Chapter 1

Consumption, Environment and Public Policy

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1. Introduction

During the years since the 1992 Earth Summit in Río de Janeiro consumption has emerged as a significant environmental policy issue. Agenda 21, the conference's framework for sustainable development, devoted an entire chapter to consumption.[1] In it the satisfaction of a seemingly endless stream of consumer desires was identified as a major cause of global environmental problems. With hardly a pause, the newly minted United Nations Commission for Sustainable Development initiated a research programme to examine more rigorously the challenges associated with any attempt to achieve more sustainable consumption. Elsewhere within the networks of environmental high politics the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the Paris-based association that serves as a diplomatic club for the world's most affluent nations, quickly mustered some of its own resources for a parallel investigation (see for example OECD 1996; OECD 1997; OECD 1998).[2]

With bewildering speed a long list of learned societies, national governments and non-governmental organisations also rushed to articulate positions concerning the environmental effects of contemporary consumption practices. For instance, the Councils of the Royal Society of London and the United States National Academy of Sciences issued a joint statement in 1997 calling for a "better understanding of human consumption and related behaviours and technologies". This unusual collaboration went on to suggest that modifications in consumption practices were needed to assist in "the transition to a sustainable, desirable life for the world's people in the coming century." (IOCU 1993:xx) Some national governments, the most prominent perhaps being the Netherlands, have initiated multi-year research and policy programmes designed to reduce the environmental impacts of consumption in their countries and abroad (Aarts *et al.*, 1995; Noorman and

[1]A number of commentators have discussed the highly negotiated and contingent nature of Chapter 4 of Agenda 21, the section of the report explicitly concerned with consumption. Indeed, representatives at the pre-conference sessions encountered great difficulty coming to agreement on both substantive themes and technical details concerning the role of consumption as a contributing factor to global environmental deterioration. Numerous passages in the final document were 'bracketed' meaning that the intent was to revisit these issues in the period following the Earth Summit.

[2]The Copenhagen-based Nordic Council of Ministers is another secondary policymaking institution that has played an important role in advancing sustainable consumption as an agenda item in international deliberations.

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Uiterkamp 1993; Spaargaren 1997). Traditionally concerned only with promoting consumer protection and increasing the range of choices available to consumers, advocates such as the International Organisation of Consumer Unions have also begun to press for less environmentally damaging forms of consumption.

Taken as a whole, these developments mark an unmistakable watershed in the understanding of environmental problems for purposes of public policymaking. For the past two centuries, and particularly during the last thirty years, solving environmental problems has been construed as a producer responsibility and consumers have been placed at a distance from the assignment of culpability. Such an allocation of blame has given rise to familiar forms of regulation in the world's wealthiest countries aimed at modifying production techniques and technologies. For instance, policymakers have typically viewed acid deposition in productionist terms, an interpretation that has resulted in legislation requiring operators of large combustion plants to install flue-gas desulphurisation equipment designed to cleanse emission streams. Also present, but much less prominent in this respect, have been proposals to shift electricity production away from coal toward less environmentally damaging fuel sources such as natural gas, wind and solar. Pollution problems generally have been targets for a variety of techno-fix solutions aimed at modifying the means of production. Even the design of more energy-efficient household appliances represents an obligation that has been placed squarely on the shoulders of producers. There has been little serious thought or effort devoted to regulating consumption itself in order to address environmental problems.[3]

Policymakers and consumers have therefore been quick to blame industry for environmental problems. Meanwhile, a growing array of global environmental problems, ranging from climate change to ozone depletion to declining biodiversity, has been blamed by some on high population growth rates in many of the world's poorest countries. Such an interpretation has suggested that if the world is serious about dealing with the environmental crisis, the first imperative is to address the demographic "disaster" in the Third World. Accordingly, international assistance programs, often disregarding the protests of target-country governments, have aggressively sought to disseminate modern forms of family planning to defuse the population "timebomb".

What this discussion suggests is that over the past four or five decades consumers in the richest nations have largely avoided being identified as responsible for the environmentally damaging effects of their consumption practices in part because other targets and explanations have been offered. This distancing has been encouraged by elected officials in the richest countries who have been reluctant to question consumer decision making, aspirations and sovereignty. This approach has been reinforced recently by the neo-liberal

[3]The main area where this needs to be qualified is energy. From the 1970s onward there have been some attempts to encourage consumers to use less energy. However, these have not been entirely successful. The US shifted responsibility for demand side management to producers partly because it became clear that government efforts to encourage frugality were the object of derision. Jimmy Carter's famous address to the nation in which he encouraged citizens to turn down the thermostat and put on an extra sweater is still widely remembered as the classic failure to launch a consumption debate, although the environment was not the primary concern. Nevertheless, most European governments have maintained programmes to encourage energy conservation in the home and private car use.

orthodoxy, which asserts that any political interference with consumer autonomy violates rights, and, more practically, is a recipe for economic and electoral disaster. One of the most notable effects of the 1992 Earth Summit has been to begin to call this interpretation into question and to initiate a process in which consumption is now coming to be viewed as a legitimate domain for environmental policymaking.

