

A stylized world map composed of a grid of dots. Most dots are light gray, but several are highlighted in red, including one in North America, one in Europe, one in Africa, and one in Asia.

# Is Different Really Enough?

Thoughts on a New Role for Consumption

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- Economic growth remains the focus of both policies and societies worldwide. In the meantime, social inequality rises and the ecological destruction of our planet continues to accelerate. We urgently need ideas that transcend the borders of the uniform thinking in which we have established ourselves, often accepting too easily the alleged lack of alternatives as an excuse for inaction.
- The challenges of our consumption-driven society are primarily systemic. Individualising responsibility for its transformation will not only not be enough, but also wear out solidarity and deepen social inequality. Instead, we need initiatives that encourage people to resolidarise and rediscover spaces of political action. Among other things, this will contain the need for a redefinition of many values that lie at the center of our living-together.
- Discussing sustainability and consumption means discussing the question of how much we can still consume. As long as we keep thinking that we can progress towards more sustainable lifestyles by consuming not less, but only »better«, we will most likely fail to even ask the right questions.



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# Introduction

*Judith Gouverneur*

Twenty years ago, the global action plan Agenda 21 proclaimed: »The major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production, particularly in industrialised countries« (Section I, Chapter 4.3). Beyond the necessity »to promote efficiency in production processes and reduce wasteful consumption in the process of economic growth«, it defined the need for governments »to develop a domestic policy framework that will encourage a shift to more sustainable patterns of production and consumption« (Chapter 4.17). Thus, sustainable consumption was supposed to comprise not only efficiency gains in resource consumption, but also reductions in the overall consumption levels in industrialised countries, as well as fundamental changes in current consumption patterns.

More than 20 years later, however, debates continue to focus on aspects of product efficiency and »smarter«, »greener« ways of consuming, while neglecting politically explosive – yet necessary – debates on sufficiency, de-growth, and radical change, as well as the questions of justice that sustainable consumption raises. As a consequence, emphasis is placed on consumers, who are being persuaded into believing that they can make a difference by buying the right products, thus saving both the market and the environment through the sheer power of their demand. While the impact of consumers' decisions cannot be denied, the instrumentalisation of consumer behaviour obscures interests. Furthermore, it distracts from the common political responsibility to overcome the societal unease, which requires a notion of change that extends far beyond aesthetic corrections.

Against this backdrop, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's online portal, FES Sustainability, invited experts from different parts of the world to address the question of consumer responsibility in the necessary transformation process towards more sustainable consumption-production patterns, from an environmental and social justice perspective. How powerful is the consumer? How relevant are his decisions with regard to the necessary

transformation of our production-consumption patterns? How do individual and collective responsibility, or lifestyle change and systematic change, respectively, relate to each other? How much power does the consumer have with respect to business?

Furthermore, a clear focus is put on the social consequences that follow from the alleged power and emancipation of the modern consumer. Does »the« consumer even exist? What does consumer responsibility presuppose in terms of capacity to act, freedom of choice, and access to information and knowledge? Does a differentiation concerning the level of responsibility have to follow from that, both on a national and global level? Does the right to development contain the right to consumption? What triggers sustainable consumption – and do motives matter?

This publication documents the discussion on sustainable consumption and responsibility, which was hosted by FES Sustainability's Discussion Forum. Designed to serve as a platform for transparent debate and contestation around the idea of sustainability, the Forum aims to spur lively debates that are carried on and multiplied in a wider public. Part one presents the individual input papers and comments by the discussants, followed by a joint paper that summarises crucial aspects of the debate, carving out both commonalities and central conflict lines.

Finally, in part three, Prof. Dr. Jörg Petruschat changes the perspective and explores the power of design: can product designers reformulate lifestyles and help overcome the fixation on ever-growing consumption?



## Part 1: The Discussion

# 1. Converting Consumers to Cultural Pioneers and Eco-Missionaries

*Erik Assadourian\**

Consumers, first and foremost, consume, typically understanding that their well-being is obtained through their consumer practices: whether through the stuff they own; the novel experiences they have (such as flying to far-off destinations for vacation); their exotic, high-on-the-food-chain, out-of-season diets; even their simple daily comforts (such as living life at 70 degrees regardless of the weather outside). Thus, the answer to the question at the heart of this discussion – whether the consumer can play a role in getting us to a sustainable consumption and production paradigm – is simple: absolutely not.

