Sustainable Consumption: Perspectives from Social and Cultural Theory

by

David Evans and Tim Jackson

RESOLVE Working Paper 05-08

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Abstract

At a time when there is a widespread recognition that those living in developed nations need to consume in ways that are more sustainable, the task of motivating sustainable consumption is often treated in a largely instrumental manner relying heavily on communication campaigns aimed at individual 'behaviour change'. Though this approach draws on insights from social psychology, consumer behaviour theory and marketing, it often neglects understandings that arise from social and cultural theories of consumption. Perversely, these more sociological theories of consumption – with a few notable exceptions – have tended to shy away from an explicit concern with 'sustainability', eschewing in particular its normative agenda. Nonetheless, this paper argues, social and cultural theories have a wealth of insight to offer. In particular we suggest that sociological theory can add an invaluable level of depth and sophistication to understandings of consumer behaviour and the complexities underlying the challenges of 'lifestyle change'. This paper considers – through reference to the social and cultural theorists who *have* addressed the question of sustainable consumption - the conceptual, normative and practical implications of bringing socio-cultural approaches to consumption together with the agendas of environmental sustainability. Crucially, we argue that the real challenge of sustainable consumption is confronting the tension inherent in the idea of sustainable consumerism and suggest some strategies for resolving this tension.

Keywords

Introduction

It is perhaps unnecessary, in this volume, to set out the landscape in which debates about sustainable consumption have become pertinent and the terms on which they are taking place. What is noteworthy, however, is where these debates are drawing their understandings of consumption from. Whilst the term sustainable consumption is relatively recent; its analysis is increasingly drawing on the human sciences and their long standing concern with consumption in its various guises. Indeed, it is now widely recognised that 'sustainable consumption' cannot be framed as a technical problem wherein levels of economic consumption (of goods and services) can remain the same or increase whilst efficiency gains in resource productivity (i.e. the consumption of material resources) provide the solution. Such a view, as Jackson (2004) points out, would equate sustainable consumption with sustainable production which in turn runs the risk of overlooking any potential rebound effects or the ways in which consumption is embedded in modern ways of living. Thankfully, it would certainly seem that a focus on consumption proper is characterising the debate and that understandings of consumption are not restricted to the models of utility maximisation and rational choice that underpin (conventional) microeconomic theory. It is quite clear that in particular social psychology, consumer behaviour theory and marketing have all established a presence and brought their understandings of consumption to the table. For example, the United Nations Environment Programme (2005) has addressed the use of communication campaigns and marketing strategies to motivate sustainable consumption and sustainable lifestyles whilst in the UK, the Department of Food, Rural Affairs and Environment (DEFRA) draws heavily on social psychology and the mantra of behaviour change in its sustainable production and consumption research programme.

By contrast, broadly sociological approaches – aside from some notable exceptions (for example Shove, 2003 or Southerton *et al*, 2004) - are conspicuous by their relative absence in the sustainable consumption debate. Without denying the importance of the approaches mentioned above; there is a sense in which social and cultural theories of consumption can help unpick the complexities underlying consumption (of various sorts) and so offer the potential to contribute a level of depth and sophistication to the challenge of motivating sustainable consumption. The reasons for this seemingly perverse absence are perhaps not difficult to fathom. On the one hand, current debates concerning behavioural change at the individual level lend themselves more to the discipline of social psychology than to social and cultural theories that tend to address social 'structures' and processes. On the other, contemporary sociological accounts of consumption have tended to shy away from explicit engagement with normative issues (Sayer, 2003) and the agendas of environmental sustainability. Either way, it is not our intention to systematically address this absence but rather to show how social and cultural theories of consumption play out when faced with the demands of environmental sustainability and *vice versa*. In addressing the conceptual, normative and practical implications of doing so, we hope to demonstrate the importance of social and cultural theories to

the sustainable consumption debate both in terms of framing the problem *and* strategies for resolving it.

Consumption and Consumerism

The starting point of our analysis is that there is a fundamental distinction to be drawn between consumption and *consumerism*. People often quip that 'sustainable consumption' is something of a contradiction in terms and it is not difficult to see why. For example, 20% of the world's population are using 80% of the earth's non-renewable resources and they are doing so by spending 86% of all the money that goes into personal consumption (UNDP, 1998) whilst recent estimates suggest that if everybody in the world were to consume (and concomitantly, pollute) at the same rate as persons living in Western Europe then we would need 3 planets to support us (WWF, 2004), 5 if we bring North America into the equation. However, this does not mean that consumption *per se* is inherently unsustainable. Indeed, the National Consumer Council has suggested that sustainable consumption is a *balancing* act that takes into account the 'quality of life' of consumers in the present time period alongside resource use and environmental impact such that future consumers can enjoy the same quality of life that is enjoyed today (NCC, 2003). The situation detailed above represents a distinct lack of *balance* and it is no coincidence that the 20% of us who are responsible for this 3 (or more) planet living tend to live in *consumer societies* that are characterised by a culture dominated by the ever spreading logic of *consumerism*.

