectives of sustainable development. Fedrigo and Hontelez (2010) observe that through promoting GC, SC has been downgraded to “sustainable consumer procurement”. Aunty and Brown (cited from Hobson, 2006) refer to green products and technologically driven solutions as ‘weak sustainability’; Fuchs and Lorek (2005) pick up on this to highlight the differences between a “weak” SC approach (based on efficiency) and a “strong” SC approach (based on sufficiency). The emerging new economics domain emphasizes needed deep systemic changes as against current peripheral activities (Brown et al., 2012; Jackson, 2009). Instead of the narrow focus of green consumerism, Lebel and Lorek (2008) propose to enable “sustainable production–consumption systems”.

This paper draws on the discursive confusion over discourse and practice of sustainable consumption (Hobson, 2006; Markula and Moisander, 2011) in an attempt to clarify the differences between GC and SC, and to provide a broadened framework for SC policy design that enables wellbeing and ecological sustainability without propagating the economic growth dogma that has a stranglehold on contemporary policy making (Daly, 1996; Jackson, 2009; Meadows et al 2004, Princen et al., 2002; Schor, 2010).

The paper starts by presenting the proliferation of green consumerism in sustainable consumption policy. In the following section it addresses the differences between GC and SC, examining their histories, definitions of the consumer, proponents of the different viewpoints, sample policies, and the central tenets. The above criteria are discussed not in a linear analysis but interwoven to reflect the complexity of the issue. The paper then presents some frameworks for understanding consumer behaviour and, drawing from them, introduces a framework for sustainable consumption policy, arguing that in order for consumers to exercise agency, there must be three preconditions: the right attitude, facilitators that could translate attitude to behaviour, and sustainable products and infrastructure. The paper then concludes by proposing a four-action policy plan for policy to enable sustainable consumption.

2. Differentiating green consumerism from sustainable consumption: an analysis of literature

2.1. Historical development

A recent history of SC can be referred back to the 19th century, with writers like Henry Thoreau and Thorstein Veblen as early critics of high levels of consumption in industrial society. Although consumerism was not necessarily related to environmental consequences, criticism of conspicuous consumption (see Veblen, 1899) came under the lens of pursuits of social status and the potential socially distorting consequences it had on contemporary society. A more recent history of SC in international policy can be seen from the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment; this was in the same year as the release by the Club of Rome of the landmark publication *The Limits to Growth* with a clarion call to shift course away from the economic growth paradigm in order to avoid overshoot and collapse (Meadows et al., 1972). In 1992 at the Rio Earth Summit, SC came to be established as a policy concept in its

¹ In fact raw materials are now being used as a weapon in geopolitical wars (see China and rare earth metals, Iran and oil, Palestine/Israel conflict and water).

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