Certainly some »enlightened« consumers try to live green lifestyles – myself included – avoiding meat, motorised vehicles, and other environmentally harmful goods, but in reality they are still living far, far beyond the ecological limits (yes, I am, too). As Jennie Moore and William Rees describe in *State of the World 2013: Is Sustainability Still Possible?*, even if residents of Vancouver all practised veganism, gave up cars and airplanes, and lived in passive solar houses foregoing all fossil fuel use, they'd still live a lifestyle that would require an extra third of a planet if everyone lived like them.<sup>1</sup> But few consumers would even voluntarily reduce to that level of consumption, let alone to a level that true sustainability entails – a lifestyle that most consumers understand as a »developing world« lifestyle.

Ultimately, a sustainable culture is in direct conflict with any type of consumer culture. If seven billion people were to live truly sustainable lifestyles (assuming an equitable distribution of wealth, rather than a rich elite and an impoverished majority), at best, the world would live like Cubans – with minimal access to fossil fuels, private cars, and unneeded consumer novelties, but with access to enough to eat, excellent education and health care, basic appliances maintained to last generations, and

organic small-scale agriculture that both creates community food security and local livelihoods.<sup>2</sup> While many consumers would like access to good education and health care, few would sacrifice the freedom to buy whatever they like – whether that be iPhones, cars, pets, or countless other consumer goods. And unfortunately, no level of purchasing hybrid cars instead of SUVs will get us to sustainable consumption, but will most likely only slow the transition, as consumers delude themselves into believing that they're doing their part to consume sustainably, when they're not.

That noted, the only way we can get to a truly sustainable civilisation is to re-engineer cultural norms to delegitimise the consumer way of life altogether, so that living sustainably feels natural and living as a consumer becomes a societal taboo. Of course, considering that political and economic power – and thus cultural power, because most modes of cultural transmission are controlled by those with economic power – are in the hands of those promoting consumerism, this sounds like a utopian fantasy. And perhaps it is for now. But eventually, consumer cultures will implode as ecological systems break down, and as temperatures rise two, four, even six degrees Celsius higher than pre-industrial averages. At that point, only the richest will be able to afford to live consumer lifestyles, while the vast majority of people will need to look for an alternative cultural orientation; ideally a sustainable one, though at that point any that enable them to survive will in all likelihood be accepted, whether that be fascism, theocracy, corporate feudalism, or whatever other models a dystopian future might bring.

### The Rise of Cultural Pioneers

In the past 200 years, cultures have changed radically. Growth has become celebrated, thrift set aside, and a consumer lifestyle has become the norm for at least

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\* This paper is based on Erik's chapters, Re-engineering Cultures to Create a Sustainable Civilization and Building an Enduring Environmental Movement, in: *State of the World 2013: Is Sustainability Still Possible?*

1. Jennie Moore and William E. Rees (2013): Getting to One-Planet Living, in: *State of the World 2013*. Washington DC: Island Press: 39–50.

2. Pat Murphy and Faith Morgan: Cuba: Lessons from a Forced Decline, in: *State of the World*, op. cit. note 1.

two billion people around the world – a number that is projected to increase by another billion over the next 15 years or so.<sup>3</sup> This transformation has not been »natural« but engineered by entrepreneurs, corporations, policymakers, even – as the ideas have been internalised – by consumers themselves. As companies saw opportunities to sell everything from doughnuts to disposable diapers, Happy Meals to iPhones, pet dogs to Pepsi-Cola, they spent billions of dollars to sell these as lifestyle symbols (US\$500 billion in 2012), billions more lobbying governments to help normalise these changes, and through tens of thousands of smaller efforts transformed the dominant cultural paradigm to consumerism.<sup>4</sup>

This new paradigm is, of course, untenable on a finite planet – driving mass extinctions, climate change, pollution, deforestation, and so on. These ecological changes, however, have not stopped those wedded to this system to continue promoting it further. Indeed, high economic growth rates are celebrated daily in leading newspapers, and low ones are decried as tragedy.

