



## Thrifty, green or frugal: Reflections on sustainable consumption in a changing economic climate

David Evans\*

*Sociology and the Sustainable Consumption Institute, University of Manchester, United Kingdom*

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 7 July 2009

Received in revised form 23 February 2011

Available online 25 June 2011

#### Keywords:

Ethics  
Frugality  
Recession  
Sustainable consumption  
Sustainable lifestyles  
Thrift

### ABSTRACT

In the context of a string of economic crises that have affected major world economies between 2007 and 2009, there seems to be a certain amount of overlap between debates around these issues and debates around long term environmental problems such as climate change. One of the interesting points of overlap is a renewed interest in notions of austerity with optimistic commentators offering up hope that a (re)turn to frugality represents a unique opportunity for the pursuit of sustainable consumption. Against this backdrop the analysis sets out an approach to frugality as a social practice and drawing on a qualitative study of persons who identified themselves as attempting to reduce their environmental impacts, it considers the links between frugality and sustainable consumption. Crucially, a distinction is drawn between thrift and frugality in relation to: (1) the scale at which they exercise care and compassion; (2) their relationship to the normative expectations of consumer cultures, and; (3) their consequences in terms of environmental impacts. Taking these distinctions alongside historical analyses of changing consumption patterns, a note of caution is offered that the passage from the economic downturn to sustainable consumption may not be as clear as might be hoped.

© 2011 Published by Elsevier Ltd.

### 1. Introduction

Over the last 20 years debates surrounding the nature, necessity and possibility of 'sustainable consumption' have gathered momentum to become a hot topic in the global environmental arena. The emergence of this debate can be traced to the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 and its key policy document – Agenda 21, where attention was drawn to the environmental impacts of consumption patterns in industrialised countries. Subsequently, these unsustainable patterns of consumption were identified as a major cause, if not *the* major cause of environmental degradation (UNDP, 1998; OECD, 2002) and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development identified changing patterns of consumption as one of its three main objectives. This paper joins an emerging body of work in geography and cognate social science disciplines that is concerned with the academic study of sustainable consumption (for example Cohen and Murphy, 2001; Burgess et al., 2003; Shove, 2003; Southerton et al., 2004; Barr and Gilg, 2006; Eden et al., 2008). Analytically, this paper is weighted more heavily towards a consumption perspective and the study of consumers than it is towards a sustainability/environment perspective and it seeks to explicate the concept of frugality as a social practice whilst

considering the ways in which it relates to notions of environmentally sustainable consumption.

As Lastovicka et al. pointed out over 10 years ago (1999), frugality has been largely ignored by consumption studies and whilst very little work has been done in the intervening years to correct this deficit; the sustainability agenda has brought about renewed interest in the concept of frugality (Alcott, 2008; Pepper et al., 2009) and related notions of voluntary simplicity (McDonald et al., 2006). Added impetus to consider the relationship between frugality and sustainable consumption has come from speculation as to the consequences of the economic downturn in terms of environmental sustainability. Here, there is a tendency to assume that the economic downturn will bring about a (re)turn to frugality and with it, a move towards more sustainable patterns of consumption. This is certainly manifest in public and popular imaginations. For example in April 2009, the UK's Energy Saving Trust launched a 'war time spirit'<sup>1</sup> campaign organised around strategies for saving money and energy in response to the (now) related problems of recession and climate change. Similarly, Patricia Nicol's popular history book *Sucking Eggs: What Your Wartime Granny Could Teach You about Diet, Thrift and Going Green* (2009) posits links between the necessity of saving money and reductions in environmental impacts.

\* Address: University of Manchester, Arthur Lewis Building (3rd floor), M13 9PL, United Kingdom. Tel.: +44 (0)161 275 0258.

E-mail address: [david.evans-2@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:david.evans-2@manchester.ac.uk)

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.energysavingtrust.org.uk/Media/Corporate-Media/Media-centre-images-docs/Wartime-spirit-campaign/Wartime-spirit-press-release>. Accessed 20/09/2010.

In terms of academic speculation, only Hinton and Goodman (2010) have considered the links between the economic downturn, frugality and sustainability. Acknowledging that the consequences of the economic downturn are uncertain and ambiguous, they nevertheless entertain the possibility that it might encourage consumers to embrace voluntary simplicity, reject consumerism and consume more sustainably. Such optimism, I contend, results from the tendency to treat thrift and frugality interchangeably alongside a degree of historical blindness.

Specifically, the paper proceeds as follows. To begin it sets out the definition and approach to sustainable consumption that is adopted in this analysis and drawing on theoretical, technical and secondary sources, considers its relationship to thrift. From here, it draws on a qualitative study of persons who identified themselves as attempting to reduce their environmental impacts to consider the links between the practise of frugality and notions of sustainable consumption. With this a distinction is drawn between thrift and frugality, the crux of which lies in the different scales of care and compassion that are mobilised through the (non)consumption practices associated with each. Crucially, it is argued that thrift and frugality differ in their relationship to the prevailing normativity of consumer cultures and their consequences in terms of sustainable consumption. Finally, these distinctions are brought together with historical accounts of consumption to caution that the economic downturn is unlikely to disrupt the dominant expectations and practices of consumer cultures in favour of more frugal and environmentally friendly forms of consumption.

