

ANALYSIS

Willing consumers—or locked-in? Policies for a sustainable consumption

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Abstract

Postmodern explanations of consumer behaviour stress social and psychological factors to the neglect of explanations based on structural issues such as the working life conditions which favour a work-and-spend lifestyle, the conditions of urban living or the effects of pervasive marketing. This paper argues that consumers may not be so keen and willing but are rather locked-in by circumstances. Some of these circumstances are deliberately created by other interests, and a policy to limit consumption must look for adequate means over a large and varied field. In the end shorter working hours may be an important key to a more sustainable future. © 2002 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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To reduce consumption in the rich countries—or to change its character and content radically—is often considered a condition for a sustainable development. This turns the searchlight on the consumer as the principal lever of change. In economics, she is assumed to base her decisions on rational and deliberate considerations of how to satisfy her preferences. Other disciplines stress social and psychological factors. Historical and technological changes add to the list of factors contributing to the present consumption. All in all, this seems to establish that consumers really are intent and keen on consuming. It is hard to evade the disheartening conclusion that the envi-

ronmentally required reductions or changes are unrealistic under present conditions.

But these arguments for consumption remain within a tradition focussed on individual choice. They obscure how consumer's choices are affected by structural factors in society such as working life conditions, urban structure and everyday life patterns. The focus on the consumer also fails to pay attention to how producers and businesses construct the field of consumption to satisfy their interests. It neglects the role of the state and how business tends to co-operate with or pressure governments to create conducive conditions for increasing consumption. Thus, we may accept that consumers are making a deliberate choice rather than being passive victims following the dictates of producer's marketing efforts, but we must still

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acknowledge that business makes intentional use of all the factors people do consider in their choice.

The aim here is to approach the issue of sustainable consumption broadly. Moving towards a sustainable consumption may in the end be a task for the individual but the debate about this must also acknowledge the structural factors, that surround her. The focus here will be on the power of the political system to intervene. Legal and organisational changes can promote a change of behaviour. To accomplish such changes may, however, require the participation of the same individuals who are consumers but rather in their parallel role as citizens.

The paper starts with a brief background on the issue of sustainable consumption. The next section summarises the individual approach. Here the paper refers to Røpke (1999) who provides a broad and comprehensive description of the ‘willingness to consume’. Section 3 discusses some historical changes (also recognised by Røpke) but also other structural issues that explain increased consumption. These raise the question if consumers are so ‘willing’ or if they rather are locked-in by the circumstances. Section 4 introduces a model to illustrate the relations among people (acting in different roles), business and the government. The final section discusses policy actions that might help to unlock consumers from a pattern of consumption driven by the forces discussed in previous sections.

1. Background: growing concern over lifestyles, modest official reaction

Environmental issues entered the global scene with the UN conference in Stockholm, 1972. At this time conventional environmental issues such as pollution and poisoning of nature were prominent in most people’s mind. But the motto of the conference—‘Only one earth’—also reflects an early concern with resource depletion. The Club of Rome report ‘Limits to Growth’ (Meadows et al., 1972) supported this aspect. Still it was not until the so-called Brundtland

report (‘Our Common Future’ (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987)) that the issue of sustainable development became a permanent element in the public debate. This report takes a fairly optimistic view on the possibilities of combining ecological sustainability with continued economic growth. By 1992, at the Rio conference, a more sceptical mood prevailed. Its main document, Agenda 21, claims that the lifestyles of the North mean an over-consumption incompatible with a global sustainable development. This provoked opposition from the North. All the same, the United Nations as well as OECD and other international and national bodies have organised themselves to analyse ‘sustainable production and consumption’.

Consumption is normally regarded in its economic sense but this is closely connected to the ecological one. Consumption patterns remain intensive in energy and materials (Daly, 1996), consuming them ecologically by increasing their entropy: material is dispersed, energy becomes less useful (Georgescu-Roegen, 1971). There is little sign of a dematerialization. The ecological load differs between different kinds of consumption but it is often unfeasible to single out specific parts of it because consumption comes in packages. This calls for an analysis of activities and aggregate consumption as it is realised in lifestyles.

All scientific evidence suggests that the global environmental situation continues to deteriorate (European Environment Agency, 2000; United Nations Environment Programme and Stockholm Environment Institute, 1999) and OECD, in its latest Environmental Outlook, stresses the unfavourable trends in consumption as a major problem (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001). Governments in the North still hesitate to commit themselves to an issue that is politically very sensitive. Generally, it figures among the less prominent environmental themes (Lafferty and Meadowcroft, 2000). This tallies well with Jacobs’ remark that “raising the level of consumption is generally regarded as the key political objective of any

government: the principle measure of its success and... the best indicator of its likely vote” (Jacobs, 1997).

Nonetheless, it is generally recognised by environmentalists that ‘household consumption in industrial societies like the UK must decline’ (ibid). Ecological modernisation may achieve a relative decoupling (less per unit) but this does not suffice to compensate for growing volumes. Higher efficiency due to technological improvement may instead create a rebound effect: saving energy or natural resources per unit of production results in lower costs which encourage increased consumption (Jevons, 1865; Herring, 1998). In the end, a growing volume of activity will offset the initial gain, like futile attempts to catch one’s own tail.

