



Consumerism, self-creation and prospects for a new ecological consciousness

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ABSTRACT

The shift from production-based to consumption-based societies has seen consumption transformed from a means of meeting material needs to a method of creating a personal identity. Citizens of affluent countries increasingly seek a sense of self from their consumption activity instead of their workplace, class or community. Environmental appeals to change consumption behaviour implicitly ask people not merely to change their behaviour but to change their sense of personal identity. This can be threatening and makes more difficult the emergence of a new ecological consciousness, although the phenomenon of downshifting provides some grounds for optimism.

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The emergence of a new ecological consciousness will depend not so much on a change of beliefs and attitudes but on the emergence of a new sense of self and the relationship of that self to the natural environment. In the first instance, we therefore need to understand how people construct their sense of self, that is, how they form their personal identity and how they act out those identities in their behaviour.

I will suggest that in affluent countries the conception of self has been transformed in recent decades in ways that make an ecological consciousness a more remote prospect, and that reversing this trend will depend either on severe environmental shocks or, one can only hope, a widespread change in the process of self-creation induced by a collapse of public confidence in the consumer life.

The implication is that the task of achieving true sustainability, and especially avoiding climate disruption, is no longer predominantly a scientific or technological one, but a cultural and social one. The observations made in this paper apply to affluent countries only, although many developing countries are rapidly evolving into societies with the same characteristics.

The prevailing situation and the possibilities for a shift to an ecological consciousness depend on both the exercise of agency—the capacity of individuals to make choices and act on them independently—and the influence of structures, especially the ‘soft’ institutions that shape attitudes and orientation to life. In consumer societies more than any others, these institutions often have a hidden or subtle authority; moreover, their objective is to

persuade individuals that they are acting autonomously, which confounds the notion of agency. In short, I argue that in modern consumer society most individuals have the opportunity for greater agency but refuse to exercise it.

1. From production to consumption

I argue that the most deep-seated structural change in Western societies over the last four decades or so has been the reversal of the traditional relationship between production and consumption, a change that has rendered obsolete ideologies and political programs founded in the 19th and early 20th centuries. While goods can only be consumed after they have been produced (unlike services whose production and consumption occur simultaneously), the dynamic that drives social change now lies in the process of consumption. The production and consumption societies described below should be considered ideal types in the Weberian sense, that is, synthetic concepts designed to capture essential characteristics and a process of historical transformation [1].

Previously, from the beginning of the industrial revolution, production led consumption. In ‘production societies’ economic growth was determined by investment and the pivotal factor was investor confidence. Products were largely standardized and corporations competed with each through the efficiency of their production processes. Success depended on the refinement of production processes with phases including Taylorisation and mass production.

In these social formations, prices for standardized products were the focus of both consumers and producers. Early analysts, such as Vance Packard [2], pointed to the growing influence of

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advertising, yet consumers were seen to have given tastes and the task of advertising was to persuade them that the product would satisfy their needs. Marketing, then largely confined to advertising, was a subsidiary aspect of business organisation.

As a process of satisfying needs, the extent and composition of consumption were closely tied to the place of the household in the production process. Only the wealthy elite was pre-occupied with consumption as a marker of status. Society was divided along class lines, where class was understood predominantly in terms of the relationship to the means of production. Political debate, industrial struggles and class were closely connected, with a strong focus on how the value of output would be divided between workers and owners of capital.

In the production society, personal identity was determined above all by the culture of the group or class to which one belonged and cultural development was to a large degree autonomous in the sense of being under the control of the membership of the social groups that participated in them.

Over the last four decades, and especially the last 15 years, the reversal of the relationship between production and consumption has seen consumption and marketing become the dynamic force of the system [3]. The mechanisms driving the shift are set out below, although it should be added that the process has been inseparable from the relocation of a large proportion of manufacturing activity from rich countries to poor ones. The 'consumption society' goes beyond the notions of 'post-Fordism' which, although identifying an important intermediate stage, still focussed predominantly on the production process [4]. In contrast to the production society, in the consumption society reproduction and growth are now determined less by investor confidence than by consumer confidence, which in turn is influenced by the availability of consumer credit, facilitated by the transformation of financial markets.