To see this more clearly, consumption is best defined, quite simply, as:

"[t]he selection, purchase, use maintenance, repair and disposal of any product or service" (Campbell, 1995)

Taken as such, it seems that social and cultural approaches to consumption tend to frame it as an economic process that is concerned with the consumption of goods and services which in turn hints that they tend not to make an explicit distinction between this economic consumption of goods and services and the material consumption of natural resources (again, there are notable exceptions such as Halkier, 1999 and Shove, 2003). Whilst we recognise the importance of decoupling understandings of these processes; it is not our intention to pursue fully the ramifications of doing so. Nevertheless, this distinction is central to our analysis as it is on these grounds that we draw a distinction between consumption and consumerism. We are working with the assumption that any process of economic consumption is necessarily going to have an environmental impact in terms of material consumption and resource use *but*, in theory at least, its uptake can be balanced against the objectives of environmental sustainability and the needs of future generations. By contrast, we argue that the implications of *consumerism* are inherently unsustainable in terms of material consumption.

To take a step back, we can return to the sociological differences between consumption and consumerism. *Consumerism* is best understood as a cultural

condition in which economic consumption becomes a way of life (Miles, 1998). It is a state of affairs in which more and more cultural functions are handed over to the activity of consumption such that is colonises more and more aspects of human experience (Bauman, 1998 Habermas, 1984 Jackson, 2006). In addition to the well trodden arguments surrounding the uses of consumption to pursue hedonistic pleasures or to mark status and identity; it refers to the ways in which an increasing number of 'social conversations' (Jackson, 2006) such as questions of morality, meaning and the good life are mediated through processes of consumption. Consequently, consumerism is characterised by high levels of economic consumption which in turn results in high levels of material consumption and accelerating environmental degradation. In a nutshell, whilst the balancing act of 'sustainable consumption' is at least feasible; the balancing act of 'sustainable consumerism' poses a far greater challenge. It is at this point that the importance of social and cultural theory becomes clear because socio-cultural theories of consumption have been far more concerned with the dynamics of modern *consumerism* and consumption in a consumer society than with consumption per se.

Less is more?

In illustrating the contribution that social and cultural theory can make to the sustainable consumption debate, it is good to begin on familiar territory. Whilst 'sustainable consumption' can be defined in any number of ways; it is certainly possible to find lines of thought that position it as a question of consuming *less* (of consumer goods/services, of natural resources, or both). Against this backdrop, there are influential ideas around the relationship between consumption and well being that are increasingly questioning the micro economic, public policy and common sense orthodoxy that has long equated increases in consumption with increases in utility. For example, there is a wealth of popular literature which intimates that economic growth and with it increased consumption does not go hand in hand with increases in happiness (for example Layard 2004). Indeed, terms such as *affluenza* (James, 2007)) are gaining currency in media and popular discourse. Anybody wishing to promote the idea that people could 'live better by consuming less' such that there is 'double dividend' (Jackson, 2005) in consuming sustainably (less) will no doubt turn to these ideas. However, they might also profit by turning to more sociological critiques of consumerism should they wish to mount a more thorough and robust critique of consumption and the cultural conditions in which it flourishes. Indeed, social cultural theories tend to dig a little deeper – or least cast the net a little wider - in order to locate the social processes underlying the failure of economic growth and consumption to bring increased happiness.

For example, Bauman (2002) draws a distinction between pleasure and happiness and with this he positions the pursuit of pleasure as a distraction from the pursuit of happiness which in turn (or perhaps because of) leads to a 'false' happiness. Pleasures, according to Bauman, are found in easy and instant gratification and are by definition short-lived and momentary; things that cool down at their hottest moment creating the need for new beginnings and new sensations. Happiness, by contrast, is found in duration; something immune to passage of time, outlasting the