Governments - and business - tend to dress an aversion towards restrictions on consumption with references to consumer sovereignty. The understanding is that the predicament of overconsumption can only be overcome if the values behind the present lifestyles change; to this end consumers may be informed and educated but not coerced. The ethical question of ‘living lightly’ to save planetary resources is by and large left as an issue for individuals and organisations of civil society. The green claim in this spirit is that we should combine the train towards higher *efficiency* with a sense of *sufficiency* that would limit the aspirations. The moral ring is never far off in such statements and may be followed by a resigned attitude because it is difficult to point to an agent for such a change of value (whereas it is easy to recognise all the consumption promoting interests). But this paper rather hinges on the assumption that an agent of policy change (but not necessarily value change) is available as people, not in their capacity of consumers but as reflecting citizens in the political process. In this role, people may agree on rules and norms even if they do not tally with each person’s individual preference - even a smoker may agree to smoking bans in certain areas or circumstances. Such responsible action cannot be taken for granted so this is, of course, no panacea to the problem of sustainability but it is a venue worth exploring.

2. Consumption as extended utilitarianism

In the discipline of economics, consumption is an individual choice among different ways of acting to optimise one’s benefits, and it offers a distinct way of explaining how this choice is made. Other disciplines have objected and suggest other or complementary explanations; we may group them as utilitarian, differentialist and culturalist.

The utilitarian approach is the economic one but the term stresses the ties to the psychology of Jeremy Bentham. In his vocabulary utility is anything that satisfies human needs by being useful, good or producing happiness—the terms are interchangeable.¹ In consuming, people use their available means to maximise their utility according to their idiosyncratic preferences. As interpreted in economics, utility is measurable and allows rational ordering of individual preferences but not interpersonal comparisons. Another assumption is that ‘more is better’ (even if it has repeatedly been demonstrated that the correlation between income and happiness is weak). The process of choice is assumed to be atomistic, performed independently by each consumer.

In the differentialist approach, in contrast, social relations are the key issues. Consumption is regarded as a system of signs, which creates meaning in terms of a social order. The phenomenon is of long standing; costumes and attires were important markers in the European courts many centuries ago. With the appearance of a bourgeois class in the late 19th century, the use of interior decoration, clothes and other belongings became an important means to ‘close doors and build bridges’ in the social world; the quote is from one of the pioneer scholars in the field, Georg Simmel (Simmel, 1978). Thorstein Veblen described the behaviour of the ‘nouveau riche’ in New York 100 years ago—how to display your wealth in the most efficient way by ‘conspicuous consumption’ (Veblen, 1899). Eco-

¹ Utility—‘that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness (An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation, 1780) (Halévy, 1955).

nomist Keynes also remarked on the issue of envy, and Harrod and Hirsch drew on the difference between democratic wealth, which may be bestowed to everyone, and oligarchic wealth which is, by its logic, reserved for a selected group at the expense of the rest (the phrase ‘no society can ever be so rich that everyone can afford to have a servant’ explains the concept). This leads to the notion of positional goods which is by necessity scarce and for that reason becomes more attractive with growing prosperity: antiques, houses in specific locations, positions in organisation, etc. (Hirsch, 1976). Anthropologists like Mary Douglas (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979) and the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1984) stress the importance of displaying taste. Bourdieu—in the French post-WWII setting—describes an elaborate social structure where the content as well as the scope of your consumption is relevant for your position. This means that the number of records or books one possesses is not decisive but also what kind of musical or literary taste they reveal. The invocation of court habits and Veblen implies a ‘trickle-down’ procedure: that fashions—as well as aspirations—appear at the top and are gradually copied by lower social strata. But the stratified society must not be a strict ladder society; Bourdieu describes a field with a cultural dimension perpendicular to the economic one. Others, e.g. Featherstone (1991), question the concept of trickle-down and demonstrate that modern fashion influence may travel sideways and even upwards socially (as when youth cultures spread to the middle-aged). Wilk (1997) stresses that a differential approach may just as well be expressed in terms of dislike and repudiation (“I would never dream of buying that”) as in desire for consumption.

The culturalist approach instead relates an individual to her own self-understanding. Here consumption is not a signal to the world but to own mind. What you acquire should match and support your understanding of who you are (Campbell, 1987). By extension, this obviously also implies the possibility to create yourself with the help of an abundant supply of consumption items: clothes, equipment for all walks of life,

furniture and other accessories to decorate your home, etc. Featherstone discusses how this may be turned into an skilful art of either submitting to a predetermined style or freewheeling across the entire supply of available markers. In a similar vein, Löfgren (1990) describes a prevailing lifestyle (in particular in Scandinavia?) oriented towards the (material) creation of a home and interior decoration expected to serve as a family haven with the emotional and material aspects interweaving. Still others regard consumption as a means to escape the boredom when life appears as a prison (Cohen and Taylor, 1992).

A special issue is the quest for change and novelty as such, whether this is instinctual or culturally instilled with business’ keen assistance, which seems to amplify other forces of consumption.

