



Nationalising local sustainability: Lessons from the British wartime Utility furniture scheme



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ABSTRACT

Analyses of sustainable design and commodity networks often make a priori assumptions about the capacity of markets to provide solutions to environmental problems; and have a tendency to celebrate local scales of action. This paper offers a contrasting account, in which the national state sought to carefully manage scarce natural resources and to ensure equitable consumption at a time of deep crisis. We utilise the historical example of the British wartime Utility furniture scheme in order to draw out three lessons for sustainable and equitable environmental practice. First, we argue that national states do not simply provide an institutional backdrop to sustainable production but rather can act as important organising agents. Second, the paper emphasises that sustainability is best achieved through interventions across a commodity network, beyond simply modifications to a single node such as design. Finally, we underscore the value of ‘pragmatic centralism’ in environmental decision-making, calling attention to the collaborative practices that underpinned the scheme. The example of Utility’s adaptive responses—borne out of crisis, scarcity and shortage during wartime—offers much that is of intrinsic interest to current concerns about resource consumption and the drivers of sustainability in commodity networks.

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1. Introduction

During the Second World War, the British government under its “Utility” scheme sought strict controls over the production, distribution and pricing of a range of consumer products, such as cloth and clothing, furniture and fabrics, bedding, household textiles, glass, pottery, footwear and hosiery (Attfield, 1999; Hargreaves and Gowing, 1952). Planned and implemented during the early years of the war, the Utility scheme sought to manage acute shortages of raw materials such as timber, metal, cotton and rubber as well as to facilitate the equitable distribution and consumption of finished consumer goods under conditions of extreme scarcity. Whilst wartime and early post-war consumer rationing has tended to be the most well-known element of the mid twentieth century British domestic economy, the broader dynamics and implications of the Utility scheme have been less well understood and analysed. In this paper we use the example of the Utility scheme for furniture to engage with current concerns about drivers of environmental sustainability in commodity networks, including the potential for markets to deliver the sustainable production of consumer goods.

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The development of the Utility furniture scheme initially was triggered by commodity shortages that emerged from the immediate collapse of imports as well as the diversion of wood and metal from domestic to wartime production (Ford, 1951; House, 1965). The concomitant restrictions in the supply of furniture as a finished good at a time of dramatic increases in demand led to racketeering and profiteering in the second hand furniture market; and the state sought to prevent the recurrence of similar abuses which had taken place during the First World War. Consequently, an important perspective is the recognition that the Utility furniture scheme was a necessary political intervention into the market and one for socially equitable purposes.

Under the Utility furniture scheme, the national state made a series of profound interventions across the sector. Furniture design, manufacturing, distribution and consumption were all reorganised (Reimer and Pinch, 2013). Production was redistributed away from historic concentrations in London and High Wycombe (Hall, 1962) to be taken up by ‘designated’ firms across the whole of Britain. Designation by the Board of Trade involved a careful selection of manufacturers based on potential production capacity and sufficient labour resources. Firms were not necessarily required to possess highly skilled labour, because furniture design expertise had been standardised and centralised: only a defined set of ‘Utility’ furniture types could be produced.

Designated manufacturers were compelled to supply retailers within 38 defined 'production zones', based upon existing county boundaries, with some amalgamations in, for example, Devon and Cornwall or Norfolk and Suffolk (Board of Trade, 1942–1944b). Furniture consumption was both rationed as well as spatially controlled. Buying permits were issued by the Assistance Board on behalf of the Board of Trade to 'priority classes' such as newly married households or those who had been bombed; and permits were only valid at retailers within a 15 mile radius of the address to which the furniture was to be delivered.

The fascinating example of Utility helps us to think about how best to deliver sustainability. The 'local' is much celebrated in the sustainability literature. The idea that the small scale and local is intrinsically more sustainable, adaptive, beautiful and participatory—and that the local is where potential is most deeply embedded—has been a leitmotif running from the Arts and Crafts movement to contemporary green designers. The state or 'the centre'—by inference, if not by explicit statement—has been cast as 'Big', corporate, restrictive, un-adaptive, anti-democratic and inflexible. Although researchers have gone in search of innovative local practice, responses often appear piecemeal and fragmentary. As our account of the Utility furniture scheme will demonstrate, if more geographically widespread change in environmental practice is to be delivered one may have to think about how larger scale interventions, including the role of the national state, have the pragmatic capacities to nationalise forms of local sustainability and equity.

