



Christmas tale of (un)sustainability: Reflecting on consumption and environmental awareness on the streets of Amsterdam

Helen Kopnina*

The Hague University of Applied Science, The Netherlands

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Consumption
Ecological modernization theory
Environmental Kuznets curve
Postmaterialist values theory

ABSTRACT

In reflecting on Dutch Christmas shoppers, this article will discuss environmental Kuznets curve (EKC), postmaterialist values hypothesis, and ecological modernization theory. According to the EKC hypothesis, while at the initial stages of industrialization material resources are often used unsustainably, continuing industrialization leads to a threshold after which lead to progressively more sustainable technologies. According to the postmaterialist values hypothesis, only wealthier societies can 'afford' to care about the environment, assuming that wealth will lead to development of greater concern about and valuation of environment. Finally, ecological modernization theory postulates that environmental conditions improve with advanced technological development and suggests that enlightened self-interest, economy and ecology can be favourably combined and that productive use of natural resources can be a source of future growth. In generalizing economic, political and social trends in relation to consumption in The Netherlands, the aim of this article is to consider the consequences of Western-style consumption for the enterprise of global development.

© 2013 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

There's nothing they need, nothing they don't own already, nothing they even want. So you buy them a solar-powered waving queen; a belly button brush; a silver-plated ice cream tub holder; a "hilarious" inflatable zimmer frame; a confection of plastic and electronics called Terry the Swearing Turtle; or – and somehow I find this significant – a Scratch Off World wall map. . . . They seem amusing on the first day of Christmas, daft on the second, embarrassing on the third. By the twelfth they're in landfill. For thirty seconds of dubious entertainment, or a hedonic stimulus that lasts no longer than a nicotine hit, we commission the use of materials whose impacts will ramify for generations. . . . So effectively have governments, the media and advertisers associated consumption with prosperity and happiness that to say these things is to expose yourself to opprobrium and ridicule. . . . When the world goes mad, those who resist are denounced as lunatics. Bake them a cake, write them a poem, give them a kiss, tell them a joke, but for god's sake stop trashing the planet to tell someone you care. All it shows is that you don't. (Monbiot, 2012)

Introduction

This article aims to interrogate manifold features, uses and manifestations of the term sustainability through critical investigation of the Dutch environmental attitudes and practices. Consumption, particularly in regard to energy and transportation will be examined in the light of environmental Kuznets curve (EKC) hypothesis, postmaterialist value theory, and ecological modernization theory.

According to the EKC hypothesis, during early industrialization, economies use material resources more intensively, until a threshold is reached after which structural changes in the economy lead to progressively less-intensive materials use (Grossman & Krueger, 1991). It is believed that high income levels and economic growth lead to environmental improvement that favour sustainable practices (Stern, 2004).

Following the postmaterialist values hypothesis, while wealthier societies can 'afford' to care about the environment, the developing countries or poor people are concerned about meeting their basic needs (Inglehart, 1971, 1977). Thus, it is assumed that wealth will lead to development of greater valuation of environment in a society that is materially satisfied, and in citizens whose basic needs are met. Closely related to these is ecological modernization theory (e.g. Mol & Sonnenfeld, 2000), which states that enlightened self-interest, economy and ecology can be favourably combined and that productive use of natural resources can be a source of future growth and development. Ecological modernization emerged in the early 1980s within a group of scholars at Free

* Correspondence address: Barentszstraat 144, 1013 NS, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Tel.: +31 645584957.

E-mail addresses: h.kopnina@hhs.nl, alenka1973@yahoo.com

University in The Netherlands and the Social Science Research Centre in Germany.

Ecological modernization theory has been used by scholars particularly in application to their countries of origin, Germany and The Netherlands, and having little to say about the developing world (Fisher & Freudenburg, 2001). If ecological modernization and correspondent rise in environmental postmaterialist values is possible in these countries – could other countries then be encouraged to emanate this model of sustainability?

We shall start with the Christmas tale from the Netherlands.

The Dutch Christmas tale of consumption

In 2011 the Dutch queen Beatrix (that abdicated in April 2013) used her traditional Christmas speech to urge the people of the Netherlands to take better care of the planet.

'Selfishness and a tendency towards excess makes one blind to the damage to our natural environment and undermine communities. . . The earth which feeds life, but cannot speak for itself, needs a voice. That should be heard in all minor and major decisions,' she said (http://www.dutchnews.nl/news/archives/2011/12/queen_calls_for_better_care_of.php).

As the author started composing this article just before Christmas 2012 in The Netherlands, when the streets, the newspapers, and people's conversations were permeated by the gifts and the wishes for the future. Just as any Christmas shoppers in most Western countries, the Dutch are filling their Christmas bags or bicycle carrying baskets, and peddle back home to share the gifts with their loved ones. In 2010 the Dutch averaged at 206 euros on Christmas presents (<http://www.statista.com/statistics/209306/christmas-present-budget-in-2010-by-country/>). In 2012 the Dutch are likely to be as generous, as witnessed from lines in malls and smaller shops.