Differentiation rather than standardization now characterizes products; production decisions respond to the enormously variegated, specific and constantly changing demands of consumers so that marketing creativity has replaced production efficiency as the key to competitiveness and corporate success. For most goods and services, price is now a secondary consideration. In many cases, the cost of investing goods with often-intangible qualities that contribute nothing to the practical usefulness of the items now exceeds the cost of actually manufacturing the goods. The \$200 pair of sneakers that costs only \$20 to produce, with much of the difference made up by the costs of marketing, is the emblematic case.

As a result, within firms marketing departments now dominate production departments. Marketers are engaged in an endless process of creating and transforming, as well as responding to, consumer desires. Consumption is now intimately tied to the creation and reproduction of a sense of self, and these identities are only loosely connected to the place of households in the production process. Luxury consumption is no longer confined to the rich but reaches down to all consumer groups, a phenomenon that has led luxury goods producers to put their brands on a wide range of items including 'entry-level products' accessible to all. [5]

Class, as a social category rooted in production, is now greatly diminished in significance, reflected in the decline of trade unionism, the breakdown of traditional political allegiances and the reluctance to identify as 'working class'. Instead, people's place in the social order is more fluid, relying less on their origins and occupations and more on consumption decisions that reflect ideas of self-creation and 'lifestyle'. Bourdieu emphasised the acquisition of cultural capital as a marker of class distinction [6]. In the media-soaked consumption society, I suggest, the hierarchy of cultural goods has been washed out by popular forms of personal differentiation created or moulded by the market. Thus 'taste' as

a marker of class status has lost some of its force, although this is a process still underway, as Southerton confirms in his analysis of kitchen choice [7]. On the other hand, Bourdieu's contention that the working class have a 'taste for necessity' cannot be sustained when nearly every consumer has acquired a taste for luxury [5]. The implication is that cultural reproduction, although retaining a degree of autonomous development, is now inseparable from the market.

The other great social change of the last four decades or so, associated with the reversal of the relationship between production and consumption, has been the spread of free market ideology and the concomitant penetration of market values into areas of social and cultural life from which they were previously excluded. These values are those of the priority of economic growth, materialism, individualism, competition and monetary valuation. Monetary valuation equalizes all values by giving them a common metric and thereby destroys or marginalises values that do not conform to the economic. The spread of these values has in turn seen the jettisoning of much of the social and cultural ballast that held back economic forces. When consumption was subsidiary to production, and the values of the market were confined to the economic, social relations and culture enjoyed a much greater degree of autonomous development. But with the infiltration of the market and its values into all areas of social and cultural life — education, cultural production, sport, household production, marriage, the decision to have children — the constraints on the pre-eminence of economic growth as the first priority weakened. To a degree hitherto unknown, the demands of the economic system for faster growth dovetailed perfectly with the desires of citizens for higher incomes. The logic of market expansion for the first time came into concordance with the life goals of individuals, a phenomenon I have elsewhere dubbed 'growth fetishism' [3].

2. Consumption and identity

The structural transformation represented by the shift from production to consumption has been reinforced by other social changes. The new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which rejected traditional standards, expectations and stereotypes, were a manifestation of the deeper human longing for self-determination. The democratic impulse — which until the 1970s took the form of collective struggles to be free of political and social oppression — had metamorphosed into something else, a search for authentic identity, for true individuality [8]. The changes wrought by the new social movements, including the removal of educational and workplace barriers to women, for the first time provided the opportunity for the mass of ordinary people to aspire to something beyond material security and freedom from political oppression.

However, before they had an opportunity to reflect on their new-found freedom to 'write their own biographies', the marketers arrived with the resources that could be used to create 'autonomous' identities [8]. Over the last two decades in particular, the marketers have seized on the desire for authentic identity in order to sell more gym shoes, cars, mobile phones and home furnishings. The inability of consumerism to allow true realisation of human potential manifests itself, to an ever-increasing degree, in restless dissatisfaction, chronic stress and private despair, feelings that give rise to a rash of psychological disorders — including anxiety, depression and substance abuse [9–11]—and a range of compensatory behaviours including many forms of self-medication.

Thus most people in rich countries today seek proxy identities by means of commodity consumption [12,13]. The desire for an authentic sense of self is pursued by way of substitute gratifications, external rewards and, especially, money and material consumption [10,14]. Advertising long ago discarded the practice of

selling a product on the merits of its useful features. Modern marketing builds symbolic associations between the product and the psychological states of potential consumers, sometimes targeting known feelings of inadequacy, aspiration or expectation, and sometimes setting out to create a sense of inadequacy in order to remedy it with the product [15].