Despite this new interest in consumption, efforts to create a dialogue on how to link consumption with the environment have often been quite confused due to difficulties faced in pinning down core concepts and drawing boundaries around the discussion. Much of this difficulty stems from the fact that consumption is, on one hand, a very real material activity involving physical units of oil, wood, steel, and so forth. On the other hand, the acquisition of goods is undeniably tightly bound up with cultural practices aimed at achieving numerous social objectives including the production or reproduction of values, a cohesive society and individual identity. Consideration of the environmental impacts of consumption has traditionally privileged the material perspective and this has given rise to familiar moral appeals to consumers cautioning them, for example, to avoid artificial fibres in their clothing, to use public transportation, to purchase energy-efficient refrigerators and to adopt vegetarian diets. It is perhaps no surprise that these campaigns have been relatively unsuccessful in eliciting desired behavioural changes and, even in cases of apparently favourable adjustment people can find it difficult to act in a way that is consistent with what they believe.

To move the debate forward, this book folds into the customary materialistic view of consumption a series of more complex and nuanced perspectives on consumption and the environment drawn from the social sciences. During the past decade several branches of the social sciences — most prominently the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, history and cultural studies — have experienced an explosion of interest in the study of consumption as a set of social and cultural activities (key contributions include Miller 1995; Campbell 1987; Fine and Leopold 1993; Warde 1997). Consumption is seen by scholars working in these fields as a window of critical importance on modern/post-modern societies. Many contend that consumption has replaced production as the pivotal realm of social activity in an increasingly fragmented world. In this world, material objects as symbols serve as essential tools of communication. Curiously though they have been largely silent on matters of ecological impact. We hope that this volume will succeed in integrating the conventional view of consumption as the material throughput of resources (often with pronounced environmental consequences) with an understanding of the political, social and cultural significance of these practices. We believe it is only through such a synthesis that it will be possible to provide a theoretically sound and empirically rigorous basis for environmental policy that aims to move affluent nations toward more sustainable consumption patterns.

2. Boundaries and Definitions in Environment-Consumption Debates

Policy dialogue on sustainable consumption has to date been poorly focused and muddled, largely because of the ambiguous nature of core concepts and the problem of how to draw boundaries around the discussion. Political theorist Thomas Princen has considered the problem of defining consumption in a way that is useful for analysing

environmental problems and his work provides a useful starting point (Princen 1999). Princen argues that for a variety of reasons the clarity and value of efforts to conceptually link consumption and the environment are often limited. One common problem is defining consumption in a way that is too broad to be useful. Princen contends that a good example of this is the influential perspective advanced by biologist Norman Myers who defines consumption as "human transformations of material and energy" (Myers 1997; see also the accompanying rejoinder by J. Vincent and T. Panayotou). Arguably, such an expansive definition fails to establish consumption as a useful focus for public policy or the social sciences.[4] Associated discussions are condemned to remain hopelessly mired within the poorly defined realm of study that has come to be known as the human dimensions of global environmental change.

In many respects we encounter the opposite problem when we approach consumption from a narrowly disciplinary perspective, overly influenced by the assumptions and prejudices of a particular academic point of view. This dilemma is perhaps most concretely illustrated by the discussions that customarily take place among economists, although they are by no means the only offenders. Economists tend to define consumption simply as the exchange of goods in a market. The risks of adopting such an approach are considerable, mainly because there are plenty of consumption practices that do not involve financial exchange in markets. A gender bias, for example, becomes clear when we recognise that men are commonly the consumers of meals prepared by women. In a conventional domestic setting no money changes hands, though it would if the same service were to be provided in a restaurant. More generally substantial quantities of resources are used around the world outside the formal economy. Another problem is that by emphasising financial exchange economists are inevitably and prematurely drawn toward market-based public policy recommendations.