The new trend that swept the Netherlands in the past few years, also reflective of other Western countries, is 'sustainable', or 'green', 'responsible', ecologically enlightened consumption. Many Christmas gifts are wrapped in recycled paper, shoppers prefer to buy organic, biological, and fair trade products. Overall concern about eco-efficiency in the types of gifts and transportation has become wide-spread on the wintry streets of Amsterdam, as witnessed by the rise of fair trade shops and eco-plazas. Inspired by festive atmosphere, one might ask whether the Dutch citizens have reached the level of environmental awareness and sustainability in consumption that could be emanated by less fortunate (in terms of GDP) countries of the world?

Not necessarily. For example, consumption energy has been on steady rise in The Netherlands since the financial crisis in 2009, and the rise in renewable energy has been negligible (The World Bank, 2012). The Netherlands still relies on more than 80% non-renewable energy, with other sources of renewable energy compromised of bio-mass, that often comes from wood sources imported from developing countries and Canada (European Environmental Agency, 2010). According to the World Bank report (2010), the electric power consumption (kWh per capita) in Netherlands was 6895.66 in 2009 (The World Bank, 2010). The percentage of alternative and nuclear energy in Netherlands was last reported at 1.72 in 2010, with the bulk of energy coming from non-renewable sources report (The World Bank, 2012). The Dutch government has recently approved plans for continuing with building another coal plant and engaging in large scale fracking operations that were hailed as environmentally damaging by the majority of Dutch environmental organizations.

The Netherlands Court of Audit, which checks that the government spends public funds and conducts policy as intended,

reports that there have been a failure for years to achieve energy saving targets and predicts that the Netherlands will not meet the agreed EU targets of "20-20-20", requiring 20 percent reductions in carbon emissions and energy use and a 20 percent increase in renewable energy by 2020. Energy consumption in the Netherlands increased by 11 percent between 1995 and 2007, not by 4 percent as the government had planned. As a result, 13 megatonnes more CO₂ were emitted than intended (<http://www.enigin.net/news/enigin-update-netherlands-failing-to-reach-energy-saving-targets/>).

In the article titled 'Dirty Dikes' of The Economist, The Netherlands is described as a 'sink-hole of pollution' with its water 'brimming with nitrates and phosphates, and the air is clogged with particulate matter':

The Netherlands. . . scores particularly badly on the quality of its soil, where those phosphates and nitrates linger in large quantities. They seep into surface water, the quality of which is also below EU guidelines. Emissions of nitrogen monoxide and dioxide are triple the EU average. Carbon-dioxide emissions rose by 15% between 1990 and 2010. Only vast purchases of emission rights keep the Netherlands below its Kyoto targets (The Economist, 2012).

Would those tourist-celebrated bicycles used by many Amsterdam residents not account for greener transportation trends? Apparently, not. With more than seven million passenger vehicles on its roads, the Netherlands is the sixth largest automotive market in Europe (European Automobile Manufacturers' Association, 2011). According to Eurostat (2013), car density in the Netherlands in 2009 is 462 per 1000 inhabitants, up from 371 per 1000 in 1991. This is remarkable, because the Netherlands has a small territory with a highly developed public transportation system.

Within the European Union, The Netherlands appears to be one of the worst countries for air pollution by emissions from diesel cars. Despite European Environmental Agency regulations, by 2010 emissions had decreased much less than anticipated by the EU standards (European Environmental Agency, 2011). Recent studies of Dutch children's perception of cars indicate that the future generation of Dutch citizens is not likely to start using public transport (Kopnina, 2011b; Kopnina & Williams, 2012).

The Dutch Household Consumption Radar, an instrument developed by Statistics Netherlands to analyze developments in consumption by Dutch households and place them in different contexts, uses six indicators selected on the basis of an econometric study, monitors whether circumstances have developed favourably or unfavourably for Dutch consumption. These indicators are consumers' expectations for the development of unemployment; consumers' expectations for their financial situation in the coming year; producers' expectations for their future number of employees; annual change in employed working labour force; annual change in prices of existing own homes; annual change in Dutch share prices.

Household consumption is influenced by consumers' expectations, developments on the labour market and developments in capital. How willing households are to spend their money depends on their expectations for the future. If they are positive about their future financial situation and the labour market, they will be more willing to consume. Developments on the labour market give an indication of how the purchasing power of households is developing and its effect on consumption. The change in the employed labour force shows how the labour market has developed. Producers' expectations gives an indication of how employment may develop in coming months. The development of households' consumers capital position is reflected by developments in house prices and share prices. If these show positive changes, consumption will rise. (CBS, 2013)

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6776658>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6776658>

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