In particular, Douglas’ description of individual aspirations in the social field has much in common with that of an economics one (as Røpke notes). All three approaches might even be condensed into an ‘extended utilitarian’ one since they all aim to promote individual benefit, in particular since the motives may overlap. But as extensions do, this also trivialises the approach and turns attention away from the crucial issue focussed in critical theory: that consumption is set to work to satisfy all sorts of aspirations. The postmodern view is rather to rationalise consumption habits; ‘the academic critique of consumerist conformity [has]... turned into a celebration of choice, identity in and through goods.’ (Cross, 2000). The consumer is made the key person without asking what external forces drove her to become a habitual consumer.

3. Structural forces driving consumption

For describing the individual driving forces, the incentives to consume created by surrounding circumstances and forces should not be overlooked. Some are included in Røpke’s account (even if these testify to inevitability rather than willingness to consume); some more are added below.

3.1. *Historical changes: individualisation and consumption*

The economic history of most Western countries includes the departure from a traditional farming society of small means, crammed housing and close ascribed social bonds. People who have made their way out of such circumstances into the industrial society are prone to cherish the pleasures of material consumption. Similar observations have been made in countries which are today in a similar period of transition (Ger and Belk, 1996). People will also grasp the opportunity to live in households of their own choice. There are more single generation households because young people leave their parental home sooner and the elderly live by themselves and not in extended families. Divorces also add to the number of single or small households. This development is assumed to have boosted consumption by multiplying the demand for kitchens, bathrooms, white and brown goods, etc. that each household requires. Increased incomes have been changed into personal independence.²

But the claim may have to be modified—This is crucial because it also suggests a social critique of this rupture of bonds in living which points in an inappropriate direction. Much of it is actually due to involuntary movement for jobs or education; it is also very hard to imagine any measure to stem this demographic tide. Living together may be quite economical: for similar living standard the per capita requirements in a two-person household can be estimated to just two thirds of what a single person requires. But the fact that the average number of persons per household has decreased can only explain a small part of the increased consumption over the years—in the order of 10%.³

² The limited interest in housing collectives has been ascribed to the fact that the living memories of crammed housing still are stronger than the experience of sorrows of loneliness in single households. Compare the film 'Together' by Lukas Moodysson with the much-quoted line, "I would rather eat hot dogs together than fillet of beef by myself".

³ The total economic means required for Swedish households 1960 and 1985 (reduced for population growth), assuming constant living standards, were only approximately 10% higher (own calculations). The rest of the increased consumption must be explained by other means.

In the same time the living space per household—albeit smaller!—increased by one half. Car ownership has doubled (more below) and households have acquired more appliances and leisure equipment. Multipurpose items have given way for specialised—one pair of shoes for each kind of activity, specialised kitchen utensils or power tools for each application, etc. Vacations have turned more elaborate, etc. Individualisation is perhaps more pronounced within the household with each member expecting his own TV set, computer or telephone. This development has been strongly encouraged by the relative price drop in industrially produced goods.⁴

3.2. *Urban structure and consumption*

A favoured type of housing—provided that one can dodge the externalities—is low-density one-family housing. Typically this has created an urban sprawl with long distances to travel to work and difficult to serve with public transport. This increases the attraction of the car, which again reinforces the urban sprawl to accommodate the space demand for traffic arteries, protective zones and parking. The sprawl also affects the commercial services, which have to draw customers from larger areas, encouraging shopping by car. Once in the car, the marginal driving effort to larger malls is limited and this pushes the concentration of services further, rendering the private car even more indispensable. This upward spiralling, promoting car ownership, is a well-known fact in urban planning but little has been achieved to stall it. Environmental concerns add to the problem because transport, especially by car, and housing have the highest environmental loads (in addition to being the heaviest items on the household economy).

⁴ Individualisation coincides with claims that we are past the age of mass consumption. It is no longer necessary to produce long series of identical (mass) products. But this gives a choice within limits—the range of differentiation is small and truly customised products would be very expensive. This substantiates the notion of the 'eccentric millionaire': only the very rich can afford to have things the way they really like it!

Car ownership also develops from a household issue to an individual one, in particular where it has become indispensable for work trips, and the growth today mostly derives from households buying a second (or more) car. Meanwhile many single parents apparently refrain from a car for economical reasons, as do young people, at least in urban areas where satisfactory public transport is available.⁵ In Sweden, some 20% of the households have more than one car (and the group grows) while some 20% of the households still lack a car, and this group is more or less constant (Näbig, 2000). This creates a social problem of mobility while the main environmental problem is rather the negative trend for the cars' performance.

In a specific American context, Segal (1999) stresses that even middle-class US households have to work hard to satisfy further needs arising from the urban structure. Parents who aspire to good schools for their children must choose the right districts where housing is likely to be expensive; likewise the fear of crime or violence may force households to spend dearly on housing in proper areas. This illustrates how neglect on the part of the state in guaranteeing certain quality of life factors such as basic rights of education and security affects the households, forcing people to choose work before leisure.