More generally, as Princen explains, there has been a tendency simply to conflate the emerging interest in consumption with a variety of existing debates. The most obvious ones are critiques of materialism, inequity between North and South, and population growth. Materialism, for example, has been roundly condemned for decades because of its supposedly alienating and ultimately dissatisfying nature (see various contributions in Crocker and Linden 1998.) Such critiques often have religious origins and stem from deep-seated misgivings about the social consequences of self-indulgent and immodest lifestyles. There has been a trend, with the rise of environmental problems, simply to graft the environmental critique of consumption onto critiques of this kind. In the area of the global distribution of wealth and opportunity a similar thing has happened. As Princen (1999, p. 352) says

> If the problem is one of inequity, no analytic advantage is gained by calling it consumption. Adding the environment and calling the problem consumption only muddles the long-standing debates of North and South, haves and

[4]Indeed, it is such thinking that has largely been responsible for relegating the study of consumption within the social sciences to a decidedly second class status, one best pursued by individuals with backgrounds in marketing and related disciplines. For a thorough discussion of the stigmatised position of consumption as a focus for serious intellectual inquiry refer to Douglas and Isherwood (1979).

> have-nots, rich and poor, powerful and powerless, to include environmental inequities. These problems are real and serious, but, a priori, there is no reason why consumption per se should be identified as the problem.

In many ways the issue of population growth is similar. It is related, but analytically separate, from consumption and there is nothing gained by simply conflating them.

The task that Princen sets himself, therefore, is how to approach consumption in a way that acknowledges its complex character, establishes it as a discrete and useful conceptual category, and, at the same time, links it to the environment. His solution is to endorse a definition that emphasises material impacts. This acknowledges that consumption is a natural act, necessary for organisms to survive. Over-consumption occurs when consumption undermines the life-support system of a species. As he states:

> the human behaviour that intersects with the biophysical realm can be termed *material provisioning*, that is the appropriation of material and energy for survival and reproduction ... In sum, an ecologically grounded definition of consumption takes as a starting point human material provisioning and the draw on ecosystem services (Princen 1999 p. 355–356).

Such a 'using-up-of-resources' approach transcends the common production-consumption dichotomy.

Although this approach certainly satisfies what Princen sets out to achieve — namely the linking of consumption to environmental impacts — it does so at considerable cost, and a solely physical-systems approach offers an inadequate basis for discussions of sustainable consumption for several reasons. First, it has little or no relevance to consumption itself. People do not consider themselves to be 'materially provisioning.' In emphasising the physical dimensions of consumption, its social aspects are lost completely. This way of proceeding is narrowly disciplinary in much the same way as the economists' approach about which Princen is correctly quite critical. Second, Princen ignores the fact that consumption-environment interactions do not occur only at the material level. The environment is also very much a socially constructed aspect of consumption. Princen and others may argue that this aspect of consumption is not important because it does not involve *real* material impacts, but in practice it will. Also, the social construction of consumption-environment linkages is likely to be central to public policy and an exclusively material view of consumption and the environment risks missing an opportunity. Finally, and more serious still for prospects of developing a workable understanding of sustainable consumption, is the fact that a physical-systems approach to consumption does not allow issues of equity to enter easily into the discussion, within or between countries.

For these reasons, operationalising sustainable consumption within the conventional dichotomy of production and consumption seems appropriate. This allows direct engagement with prevailing approaches to public policy (which invariably continue to focus on production). It also enables easy interaction with academic social science where disciplines have historically tended to emphasise production and production-related explanations of society. However, endorsing a loose production-consumption approach is

not the same as sanctioning a supply-demand framework that will tend to lead to discussions of exchange in markets and externalities. That said, because production-consumption is not radically removed it is still possible for those with a supply-demand mind-set to engage with such a discussion.

Against this background we can describe the boundaries around the sustainable consumption debate to which the discussion contained in this book will conform. In the context of the traditional production-consumption dichotomy consumption involves people acquiring (often but not necessarily in markets using money) and using objects, services, and places. This is not to deny that institutions are also consumers, however consumption by institutions does not provide the focus for the discussion that follows.[5] The environment enters in at different levels e.g., the physical and the socially constructed. It is the physical impacts of consumption that are of primary concern from a sustainability point of view, either because of their impacts on other people (often distant both geographically and temporally) or simply because of their implications for ecosystem integrity. However, the social construction of the environment is also very significant because, for example, the idea of 'nature' is often mobilised by producers to promote consumption of particular goods.[6] Also, public policy to achieve sustainable consumption may involve constructing environmental concern among consumers as a prerequisite for changes in their acquisition practices. The social dimensions of sustainable consumption involve primarily questions of distribution and equity. Such considerations may raise issues about the distribution of the negative impacts of consumption or the very distribution of opportunities to consume.