The task of the advertising industry is to uncover the complex set of feelings that might be associated with particular products and to design marketing campaigns to appeal to those feelings. This is a challenge: consumers today, for the most part, do not consciously understand what they want or why they want it [15]. Prodigious intellectual and creative effort is poured into marketing. All aspects of human psychology – fears, sources of shame, sexuality, spiritual yearnings – are plundered in the search for a commercial edge [16]. It is virtually impossible today to buy any product that is not invested with certain symbols of identity acquired by the buyer knowingly or otherwise, even down to the humble potato [17].

The beauty of this approach is that consumers can never get what they want. Products and brands cannot give real meaning to human lives, so consumers lapse instead into a permanent state of unfulfilled desire [18], the existential state of the consumer in modern capitalism. For all of its practical necessity, shopping has also become a response to the meaninglessness of modern life. Consumer spending was first transformed from a means of acquiring the necessities of life to an activity aimed at acquiring status through displays of wealth, and then became a way of creating the self through identification with certain products and brands.

3. Individualization and self-creation

Ulrich Beck has argued that, in place of societies in which people living in largely homogeneous neighbourhoods and communities form their sense of self by unconsciously absorbing the cultural norms and behaviours of those around them, we live in an era of 'individualization' [19,20]. The term refers to the requirement to create one's own self, to 'write one's own biography' instead of having it more or less drafted by the circumstances of one's birth. The new imperative arises in a society saturated by the outpourings of the mass media, in which the symbols of achievement and the characters worthy of emulation appear on the screen and the magazine pages rather than in the local community or in handed-down stories of the saintly and the stoic. Whether individualization is a blessing or a curse – whether it means the final step to personal freedom or being set adrift from all that is solid – is not the point; the point is that fixity can no longer be assumed, that personal relationships and connections to social groups are always contingent, and that individuals must now scan the world to decide with whom or what they wish to identify. The process of individualization creates the social conditions for the flourishing of modern consumerism by providing the opportunity for marketers of goods to step in and satisfy the desire to find and express a self, to exploit the desire for self-rule. In this way people 'are active agents in the creation of enchanting myths of individual sovereignty' [21].

The transition to a world in which we are cast adrift from our roots, and where consuming things rather than making things has become the characteristic act, has had two profound effects on how people think about themselves, each with far-reaching consequences for the prospects for the emergence of an ecological consciousness. The first is that if we are each responsible for our own lives those who succeed in socially sanctioned ways feel justified in their efforts and duly rewarded for their dedication, determination and superior character. Their success absolves them of the need to feel compassion for those who have failed, for failure

can only reflect poor choices or a lack of character. Those who do not succeed must internalize their disappointment rather than blame the bosses, the schools, the government, exploitation or the class system. In this world, social problems become individual failures; there are no more dysfunctional societies, only individual 'losers', a process that has a deeply conservative political effect.

The second is that the increasing substitution of individual life stories for class-based stratification has, paradoxically, a homogenising effect, for identities that can be forged from the products provided by the market are not to any great degree the creations of those who adopt them, but are manufactured by marketers or popular culture. The individuality of the marketing society is a pseudo-individuality, as if there were an 'invisible hand' guiding the pen that is taken up to write one's own biography. Beck's individualized society is in fact structured by opaque institutions that exercise influence over us in beguiling rather than coercive ways.

When considering the relationship between consumption and sustainability we must recognize that, in rich countries, the compulsion to participate in the consumer society is no longer driven by material need, but by the popular belief that to find happiness one must be richer, irrespective of how wealthy one is already. In affluent countries today the power of the market is primarily an ideological rather than an economic one. The market rules less by material or political compulsion and more by consent.

The instrumental processes of globalization – the opening up of trade, the emergent power of financial markets, the transnationalization of corporations and international economic coordination – are the mechanisms by which a historically and culturally specific ideology is spreading and colonizing the world [22]. The legitimacy of the export of global consumer culture is drawn from the belief that human well being is improved by increasing the volume and quality of goods and services consumed by individuals, and its effect is to give a privileged place to all activities and policies that promise an increase in the rate of economic growth. Parallel with this formal set of values and beliefs are cultural forms of behaviour that place extraordinary emphasis upon consumption as the foundation of lifestyle. This is why there has been so little resistance to globalization; people around the world have been persuaded that economic growth is the path to happiness, and that unfettered markets will maximize growth.