Thus, we will need cultural pioneers who can extract themselves from the dominant consumer cultural paradigm and work toward bringing about a new sustainable culture – ideally now, and in a way that can compete with consumerism; but at least in a way that offers an alternative so that as the consumer culture breaks down, a positive alternative will be ready to implement. These pioneers will need to embed themselves in existing institutions – governments, business, education, media and advertising, social movements, even religions – working to overhaul systems and the cultural norms they reinforce in order to make them orient on sustainability.

There are some hopeful signs that this is happening. From social marketing and culture jamming efforts that scrutinise the marketing-saturated world we live in today, to bold new films like *Avatar*, which offer new ways of relating to planet Earth. New movements like Earth Jurisprudence are working to give voice to the planet, like Human Rights did for much of humanity so many

decades ago; and efforts like school meal reform are trying to transform the next generation's palates to like healthy, sustainable fare, just as food companies have done so effectively with foods high in sugar, fat, and salt with this generation.<sup>5</sup>

The list of successful efforts – across sectors – is impressive. But in truth, they all add up to just a drop in the ocean. For every cultural pioneer that creates a new »Story of Stuff« that helps people question the consumer way of life, another 10 create games like »Angry Birds«, which has absorbed more than 300,000 years of life energy around the world as players continue to hurl vengeful birds at unrepentant pigs.<sup>6</sup> Without some mechanism to expand cultural pioneering efforts and re-educate humanity more broadly, the only way out of consumerism will most likely be the hard way out; and that will mean a nasty, brutish, and short future for most of humanity for centuries to come.

### Cultivating a New Eco-Missionary Philosophical Movement

If one looks honestly at the history of environmental movement, one cannot help but question whether it has been a success. Yes, it has been essential in cleaning up air and water pollution, and in protecting certain areas and species. Nevertheless, as environmentalist Peter Berg noted in the early 1980s – not long after monumental victories in improving air and water quality – »rescuing the environment has become like running a battlefield aid station in a war against a killing machine that operates just beyond reach, and that shifts its ground after each seeming defeat. No one can doubt the moral basis of environmentalism, but the essentially defensive terms of its endless struggle mitigate against ever stopping the slaughter.«<sup>7</sup> At best, playing defence – as the environmental movement does – only slows down the destruction of the planet, it does not bring us to a sustainable future.

3. McKinsey Global Institute (2012): *Urban World: Cities and the Rise of the Consuming Class*.

4. Jonathan Barnard (2012): ZenithOptimedia Releases September 2012 Advertising Expenditure Forecasts. London: ZenithOptimedia, 1 October 2012.

5. For many more examples of cultural pioneering efforts, see: *State of the World 2010: Transforming Cultures: From Consumerism to Sustainability*. New York: WW Norton & Co.

6. Adrienne LaFrance (2012): Macon Money: A social game in Georgia tries to bring residents together across traditional boundaries, in: *Nie-man Journalism Lab*, 2 May 2012.

7. Berg quoted in Bill Devall and George Sessions (1985): *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*. Layton UT: Gibbs Smith: 3.

Other critics contend that the environmental movement has remained marginalised as a »special interest«, and has been unable to create a powerful vision to redirect human societies and cultures in new directions. Cultural pioneers could play that role but they are too few and too unorganised. What is needed is the creation of a deeper strategy to cultivate both pioneers and deeper cultural change. Perhaps the best way to do this is to apply lessons from the successful long-term movements of the past – namely, missionary religious movements that have reoriented societies over centuries in radically new directions.<sup>8</sup>

How have missionary religious philosophies spread so completely around the world – across such diverse locales and cultural contexts? (Religions, while they are understandably more than this to adherents, are essentially orienting philosophies.) Yes, swords and guns were part of their success, as was the adoption and subsequent spread of these philosophies by governments. However, a larger part of these philosophies' success was due to a powerful, timeless vision, beautiful stories, inspiring exemplars, committed adherents, and the promise of immediate assistance – the offering of food, clothing, education, livelihoods, medical care, even community.