3. Consumption and Environment: A 'Levers, Knobs and Dials' View of Public Policy

We make an explicit attempt in this book to think about public policy and practical actions while making use of the informative capabilities of a broad range of the social sciences. To set the scene for the discussion that follows it is useful to describe, and possibly to caricature slightly for purposes of emphasis, existing approaches to consumption and environment problems. When policymakers engage with a problem it is inevitable that their proposals will be heavily influenced by the assumptions they make about what it is that is being manipulated. These assumptions are linked to the type of knowledge being applied. This is particularly the case with respect to consumption-related environmental problems where arguably it is the world-views of economists and technologists that dominate.

[5]It can be argued that consumption by institutions is substantially more important from the perspective of limiting environmental impacts than what takes place at the individual and household levels. We do not disagree with this claim, but choose in the current context to focus our attention on non-institutional consumers.

[6]Even so-called eco-friendly forms of consumption require the non-recoverable utilisation of resources and as such lead to some of the same forms of environmental deterioration as more conventional consumption. For an illuminating treatment of this consumerist mode refer to Price (1995).

Policymakers (public or private sector) typically make a variety of judgements about consumers and markets that have their origin in neo-classical economics. It is also common to hear members of the public voice similar opinions, even though their own actions often reveal them to be false. For example, consumers are generally thought to be autonomous and rational. They are autonomous in the sense that their consumption decisions are not influenced by other consumers and rational in the sense that they are egoistic beings interested only in maximising personal welfare. Another important dimension of the economist's perspective that infiltrates conventional thinking involves the market. The market is where consumers express their preferences by demanding goods. A standard assumption about markets is that to work efficiently prices must be correct and information must be readily available.

On the basis of this model a range of consumption-focused environmental policies immediately offer themselves. Many of them seem obvious. If, for example, a market is not functioning properly two explanations seem probable — either information is not conveniently accessible or the prices are not accurate.[7] Such apparent circumstances often produce a variety of proposals aimed at 'internalising the cost of environmental damage', 'removing perverse subsidies' and dealing with the 'information deficit.' We can refer to this as the eco-taxes and the eco-labelling approach to consumption and environment problems and it has attracted considerable support in recent years.[8]

The purpose of this volume is partly to undermine this atomistic and economistic mode of public policymaking in the area of consumption and the environment and to build a richer and more accurate view of consumption. The papers in this book clearly establish, for example, that consumers are in practice profoundly influenced by what other consumers buy. We also establish beyond doubt that consumers are not rational and egoistic welfare maximisers in the way economists customarily suggest. Consumers may be rational in the sense that they act purposefully to achieve particular goals, but their consumption practices are likely to be informed by a diverse range of ethical beliefs and value positions. In the face of these insights the eco-taxes and eco-labelling approach to policymaking is revealed as unhelpfully simplistic.

The second dominant form of knowledge influencing public policy at the nexus between consumption and the environment derives from the design and engineering professions.[9] The technologist's key assumption is that all consumption-related environmental problems

[7]There is also a substantial literature on "barriers" that refers to transaction costs, market entry barriers, imperfect competition and these lead to other policy proposals.

[8]Especially in northern Europe, ecological taxation in the form of carbon taxes and roadway charges has received a strong political embrace, although practical application has been less widespread, in part as a means of encouraging a shift away from taxes on labour toward taxes on environmentally harmful activities. A good review of the status of eco-taxation as a tool of environmental policymaking is offered by Tim O'Riordan (1997). Eco-labeling has become a common device and it is regularly used to identify the environmentally significant components and processes of products ranging from timber to tuna. The expectation is that consumers value such information and that it will aid them in purchasing goods that embody higher levels of environmental responsibility.

[9]Of course the design profession is very diverse. The argument here is built on one approach to design, which focuses on technology and materials. Design also has a "soft" side which is more focused on social relationships. Chapter 12 of this volume emerges from the design tradition and shows that not all approaches in that tradition can be criticised along the lines that follow.

can ultimately be solved through technical inventiveness. This assumption is grounded in a view that sees society as a machine whose purpose is to meet human needs. As such, the key constitutive social relationships involve resource and material flows, energy inputs and outputs. The ultimate goal is to make the system as efficient as possible in its use of resources and energy. Technological innovation is central to this project.[10] The economist simplifies the individual by assuming a limited number of universal characteristics; the technologist loses sight of the individual and society, except as the recipient of final goods and services or as a source of problems to be solved.

