

## Preface

This book began its life in a series of four seminars sponsored by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) under the title "Sustainable Consumption and Lifestyles: Integrating Environmental and Social Science Perspectives". The Oxford Centre for the Environment, Ethics and Society (OCEES) at Mansfield College and the Department of Environmental Social Sciences at Keele University served jointly as the convenors of these discussions between 1998 and 2000. The seminars brought together two loose groupings of researchers. On one hand, we invited environmental social scientists concerned about the physical impacts of consumption, the use of natural resources and the capacity of the earth to absorb an ever-increasing volume of wastes. On the other hand, the meetings included scholars from the fields of sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies who focused their attention on the role of consumption in identity formation and communication, but had little interest in the environmental impacts of these activities.

As one might suspect, this was, from the start, an ambitious endeavour. Within the realm of environmental studies, as in many other areas of intellectual inquiry, there has recently been a great outpouring of rhetorical support for the pursuit of interdisciplinarity. However, few guides outlining how to achieve this noble goal exist. We therefore viewed the series of ESRC seminars not only as a chance to formulate some potentially valuable insights regarding the social and environmental implications of modern lifestyles, but also as an opportunity to promote interdisciplinarity and meaningful communication across several academic disciplines.

Assembling a group of scholars able to embark on such a project was more difficult than initially anticipated. The main problem proved to be the monumental divide between realist and constructivist approaches — one that runs deep within the social sciences. The environmental scholars tended to take the negative physical impacts of consumption as their point of departure whereas the consumption scholars were more interested in how people use material goods to socially construct their own realities. From the outset it proved quite difficult to find ways to talk effectively across this gap.

Another problem was the tendency for the two groups to adopt different positions with respect to analysis and prescription. The environmental scholars were typically interested in practical actions and were quicker to adopt a critical stance toward the consumption practices common in rich countries today. In contrast, the consumption scholars were antagonistic to the idea of adopting normative positions with respect to consumption. Moreover, they were often openly hostile to the idea of engaging in discussions aimed at encouraging the transformation of existing consumption patterns in order to reduce their environmental impacts. Because of these dilemmas some participants withdrew from the project and others replaced them. Through this iterative process we eventually identified a core group of researchers who were prepared to straddle the realist-constructivist divide

and to contribute meaningfully to the pursuit of an interdisciplinary dialogue on the connections between consumption and the environment. They were also willing to adopt normative positions with respect to consumption, environment and development issues.

In April 1999 the study of sustainable consumption at OCEES and the preparation of this book received extra momentum from the establishment of the Oxford Commission on Sustainable Consumption. Based at Mansfield College, the Commission was formed to act as a catalyst for the action needed from citizens, governments, business, media organisations and others to pursue sustainable consumption. In particular, this endeavour involves identifying and promoting best practice and the Commission will submit a report on consumption to the Earth Summit+10 meeting of the United Nations in 2002. This volume represents a significant contribution to the ongoing work of the Commission.

We would like to express our appreciation to our colleagues at OCEES and the Fellows of Mansfield College for numerous enlightening discussions on the subject of consumption and the environment. In particular, we would like to thank Caroline Bastable, Michael Freedan, Antonia Layard, Anne Maclachlan, Laurie Michaelis, John Muddiman, Jouni Paavola, Neil Summerton and Bhaskar Vira. For their support we are especially indebted to David Marquand, the current Principal of Mansfield College, and his immediate predecessor, Dennis Trevelyan.

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