The belief in the power of growth and consumption are buttressed in turn by an instrumentalist attitude to the natural world, a philosophy in which the environment is characterized as providing 'resources' that have value only to the extent that they contribute to human welfare measured by market activity [23]. This ideology conceives of the natural world as a more or less infinite repository of material inputs into the production process and a more or less infinite sink for absorbing wastes. It understands the exploitation of the natural world as not just a right but virtually a duty.

4. Green consumerism

The process of individualization and the role of marketing in self-creation suggest the need for a radical rethinking of the strategies to bring about a sustainable relationship between humanity and the natural world. Yet much of the effort of environmentalism at shifting consciousness has focused on what is best described as 'green consumerism', an approach that threatens to entrench the very attitudes and behaviours that are antithetical to sustainability.

Green consumerism is the collection of efforts by environmental NGOs, businesses and governments to persuade individuals to buy goods and services that have a less harmful environmental impact

associated with their production, distribution and disposal. The consumption of 'green' consumer goods has itself become a method of self-creation through consumption practices although, in practice, green consumerism has failed to induce significant inroads into the unsustainable nature of consumption and production. For example, in Australia after a decade of heavy promotion by 2008 only nine per cent of householders had opted to pick up the phone to ask their electricity retailer to switch them over to green power (renewable electricity) [24]. Michael Maniates argues that, while its motives may be laudable, the danger of green consumerism is that it brings about the privatization of responsibility for environmental degradation [25]. Instead of being understood as a set of problems endemic to our economic and social structures, we are told that we each have to take responsibility for our personal contribution to every problem. This assignment of individual responsibility is consistent with the free market view of the world.

When environmental problems become individualized the nature of public debate is transformed. It's no longer about the institutions that perpetuate and reinforce environmental degradation; it's about our personal behaviour. When citizens concerned about the environment are told to express their concern through their purchasing decisions, social conscience becomes a commodity [24].

The ethical conversation is also changed: instead of understanding the structural factors that are the cause of and solution to the environmental problem, it becomes a question of personal morality in which each of us is assigned a place on a moral scale, with green purity at one end and environmental irresponsibility at the other. In this way we are encouraged or shamed into buying eco-friendly products, insulating our homes and recycling our waste. Websites that allow us to calculate our own ecological footprints reinforce the personalizing of responsibility. While these activities are valid expressions of personal concern, when they are promoted as the solution to environmental decline they may actually block the real solutions. As Maniates has written: 'A privatization and individualization of responsibility for environmental problems shifts blame from state elites and powerful producer groups to more amorphous culprits like "human nature" or "all of us"' [24]. Environmental concern becomes depoliticised.

While advanced as a way of harnessing the power of consumers, green consumerism can be disempowering because it denies agency of *citizens* instead of consumers. It is important to stress that the failure of consumers to take up green power or engage in recycling does not mean that they don't care and nothing should be done. This confuses the role of the self-interested consumer with the role of the responsible citizen. Despite attempts to turn us all into rational economic calculators, consumers are not the same as citizens; supermarket behaviour is not the same as ballot box behaviour [26]. Mark Sagoff presents a wealth of evidence to show that people think and act quite differently in the two roles [23,26]. Thus it is not inconsistent for consumers to decline to take up green power when it is offered but to vote for a political party that promises to require everyone to buy green power.

The obstacles to a new politics of sustainability should not be underestimated. Environmentalists have long recognized how difficult it is to persuade people to change entrenched consumption habits. Consumption behaviour and the sense of personal identity are now so closely related that a challenge to someone's consumption behaviour may be a challenge to their sense of self. Green moralising and appeals to rational self-interest have limited efficacy and further progress by environmentalism depends on new strategies [27].

The argument can be further illustrated with reference to the phenomenon of 'wasteful consumption'. Increasingly, shopping is

an activity undertaken for the thrill of the purchase and 'mood enhancement', rather than for the anticipated pleasure to be gained from owning or using something [13,18]. As one marketing strategist puts it:

We are beyond satisfying basic demands and we have moved to a tertiary level where consumption becomes leisure. Even the stores that appear to be for basic needs are really about leisure [28].

