

Chapter 13

Sustainable Consumption: Environmental Policy and the Social Sciences

Joseph Murphy and Maurie J. Cohen

1. Introduction

The modern environmental era dawned in 1972 with the United Nations Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment. Around this time governments throughout the developed world began to institutionalise environmental protection. In 1971, for example, eight of the world's richest countries created environmental ministries. Other actions common at this time were the establishment of national environmental authorities and agencies and the inclusion of commitments to environmental protection in national constitutions. Slightly later, from the mid-1970s onwards, national environmental reports emerged and for many countries these were followed by environmental framework legislation (see Jänicke 1992).

From the outset government actions to solve environmental problems were based on an easily identifiable approach (see Chapter 1). Policymakers placed their faith in science and technology and in their own ability to craft ameliorative solutions to environmental problems. They reinforced the dominant role of scientists and technologists because of their tendency to understand environmental problems as largely related to wasteful or dangerous production processes. On the whole they faced each new challenge with reasonable optimism, confident in their ability to find a rational solution once they had identified basic cause and effect relationships. Although apocalyptic publications like *Limits to Growth* (Meadows *et al.*, 1972) and *Blueprint for Survival* (Goldsmith *et al.*, 1972) suggested things might be more complicated, policymakers did not seriously entertain the idea that environmental problems raised basic questions about the structure of society.

More recently we have witnessed the emergence of environmental issues that have dented the confidence of governments. The costs associated with environmental protection have become a serious matter. In the 1980s and 1990s this resulted in greater effort to identify tolerable (or at least acceptable) levels of environmental and health risk in order to balance threats against the costs associated with dealing with them (Cohen 1999). In Europe, following various widely-publicised environmental and health disasters, a previously unknown scepticism about the virtues of science and technology has emerged. In the late 1990s the conflict between environmental protection and trade liberalisation coalesced

and governments became locked in conflicts pitching multi-lateral environmental agreements against free-trade rules. These developments have been associated with an increasingly desperate attempt to argue that there is no necessary contradiction between economic growth and environmental protection. However, although the basic approach is under attack, policymakers continue to maintain that technical solutions, although elusive, are not completely out of reach.

Interestingly, this approach to environmental problems is fundamentally different to the approach that is taken to problems elsewhere. Whether we are, to name a few examples, speaking of alcohol and drug abuse, teenage pregnancy or eating disorders, policymakers and others have accepted that these are “social problems.” Activists may bring these issues to the attention of the public and policymakers, but they grow out of and reveal basic contradictions and inconsistencies within society. Though there are advocates of scientific and technological “solutions” to many of them, few people honestly believe that, to take one example, we will make substantial inroads into the use of illegal drugs via technology. The point of departure for addressing social problems constructively and meaningfully is to recognise their inevitability given the existing structure of society and to engage with their social dimensions.

Contrasting environmental problems with commonly-accepted social problems in this way reveals that governments and others have been surprisingly reluctant to acknowledge the social dimensions of environmental dilemmas. This may go some way to explain the emergence of more and more intractable problems. A benign explanation for this is that the physical nature of environmental issues, in combination with some notable technological successes since the 1970s, has led to the belief that they are, in fact, technical problems. They are similar to any other puzzle that an engineer faces everyday and therefore there is no need to consider social dimensions. More likely, however, approaching environmental issues as technical problems is attractive because it means that decision-makers can avoid grappling with complex and politically-divisive issues. We have, therefore, sought to “manage” our environmental problems without taking on the challenging task of trying to understand — or even identify — the conflicting tendencies responsible for them.

The recent emergence of an environmental-policy debate in the area of sustainable consumption, however, may represent an attempt to overcome several decades of denial of the social dimensions of environmental problems. That said, given the legacy associated with that denial it is not surprising that we find this is a challenging task. Rather than thinking originally and developing new approaches the predisposition has been to apply existing bodies of knowledge regardless of their fitness for use (see Chapter 1). In this book we have sought to move the debate forward. We have examined the emerging interest in consumption as a focus for environmental policy in order to assess its efficacy and to contribute constructively to the discussion. In this final chapter we summarise the understanding of consumption that has emerged. We discuss how policymakers can link consumption to the environment and outline novel approaches. However, one of our main conclusions is that sustainable consumption is not only a policy issue. It also has profound political implications. The pursuit of more sustainable consumption may ultimately have to be driven at the political level. We therefore also discuss the likelihood of a new politics of sustainable consumption.

2. Consumption and the Influence of Society

This volume clearly establishes that it is not possible to understand consumption by examining only what individuals do as autonomous actors. In reality people's consumption practices are profoundly affected, and possibly determined, by a broad range of societal influences. For this reason Josiah Heyman asks us in Chapter 8 to "widen the relevant units of consumption beyond individuals or other isolated entities." These factors, which are aspects of society first of all, come in various forms, but three of the most influential ones are network, infrastructure and group influences.