enjoyment that any particular pleasure can bring. Where the pursuit of pleasure is *easy* but fleeting; the search for happiness requires a steady focus on and commitment to one desire with results that are altogether much more satisfying. Bauman is not saying that pleasure is inherently bad, rather he notes that: 'true happiness always gives pleasure …but not all pleasures make a man happy' (P.127). It is the difference, so to speak, between a casual sexual encounter and physical intimacy in a long term relationship. Viewed as such, one could be forgiven for thinking that consumerism, with its seemingly endless capacity to gratify our desires instantaneously – even those that we didn't know we had - is good at providing *pleasure* but perhaps not so good at providing happiness. This would go a long way towards elaborating the idea that increases in consumption do not equate to increases in happiness. It is even more tempting to think of this in terms of the difference between *having* - consumer goods and with it pleasure and *being* - a happy individual, living a meaningful and purposeful life. Indeed, critiques of consumption that rest on criticisms of materialism (for example Kasser, 2002) certainly work with the idea that there is a distinction between having and being through which consumerism gives primacy to having. For Bauman, it is a little more complicated in so far as he does not work with a 'being/having' dichotomy (Fromm, 1976), nor does he find fault in the notion of 'having'. Instead, he locates a much deeper pathology inherent in consumerism that erodes the possibility of having as well as that of being. In Bauman's view, contemporary consumerism fosters a culture in which commitment (to having and to being) is somewhat lacking:

"Consumerism is not about collecting and accumulating *possessions*. It is, in its essence, about gathering *sensations*…Neither 'having' nor 'being' count for much in the current models of a happy life, but *use*. Instant use, 'on the spot' use…use that can be stopped the moment the joys grind to a halt" (*op cit*: p. 154)

In positioning consumerism as a never ending sequence of new beginnings, Bauman stresses that it is not the actual having of sensations that fuels consumerism but the tantalising *promise* of having these sensations such that the joy of longing for something disappears at the very moment it is acquired; at which point, one's efforts and desires are refocused in pursuit of yet another new sensation. It is not difficult to see this: that new MP3 player that is longed for and lusted after until the day that it is actually acquired and all the promise that it held when out of reach is short lived. Undeterred, attention is redirected to the acquisition of something else and the cycle begins again. There are obvious resonances McCracken's (1990) brilliant analysis of displacement and deferral (see below) but it is important to note that in this framing, consumerism fails to ever provide the happiness it promises whilst simultaneously facilitating a 'throwaway society' that is characterised as much by waste and disposal as it is by (over) production and (over) consumption such that its environmental impact is unsustainable.

Theories of Consumption: Varieties and Commonalities

Compelling as Bauman's analysis is; it is certainly not representative of the myriad ways in which social and cultural theory has accounted for consumerism and

consumption. Furthermore, there is no consensus among social and cultural theorists that consumerism is necessarily bad or in some way pathological. For example, critical approaches such as Bauman's could easily be dismissed on the grounds that they are 'subjective' opinions or, at worst moralistic and naïve, based on elitist prejudice rather than empirical evidence (Miller, 2001). In fact, the whole business of critique and defence can become rather messy when it comes to social and cultural theories of consumption and this may, in part, explain their aforementioned absence from the sustainable consumption debate. This is even more apparent when considered alongside the distinction between consumption and consumerism. For example, against the wealth of sociological critiques of consumerism (and these are rarely explicitly ecological) as a cultural phenomena there is a tendency to defend (or at least refusal to criticise) the individuals that consume in a consumer society. Consequently it is very difficult to depart from a morally ambivalent position on consumerism when looking through the lens of social and cultural theory. So, rather than attempting to offer normative evaluations of consumerism that feed into existing debates around sustainable consumption (such as whether or not we can live better by consuming less); our intention in this section is to review existing and conflicting accounts of consumerism with a view to locating commonalities that enable us to frame the debate in slightly different terms.

Of course, any attempt to provide a succinct summary of the ways in which social and cultural theory has engaged with consumption is inevitably going to do violence to a very rich and complex domain of thought and debate. Nevertheless, we present an overview and synthesis of some of the main approaches in order to give a flavour of the ways in which consumption and consumerism have been conceptualised. For a start, there are broadly 'postmodern' theories that stress the playful, hedonistic and creative freedoms afforded by consumption and modern consumerism. For example, Campbell (1987) stresses the significance of consumption in relation to pursuing private desires and fantasies whilst Featherstone (1991) argues that:

'[t]he new heroes of consumer culture…display their individuality and sense of style in the particularity of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance and bodily dispositions they design together into a lifestyle'. (Featherstone, 1991: p.86)

Essentially, he suggests an opening up (or breaking down) of social structures characterised by a shift from 'rules' to 'choices' alongside a movement from mass consumerism to a multitude of possibilities such that 'everyone can be anyone' via playful indulgence in processes of self actualisation and identity formation. Similarly, theorists such as Fiske (1990) and Willis (1991) highlight the importance of consumption in creative and cultural processes by distancing its analysis from the economic (and often exploitative) conditions of production and potentially homogenising conditions of marketing and distribution. Similarly, Sayer (2003) draws attention to consumer capacities of 'decommodification' and 'recontextualisation' by way of popular resistance to commodification and consumerism.