The transformed function of shopping means that waste is not so much a troublesome by-product of consumption but a consequence of the strategies adopted to find meaning. The modern consumer has moved from asking 'Do I really need a new one?' to 'Why should I make do with the old one?' Dealing with ever-growing piles of waste is transformed into a psychological and social phenomenon as well as an engineering one.

While desire might have no bounds, our capacity to use things is limited: there is only so much we can eat, wear and watch, and a house has only so many rooms that can be usefully occupy. The difference between what we buy and what we use is waste. A study of the extent of wasteful consumption in Australia revealed that virtually all households admit to wasting money by buying things they never use—food, clothes, shoes, CDs, books, exercise bikes, cosmetics, blenders, and much more [29]. They admit to spending a total of A\$10.5 billion (US\$10 billion) every year on goods they do not use, an average of A\$1200 (US\$1140) for each household (more than total government spending on universities or roads). These values are underestimates as the study did not assess the sums spent on major items such as houses that are too big, holiday homes that are not used and automobiles that rarely leave the garage.

Having succeeded in persuading us to buy a product, advertisers must immediately begin the process of selling a replacement. Changes in fashion and the restless wish for renewal lead to billions of dollars spent on goods that are not use and are either thrown away or put into storage long before they need to be replaced. The self-storage industry has been growing exponentially despite the fact that houses are becoming bigger while the size of households is shrinking [28].

The problem of wasteful consumption will worsen. The study referred to above revealed that richer households waste more than households with low and moderate incomes. That is to be expected. In a result that contradicts the idea of an environmental Kuznets curve—which hypothesizes that, above a certain threshold, higher per capita incomes are associated with greater preference for environmentally benign products [30]—when asked if they feel guilty about buying things that they do not use, wealthy people are less likely than poorer people to express remorse. (Close to half of people in low-income households say they feel 'very guilty' compared to around 30 per cent of those in high-income households [28].) In addition, despite two decades of environmental education, young people are both more likely to engage in wasteful consumption and less likely to feel guilty about such behaviour.

5. Another path

If consumption is no longer aimed at meeting material needs but at psychological reproduction, and the identities so created are relinquished only reluctantly, then any demand to change consumption patterns asks the consumer to experience a sort of death. This helps to explain the chasm between the complacency of most people and the rising panic among climate scientists, and raises the question of whether citizens of affluent countries are so dependent on high levels of consumption that they will find it impossible to moderate their material demands. Is there is evidence indicating that citizens of the affluent West can be

persuaded that there is a more authentic and fulfilling alternative to the consumer life?

After decades of intensifying and often immiserising consumerism [9,10], many people are beginning to question the foundational belief that improved well being depends on ever-higher levels of consumption. One important manifestation is the phenomenon of 'downshifting', that is, the voluntary decision to reduce one's income and consumption. When asked in surveys whether, over the last ten years, they had voluntarily changed their lives in ways that meant they earned less money, around one fifth of adults in Britain, the United States and Australia say 'yes' [31,32]. (The figures exclude early retirees and new mothers.) Those who made the change come from a variety of age and income groups—high, moderate and modest—and are not confined to those 'wealthy enough' to take the risk. Unlike their cousins, the voluntary simplifiers and 'cultural creatives' [33], downshifterers are not for the most part motivated primarily by philosophical concerns but by a desire to attain more 'balance' in their lives, typically indicating they prefer to devote more time to their families, health or hobbies [34]. At the cost of some income they are choosing greater fulfilment. For some the decision is precipitated by a meaningful event, but all make the life-change only after a long period of reflection in which they distance themselves from prior life narrative and become accustomed to the idea of new one [34]. For some, the values of moderation and frugality become central to their new sense of self.

This suggests a radically different approach to achieving a shift in consciousness and political change. Instead of confronting consumers with the facts of environmental decline and thereby hoping, against the evidence, that rationality will prevail over the demands of market-based self-creation, a more powerful approach is to ask them to reflect on whether the aspirational lifestyle actually makes them happy. The evidence indicates that many people are open to a conversation about happiness and the role of materialism. Large majorities believe that a radical change in values is needed; nine in ten Americans believe their society is too materialistic, with too much emphasis on shopping.[35] A 'politics of downshifting'—'Rich lives instead of lives of riches'—may prove a far more effective means of promoting reduced consumption and environmental protection, albeit as a by-product, than pointing to the dire consequences of failing to respect the natural environment.

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