First, the interconnectedness of people and their location within consumption networks is a key feature of the consumer society. In this volume contributors discuss networks of consumption at every spatial scale and describe how they create the complex geographies of an increasingly globalised consumer society. In the case of food, as described by David Goodman and Michael Goodman in Chapter 6, the networks varied in scale from local to global. In Chapter 7, Michael Redclift discusses eco-tourism in Mexico and a network linking local entrepreneurs and affluent eco-tourists from Europe and North America. These networks and others are not necessarily tied to political-administrative boundaries and in many cases the actors have no meaningful contact with each another. However, they do have profound implications for consumption.

Drawing on Chapter 6 and the food example it is useful to consider networks at a material and a cultural-political level. As David Goodman and Michael Goodman point out the movement of foods in networks around the world has profound environmental implications. Impacts include the appropriation of land in the developing world for export crops, as well as the use of energy for transport and refrigeration. However, at the same time, at a cultural-political level, food labels such as fair trade, attempt to establish a link between producers and consumers in different parts of the world that may be beneficial in many ways. Although the environmental affects of the transport may be questionable, the fact that consumers can use their purchasing power and their position in a global network to demand improvements in producers' environmental and social performance can be positive.

Eventually, and inevitably, discussion of these networks leads us in the direction of a global political economy of production and consumption. These networks are not just spatially extensive they are also very hierarchical. All producers and consumers in affluent countries, as well as many in poorer ones, are part of this political economy and any credible explanation of consumption must acknowledge it. However, we do not need to rely on abstract theoretical arguments to establish the impact and significance of these global networks. Instead, it will suffice to draw attention to a prominent example. It is the case, for instance, that decisions made by the World Trade Organisation to promote less restrictive international trade can determine the mix of available products across whole continents, irrespective of the desires or preferences of individual consumers. It is clear that any explanation of consumption that hopes to form a basis for policy must be cognisant of the features of these global production and consumption networks.

Second, we can usefully distinguish network influences on consumption from the role of infrastructures and technologies — road systems, mobile phones and so forth. These

influences are particularly apparent in Part V. Considering the case of water consumers on the West Bank, Heather Chappells and her colleagues in Chapter 9 show how the consumption pattern of a whole society is determined by the physical infrastructure. At the same time the infrastructure is itself a reflection of the prevailing political situation. The infrastructure simply will not provide water to some settlements at times of low flow, while it does to others.

One of the most interesting aspects of this discussion of water technologies is that it demonstrates how infrastructure and technology can have profound cultural impacts. In the case of water consumption in the UK, and the impact of the mains water system, for example, Chappells *et al.* argue convincingly “this invisible, inaudible, almost incomprehensible system of provision has arguably de-politicised both water and the practice of its consumption.” In contrast, water in the Middle East is highly visible and charged with unavoidable political meaning and consequences. As well as availability, it is technology and infrastructure that is having a cultural impact on consumers in this case. Significantly, however, the material nature of infrastructures and technologies can lead to the mistaken assumption that their impacts are only physical.

Finally, to explain consumption practices often at smaller spatial scales we can examine various group influences, such as those linked to family or friendship groups. It is clear from the contributions to this book that residing in groups are rules, norms and assumptions about consumption and a person may or may not be aware of the extent to which these limit and shape choices. These norms can change, and they can be ignored, but they do exert powerful control over what people do, in part because they are often intangible and taken for granted. Josiah Heyman, for example, describes how a family’s decision to move from a traditional rural Mexican village to an industrial city places its members in new social settings — schools, factories, and community groups — and these impose different norms of cleanliness on the new arrivals. Although this is not the only reason why a family might purchase a washing machine, and then connect to a centralised electric utility, it is a significant, albeit intangible, influence. On reflection it is immediately obvious that everyone is subject to these kinds of influences.

3. Consumption and the Goals of Individuals

The relationship between society and the individual, as numerous others have established, is complicated. Although it is common for people to claim that they have to consume in a particular way in order to live a “normal” life, this fails to account for how the actions of individuals create and recreate the society that constrains them. It is more accurate, and indeed more useful, to observe that constraints in many cases are both the context *and* outcome of individual action. Individual consumption decisions will necessarily reproduce *or* change existing networks, group norms and infrastructures. Therefore, consumers as individuals are not innocent and powerless in a simple sense. It is also not possible to draw a clear line between society and the individual.¹ With this in mind, however, we can

¹This type of argument can be derived from various bodies of work, particularly that of Anthony Giddens (structuration theory) and Roy Bhaskar (critical realism).

consider the material, social and psychological goals of the individual which help to shape consumption patterns.