To succeed, the environmental movement needs to become an ecological-philosophical movement, creating a strong, attractive, orienting philosophy – complete with a cosmology, theodicy (a theory of suffering), ethics, stories, and practices that help bind communities together. At the same time, an ecological-philosophical movement will need to spread globally, and should thus utilise the provision of social services. Providing social services is not only a worthy goal in itself (especially in a constrained future where social services will most likely become harder to come by for most people) but also a means to both grow the ranks of adherents and change how people view the world and live their lives.

For example, imagine a school that at every opportunity reinforced the idea that humanity depends completely and utterly on Earth and its complex systems. That it is unjust to consume more than your fair share and to have a lifestyle that depends on the exploitation of ecosystems, workers, and communities polluted by factories, mines, and dumps. That the best life to live

is one committed to changing this untenable, inhumane, and unsustainable system in ways that improve the well-being of your local community, your broader philosophical community, and above all the planetary community.

This is a philosophy that could be reinforced in every aspect of the school – from what is taught in the classroom (ecology, ethics, activism, and permaculture along with basic maths and literacy) to what is served in the lunchroom and everything in between. Some students would walk away with only knowledge, including a better understanding of our dependence on Earth and perhaps a basic livelihood and trade skills – skills that will only grow in value in a post-consumer future. But others would walk away with a deep commitment to this way of thinking, and perhaps even become cultural pioneers or missionaries of this ecological philosophy, starting new schools or other social services that could improve people's lives, while spreading a way of life that could compete with the seductive consumerist philosophy so dominant today.

Furthermore, this model could be applied to a variety of needs. Eco-clinics could not only provide basic medicine, but also focus on prevention that would help both people and the planet. For example, people with adult-onset diabetes might be asked to spend time tending the eco-clinic garden in partial payment for treatment – growing healthy food to replace the toxic, processed fare that contributed to their diabetes and so many other modern ailments. The clinic could also provide cooking and lifestyle courses as well as engage with the larger community to help patients eat well and regain their health. In the process, their ecological impact would shrink along with their waistlines as they reduced their consumption of meat and processed food, both of which have higher ecological impacts than locally grown vegetables.

As eco-philosophies spread, and their followers grow in number, new opportunities would also grow. The Quakers, a small Christian sect, became a dominant economic and political force of Pennsylvania in the 1700s, and a major force in the abolition movement. Even today, Quakers remain a powerful voice in international peace and governance processes – far beyond what their total membership of 340,000 would seem to warrant. Eco-philosophical adherents could become

8. Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus (2004): *The Death of Environmentalism*. Oakland CA: Breakthrough Institute.

groomed to play important roles as cultural pioneers, driving cultural change by taking leadership roles in government, the media, business, and education. And in the process, they could hopefully redirect cultures away from consumerism and reorient them on sustainability.

The hope is that we prevent a collapse of civilisation by spreading a new set of philosophical, ethical, and cultural norms that bring about a life-sustaining society to replace our consumer culture. Yet in reality, the odds are high that the future is going to look more like something out of a dystopian science fiction story – such as, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, *Soylent Green*, *Mad Max*, or *The Postman* – and much sooner than we think.

The second hope is that if we fail to prevent a global ecological transition (or collapse from a human perspective), we at least preserve enough knowledge and wisdom so that as the dust settles in a few centuries, with the population stabilised at a lower number that a changed planetary system can sustain, our great-great-great-great grandchildren do not recreate our mistakes – once again celebrating growth and consumerism on a finite planet – but instead stay true to a philosophy that allows them to sustain the planet that sustains them over millennia.

Cultural pioneers and eco-missionaries will be essential in making either of these hopes reality. The faster we find and enact the means to convert global consumers into both of these, the more likely the future will be just a little less bleak.