The policy proposals that emerge from the technologist's worldview commonly emphasise supply-side initiatives, not surprisingly because it is manufacturers and entrepreneurs who can mobilise the forces of innovation to solve society's problems. At its most limited scale this involves redesigning products to reduce their impact on the environment, particularly in the use phase. Such an approach has, for example, been regularly utilised to increase the fuel efficiency of automobiles. More recently, life-cycle assessment has become a frequently used tool to conduct these kinds of analyses and to aid in the ranking of various alternatives. Occasionally, the technologist may endorse more radical redesigns of products that have the potential to transform society and to ameliorate the environmental impacts of consumption. Tele-working to reduce commuting problems is an instance of this kind of 'outside the box' thinking. Take-back obligations requiring manufacturers to recover their products at the end of their useful lives and various product design and performance standards are policy options linked to this perspective.

While technological innovations, particularly those of a more visionary nature, no doubt have considerable potential to reduce the environmental impact of contemporary lifestyles, a technology-focused approach to sustainable consumption is extremely problematic for a number of reasons.[11] Firstly, underpinning the technological worldview is often an uncritical technological optimism. Arguably this is at least partly responsible for many of the environmental problems that we currently face. Second, in pushing society to the periphery technologists operate with little or no understanding of human agency and commonly fail to consider how people may change their behaviour to avoid realising the designed 'solution.' Finally, this perspective typically gives inadequate thought to the social costs of technology such as second order effects and impacts on marginalised groups.

In practice, therefore, despite their dominant positions in the policymaking process, the economist's and technologist's approaches to sustainable consumption are inadequate. But with these problems in mind it is worth reflecting on why, paradoxically, they are apparently so appealing to policymakers. We can identify a number of factors. First, the division of labour associated with the creation of discrete academic disciplines and perspectives is surely a necessary condition for the emergence of partial perspectives which come to dominate policy making. In the absence of somewhat arbitrary and reductionist boundaries

[10]A celebrated example of this perspective is Julian Simon (1986) *The Ultimate Resource 2*. For an excellent treatment of technocentrism within the history of ideas see Pepper (1996). The more general point being made here is that such thinking is central to essentially all forms of engineering education and practice.

[11]The new fields of industrial ecology and ecological design are largely organised around the reconceptualisation of manufacturing systems and the radical redesign of products (see, for example, von Weizäcker *et al.*, 1997; Zelov and Cousineau 1997).

such incomplete views of consumption (and social affairs more generally) would not be possible (Dickens 1996). Second, because these disciplines grossly understate the complexity of the world they promise relatively easy solutions and are therefore politically attractive if not effective. Third, the economic and technological approaches have much in common with each other and not surprisingly interventions deriving from them often operate in tandem and to some extent dovetail together. Both essentially offer a "levers, knobs and dials" view of the world. In academic circles this perspective might be called instrumentalist and mechanistic, and both are based on an atomistic ontology. Society itself is not really part of the picture at all. Finally, it is also the case that policymaking bodies often have cultures that promote similar perspectives. Bureaucratic organisations tend to employ people with either an economic or a technological worldview and contract research from institutions that are able to use the language and discourse. This does not just mean that alternatives get overlooked because they are outside the line of vision. Analyses of policy networks and discourses suggest that only people able to use the dominant approach will be seen as legitimate contributors to policy discussions (Hajer 1995).

Our aim here is not to disable the prevailing model guiding policymaking and to leave nothing in its place. Most of the contributors to this volume are sympathetic to the claim that contemporary consumption practices are woefully problematic from an environmental standpoint and are in need of modification and that achieving this will require new approaches to policymaking. Our objective in assembling this collection is to offer a more robust and comprehensive way of conceptualising the complex relationship between consumption and the environment and to forge recommendations that are consistent with this interpretation.

In many respects, therefore, this discussion helps to establish the task of this book. Somewhat ambitiously, we seek to draw on a diverse range of the social sciences that have evolved a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between consumption and the environment to outline new approaches to public policy in this area. It is necessary to show that an alternative is possible. At the same time, we should not casually discard the contributions made by economists and technologists. People *are* spurred on to behave in particular ways by concerns for personal welfare and prices do influence consumption practices. The point is that over-reliance on these perspectives leads to a heavily blinkered view. Furthermore, in our quest for acceptable solutions to some extraordinary problems it has become common to interpret this partial picture as constituting the full landscape. In a similar spirit, and to prevent misinterpretations of our intent, it is important to re-emphasise that technology may indeed have a major role to play in addressing a broad range of consumption and the environment problems. However, the role of technological innovation is surely less than is claimed by its most enthusiastic supporters and, if experience is any guide, such ingenuity is likely to throw up any number of unanticipated (and essentially unpredictable) surprises.