It is important to state that consumption by individuals is linked to the objective of staying alive and maintaining health. People routinely consume food for this reason. Clearly, the importance of the material dimension of consumption is seen in especially bold relief in developing countries. However, with respect to the majority of people in the richest countries, consumption cannot be explained entirely in this way. In fact, it seems likely that as people become wealthier the material significance of consumption declines as it begins to be linked to a range of other projects associated with social and psychological goals. Stephen Zavestoski's discussion in Chapter 10 is particularly interesting in this area. His contribution examines consumers in affluent countries who have voluntarily made the decision to reduce their levels of consumption. However, it is clearly not their intention to consume less than is required for survival or even a "comfortable" lifestyle. Nonetheless, they have become aware that their desire to consume is connected to a range of non-material objectives and at the same time they have begun to question the extent to which consumption can actually help them to achieve these. This is highly relevant from a policy standpoint because the tendency to view consumption from the "basic needs" perspective is quite strong.

With respect to non-material objectives we can usefully consider the social objectives of individuals first because of the connection with group influences discussed above.² A starting point is the desire for group membership. As previously mentioned, it may be more important to accept that certain consumption norms reside in groups rather than individuals, but in making consumption decisions individuals are often motivated by a desire to demonstrate group membership. In contemporary society individual consumption activities are some of the most powerful ways of conveying messages to larger groups. This is especially the case where personal relationships are ephemeral and communities lack familiar markers of stability.

Related to the social objective of group membership are goals such as status seeking within groups and what might be called distancing — the attempt to show that one is not a member of a particular group. Jouni Paavola describes in his chapter a consumption game in which neighbours or colleagues use consumption to display wealth and power. To assist distancing ideas of "good taste" and "bad taste" have been widely used by members of different classes to establish social distance between themselves and others. Although the people involved commonly refer to what they are buying as "better made" or of "higher quality", this creates the illusion of absolute criteria underpinning consumption rather than more fluid (and inadmissible) class-related ones (see particularly Bourdieu 1999).

Although the boundary is blurred there is value in distinguishing between the social and psychological objectives of the individual. The latter involve a range of issues tied to identity, or what Zavestoski refers to in his chapter as the "self-concept". The tourists in Michael Redclift's contribution, attracted by the idea of eco-tourism, in some way understand themselves to be concerned environmental consumers. This is their identity and the

²The distinction between material and non-material objectives or needs is fairly common (for other examples see particularly Jackson and Marks 1999; Max-Neef 1991 and 1995; Frank 1999).

act of consuming — going to the eco-park — plays a role in confirming it to themselves. It also provides entrepreneurs with a way of attracting rich tourists from Europe and North America to new resorts on the “Mayan Riviera”. A more mundane example of this phenomenon is the purchase of a newspaper known for a particular political perspective. Clearly, a newspaper contains news and may be valued on this basis, but its title and its content also help to reconfirm the consumer’s understanding of herself. We think most readily of the investment banker who carries a copy of the *Financial Times* or the *Wall Street Journal* that may never be read, and the left-leaning progressive who subscribes daily to *The Guardian*, but finds she is recycling mint copies.

Here it is important to introduce Kersty Hobson’s Chapter 11 discussion of the argumentative nature of human psychology with thought being a constantly constructive and destructive act. This moves the debate away from the idea that consumption is merely an expression of inner beliefs. Rather, people find it necessary to continually find ways to re-establish and reaffirm their identities. As Hobson argues:

[H]uman thought is not reducible to isolated logic, but is instead a constantly constructutive and destructive act. By paying attention to the argumentative dimensions of social life, rather than lamenting them, we can move away from an approach that considers expressed attitudes as verbalisations of inner beliefs, to an understanding of justifications and criticisms as rhetorical stances, realised in the context of social controversy.

The act of consuming is easily brought into this view of psychology and Hobson’s distinction between “practical consciousness” and “discursive consciousness” seems particularly useful. Routine and habitual consumption is likely to involve practical consciousness and is rarely questioned, although it may provide the service of continually confirming who one is. Change requires consumption to become an issue of discursive consciousness, but here adjustment may be resisted because of the threat to one’s “ontological security”.

4. Consumption and Properties of Objects

Our discussion so far has focused on consumers, either as parts of society or as individuals. Before moving on to link environmental concerns to consumption we also need to consider the properties of objects. These properties form an essential part of any explanation of consumption. We can focus on usefulness, interconnectedness and symbolism.

A standard way of understanding consumption is in terms of the usefulness of specific products. The assumption is that objects are valued to the extent that they do what they are supposed to do — fitness for use. From this perspective products are compared with other products in the same category — say electric cookers with gas cookers — because it is against similar products that consumers can make meaningful comparisons. The key assumption is that within a certain price bracket a consumer will attempt to maximise utility — ability to satisfy human wants. However, although this perspective is useful and powerful, it is incomplete. It tends to link consumption to pragmatic concerns about

workmanship, durability and price. In practice, usefulness and related concerns comprise only part of the motivation of the consumer. Two other important properties of consumption goods that also influence consumers are interconnectedness and symbolism.