Against this, there are broadly Marxist theories that raise questions about the relationship between consumption and freedom. For a start, Marx (1897) himself discussed the ways in which capitalism fetishises commodities in order to conceal the exploitative relations of their production. Most famously, Adorno and Horkheimer's (1947) analysis of the *culture industry* represents a vitriolic attack on the ways in which culture and the creation of meaning in modern consumer societies is handed over to commercial interests and industrial processes. As a corollary, they argue, any notion of individual choice or the very notion of genuine agency is abolished:

"[t]he individual is an illusion not merely because of the standardisation of the means of production. He is tolerated so long as his complete identification with generality is unquestioned'

A popularisation of this idea is found in the equally influential work of Marcuse (1964) in which it is suggested that any deviation from or threat to mass/consumer culture is 'liquidated', not by rejection or denial but by 'incorporation into the established order through reproduction and display on a massive scale' (1964: 60). These analyses of pseudo individualism and repressive tolerance bring even the perceived freedoms of consumption into question. In direct opposition to the idea that consumers make choices in the context of multiple possibilities; these so-called 'critical' theories suggest that the 'general' and the 'particular' are one and the same, differing only to the extent that products are targeted at different types of consumer. Indeed, from a functional point of view, there is very little difference between a sports car and a small hatchback and yet they are differentiated by any number of symbolic characteristics (which we discuss in more detail below). A good illustration of the ways in which consumer 'freedoms' are largely manipulated can be found in the ways that supermarket loyalty cards operate. Supermarkets use data from loyalty cards to profile consumers and 'reward' them with heavily tailored vouchers designed to steer them towards buying what the supermarket wants them to whilst giving consumers a feeling of a purchase freely chosen (Smith, 2004). Additionally, Bauman (1988) has questioned the extent to which such 'freedoms' are actually desirable in the first place on the grounds that too much consumer choice can lead to anxiety. Here, it is worth noting that that Starbucks proudly offer 87'000 drink permutations to choose from. With so many options, it is very hard for customers to feel confident that they are making the best possible choices.

As a corollary of these disagreements over the question of freedom, social and cultural theories of consumption are divided over the nature of 'needs'. For example, Marxist lines of thought (for example Lodziak, 1995) emphasise the role of consumerism in creating and manipulating consumer desires such that decisions are made according to 'false' needs. Conversely, broadly post-modern lines of thought (for example Featherstone, 1991) stress the role of consumerism in satisfying 'higher order' human needs and desires for novelty, status and self-actualisation. The difficulty in reaching consensus lies in the impossibility of defining an objective set of human needs when the needs of human flourishing are largely a matter of subjective experience and difficult to abstract from the seemingly 'basic' needs of human

survival (Soper, 2008). It is not sufficient to demote such needs to the category of 'desires' (Fromm, 1976) because the grounds on which social theorists draw the line in the sand or offer a normative critique are likely to be subjective and/or elitist as is the idea that there is something inherently wrong with the pursuit of pleasure and desire. Similarly, we have to question the extent to which social theorists can proclaim a need to be 'false' because even if we happen to agree with their normative position; it is highly likely that those to whom they attribute this 'false' need may not well not experience or even acknowledge it as such. On this note, there are some interesting ideas surrounding the impacts of consumerism on other (non-consumption) dimensions of human flourishing and needs such as personal and social relationships. On the one hand, there are those who suggest that consumerism stultifies our relationships with others, such as Bauman (2002) - who argues that the logic of consumerism (detailed above) spills over into our personal lives such that we grow to view relationships as 'disposable' and Lasch (1979) – who argues that consumerism is part of a wider culture of narcissism in which we are no longer able to relate to other people and thus consume as part of a futile attempt to compensate for this alienation. On the other, Daniel Miller (1998, 2001) has famously demonstrated, through in-depth qualitative research, that love and devotion are manifest in processes of consumption and that those whose relationships are expressed through 'manipulation of their material worlds' tended to experience close and intimate social networks.