## 2. Sustainable consumption, thrift and frugality

Despite the prevalence of ‘sustainable consumption’ on popular, political and academic agendas, there remains a good deal of ambiguity and uncertainty as to what it means and what it entails. Is it a matter of individuals buying ‘eco’ alternatives, exercising moderate restraint and engaging in ‘easy’ conservation activities (such as declining plastic bags)? Perhaps it is about buying local and/or fairly traded produce? Or does it require a complete overhaul of the ways in which consumption is socially and technically organised? As Hinton and Goodman point out, sustainable consumption:

‘[C]riss-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. (Hinton and Goodman, 2010: 246)’

They go on to suggest that however it is defined, it is characterised by an *ethical* dimension that is mobilised by consuming *differently*. The analysis here approaches sustainable consumption through an ecological lens and so understands it as a matter of consuming differently in order to reduce adverse environmental impacts. It follows that sustainable consumption is a matter of consuming differently by consuming less, both in terms of the quantities of goods and services consumed (volume) and the environmental impacts of that which is consumed (composition). Consuming less in order to reduce environmental impacts incorporates an ethical dimension insofar as it can be seen as an effort to do ‘good’ or ‘right’ by future generations, vulnerable populations, non-human species and the environment itself. To formalise: sustainable consumption is an ethical practice of consuming less in order to reduce environmental impacts.

On the topic of consuming less, it is logical think about thrift and frugality. Both terms imply a restraint on consumption and/or expenditure but the analysis here suggests that a distinction needs to be drawn between the concepts, especially with regards to their consequences in terms of sustainable consumption. Thrift

is the art of doing more (consumption) with less (money) and so thrifty practices are practices of savvy consumption, characterised by the thrill and skill of ‘the bargain’. For example, it is thrifty to purchase an unbranded shirt that costs half the price of – but looks exactly the same as – a branded equivalent just as it is thrifty to buy a particular item of food when it is on special offer in the supermarket. Similarly, the art of thrift is to save money by spending money such that the purchase of a pair of jeans reduced from \$80 to \$40 is more likely to be understood as a saving of \$40 than an expenditure of \$40. Thinking with Daniel Miller’s *Theory of Shopping* (1998), thrift can be understood in terms of preserving the economic resources of a household such that they remain available for further acts of consumption which in turn enables expressions of love and devotion towards one’s immediate family and friends. It is important to note here that thrift has an undeniable moral dimension, a point that is all too often dis/missed by environmental critiques that treat consumption as innately bad or immoral (see Miller, 2001a; Wilk (2001 for a fuller discussion). Nevertheless the moral dimension of thrift does not work to provide a restraint on consumption; it provides a restraint on expenditure that is grounded in the imperative to free up resources for further consumption as a means to act morally towards significant others.

If thrift is not conducive to consuming less, this begs the question as to its consequences in terms of environmental impacts. At a general level, it can be noted that the vast majority of everyday consumption is underpinned by thrift (Miller, 2001b) and so accepting that current patterns of consumption are environmentally unsustainable, it follows that thrift does not lend itself to sustainable consumption. More specifically, it is useful to think in terms of the volume and composition of goods and services that might be consumed in the course of practising thrift and how these relate to notions of sustainable consumption. I should note, however, that I have not conducted empirical research into this and so my discussion is limited by a reliance on theoretical, technical and secondary sources. Starting with the composition of goods: a price premium is likely to be associated with anything that carries some sort of ‘green’ or ‘sustainable’ credentials (inverted quotations fully intended) making them a less attractive alternative to their ‘mainstream’ counterparts. Similarly, Cooper (2005) has suggested that sustainable consumption necessitates the purchase of durable consumer goods that will be thrown away less frequently. Again, these goods are likely to carry price premiums such that their purchase might be precluded by the practise of thrift. It should be noted, however, that Cooper’s analysis rests on some questionable assumptions about the ways in which consumers get rid of things (see Gregson et al., 2007).

More substantively, Clift (2008) has quantified and measured the environmental impacts of consumption. Starting with the assumption that consumers will spend their disposable incomes (and even if it is saved, it will be spent eventually – whether by them or those who inherit it) and that all expenditure entails environmental consequences, he explored the categories of spending that have the lowest carbon footprint and concluded that environmental impact per pound spent is minimised by the purchase of luxury goods. With this he suggests, perhaps provocatively, that sustainable consumption is best served by the purchase of expensive items as opposed to the sort of bargain hunting that thrift necessitates. This recalls Juliet Schor’s (2005) argument, with a particular focus on apparel, that the artificially low price of items in department stores (brought about low wages and a failure to account for environmental externalities) has contributed to unsustainable levels of consumption and disposal. So whilst it may be thrifty to purchase cheap t-shirts and it may even make economic sense to throw them away after a month; this is not really compatible with a move towards more sustainable patterns of

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5074500>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5074500>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)