The interconnectedness of objects and services is easy to understand. It is clear that goods are not purchased in isolation based only on their usefulness and in direct comparison with other products in the same category. Instead, objects are consumed in association with a wide variety of other objects and services. This happens, for example, where the benefit of a particular item cannot be gained unless a particular service is also purchased. The house in the country cannot be purchased unless the family also has two cars. On a more mundane level, as Kate Fletcher and her colleagues describe, household appliances sustain particular lifestyles. The clothes dryer is, for all intents and purposes, a necessary and complementary object to the washing machine. In reality there are very few consumer goods that are not linked in similar ways.

Interconnectedness is perhaps easier to understand than symbolism, but the chapters in this volume also illustrate that the latter is a property of many consumer goods. Research in this area is closely associated with the work of French sociologist Jean Baudrillard (1998:27). In language typical of this particular school of social theory he explains

Few objects today are offered *alone*, without a context of objects which “speaks” them. And this changes the consumer’s relation to the object: he no longer relates to a particular object in its specific utility, but to a set of objects in its total signification. Washing machine, refrigerator and dishwasher taken together have a different meaning from the one each has individually as an appliance. The shop-window, the advertisement, the manufacturer and the *brand name*, which here plays a crucial role, impose a coherent, collective vision, as though they were an almost indissociable totality, a series. There is, then, no longer a sequence of mere objects, but a chain of *signifiers*, in so far as all of these signify one another reciprocally as part of a more complex super-object, drawing the consumer into a series of more complex motivations.

Stephen Zavestoski’s chapter suggests that some consumers, namely those he describes as voluntary simplifiers, have become disenchanted with the “complex super-object”, rather than any specific good or service. And clearly the level of symbolism is connected to group influences on society and the social and psychological objectives of individuals discussed above. Marketing experts often exploit this cultural dimension of consumption, but it rarely becomes the focus of public policy.

5. Consumption and Environment Relationships

In this chapter we have tried to develop a complex and multi-layered understanding of consumption. However, although we believe that such an understanding should inform

policies aimed at achieving more sustainable consumption we have not so far attempted to link consumption to the goal of sustainability. As a first step in this process we can now explore the relationship between consumption and the environment at three levels: the physical, the cultural and the ethical.

It is the physical link between consumption and the environment that often motivates environmentalists. Issues such as the destruction of rainforests, climate change, hazardous-waste disposal and declining biodiversity are central to debates about the ecologically destructive impacts of consumption in rich countries. We have not included in this book a systematic assessment of the state-of-the-environment or the extent to which particular consumption practices are responsible for specific problems. This has been done elsewhere (see, for example, UNEP 1999 and the annual State of the World reports produced by the Worldwatch Institute). However, contributions contained in this volume have addressed many of those forms of consumption that are most problematic. For instance, Michael Redclift's chapter discusses the ecological implications of tourism. David Goodman and Michael Goodman focus on food consumption. Kersty Hobson considers the utilisation of energy and the management of household wastes. These and others are all areas where trends suggest that the environmental burden will grow in the future in an unsustainable way.

The physical relationship between consumption and the environment is important because, as Markku Oksanen argues in Chapter 4, in a liberal society interference by government into the lives of people must be clearly justified. Probably the most compelling justification in this area emerges when the actions of one group of consumers are judged to be imposing unacceptable harm on others and violating their rights at the physical level. This involves violation of what Oksanen and other political theorists refer to as the "harm principle". However, in the context of a world divided into nation-states experiencing complex environmental problems efforts to link cause and effect are fraught with many difficulties. Furthermore, people tend to value residents of distant communities less than they do those who live in closer proximity. The geographic displacement of the ecological impact of consumption therefore poses profound dilemmas, especially given the fragile status of international institutions empowered to address environmental issues on a global scale. For these reasons and others there are various significant risks associated with focusing only on the physical relationship between consumption and the environment.

Considering the cultural aspects of consumption and the environment is one way of ensuring that the debate does not remain stalled at the physical level. An example is the discussion of the idea of nature in Redclift's contribution to this volume. Examination of the culturally determined qualities of the environment in Western civilisation tends to start with the ancient Greeks and moves forward assessing such issues as the changing understanding of nature (Glacken 1967). Academics often draw on the arts, writing and painting in particular, to analyse the relationship between people and the environment at various points in time (see, for example, Schema 1995). What is important here is that history helps to produce, at a cultural level, a particular type of relationship between environment and society and this has implications for consumption practices. Environmental history thus provides much that appeals to the marketing expert in her attempt to increase sales. For instance, it is easy to see the influence of nineteenth century Romanticism,

especially its engagement with wild mountains, in the images used to sell cars. Arguably, without our collective memory of the Romantic period the open road winding through a mountain pass would make less sense and would be useless for the purpose of producing a readily accessible and understandable promotional message. This collective consciousness also provides a potential resource for public policy.