4. The Road Ahead

The first section of this book builds on the introduction and examines the new policy debate in more detail. In Chapter 2 Maurie Cohen examines the emergence of sustainable

consumption as a distinguishable environmental discourse from an historical perspective. He discusses the most influential policy pronouncements of the past three decades and describes how conventional explanations of global environmental deterioration were initially rooted in concerns about population growth in the developing countries. This discourse's privileged position is explained largely by the ability of the world's wealthiest countries to monopolise the debate within international institutions. By attributing responsibility for global environmental problems to the combination of rampant birth rates and poverty, the affluent nations managed to avoid confronting directly how domestic practices were impinging upon global ecological health. Cohen argues that it was not until publication of the Brundtland Report in 1987 that an alternative interpretation began to offer a challenge. At the same time climate change and other novel trans-boundary issues were beginning to reconfigure international environmental politics and newly created forums gave developing countries new institutional settings in which to challenge the dominant perspective. Countries such as China, India and Brazil contended that the high rates of consumption in affluent nations were responsible for misuse of global resources and waste sinks. Constructive domestic action by rich countries was seen as necessary before attempts were made to constrain the growth prospects of people in the developing world. Particularly important for pressing forward this claim were the preparatory deliberations leading up to the 1992 Earth Summit in Río de Janeiro in which developing countries worked to overturn the prevailing environmental orthodoxy and to develop a new explanation of global environmental problems.

In Chapter 3 Joseph Murphy analyses the European Union's approach to environmental policy and consumption. Various European Union policies, regulations and directives are discussed and the theory of ecological modernisation is introduced and developed to provide a benchmark against which current approaches are assessed. In order to explain the nature of policy outputs a structural-institutional policy analysis model is applied and the analysis is developed further using ideas from discourse analysis. In the area of consumption Murphy argues EU environmental policy is particularly weak. It does little more than encourage the redesign of products and their purchase by better-informed consumers. It appears to be based on simplistic neo-classical economic assumptions about consumers and at the same time is underpinned by an uncritical technological optimism. The final section of this chapter explains why European environmental policy in this area has these shortcomings. Murphy draws attention to the influence of macro-economic pressures on the EU, particularly the overriding goal of being competitive with the United States, and how this makes questioning consumption in any profound way extremely difficult. He also highlights the importance of smaller scale influences such as policy networks dominated by particular assumptions about environmental problems and how they can be solved.

The chapters by Cohen and Murphy establish that there may be an opportunity for the social sciences to contribute to the policy debate in the area of consumption-related environmental problems. Parts III–VI of this book each consider linked disciplinary perspectives on consumption-environment issues as a first step toward this goal. The approaches range from political theory and economics (Part III) to psychology and social psychology (Part VI) with geography, anthropology, sociology and cultural studies covered in the middle sections.

Markku Oksanen discusses 'Liberal neutrality and consumption' in Chapter 4. From the perspective of a philosopher and political theorist Oksanen focuses particularly on how intervention by a public authority into the consumption practices of individuals can be justified in liberal political systems.[12] Oksanen reminds us that in liberalism the state is required to be neutral with regard to the actions of individuals. In the area of consumption this is seen in the idea of consumer sovereignty and this creates a considerable barrier to an active consumption policy. Oksanen pursues his discussion with reference to the consumption of fox furs. This case is challenging because although it is ethically problematic it does not place a significant burden on the environment in a physical sense. Also, it does not result in harm to other people and therefore the accepted justification for government intervention does not apply. Oksanen argues that this case establishes two important points. First, it draws attention to the anthropocentric nature of liberalism. Second, it raises fundamental questions about the idea of state neutrality. Following John O'Neill he distinguishes between two alternative understandings of state neutrality in liberalism. A "dialogic" view involves making laws based on deliberation and compromise and requires us to believe we can resolve differences and find solutions to problems in the public sphere. A "non-dialogic" view involves leaving things unresolved because it is impossible to reach a solution by means of debate. In this case controversial and complex problems associated with consumption will get decided in the market place. Oksanen concludes that government intervention to deal with consumption-related environmental and ethical problems is possible in a liberal political system but it may require a dialogic view of government neutrality.