3.3. *System change and consumption boost*

Consumption comes in clusters because household technology is often systemic. The various items are interconnected and they depend on the household's connections to the outer world: water, electricity, communication. Other systems depend on a specific technology to which the household adapts its own collections. This makes the household vulnerable to technological shifts, which may turn the collection outmoded. The shift may be motivated by improved performance but this is often mixed with a business interest in

renewal (and premature scrapping) to increase sales. Some examples are systems for recording and playing music and photography/filming. Consumers' collections of vinyl and CD records (and later types), cassettes, 8 mm-film and videos, etc represent a much larger expenditure than the players. Even if much of it is bought for novelty, changes also create a need for replacement (as well as an increasing problem of accessibility for all personal recordings).⁶

The pace of transition in these cases is, however, mainly determined by the acceptance of the consumers (albeit pressured by sellers and the quest for novelty) which is a deterring factor. This does not apply when the government is involved in the infrastructure of the system. Two topical examples are digital broadcasting and the third generation of mobile telephones. Digital broadcasting will require completely new TV and radio sets (or set-top boxes for TV). The technological gains in quality can hardly motivate this change and increased channel capacity is hardly an urgent consumer demand. As for mobile phones, the hype now seems to have settled. In both these cases, governments and business are jointly promoting systems that will require premature scrapping and create a tremendous sales boost.⁷ There are past success stories of this kind of cooperation where amenities and services, e.g. rural electrification, have been made generally available through private/public partnership but it remains to prove that consumer benefits in these new instances outweigh the sum of consumer costs and environmental load.

3.4. *Consolidating a consumer culture*

Markets are supposedly a place for deals between equal partners and advertising is the seller's means of informing prospective buyers. But this cannot disguise that 'marketing' has long since

⁵ There has been a remarkable trend shift in Sweden where fewer young people today have a driving license down from 80 to 60% of the 20-years old in 10 years (Åkerman et al., 2000).

⁶ As with cassettes and films, computer documents are rapidly becoming illegible because new programs or program versions cannot cope with them.

⁷ Some 9 million Swedes share approximately 6 million TV sets and 22 million radios today. As I finalise this paper, it is announced that digital radio will be mothballed in Sweden.

become a pervasive cultural factor in our society. This has been discussed and criticised for decades: ours is a ‘consumer culture’ where every human wish tends to be transformed into a commercial object or service (Marcuse, 1964; Durning, 1992; Cross, 1993). Today marketing merits a renewed examination because this consumption is not ecologically sustainable but also because marketing is steadily becoming more intrusive as it turns to lifestyling, takes a firm grip of media and enters public institutions:

- especially in the 1990s, large multinationals have developed their brands into lifestyle concepts. Firms like Nike, Coca-cola or McDonalds turn from marketing goods or services to developing their brands into dominating signals of a ‘feel good lifestyle’ (while production increasingly is outsourced to subcontractors or franchise-holders which offer appalling working conditions) (Klein, 2000).
- commercial TV and radio is gaining ground over public services and media corporations tend to become integrated into larger economic trusts. This amplifies the trend that the journalistic content conforms more with the owners’ and the advertisers’ interests. World wide, there is a concern over the uncritical trend in journalism which has no further aim than to ‘bring the reader/viewer to the commercial message’.⁸
- other routes of market penetration are sports and cultural events sponsored by and named after firms. Schools and universities make contracts with firms giving them access to campus and even to the curricula. Large sums are spent on indirect or clandestine means to affect public opinion and the public agenda: promotional events, lobbying, more or less rigged opinion polls, think tanks and research institutes which provide arguments and scientific backing, etc. As environmental and anti-consumerism organisations (like Greenpeace and Adbuster) learn to use publicity and media effectively, this also accentuates that business

has vastly superior resources to set the agenda.⁹

Marketing also radiates into almost every sector of the economy, constituting a formidable pressure group: in addition to the multi-billion advertising sector itself—involving many categories of people—marketing virtually finances newspapers and journals including all who make a living out of them (editors, journalists, photographers, artists, printers, distributors) and it pays for (commercial) TV which employs news staff, actors and artists engaged in the programs, technicians and all supporting staff, etc. These very vocal and very influential groups may resist measures to curb marketing and consumption vividly.¹⁰

Finally, political integration and technical development has made it more difficult to enforce political rules about marketing. One example is Sweden’s problem of upholding a ban on TV advertising directed to small children: EU legislation may overrule national legislation, and satellite television is outside the legislation of the country of destination. Another example is the advertising of medical drugs: previously mainly aimed at medical staff but now (especially via Internet) increasingly to would-be patients who then exert pressure on their doctors.¹¹

3.5. *Work and consumption*

Work and consumption are the two sides of the coin of the economy. The amount of work per-

⁹ Thomas Dietz reports that industrialist risk scientists outnumbered comparable scientists working for environmental groups by seven or eight to one (Thinking about Environmental Conflicts, paper in press). Similarly campaign funds from business outnumbered opponents by at least ten to one for the Swedish referendum on EU membership (Premfors, 2000).

¹⁰ It has been estimated that Swedes meet 3000 commercial messages every day. The advertising sector commands 40 billion kroner per year, at least 100 times more than public resources for independent consumer information (Dagens Nyheter and Konsumentverket (Swedish Consumer Board), personal communication, 10th May 2001).

¹¹ So-called life quality products—such as Viagra or slimming preparations like Xenital—quickly (and until the rules were changed) became a heavy burden for the state when they were eligible for public subsidies.

⁸ Both trends are obvious in Sweden where public service TV and radio used to have a very strong position. The trend where media businesses merge and become part of conglomerates is global and very marked in the USA.

formed determines the level of consumption, individually as well as nationally. Thus a radical proposal for sustainable consumption is to reduce the input of labour. Two issues are at play here: our understanding of the work/consumption nexus and the political forces around work and around the national economy.