Less historically, it is also important to note that in advanced industrial countries “the environment” as something jeopardised by consumption is a highly contested social construction. People hear about the probable consequences of climate change on the television news and read about threats associated with genetically modified organisms in newspapers, but different stakeholders provide conflicting accounts. Consumers have no access to independent information about the extent to which their actions are actually contributing to environmental damage. What is clear though is that the public is now less likely to accept science or the government as authorities (for further elaboration see, for example, Irwin and Wynne 1996).

The third link between consumption and the environment is the ethical one, although it is certainly possible to argue that ethics is simply an aspect of culture. Jouni Paavola discusses the ethics of consumption in detail in Chapter 5. It is worth reiterating here the three value positions that he identifies and how they relate to consumption choices:

- Assessment of consumption choices based on their future consequences for individual welfare (egotistic) or the welfare of society (social) — a “utilitarian consequentialist”. Here welfare is a narrowly defined term. Consumption that results in increased happiness for the individual in the future, such as the purchase of a new car, is consistent with the egotistic version of this position.
- Assessment of consumption choices based on their future consequences, but not in a way that makes individual welfare consequences the decisive issue — a “non-utilitarian consequentialist”. This value position could involve other outcomes being treated as intrinsically valuable. For example, consuming in a particular way could be judged to be good if it successfully protects endangered species, if the preservation of species is considered intrinsically valuable.
- Assessment of consumption choices in a way that does not judge the goodness of the choice according to its consequences but instead attaches value to behaving in a certain manner or according to certain rules — a “deontological” value position. For example, if it is considered that genetic manipulation of nature is wrong, such a consumer may refuse to consume genetically modified crops and derived produce, regardless of welfare and other consequences, because it is the right thing to do.

This summary reveals how complex the ethical dimension of consumption-environment interactions can be. Moreover, Paavola correctly complexifies the picture further by reminding us that not only do different people hold different value positions, but any individual may simultaneously make consumption choices informed by any or all of the positions outlined above — inter- and intra-personal value pluralism. This is a more accurate description of values and consumption than the one offered by neo-classical economics where the only accepted motivation is egotistic welfare satisfaction.

6. Sustainable Consumption and Politics

Implicit throughout this volume is the claim that sustainable consumption is both a political and a policy issue. Many of the chapters raise questions about affluent societies that are beyond the remit of policymakers and fall more directly within the realm of politics. Indeed attempts to restrict the sustainable consumption debate to the policy level are not just flawed, they serve the interests of those stakeholders who may find their positions weakened if the agenda is ever embraced at a political level. In this section we consider three related dimensions of the politics of sustainable consumption, before moving onto more specific policy issues in the final section.

The assumption that increased consumption improves quality of life sits at the heart of politics in rich countries. It is largely for this reason that economic growth, which it is assumed gives more people more opportunities to consume, is seen as a worthy objective. Political parties on the so-called right of politics (Conservative in the UK and Republican in the US) in particular champion the individual as a consumer, but those on the left are also basically committed to the same argument. Furthermore, from a government perspective consumption is not simply a desirable goal because it enhances quality of life. Greater levels of consumption are also necessary to deliver economic growth. As a result, governments regularly use a wide variety of instruments to encourage people to consume more — tax reductions to put more money in every pocket, reduced interest rates on savings to encourage people to save less and spend more, relaxed credit laws that enable consumers to consume by borrowing against future earnings. The circularity of the argument in this area is immediately obvious.

It is clear that in many poor countries increased consumption is necessary and will improve quality of life for many people. However, in affluent countries, as various contributions to this book show, it is not as easy to draw this conclusion — more time to spend with friends and family may be better (see also Frank 1999). Perhaps the most important treatment of this issue is Stephen Zavestoski's discussion in Chapter 10. He focuses on small groups of people who have decided to voluntarily scale down their lives by consuming less. Zavestoski argues that this is not because these people are interested in saving the environment, although some of them are, but rather because they have begun to question the connection between increased consumption and enhanced quality of life. At a social and psychological level this issue is complex, but it may be linked to feelings of inauthenticity, placelessness and so forth. For proponents of more sustainable consumption this is highly significant.

Michael Jacobs (1997) provides one of the few discussions of the practical politics of sustainable consumption in advanced industrial countries. He argues that any programme of action by government must begin by challenging the position of private consumption in politics in a compelling way. Merely instructing people through policy interventions to consume less (or differently) is not convincing. The approach that Jacobs recommends is to focus on quality of life because this has more political potential. At the same time, he advises policymakers to draw attention to the concrete gains that people will achieve through alternative forms of consumption. Jacobs argues that the idea of quality of life challenges the politics of consumption side-on. It does not attempt to deny that

consumption contributes to well-being. Instead, the focus on quality of life suggests that other goods also contribute and the goal of public policy should be to raise the overall level. The political feasibility of a quality of life led argument in the area of sustainable consumption is important to remember, even if action is justified for other reasons.³