Returning to the idea that categories of consumer goods (such as cars, ready meals or family holidays) are *functionally* homogenous but heavily differentiated at the *symbolic* level; we face what is perhaps the most significant contribution that social and cultural theories have made to understandings of consumption and consumerism. Put simply, the underlying idea here is that consumption in a consumer society is a symbolic activity through which people consume cultural *meanings* rather than economic products and services (Baudrillard, 1970). Unsurprisingly, social and cultural theories differ in their normative evaluations of this. On the one hand, there are those theorists who are very scathing of the ways in which consumer goods are used to display status and prestige or 'style over substance' identities (Bauman, 1998; Simmel, 1950; Veblen, 1994) ; on the other, as we saw above, there are those who celebrate this. A very rigorous critique of symbolic and cultural dimensions of consumption is found in the work of Bourdieu (1984) who demonstrates the ways in which social hierarchies and inequalities are (re)produced through practices of consumption and displays of taste. Conversely, an enduring defence of consumption is found in anthropological insights, most notably Douglas and Isherwood's idea (1979) that practices of consumption communicate meaning and so make culture visible (and this includes the hierarchies and inequalities that Bourdieu is so scornful of) alongside Douglas' related claim that:

'An individual's main objective in consumption is to help create the social universe and to find in it a creditable place' (Douglas, 1976).

Following from this observation, Jackson (2006) suggests that consumption performs a vital sociological role insofar as it acts as a code through which to communicate

meanings which in turn helps create and maintain a *meaningful* social world. We return to this below as it is hugely relevant to the discussion at hand.

It is important to note that whilst this is clearly a very tricky territory; there is some consensus among these conflicting accounts. Here, we are borrowing heavily from the work of Kate Soper (2007) so it is worth quoting her at length:

"[w]hether consumers are analysed as relatively autonomous, or as manipulated puppets of commodification, or as constructed by discursive regimes and sign systems beyond their immediate understanding or control, they are still almost always conceived as pursuing their private desires…in the one case these are endorsed as more genuinely freely chosen or created, in the other viewed as systematically distorted…through commodity society" (Soper, 2007: 216/7)

In a related paper, it is noted that:

"[a]cross the theoretical divide, there is some considerable agreement on the supposed role of consumerist consumption in supplying 'meaning' or compensating for the loss of earlier, more institutionally and socially guaranteed, forms of existential security (Soper and Thomas, 2006: 21/2)

So, in some form or another, the strongest critics of consumerism tend to concede that it is – for better or worse – providing *meaning* and facilitating the satisfaction of *desires* or at the very least, the pursuit of hedonistic pleasures. Equally, even the staunchest defenders tend to concede that consumption – despite its benefits – is to some extent, a *compensatory* activity (see Daniel Miller's later work, 2001). These insights are pivotal to our explication of sustainable consumerism but before we explore their ramifications; we must attend briefly to a potential spanner in the works. In stressing the importance of meaning and desire, we are understating the extent to which a lot of consumption has been theorised as mundane or habitual (Gronow and Warde, 2001) alongside the fact – from an environmental perspective (recalling the distinction between the consumption of economic goods/services and the consumption of natural resource) – a lot of consumption is invisible and 'inconspicuous' (Shove, 2003). Whilst this is not the place to discuss this in detail, our contention here is that proponents of this 'ordinary' consumption do not distance their analysis as far away from a concern with meaning and desire as they might like to (see Jackson, 2005). For example, individuals may well be 'locked in' to certain patterns of energy consumption as a result of the house that they purchase but the decision to buy that house in the first place is most likely tied to semiotic and hedonistic concerns. Similarly, one's purchase of coffee at the train station each day *en route* to work may well be largely unreflexive and habitual but this habit is unlikely to have come out of nowhere and the chances are that somewhere along the line, semiotic and hedonistic aspects featured in the decisions that lead to the habit's formation.

Tension: Sustainable Consumerism?