In economic theory, work is a disutility, which makes the utility of consumption possible (and this is not invalidated by any positive feelings that people may have or express about having a job or doing their job). The understanding—also expressed by the term ‘labour market’—is that the employee is in a position to match the sacrifice with the joy and settle how many hours of work he or she will do, balancing the input of work with the desired consumption.

There is little to support this notion empirically. The amount of work performed per capita is controlled by a social order rather than by individual choice. It is not by chance that some 90% of the male labour force work around 40 h per week—a measure defined as ‘full time’ by law, contracts and norms in many countries. But surveys show that many desire shorter hours. Approximately one in six accepts individual shorter hours with pay cuts and at least half of the respondents favour a general reform that changes the meaning of ‘full time’. This indicates that individual changes are less coveted; a change should include all concerned such that it creates a new social order (Sanne, 1995).

One outcome of this is that we do not only work in order to be able to spend (which is a trivial statement) but that we also spend because we have worked and received an income which we are less keen about but will still, in all likelihood, transform into consumption. This also means growing accustomed to consuming and more commitments, a ‘ratchet effect’ which impedes any suggested cuts in consumption. Such a social order is obviously counterproductive to the endeavour of sustainable development. (Schor, 1991; Gorz, 1994; Lipietz, 1995; Soper, 1996; Schor, 1998; Hayden, 1999)

The interests of business and the state have created this situation. Employers strive to extract as many hours as possible from each employee

(rather than splitting the work among more hands) and this has made the working hours structure an issue as old as paid labour. The 8 hour day was the first major goal of the early labour movement but it took nearly a century to arrive at the 40 hour week in the 1970s. The 1980s even meant an increase in hours per capita in some countries. In addition to that, the labour input per household has increased as more married women have joined the labour force. The employers’ resistance to reforms has grown stronger as they have gained an upper hand in the last decades. Today some employers tend to regard 40 hours as a concession, a practical minimum for the person who wants to be employable and get advancements.

Up to the 1970s, the state—at least in Sweden—was neutral or positive to working hours reforms. After that, there have been no major reforms in spite of a considerable increase in productivity: trading just half of the increase into shorter hours would have brought the average working week down to 35 in the 1990s.¹² Instead, many governments are increasingly involved in promoting economic growth in the belief that this will lead to full employment. The trade unions have also been reluctant for various reasons, not least stagnant individual incomes.

4. Modelling the actors of the consumer society

The discussion above of individual and structural determinants of consumption highlights three kinds of actors which we may name People, Business and The Political Class. A triangular scheme describes how they relate to each other (Fig. 1) and this will be used to sum up the analysis above.

People and business are not only engaged in the classical labour-versus-capital antagonism in the arena of work and production. Here we are concerned with people as consumers versus business as sellers. The relation is an uneven one: people

¹² For data, see Sanne (1995). Some countries have stepped over the 40 h threshold to 38, 37, 36 or even 35 h as France is currently doing.

are subjected to pervasive marketing efforts of business whereas consumers have a limited power of consumer actions against certain products, brands or firms.

People are also political beings with a (principal) right—in democratic societies—to select their governing bodies. The relation between people and The Political Class—constituted by the elected representatives and their ‘courts’ of public officials, administrators, experts and scientists—contains all the issues of (public) governance: how political influence and power is constructed and accomplished; how responsive the government is to the people and vice versa. Pressure may be applied both ways.

The relation between Business and The Political Class lacks a comparable theory with a distribution of rights and responsibilities. The political system (in principle) rules over the firms as juridical persons but Business enjoys a *de facto* power in the political process from its capacity to affect the conditions of the state and its citizens (even if it does not elect governments¹³). This ‘econocracy’ derives from the economic resources in the hands of Business, resources which can make or unmake job opportunities, form tax bases, be used for campaigning to influence opinions, etc. The new global mobility of capital—incidentally granted

by political decisions—contributes to this power with the political entity remaining limited and territorially based.

The connections, mutual dependencies and converging interests of Business and The Political Class are ubiquitous; the modern society is not so much a ‘market capitalism’ as a ‘system capitalism’ (Ingelstam, 1999). But the transactions are less transparent than those in the other relations. Business may- and does- lobby for its interests, often with considerable financial power, but mostly covertly, as opposed to the mainly public civil and political debate of citizens and the political class. And while regulations and taxes on business are public, business often extorts governments to lift or ease the regulations, to offer tax breaks and to provide more or less direct subsidies in a much less open manner. Such candid or opaque concessions are all the more likely, claims Jänicke (1990) since bureaucracy exercises strong power and often sides with business interests. Jänicke describes this cleavage within the political class between bureaucrats and politicians and points to the paradox that the latter often pose as ‘decision-makers’ in spite of their strong dependency on the bureaucracy and business. That sometimes make them ‘scape-goats’ for social problems stemming from decisions taken by Business (such as lay-offs causing unemployment).¹⁴

In spite of the media’s obvious importance for setting the agenda, this scheme does not regard it as an actor of its own. Media’s self-imposed task of representing the public interest is restrained by its attachment to financial interests and the fact that advertising, rather than readers/viewers, pays the lion’s share of its costs. By and large—and for obvious reasons for commercial media—the media promote consumption by making the consumerist lifestyle the social norm.