The fox fur case raises the problem of value pluralism in the area of consumption and how to deal with it. Jouni Paavola builds on this in Chapter 5. In his contribution 'Economics, ethics and green consumerism' Paavola focuses first on the market and not the public sphere. He points out that in the standard model, particularly in economics, the consumer is seen as a rational actor interested only in maximising personal welfare within the constraints of a set budget and with limitless access to information about alternatives. This model of the consumer is built on what Paavola calls "self-centred welfarism". He suggests that the idea of relying on such a consumer to deliver sustainable consumption is not particularly appealing for obvious reasons. However, he goes on to establish that the model is simplistic because consumers regularly make use of ethical positions other than self-centred welfarism. The reality is inter- and intra-value pluralism. A consumer that is rational in a wider sense simply consumes in a way that is consistent with her/his values. Paavola concludes that individual action informed by an ethical concern for the environment is best able to transform the impact of consumption on the environment if agents do not act as self-centred welfarists. This will inevitably increase the protection given to the environment. However, to have an impact such values would have to generally present in society. If they are not collective action to structure the market so that it necessarily delivers particular outcomes may be required.

[12]The focus on liberal political systems is appropriate because most of the high consumption societies have such systems.

In Chapter 6 David Goodman and Michael Goodman examine food production-consumption networks and food labelling. Labels are discussed as "discursive resources" which can be used to create new producer-consumer networks and the discussion explores two views of sustainable consumption. The "universalist" viewpoint sees sustainable consumption practices as a sub-set of normal capitalist production and consumption activities. The "progressive" viewpoint suggests sustainable consumption practices are linked to entirely different ethics and organisational forms, which can coexist with capitalist ones and potentially restrict them. Sustainable consumption in this case involves the growth of new producer-consumer networks cemented by shared values and commitments. Evidence of the second version is found in some of the production-consumption networks discussed in the chapter. However, as the authors describe, such networks may struggle to maintain their identity and over time can take on the characteristics of networks commonly linked to the universalist viewpoint. Much of the chapter examines how this convergence and translation takes place. Fair Trade is examined as a challenging and positive example of eco-labelling operating on the margins of the conventional agro-food system. It is antagonistic to neo-liberal logic of commodity production and world trade and links consumers, nature and producer groups. Goodman and Goodman argue it is a political and institutional challenge (not economic at this point) to the conventional agro-food system. This chapter is particularly useful because it draws attention to the relatively limited agenda associated with much eco-labelling.

In contrast, in Chapter 7 Michael Redclift examines the consumption of places in the form of eco-tourism. In his chapter 'Changing nature: the consumption of space and the construction of nature on the Mayan Riviera' a variety of tourist developments are contrasted, each of which uses the idea of nature in some way to attract rich foreign tourists/consumers. The examples vary from resorts with no real environmental controls to an International Biosphere Reserve and World Heritage Site. He examines how ideas of eco-tourism and sustainable tourism are used to advance commercial and environmental objectives. To develop the discussion Redclift makes use of the distinction between "inside" and "outside" meanings. "Inside meanings" are what goods mean to people themselves as a result of institutional and cultural practices. Outside meanings are established by the structural conditions under which behaviour actually takes place — the economic, social and political context of behaviour. He argues that in the case of eco-tourism the structural determinants of environmental change and sustainability are closely linked to the symbolic representation of nature. Redclift concludes that a clear distinction between nature in a tourist eco-park and nature in a government reserve cannot be drawn. It is correspondingly difficult to specify an objectively correct use of the idea of sustainable consumption in the area of eco-tourism when meaning and use is context dependent.

In Chapter 8 Josiah Heyman examines the creation of "new consumers" in the manufacturing cities on Mexico's northern border. He approaches consumption and environment issues as an anthropologist. Based on extensive fieldwork he offers a fascinating explanation of working class family consumption. Heyman begins by arguing that facile assumptions about consumption abound. It is often seen as simply related to "wants" and "desires" that somehow reside in a decision-making unit, usually the individual or the family. In his chapter Heyman offers a much more detailed explanation focussing on what happens when people move from the country to an industrial centre where their lives are

fundamentally transformed in ways that necessarily result in different consumption practices. The purchase of domestic appliances and linking to centralised utilities, for example, allows households to cope with the change from being free to allocate farming and household tasks amongst an entire family to a rigid model where males devote time to wage labour and children spend more time at school. It also helps them to deal with other influences such as the greater emphasis on neatness and cleanliness in schools and factories compared to rural life. Heyman argues that any meaningful effort to affect consumption will require popular involvement and commitment and may also depend on consumption becoming a political issue. Policies must work with the needs of people and not against them and they must recognise structural constraints and influences that act on people's lives. He also reminds us not to forget about the social dimension when focussing on environmental issues and suggests that action should give hardworking but poor and highly constrained consumers a wider range of realistic choices.