The idea that consumption performs – via the creation and maintenance of a meaningful social world – a vital sociological role has already found its way into the sustainable consumption debate. Indeed, the work of Jackson (2004, 2005, 2006) has identified that this is a major barrier to the pursuit of sustainable consumption. Similarly, the work of Colin Campbell (1994) – whilst steering clear of sustainable consumption – recognises that consumerism is a complex phenomenon that any attempt to make significant changes to (as the project of sustainable consumption might necessitate) would entail 'no minor adjustment to our way of life, but the transformation of our civilisation'. But surprisingly, the most significant insight for our analysis of (sustainable) consumerism comes from the work of Grant McCracken (1990). McCracken identifies a gap between the ideals to which a culture aspires and their lived reality alongside the need to maintain this gap if these ideals are never to be tarnished by a real world encounter. Furthermore, he suggests that cultures adopt a strategy of 'displaced meaning' to actively keep these ideals out of reach which raises the question of how to re-establish access to these all-important meanings in a manner that protects them from too much scrutiny or question. With this, he suggests that consumer goods can function as bridges to this displaced meaning without ever having to bring it fully in the 'demanding circumstances of the here and now'. Put simply, consumer goods embody idealised cultural meanings and in longing for a particular consumer good we gain access to these meanings and yet – recalling Bauman's analysis above – the moment that we actually obtain the coveted good, the sense of meaning attached to it in its idealised (unobtainable) form is repudiated. And like Bauman, McCracken notes that we simply turn our attentions to a new consumer good or service such that we become committed to continued engagement with the logic of consumerism. Whilst Bauman is highly critical of this apparent failure; McCracken considers it a success because it is essential that we 'never receive what it is we want' if we are to preserve the important gap between the real and the ideal:

"Once that car that has for so long stood as a representative of 'what my life will be like someday' is in fact part of the individual's life, then displaced meaning is no longer fully displaced. It is not part of the 'here and now' and to this extent vulnerable to contradiction". (McCracken, 1990)

As such, the meaning that consumerism affords is far from a shambolic substitute for something more 'authentic'; it is actually the very mechanism that secures a meaningful world through performing a complex balancing act between contact with cultural ideals and the necessity of continually displacing meanings. Nevertheless, this is *not* conducive to the balancing act of sustainable consumption - quite aside from any concern for the sustainable consumption of economic goods and service; this process is undeniably unsustainable in terms of resource consumption (and we cannot overlook that this meaning creation by some of the world's richest persons is reliant on exploitation of the poorest). Viewed as such, it becomes clear that the *real* challenge of sustainable consumption stems from a dialectic tension between the

social and cultural functions performed by consumerism and the environmental degradation associated with the high levels of consumption that this entails.

To see this more clearly, recall the distinction between the economic consumption of goods and services and the material consumption of natural resources. Consumerism as a cultural condition is characterised by high levels of economic consumption and whether we like it or not, it is virtually impossible to mount a normative critique of this because in some form or another, it is performing vital sociological functions. Nevertheless, acknowledging the material basis of consumption forces us to recognise that consumerism is reliant on accelerating environmental atrophy which means that, aside from the impossibility of mounting a normative social and cultural critique of consumerism, there is actually no need to do so. Indeed, the material and ecological critique is perhaps the *only* watertight critique of consumerism with which to counter the consensus surrounding the capacity of consumerism to create and maintain a meaningful social world (indeed, sadly, even arguments surrounding social inequality might be written off as subjective in the absence of a material basis). Taken together, this creates a dialectic of sustainable consumerism in which there is a fundamental tension between the semiotic functions and material impacts of consumerist consumption. The challenge for sustainable consumption is one of resolving this tension satisfactorily. It is not enough to simply mount a critique of consumerism with ecological evidence because this would overlook the importance of the sociological functions that it is currently performing and, ultimately, would be disaster in terms of political feasibility and cultural viability. Equally, to assume that improvements in technical efficiency will enable levels of economic consumption to continue but with reduced environmental impacts is to overlook any potential 'rebound effects' and the sheer resilience and lack of restraint inherent in the logic of consumerism. What is needed is a way of maintaining the satisfaction of needs and conditions of human flourishing in a manner that is less reliant on the economic consumption of goods and services such that the environmental impacts of doing so are minimised.

Sustainable Lifestyles and Alternative Hedonism

A resolution of this tension can be found in the related concepts of sustainable lifestyles – which addresses the issue of meaning - and alternative hedonism (Soper, 2006 2007 2008) – which addresses the issues of pleasure and desire. The language of 'sustainable lifestyles' is becoming ubiquitous in media, comment and environmental policy and yet there is still a good deal of ambiguity as to what this actually means or entails. Part of this has to do with the difficulties involved in defining the concept of 'lifestyle'. Indeed, it has been suggested that the term can simultaneously refer to everything and mean absolutely nothing (Sobel, 1981). Nevertheless, as with consumption/consumerism, social and cultural theories have a wealth of insights to offer here and there have been some serious attempts to use these in explicating the concept of 'sustainable lifestyles' (for example Bedford, 2002 Spaargaren, 2003). It is not our intention to explore this in detail here as we have done so elsewhere (Evans and Jackson, 2007) but we do want to draw attention to the longstanding association between the analysis of lifestyles and the analysis of consumption (Chaney, 1996) to

suggest that sustainable lifestyles may be an appropriate unit through which to consider the possibilities of sustainable consumption.