Thus business can and does affect consumption in a number of ways, directly or by way of the

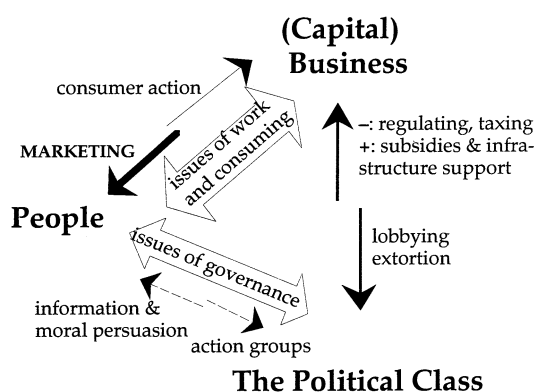


Fig. 1.

¹³ In the protodemocratic local governments set up in the 19th century in Sweden, firms voted side by side with other tax payers. This lasted until universal suffrage was introduced around 1918 (Strömberg et al., 1983).

¹⁴ Business promotion by governments takes many guises. It is not unusual to tailor the tax rules for company cars to the models of the domestic car manufacturer. This example was exposed by the violent reaction when the Swedish Road Authority some years ago proposed guidelines for its cars which would have ruled out SAAB and Volvo.

government, in order to achieve its basic objective, to enlarge vested capital. This causes structural lock-in effects, which add to any ‘natural’ propensity to consume (as discussed in Section 2). Such effects are (ordered after impact in my understanding):

1. the pattern of work-and-spend promoted by naturalising paid work as ‘full time’ with continuous, life-long occupation supported by a legal structure of social insurance, eligibility to social benefits, etc.
2. the making of a consumer culture where marketable goods are forwarded as the means to satisfy not only material needs but also needs of social stratification and cultural identification
3. the promotion of individual means of transport, in particular cars, which presuppose heavy investments in road infrastructure, a classical aim of much business lobbying
4. new communication infrastructures which force a technology shift on consumers.

As producers and sellers, Business will adjust products and production in an eco-friendly direction if government requires it or if it can promote its interests, i.e. if people demand it as a condition for their patronage. But Business is unlikely to hail the idea of reduced consumption if this threatens profits and capital accumulation. The Political Class is often ambiguous. Basically, it aims to preserve the social system and does so by balancing in its two relations. Given the environmental mood of the citizens, most governments claim to work to make people behave environmentally prudent; much current research is, for instance, devoted to devise appropriate methods for this. But politicians are wary that people are also keen about jobs. The importance attached to full employment and job opportunities makes them easy preys to Business’ pressure to expand production and consumption. This is bolstered by a lingering understanding that higher consumption means higher welfare. Thus governments tend to display a Janus face: urge people to be prudent but also encourage an expanding economy.

If the principles of business and of the administration are to profit and to rule, People remain the

only genuine force to bring about a turn in a sustainable direction. But this is an oversimplification. For one, individuals within business and administration may be very committed to sustainability. Moreover, people as consumers also yearn for consumer items—in particular when encouraged by surrounding pro-consumer structures—in conflict with their role as citizens where they may be inclined to exercise restraint in awareness of ecological limits (and sometimes in doubt about the dogma that growing consumption means higher welfare). Sagoff (1988) describes this as the ‘modern conflict’ which is very much ‘a conflict within us’, between our competing sets of preferences in our double roles of consumers and citizens.

But the ambiguity for all types of actors also brings to the fore that the relations between them may follow more than one path. Issues of environmental protection (as well as other issues!) tend to create a mutual distrust between voters and politicians: many people are contemptuous about shortsighted and ‘cowardly’ politicians for not daring to suggest radical but necessary measures; meanwhile politicians are inclined to regard voters as equally shortsighted and selfish. To break this downward spiral of negative expectations and replace it with an upward one of commitment and respect calls for what Dryzek (1990) calls a ‘discursive democracy’.

Similarly, the relation between business and the government can be adversary and terse if the opposing interests are allowed to dominate. But many insightful business leaders accept, even endorse, strict environmental restrictions if they are clear, allow adequate lead time and do not disrupt competition. Evidently it would be advantageous to take such a positive starting-point rather than get into the more common battles over limits, threats of withdrawal, etc.

5. The unmaking of consumer culture: policies for a sustainable consumption

With the Western consumption pattern, goods and services have become the answer not just to survival needs like food, shelter and security but

also to needs for meaning and social order. This made the 20th century ‘An All-Consuming Century’ (Cross, 2000). In his view, ‘commercialism won in modern America’ and this had certain positive values: ‘Consumer culture has provided contemporary affluent societies with peaceful alternatives to tribalism and class war’. But this trend, sustained in an interplay of business interests and human wishes (which in turn are spurred by business interests), may still not be sustainable: ‘there is no good reason to think that it will work for another century’ (ibid, p. 251). Cross, from an American perspective, has no specific proposals how to unmake this victorious consumer culture. But if one is prepared to grant the political system a role in turning the trend, they should emanate from people’s aspirations to consume as discussed above (Section 2) and also aim to unlock structural restraints on people’s choice (Section 3). To this end, this section traces the background to our understanding of needs and discusses some measures, ranging from more conventional ones to others suggested by the analysis above of driving forces.