Second, this book also raises questions about collective action through government versus individual action in the marketplace and the role for leadership and coercion versus the role for agreed collective action. The chapters by Markku Oksanen and Jouni Paavola, for instance, both examine the role of individuals expressing their preferences in markets and compare this with the role of collective action implemented by governments. For different reasons, both authors raise doubts about the current emphasis on individual action in markets in the area of sustainable consumption. Paavola argues that even in a society comprised of significant numbers of environmentally and socially aware people, who are prepared to act on their beliefs in the market place, it may still be appropriate to emphasise collective action for various reasons. Free-riding individuals may determine the outcome and cannot be prevented from benefiting from the actions of those who bear the cost. Collective action also has the advantage of enabling concerned individuals to avoid constant moral dilemmas associated with consumption. More practically, people may not be able to afford to act as they would like, they may not know how to do so and there may be no viable alternatives.

These contributions suggest the current emphasis on market-based strategies to achieve sustainable consumption needs to be reconsidered. However, they do not address the issue of leadership and coercion. Beyond the collective action position is a position where government effectively is no longer neutral but, in Oksanen's words, becomes "perfectionist" and actively promotes an alternative view of the good life. When faced with the choice a public may not vote for such a programme, but it may be necessary nevertheless. It is difficult to examine some parts of the sustainable consumption debate without coming to the conclusion that political leadership is necessary and governments may have to ask people to make lifestyle changes despite their unwillingness to do so. This is particularly clear in the case of energy consumption and climate change. The use of fossil fuels is so central to lifestyles in affluent countries, and the amount of change required over a relatively short time-scale is so great that it is difficult to imagine publics acting quickly enough without leadership and coercion. Clearly such action, even if justified by the threat, will expose any government to the accusation that it is violating the principle of the neutral state.

Third, in this book's opening chapter we pointed out that for various reasons the tendency has been to reduce the sustainable consumption debate to a discussion about the physical impacts of consumption and the energy and material flows through society. This is easily explained. Amongst other influences the types of knowledge that dominate policy networks encourage this kind of radical simplification. Such an interpretation, however, fails to acknowledge the existence of issues that are widely accepted as part of sustainable

³Jacobs also emphasises the need to see the value of consumption as something separate from its material nature. It is possible for the value of consumption to increase whilst its material impact falls. Potentially this overcomes the obvious objections associated with changing consumption patterns. Jacobs' is also critical of ideas of voluntary downshifting. He argues this will be marginal because of the very social nature of consumption. Only the very strong-willed or those with alternative social networks will be successful. The vast majority of people living ordinary lives will not be successful in simply deciding to consume less.

development and therefore must be part of sustainable consumption, particularly social goals and intergenerational justice.

Of the contributions in this volume David Goodman and Michael Goodman are particularly critical of the exclusion of the social dimension from debates about sustainable consumption. As an example they describe how the growing international trade in organic food promotes a relationship between wealthy consumers in affluent countries and the environment in developing countries. Although often championed as an example of sustainable consumption in practice the exclusion of issues like wages and the working conditions of employees on organic farms raises doubts given that it is widely accepted that sustainability in the world's poorest countries involves dealing with poverty and other social issues. Michael Redcliff's analysis of eco-tourism also questions the standard approach to sustainable consumption. Travel promoters and resort developers appeal to an absolute and real nature that we can apparently try to protect while we avoid complex questions about the kind of nature we actually want. Sustainable consumption in this area presumably involves some kind of eco-tourism, but the examples from the coast of Mexico convincingly show that it is not easy to identify in any objective way a type of tourism that is sustainable, particularly because of cultural issues. As these examples show the ambit of sustainable consumption can be drawn narrowly or broadly and there is a tendency for politics to simplify and to restrict what is in reality a large and complex debate.

7. Sustainable Consumption and Policy

Governments are not the only actors in society and their ability to influence consumption is limited. However, they do have more tools at their disposal to encourage sustainable consumption than any other actor. For this reason public policy is central to the sustainable consumption debate. In this final section we outline six approaches to policy in the area of sustainable consumption that have been raised in this book, although this does not represent a comprehensive account.

First, drawing particularly on Chapter 6 it is useful to link sustainable consumption to the creation of new production-consumption networks. This is likely to mean networks where non-market values to some extent cement network relationships. However, as David Goodman and Michael Goodman point out, creating and sustaining such networks is likely to be difficult. Their example is the organic food network in California. This network was originally associated with a range of social and environmental values expressed in commitments to local markets, family farms, on-farm inputs and so forth. However, with its success the network increasingly became associated with intensive industrial growers buying organic inputs globally and supplying global markets. While preserving the organic nature of the enterprise in a strict sense the network values began to change and it became associated with the use of immigrant labour and poor working conditions. In other words success, growth and expansion of the network was associated with its "translation" and the loss of many of its sustainable aspects.