A good way of thinking about 'lifestyles' is as an assemblage of social practices, that represent a particular way of life and give substance to an individual's ongoing narrative self identity and self-actualisation (Giddens, 1991). Again, there is an important symbolic dimension at play here but this does *not* mean –as the likes of Campbell (1995) suggest - that the analysis of lifestyles is the analysis of tastes rather than values or the triumph of aesthetics over ethics. Indeed, Giddens (1991) is keen to point out that these assemblages of practices should form a coherent life politics that takes into account questions of the right way to live one's life. It is important not to overplay the extent to which lifestyles are matters of reflexive choice as opposed to structural disposition (Bourdieu, 1984) and on this note, Spaargaren's (2003) analysis of sustainable lifestyles and sustainable consumption highlights the ways in which individual choices and social practices are both constrained and enabled by structural and institutional processes which, following Giddens (1984), he terms *systems of provision*. Our contention here is that these insights and the concept of lifestyles represents a way to think about alternatives to the excessive levels of consumption – material and economic – that consumerism entails in so far as it allows consideration of the ways in with individuals might engage in social practices aside from consumerist consumption.

To make such a move, however, there is a need to do some separating out of concepts. In the eyes of some, it is problematic to suggest that social practices might represent an alternative to consumption on the grounds that it is impossible to draw a distinction between consumption and practice. For example, Warde (2005) suggests that consumption 'occurs within and for the sake of practices' (p.145) – a moment in virtually every practice rather than a practice in itself:

"For example, the paraphernalia of the hot rod enthusiast – modified vehicles, manuals and magazines. Memorabilia…are more directly the consequence of engagement in the practice of a particular motor sport than they are of individual taste or choice" (Warde, 2005: 138)

We would certainly agree that virtually all social practice involves *material* consumption in some form and accept that a degree of economic consumption is likely. Furthermore, recalling our distinction between consumption and consumerism, we suggest that consumption itself is not anathema to the project of sustainable consumption. However, we would also suggest that certain social practices can be conceived of as *consumerist* social practices on the grounds that they are characterised by high levels of economic consumption such that consuming gets close to being a practice in its own right. Indeed, it is precisely these consumerist social practices – characterised by high levels of economic and material consumption – that create the tension of sustainable consumerism that we are attempting to resolve here.

The concept of lifestyles, therefore, allows for bundles of social practices that are not so reliant on such fervent engagement with the logic of consumerism and

consumerist social practices. So, whilst these social practices will most likely entail consumption (economic and material); they need not be quite so damaging as their consumerist counterparts. Of course, for sustainable lifestyles to be any sort of substitute for consumerist consumption, they must replace what is lost by reductions in consumption and as such must allow for the pursuit of cultural meaning and private desires. Our own ethnographic study of persons deliberately attempting to live and consume sustainably (Evans, 2008) certainly suggests that living a 'sustainable lifestyle' affords the possibilities of doing so through social practices that are not so reliant on high levels of economic consumption. Indeed, many of the social functions that consumerism has – according to the social and cultural theories discussed above- handed over to consumption are manifest in the respondents' narratives of engaging in activities such as spending time with friends and family, gardening, writing or even the process itself of attempting to live and consume sustainably. In doing so, the respondents in this study claim to find meaning and satisfaction; status, identity and aspiration; integration recognition and validation as well as a whole host of other benefits ranging from improving health to financial savings.

In addition to providing meaning, the study suggests that living a sustainable lifestyle can provide for the pleasure and desire that is so central to consumption and accounts thereof. These pleasures, according to the respondents' narratives, ranged from the 'simple pleasures' associated with energy saving rituals in the home through the creative indulgence involved in creating a 'whole new garment' by repairing old or broken clothing to wholesale shifts in the way that they eat (local, in-season, slowly and organic) or move (cycling and walking) leading to a changed relationship with the world around them in a manner that is innately pleasurable. This sits rather well with Kate Soper's *alternative hedonism* thesis in which she argues that a successful antidote to the environmental impacts of consumerism relies less on stressing the ecological necessity of consuming less or denying the pleasures that consumerism affords and more on stressing the ways in which it obscures the 'other pleasures' of alternative, less environmentally damaging, sources of consumption and non- consumption. She states:

"A turn to 'other pleasures' is, in this sense, therefore, not against the grain of human desire but fully consonant with it" (Soper, 2008)

Viewed as such, it would seem that living a sustainable lifestyle offers some resolution of the sustainable consumerism dialectic in so far as it offers meaning and hedonism on grounds that are less reliant on environmental degradation.