5.1. Needs, wants and aspirations in a historical perspective

The consumer culture can be traced back ideologically and economically to the Enlightenment as well as early industrialisation. The previous caste-divided society regulated consumption. Social norms, sometimes encoded as sumptuary laws, restricted the consumption of lower strata. This gave way for principles of equal rights and equal opportunities for all. Jeremy Bentham declared that everyone had the same needs and that society’s goal should be to maximise happiness for all. This utilitarian justification of consumption—which still forms the base of the market economy—is closely related to the concept of need.

It is not surprising that this breakdown of traditional social stratification created a new demand for social markers. The new ideas paved the way for an unlimited acquisition of goods, lifting the former religious ban on greediness. Merchants were quick to exploit the opportunity created by the combination of a new supply of goods and a

new social situation. This coincided with a dramatic growth in industrial production capacity.

The conflation of needs with wants—or wishes, desires etc.—was understandable in a world dominated by scarcity as in the late 18th-century England. In this context, it is also understandable that production enjoyed high esteem as a means to a better world. But already in the early 20th century, the production capacity outgrew demand in the richest country, USA, and merchants (‘Business’) resorted to marketing measures to raise demand—the real birth of a consumer culture. From this time, need is also more ambiguous and today basic needs is a very contested topic. It is quite obvious that Western countries can (or could if they applied a more fair distribution of means) satisfy all persons’ reasonable needs. Welfare states, which assume responsibility for its citizens, also tend to define a level of living standards, which everyone should be able to meet or he/she is eligible for public support.

What comes on top of that has been called a ‘discretionary income’, implying that it may be less important. It still constitutes a temptation to consume ‘wants’ in addition to ‘needs’. But the concept ‘discretionary income’ has also been considered illusive. Baudrillard (1975) is emphatic that in the social judgement there is no divide; expenses always match incomes with aspirations rising in pace with opportunities. This is all the more the case when demand is prompted by marketing efforts.¹⁵ It has, however, been shown that people do maintain a mental distinction between necessities and luxury, sorting out what is considered needed in the total set of artefacts and habits.¹⁶ Wilk (1999) remarks that this amounts to a social process by which labels of needs and wants are negotiated in society and suggests that it may be an advantageous point of intervention in the effort to limit consumption.

¹⁵ Following Schor (1998), the ‘dreams-fulfilling level of income’ in USA just about doubled in the last decade.

¹⁶ (Lunt and Livingstone, 1992; Sanne, 1995). Cross mentions the countercurrents in the American context (such as The Centre for a New American Dream) but maintains that by and large, ideas of constraint are dead in today’s USA.

5.2. *First-hand measures*

Eco-policies may have many elements in addition to the obvious ones of eco-taxes and pricing measures. In many cases governments have to disentangle themselves from existing schemes of subsidies and taxing which are counterproductive from an ecological perspective.¹⁷ Ecologically harmful consumption may be outlawed or restricted as is the sale of, e.g. drugs, weapons and obscene goods.¹⁸ Producers may be charged with the duty to retake their products after use in order to reduce the waste volumes and encourage recycling and development of lean products. The first steps of desirable technological transitions may need support and shielding from predatory competition to come into existence (with minimal delay).

With the consumer in focus, it is also natural to seek means to affect her behaviour. In the search for an environmentally benign behaviour, three themes seem to recur: the moral dimension of wanting to contribute to the overall situation, a conscious resolution to abide to a norm of behaviour (rather than external pressure) and the need for supporting structures to the individual commitment.¹⁹ To serve the first points, OECD (among others) suggests several means of informing customers and would-be customers including education in schools, product labelling, data banks, etc. Pricing may support the individual commitment, with or without eco-taxing, and so will public collection schemes for the recovery of material (eco-cycling).

5.3. *Measures in the cultural and social structure*

All of these measures above make the individual as consumer responsible for achieving a sustainable development without infringing upon

consumer sovereignty. There is a strong case for a broader approach. Policy measures must also aim at the social and cultural forces which raise consumption to unsustainable levels. Such measures can be conceived in a number of areas.

If young people are especially vulnerable to marketing, there is a case for protecting areas such as teaching institutions (as well as teaching material and curricula) from advertising and other commercial influence. Young and old alike need to be made aware of the massive influence from commercial interest which designs their world.

Another urgent policy is to balance commercial media with public service media to broaden the agenda and offer alternative perspectives. Consumption policies may include warning labels on more kinds of goods than cigarettes; advertising may be restricted, e.g. no commercials directed at small children²⁰, no advertising of obviously harmful products and limits on wayside billboards. There is also a case for taxing advertising based on its resource consumption.

Public policies can also support (or obstruct) alternative ways of accessing commodities than by individual possession. More things and services could be made available without individual consuming. Libraries, public baths and beaches and public green spaces are examples of institutions created at a time when economic scarcity ruled. Today they have a bearing as environmentally efficient.²¹ Keeping or retaining more attractions generally available—such as public beaches rather than private plots—would in a similar way limit the scope of ‘positional goods’ and reduce consumption-driving competition (Hirsch, 1976). Renting and sharing schemes may also reduce material requirements. To this end, they merit public support in kind or by regulation (as when cars with several commuters are admitted to bus lanes).