We can imagine alternative and more sustainable production-consumption networks in areas as diverse as clothing, transport and housing. Through consumption these networks

would allow people to give expression to values and concerns that they cannot express normally. Various policies aimed at encouraging and protecting such networks could prove fruitful. This may involve sponsoring start-up costs at the local level, as well as removing legal barriers at the national level that protect the embedded practices of existing production-consumption networks. It may also involve subsidies and public endorsement by political leaders and opinion formers. However, we should remember the lessons learnt in California. It is clear that public authorities must not act in a way that encourages the translation of nascent networks so that aspects of sustainability are lost. This means providing some protective cover and insulating them from harmful influences. In particular this involves recognising that processes of codifying and formalising, amongst other things, are opportunities for actors in larger networks to co-opt, constrain or destroy emerging ones. Accordingly, it may be more useful to aim to recreate small networks in new locations, rather than scaling up successful operations.

Second, as discussed above new infrastructures and technologies have massive implications for consumption because they create a large part of the context in which it occurs. Although in recent years some progress has been made in assessing the impacts of new infrastructures and technologies the focus is still on immediate environmental and health and safety issues. Impact assessments usually fail to examine the implications of millions of consumers acting through new infrastructures and technologies either at the physical, cultural or ethical levels. This suggests that sustainable consumption can be linked to a major programme of reform in the area of technology and infrastructure assessment. Government action and public policy is central to this because in many ways it would involve new institutions and procedures that democratise infrastructural and technological change. At the same time, the scope of assessment should expand beyond immediate environmental and health related concerns to more broadly consider cultural and ethical issues. New evaluation procedures and institutions should make it possible to ask important questions about consumption and new technologies and infrastructures. Do we want these infrastructures and technologies? Do we need them? Do they improve our quality of life? What are their cultural impacts? What do they mean for sustainable consumption? Such an approach entails the creation of institutions that offer meaningful participation where incommensurate perspectives can be discussed.

Third, we can consider group norms and assumptions and the pursuit of sustainable consumption. As discussed above these are relatively stable and endure over time, but they may be open to questioning and revision. In Chapter 8 Josiah Heyman provides an excellent example. He describes in detail the consumption implications of the “rigid time” that rural Mexican families encounter when they move to the city and family members begin working in factories and start attending schools:

[A]ppiances and commoditised inputs facilitate the coping of Mexican households with profound transformations of time. These households had shifted from “freely” allocating among farming and household tasks the full set of adult males, females, and children of both sexes, toward a more rigid model in which adult males devoted a considerable amount of time to paid labour and children many hours to school.

In this example it is important to distinguish between the rigidity of time and the fact that household members are occupied elsewhere for more of their time. Differentiating between these makes it possible to identify consumption impacts associated simply with work norms about time. Similar impacts are seen every weekday morning and evening on roads throughout the developed world and elsewhere as people travel between home and their workplaces.

Even minor changes to group norms and assumptions in various areas could make a significant contribution to more sustainable consumption practices. A long list of unquestioned group assumptions with implications for consumption could easily be developed in a deliberate lifestyle review. With respect to policy it is useful to note that government action will, in many cases, reinforce existing practices. For example, road building to cope with peak time demand helps to perpetuate norms about appropriate hours of work. As one of the biggest employers in any country office dress codes are continually recreated in government buildings every day. Whilst trying to avoid such reinforcing actions using policy to promote the questioning of group standards is likely to involve people in countless individual locations — home, work, school and so forth. Drawing on the insightful lessons of Kersty Hobson's discussion in Chapter 11 policy would aim to stimulate discussion and debate rather than telling people how to be more sustainable.

A fourth approach to sustainable consumption emerges out of the focus on the material goals of individuals, the usefulness of objects and the physical relationship between consumption and the environment. For those interested in reducing the environmental impact of consumption this produces a range of proposals aimed at producing a good that does the same job more efficiently or a service that replaces the physical product and thus encourages dematerialisation — selling the output rather than the product. This material level of the consumption debate has received a lot of attention in recent years and involves what Kate Fletcher and colleagues refer to in the previous chapter as the “re-designing” and “reorganising” approach to consumption. There has been significant and tangible progress in policy debates in this area in recent years. At the centre of this discussion is the improvement of the “eco-efficiency” of production-consumption systems (see Schmidheiny 1992; De Simone and Popoff 1997; OECD 1998).

This is a valuable and constructive policy debate and instruments and approaches such as the life-cycle assessment of products have a significant contribution to make in enhancing the environmental performance of consumption. We can also point to important connections between these developments and the discussion of infrastructures and technologies above. However, the limits to eco-efficiency type approaches in the area of consumption are clear. Because they take particular consumption practices as given, and ask how they can be most effectively met, they provide no basis for examining, understanding and questioning consumption and lifestyles. For this reason eco-efficiency approaches are always likely to focus on product performance or the replacement of products with services.