Heather Chappells, Jan Selby, and Elizabeth Shove in 'Control and flow' (Chapter 9) reconsider the relations between consumption, technology and the environment from a sociological perspective. In particular, this approach provides a useful contrast to the way in which the role of technology is commonly viewed in relation to consumption-environment debates e.g., as a "solution" or way of increasing efficiency. Focussing on the control and flow of water, the authors suggest that a typical public policy approach is to view water as an unproblematically homogenous resource that can be managed through common economic or institutional incentives alone. As an alternative they argue that water is in fact highly malleable and that fundamental questions about what it is and how it is channelled, contained and constituted need to be re-opened if we are to achieve more sustainable consumption. In particular they contend that more attention needs to be paid to the productive role of technologies — which not only control chaotic flows but also play a part in constituting waters and subjects. To illustrate this, the chapter considers the "co-constitutive" effects of three broad genres of technology — barriers, containers and purifiers. Drawing on examples from the UK and Palestine the authors show how technologies reflect the societies that deploy them and influence how consumption practices can be configured and organised.

In Chapter 10 Stephen Zavestoski discusses individual identity and the self. In 'Environmental concern and anti-consumerism in the self-concept' he aims to determine if concern about over-consumption emerges from the same idea of the self as concern over the environment more generally. Various self-selecting groups are examined and qualitative and quantitative data are analysed. The data suggests that the value basis of environmentalism and anti-consumerism may be similar but not the same. Anti-consumerist attitudes appear to emerge out of a narrow and more self-interested/egotistical sense of self whereas environmental concern involves a broader sense of the self and a moral community that has expanded to some extent to include nature. Anti-consumerist sentiment is linked to lack of fulfilment, excessive stress, agitation, malaise and so on. The search for a simple lifestyle is therefore selfishly motivated to some extent. Environmentalist attitudes are often more altruistic. The conclusion is that the apparent growing dissatisfaction with consumerism in some social groups is not necessarily linked to concern for the environment although reduced consumption is likely to be beneficial for it.

In Chapter 11 'Sustainable lifestyles: rethinking barriers and behaviour change' Kersty Hobson examines environmental communication strategies and how people react to them. Based on her study of the UK's Action at Home programme she criticises the model of the individual that is built into public policy in this area and then develops an alternative based on an argumentative understanding of the individual and identity formation. Drawing on the psychologist Billig she argues that thought is a constantly constructive and destructive act. Argumentative aspects of social life are essential and people need to enter into debates about lifestyles, with themselves and others, in order to understand themselves and their situation. Essentially environmental communication programmes are an opportunity to do this. This understanding moves the debate away from one where attitudes are understood simply as verbalisations of inner beliefs. It also undermines assumptions about willing participants suffering from an information deficit. The chapter suggests that communication programmes that create opportunities for debate may be more successful at changing behaviour than those that involve information flowing in one direction. Debate is more likely to result in everyday actions moving from "practical consciousness" to "discursive consciousness". However, ultimately, because the home is an important location for the creation of identity it is unlikely that large numbers of people will voluntarily make radical changes to their lifestyles over the short to medium term even if they could.

The diversity of approaches and insights into consumption practices and environmental problems in Parts III–VI clearly establish that the social sciences have an important contribution to make to policy debates in this area. The final section of the book — Part VII — begins to establish what this contribution might be. In Chapter 12 'Sustainable consumption by design' Kate Fletcher, Emma Dewberry and Phillip Goggin explore different strategies for sustainable consumption and the role of design in promoting these. The strategies they explore are *redesigning* that which is consumed (product focus/consuming greener); *reorganising* the way consumption takes place (results focus/consuming differently); and *rediscovering* the nature of needs (questioning the need fulfilled by the object, service or system, and how it is achieved). They argue that design for sustainability strategies can be clustered in these three areas and the timescale and potential environmental benefit increase as you pass from one to the other. The greatest factor improvements will occur over a long period of time and will involve reassessing needs. In a sense what this chapter offers is a manifesto for design for sustainability but the authors recognise that this will only be part of a multi-disciplinary effort if this opportunity is going to be grasped. Running through the chapter is the sense of a creative opportunity that is well beyond the vision of technical and supply-side solutions being discussed by policy makers at the moment. In many ways the task of the final chapter is, building on all the previous ones, to establish how the medium to long-term changes and opportunities outlined in Chapter 12 can be realised.

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