¹⁷ The most glaring counter-environmental subsidies are given in the energy field (in the USA as well as Europe) and in the EU agricultural policy.

¹⁸ One candidate for restrictive rules under debate in the USA is ‘sports utility vehicles’ (SUVs).

¹⁹ Utvägar. Swedish research for roads to a sustainable development. Annual report 1999.

²⁰ Confer above, also see UNDP (1998) p. 65.

²¹ The Internet is a modern institution with tremendous scope for resource saving if used properly, i.e. unless the propensity for fast hardware changes is allowed to dominate.

To the extent that consuming serves social aims, one may contemplate substitutes of a less demanding kind. To signal status may be regarded as a social condition but signalling does not presuppose commercial markers. Value is not inherent in the markers but ascribed to them in the social process; thus values are essentially arbitrary, playing against each other, not against the real objects. The crucial issue is that commercial interests infringe on this process of social distinction. Consumption flourishes because it suggests itself (in the loudest voice) but basically people want to make themselves seen, not consume. Putnam has also raised the question if civic society (in the USA) is losing ground. He observes that people are less engaged in group activities (but are rather ‘bowling alone’; see (Putnam, 1995). If this is the case, it may well include a heightened propensity to status consumption.

This raises the question if the drive for distinction can be accepted but turned in a more harmless direction. We may hypothesise that meeting in social action can substitute for (some) status consumption because it would allow people to present themselves in other capacities. Basically, social arenas of activity originate out of specific needs and issues but this also suggests a policy to facilitate for congregations where people get together, e.g. to practise art, sports, politics, (active) entertainment, hobbies or to preserve the cultural heritage, etc. In the end a socially well-knit society with a large social capital may not only reduce the quest for consumption but also increase the acceptability of policy measures against overconsumption.

5.4. *Lifestyle measures*

The measures discussed so far are still unlikely to turn the present trends. A common claim is that sustainable consumption requires lifestyle changes. One fundamental change might concern the pattern of paid work by reducing the working hours, settling for correspondingly lower income (although not absolutely lower if productivity increases continue) and a less consumption-oriented everyday life. But such an idea of ‘living lightly’ is rarely elaborated, possibly because it touches

upon the strong interest in economic growth (and higher consumption; compare above Section 1). Growth is based on high labour participation, in number and duration, i.e. working hours per capita. More employed people also means less unemployment (under some conditions). For these reasons policies to encourage more labour input are normally favoured. But the welfare of more free time and the possibility—not to be taken for granted—of more jobs through work sharing have prompted some governments (and trade unions) to favour shorter working hours.

Such a policy might mean a substantial change in the direction of sustainability because it would limit the growth of production. We saw that employees in general would also welcome such a step if applied over the whole labour market. Combining working time reforms with the green agenda appears to be a rather obvious route. Shorter hours bring the double dividends of more free time and a better environment. Productivity gains would be changed into increased leisure. The rather slow advance of the concept may be ascribed to the difficulties of bridging the diverging views on industrial growth in the traditional left agenda and the green one. (Gorz, 1994; Lipietz, 1995; Sanne, 1998; Hayden, 1999). The left has traditionally embraced growth because it seemed to promise higher incomes for all. Present trends of growing income gaps makes the prospect of shorter hours less attractive. So does the on-going dismantling of welfare arrangements such as adequate old-age pensions, low cost health services, free education in good quality public schools, etc. which force everyone to prepare for risks which are shared in developed welfare states. Thus halting (or reducing) production volumes—as radical greens propose—should be part of an ‘eco-social compromise’ which restored the security of income and social benefits to all employees.

A more marginal objection to increased leisure is that many present leisure activities are not very eco-friendly; leisure time for one includes much energy-dense travelling. Thus one has to assume that habits will also be adjusted to the new circumstances of having more free time (and less or stagnant income).

Some of the previous changes in lifestyle causing increased consumption which were discussed above are more or less of a one-time character and may come to an end. Household splitting may taper off for practical reasons (and the bearing on consumption is anyway limited). Many kinds of household equipment has reached saturation levels—and technological maturity—and sales are limited to replacement (unless promoted by technology transitions). In some cases, available use time sets a limit.²² But as long as the working pattern—with accompanying incomes—remains, the pressure to consume will probably be transferred to new objects or activities; thus shorter hours remains a key issue.

6. Conclusions

The favoured postmodern explanations of consumption behaviour stress differentialist and culturalist factors; often in a rather approving fashion which underlines the creativity of the consumer. This is to the neglect of explanations based on structural issues such as the working life conditions, which favour a work-and-spend lifestyle, the conditions of urban living or the effects of pervasive marketing. But consumers may not be so keen and willing but are rather locked-in by such circumstances. These circumstances are often deliberately created by producer and business interests. A policy to limit the consumption must look for adequate measures over a large and varied field. Limited advances can be made by changing consumer habits but further progress demands that the political system overcomes the dogma of economic growth or redefines it in terms of individual welfare of a less material-dominated kind. Shorter working hours would give double dividends by allowing people to live more lightly while enjoying more leisure. To be acceptable, this, however, requires a deliberate policy of fair income distribution and social security. Here is a key issue for a combined eco-social policy for a more sustainable future.

²² Counterarguments abound, theoretically, e.g. Burenstam Linder (1970), but are left out here.

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