One way to move beyond the eco-efficiency approach is to engage with consumers' non-material social and psychological objectives and to focus on how these are currently bound up with the consumption of material goods. This book makes it clear that consumers regularly use material goods to achieve non-material (social or psychological) objectives. The purchase of a car and goals such as respect, status and autonomy are

obvious examples. It is clear that advertising and the media more generally, particularly film and television, are central to this process and this suggests that sustainable consumption may involve strategies focussed on the management of promotional information and media messages. Although controversial this already happens, particularly where health and welfare are involved. There are numerous pieces of legislation controlling advertising and the media more generally in areas like smoking, pornography, violence, racism and so on. It is unlikely that the negative social and environmental aspects of consumption can be treated in the same way, but these examples suggest how the media can be used to create ideas of appropriate behaviour. Such things as voluntary codes of media conduct, control of product placement in films and more advertising free public space are all in line with this kind of thinking.

However, we must bear in mind though that excessive public control of advertising and the media is clearly impossible politically and undesirable socially. Therefore an alternative approach focussed on actively encouraging people to find less socially and environmentally damaging ways of achieving their social and psychological goals is also important. Here Kersty Hobson's insights into the effectiveness of information campaigns are important. Given people's genuine need to deliberate about their life choices, and to establish and to maintain their identities, we must discard the one-way model of information flow. We should strive to replace such clearly limited conceptions with policy interventions designed to engage people in dialogues about their consumption practices and their impacts. It should be remembered that any action that tries to limit the use of material objects but does not offer alternative ways of satisfying social and psychological objectives is likely to fail.

The sixth and final cluster of ideas emerges out of thinking about objects of consumption themselves in novel ways. It is clear that policymakers commonly focus on usefulness as the primary property of consumption goods. This approach leads to strategies designed to change purchasing practices within a given product category. The European eco-labelling scheme is a good example. However, such approaches do not acknowledge and exploit the fact that goods are also interconnected in various ways and that they have symbolic properties that are not the same as their properties of usefulness. This opens up the possibility for more creative lines of thinking. The symbolic characteristics of objects can be used as an example. As discussed above symbolism is to some extent a characteristic of the good itself and not the person or group that uses it. We can view the meaning attached to it as an intrinsic feature that is analogous to its colour, shape, and texture. With this in mind there may be opportunities for policymaking bodies to learn from the private sector and to think less about information provision on products and more about branding. The typical approach of labelling as a means of encouraging consumers to view goods differently stands in sharp contrast to the methods used by marketing experts to sell products, which involves very little practical information and plenty of images and symbolism.

In sum, it would appear that a more expansive understanding of consumption, in particular one that recognises the impact of context, the social and psychological objectives of people and the various characteristics of objects, offers considerable potential for creative policymaking. The suggestions we have advanced are intended to be more illustrative than exhaustive as our intention is to push the sustainable consumption debate into new areas rather than to set out a definitive blueprint.

References

- Baudrillard, J. (1998), *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London: Sage.
- Bourdieu, P. (1999), *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge.
- Cohen, M. (ed.). (2000), *Risk in the Modern Age: Social Theory, Science and Environmental Decisionmaking*. London: Macmillan.
- De Simone, L., & Popoff, F. (1997), *Eco-Efficiency: The Business of Sustainable Development*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Frank, R. (1999), *Luxury Fever: Money and Happiness in an Era of Excess*. Princeton University Press: Princeton.
- Goldsmith, E., Allen, R., Allaby, M., Davoll, J., & Lawrence, S. (eds). (1972), *Blueprint for Survival*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Glacken, C. (1967), *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought From Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Irwin, A., & Wynne, B. (eds). (1996), *Misunderstanding Science? The Public Reconstruction of Science and Technology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jackson, T., & Marks, N. (1999), "Consumption, sustainable welfare and human needs — with reference to UK expenditure patterns between 1954 and 1994." *Ecological Economics* 28, 421–441.
- Jacobs, M. (1997), "The quality of life: Social goods and the politics of consumption." In M. Jacobs (ed.) *Greening the Millennium: The New Politics of the Environment* (pp. 47–61). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Jänicke, M. (1992), "Conditions for environmental policy success: an international comparison." In M. Jachtenfuchs & M. Strübel (eds) *Environmental Policy in Europe: Assessment, Challenges and Perspectives* (pp. 71–97). Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft.
- Meadows, D., Meadows, D., Randers, J., & Behrens, W. (1972), *The Limits to Growth*. London: Pan.
- Max-Neef, M. (1991), *Human-Scale Development — Conception, Application and Further Reflection*. London: Apex Press.
- Max-Neef, M. (1995), "Economic growth and quality of life — a threshold hypothesis." *Ecological Economics* 15, 115–118.
- OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development). (1998), *Eco-Efficiency*. Paris: OECD.
- Schama, S. (1995), *Landscape and Memory*. London: Harper Collins.
- Schmidheiny, S. (1992), *Changing Course: A Global Business Perspective on Environment and Development*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme). (1999), *Global Environment Outlook 2000*. London: Earthscan.