In this regard we wish to outline the distinctive power of what we term 'pragmatic centralism'.¹ As Addison's (1975) account of the formation and actions of the British coalition government reveals, the Second World War was a period of unprecedented intervention by the state into market operations. The experiences of pre-war economic recession, combined with the shared sacrifice and solidarity of the war effort and home front contributed to an ideological shift which "...spoke always of the rational and centralized control of resources, and the priority which must be given to social welfare" (Addison, 1975, 183). The war effort vindicated new mechanisms for more equitable allocation of scarce resources based upon state assessments of social need and collective welfare; and also stimulated collaboration between public and private sector agents. Utility was one element of this pragmatic centralism.

Whilst in many respects a product of the unique political and ideological shifts of the time and of the particular circumstances of war, the example of Utility nevertheless demonstrates the existence of alternative developmental pathways toward social and environmental justice. Further, our historical focus also offers an important contribution to broader debates surrounding commodity chains and networks (see Leslie and Reimer, 2006; Reimer and Leslie, 2008; Hughes and Reimer, 2004), particularly in appreciating "...the historically constructed and politically contingent nature of chains" (Bair, 2009, 19).

Drawing upon archival research into the Utility furniture scheme, the paper explores the lessons offered by the scheme for present-day understandings of sustainable production, distribution and consumption.² Section 2 below positions the Utility furniture case study as a counter to current optimism about the power of markets to deliver environmental efficiencies and 'upgrading', by reflecting upon a period of deep economic crisis and market failure.

Section 3 uses the example of Utility to develop debates about 'green design' into an understanding of how the delivery of sustainability involves interventions that move beyond the imaginations of design as a pre-production activity to embrace the complexity of broader commodity networks, including nodes of design, production, retailing, distribution and consumption. In Section 4, we present Utility as an expedient and adaptive response to a period of resource shortage and a crisis in equitable consumption. Whilst led by the national state, the development and management of the Utility furniture scheme involved collaboration and negotiation among a wide range of participants at a time when the equitable redistribution of material resources was widely accepted: an arrangement which we characterise as pragmatic centralism. The concluding section of the paper reinforces the insights that the Utility example generates for nationalising local sustainability.

2. Market failure and sustainable commodity networks

Contemporary neo-liberal discourses do much to celebrate the capacity of globalised markets and supply chains to deliver 'environmental upgrading', in which attention to environmental standards is seen to improve firm competitiveness (see, for example, Khattak et al., 2015). Developed from broader conceptualisations of production upgrading within global value chains (Gereffi et al., 2001), more recent literature has foregrounded the ways in which upgrading might involve moves towards environmental sustainability (Goger, 2013; de Marchi et al., 2013b; on the furniture industry in particular, see Handfield et al., 1997; Kaplinsky et al., 2009; Høgelvold, 2011; de Marchi et al., 2013a). Through (for example) the use of more sustainable wood sources; the reduction of toxic substances such as volatile organic compounds; the incorporation of recycled materials and/or the general reduction in waste streams, the enhancement of environmental sustainability across the value chain typically is seen as a form of innovation which is able to improve firms', industries' or nations' competitiveness or market position.

Within associated literatures on 'ecological modernisation', economic growth, open international trading conditions and market based incentives, combined with the preferences of environmentally discerning consumers, are viewed as pivotal mechanisms for improving the environmental practices of industries and resolving environmental problems. Writing on ecological modernisation thus emphasises the efficacy of voluntary forms of private-sector self-regulation rather than formal legislative control by central government.³ A somewhat stronger role for the state is offered within related work on Strategic Niche Management (SNM). SNM is concerned with identifying circumstances under which the unsustainable trajectories and path-dependencies of established techno-economic systems might be changed to embrace more environmentally efficient practices (see Kemp et al., 1998; Caniëls and Romijn, 2008; Schot and Geels, 2008). The state is seen as potentially important first, in coordinating diverse actor networks that challenge established vested producer interests and articulating the values of community and environmental groups; and secondly in creating new niches or 'protected spaces' which allow experimentation and innovative practice within economic sectors. However, as Lovell's (2007) analysis of UK low energy housing policy demonstrates, SNM in practice risks becoming a politically expedient approach which ultimately is unable to drive more significant sector wide change.

¹ We are grateful to one of the paper's referees for helping us to clarify our use of the term pragmatic centralism.

² Empirically this study is based on analysis of a range of archival sources: the extensive records of the Board of Trade held at the National Archives, Kew; Mass Observation archives deposited at the University of Sussex, and Census of Production data on the British furniture industry. Unless specified otherwise, the general narrative detail of the Utility furniture scheme is derived from these sources.

³ For critical geographical reviews of ecological modernisation, see Gibbs (2000), Buttel (2000) and Gibbs (2006). A much earlier questioning of the role of the market in delivering sustainable outcomes is provided in Rees, 1992.

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