Nevertheless, there are limitations to this suggestion. For a start, this analysis rests on a particular framing of lifestyle as 'life project' which runs counter to the suggestion that the importance of 'structural' dispositions and systems of provision should not be underplayed. In a similar vein, these arguments rest on the study of a marginal minority who are deliberately trying to pursue a sustainable lifestyle and as such, it would be very naïve to assume that the meaning and pleasure that these persons obtain through doing so could be easily 'scaled up' and transferred to a society wide

insight. Furthermore, there is the danger that the widespread adoption of sustainable lifestyles would diminish their present capabilities of providing meaning and pleasure because, to some extent, their efficacy derives from their being oppositional to the so-called 'mainstream' of society. Of course, there is every chance that the meanings emerging from these marginal process may well feed into wider cultural processes such that there are new 'structures' of meaning available to make sustainable practice more desirable but, as yet, it is too early to tell. Either way, the main limitation of this analysis has to do with both the concept of 'lifestyles' and the distinction between economic and material consumption. Thinking back to Spaargaren's analysis (2003), he suggests that the range of social practices making up any individual's lifestyle may not be internally consistent such that 'sustainable lifestyles' do not, as a matter of necessity, entail sustainable consumption across the whole spectrum of individual social practices. Our own study of sustainable lifestyles (Evans and Abrahamse, 2008) certainly indicates – by the respondents' own admission – inconsistencies across social practices and moreover, a good deal of variation in bundles across respondents. The implication of this is that there is no model of a sustainable lifestyle but bundles of social practices that are potentially less unsustainable. Crucially, whilst virtually every respondent offered moral narratives of living a 'good life' and resisting consumerism in terms of avoiding excessive economic consumption, what is missing in the respondents' narratives is a de-ontological commitment to reducing *material* consumption. This is best illustrated in the words of one respondent:

> I know that taking a flight to Australia is bad for the environment and I wouldn't mind betting that the damage it does outweighs the good things I do elsewhere with my car and my food and whatnot. But still, that is not what it's all about, is it? I mean, it is a state of mind isn't it? As long as you think about what you do then you are doing the right thing. That's my view anyway (Male, 30)

Interestingly, this was the view common to virtually all of the respondents and it suggests that 'sustainable lifestyles' may not be all that sustainable when it comes to a consideration of material environmental impact. Nevertheless, despite an apparent failure to decouple economic and material consumption; it would certainly seem that reduced economic consumption coupled with an emerging appreciation of pleasures that are not so reliant material consumption represents a step towards the resolution of the tension between consumerist consumption and environmental sustainability

Conclusion and Discussion

Bringing social and cultural theories of consumption head to head with the objectives of environmental sustainability is in some senses a recipe for disaster. The broad agreement that the high levels of economic consumption associated with consumerism facilitates the pursuit of personal desire and collective meaning does not sit easily with the observation that the concomitant level of material consumption is ecologically devastating. Nevertheless, both sides have much to learn from one another - those concerned with the project of sustainable consumption can derive valuable insights from broadly sociological analyses of consumerism whilst the

agendas of environmental sustainability represent an important challenge to social and cultural theorists of consumption. Indeed, when faced with this challenge it would be all too easy for these theorists to view the problem as one of technical efficiency or default to a social constructivist view of science but in doing so, they would perform the very reductions that they are so keen to avoid on their own side of the equation. In doing so, they would miss a valuable opportunity to refine and find a very practical application for their sophisticated conceptual insights. What we have offered here, through reference to the ideas of the social and cultural theorists who have risen to this challenge, is some consideration of the ways in which the sociological functions currently performed by consumerism might be realised through practices that are less reliant on environmental degradation. Thinking with Baudrillard's ideas (1970) that consumption in a consumer society is the consumption of meanings rather than specific goods or services and that the relationship between object and meaning is arbitrary rather than necessary; we have considered the ways in which these 'emancipated signs' can be attached to practices that are somehow more sustainable. Essentially, this relies on the mimesis and reproduction of consumerism – or at least its prevailing logic – such that meaning and desire can pursued via alternative bundles of social practices. Conceptually, this hints at the importance of post-consumerist rather than simple anti-consumerist lifestyles. Practically, despite the limitations of our analysis, this at least offers up hope that lifestyle change is possible by way of a solution to unsustainable consumption in a manner that does not rest on technological optimism or the moralistic and didactic prescriptions of consuming less through behaviour change.

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