## Culture Samplers Instead of Cultural Pioneers and Eco-Missionaries

Comment on »Converting Consumers to Cultural Pioneers and Eco-missionaries« by Erik Assadourian

*Julia Backhaus*

I enjoyed Erik Assadourian's position paper as a very inspirational, educational, and even entertaining read (who would have thought this much precious time is wasted on »Angry Birds«!). Moreover, in terms of content, I could not agree more: a suitable focus for action

towards sustainable living is indeed our consumer culture, which is firmly embedded in existing institutions. It is appropriate to speak of a co-evolution of our lifestyle, culture, and institutions, climaxing in the current state of excessive overconsumption in the industrialised world. Although I take issue with the term »engineering« in this context, I support Erik Assadourian's assessment of the developments: »This transformation [of a consumer lifestyle having become the norm] has not been 'natural' but engineered by entrepreneurs, corporations, policy-makers, even – as the ideas have been internalised – by consumers themselves.« Elsewhere in the text, Erik Assadourian asserts that, »the only way we can get to a truly sustainable civilisation is to re-engineer cultural norms to delegitimise the consumer way of life all together (...)« Again, I agree with the »target for action« or »leverage point« he proposes – namely cultural norms and the social institutions they are shaped by – but I query the wording.

The reason I question the usage of the word »engineering« is its deterministic connotation. I want to believe (with the full might of my probably illusionary free will) that norms cannot be straightforwardly engineered. They slowly develop over time, constantly attuning to changing internal and external conditions in terms of our knowledge, identity, values, and perceptions, as well as the social institutions, infrastructures, and information surrounding and available to us. I have to admit that a strategic parallelisation of several institutions is possible and can help to construct and strengthen particular cultural norms. The history of my home country Germany is sad proof of how terribly wrong such an undertaking can go. I do not want to live in a green totalitarian regime! Yes, even if that inevitably leads to the »nasty« and »brutish« doomsday scenarios Erik Assadourian sketches in his paper. I therefore advocate the avoidance of any »cultural engineering« jargon.

A similarly uncanny feeling strikes me when reading about »eco-missionaries«. To avoid the marginalisation experienced by environmentalism and to organise scattered cultural pioneers, Erik Assadourian argues that sustainable living would ideally become a world-ordering philosophy embroidered with »a powerful, timeless vision, beautiful stories, inspiring exemplars, committed adherents, and the promise of immediate assistance (...)«; thereby mimicking missionary religious philosophies that successfully spread around the globe in the past.

The notion of an »ecological-philosophical movement, creating a strong, attractive, orienting philosophy – complete with a cosmology, theodicy (...), ethics, stories and practices (...)« appears harmless. But who decides what the vision looks like, who the exemplars are, and what practices are endorsed? Maybe we do not all need the same vision of a good life to live sustainably. Maybe the practices suitable for some people in some settings are unsuitable for others. The means to achieve a particular end are too easily justified when one is under the impression he knows what is right for mankind. Even if the end is as noble as steering civilisation away from collapse, it is worth exercising extreme caution.

One can argue along similar lines when considering cultural pioneers. I only know historical examples of pioneers who subdued precious (and often sustainably living) cultures in their efforts to conquer new lands, leaving behind trails of destruction.

In addition, I would like to stress that religions operate primarily through fear. If believers misbehave, they are threatened with punishment in their next lives or in the afterlife. If believers act in accordance to prescribed rules, they are promised rewards. The »sustainability religion« would probably pledge reward and punishment for us in this life rather than the next one, because the catastrophic consequences of our current actions are likely to be felt by the current and certainly to be endured by the next generations. Research shows, however, that references to doomsday scenarios hardly motivate actions. Fear is not inspiring! People are motivated and inspired by making collective commitments, taking action together, and experiencing immediate benefits.

Let's consider how cultural norms can be changed to support sustainable lifestyles – if engineering and proselytising are awkward approaches, at least with respect to the discourses they conjure. The duality of structure grants us agency, always enabled or constrained by structure. This implies that the current socio-economic-political system we live in and its institutions enable – if not, encourage – a consumerist lifestyle. However, a more sustainable lifestyle than most of us in the industrialised world are leading today is not impossible. This raises two questions: How can we achieve consumption reduction where it is already feasible despite current

structural constraints? And, how can we bring about the structural changes necessary to establish a Cuban lifestyle with low consumption levels yet sufficient nutrition and high-quality education and health care all around the world?

As Erik Assadourian suggests, the answer to both questions is a change of cultural norms in individuals and institutions. Cultural and individual norms are mutually constituent and interrelated; one influences the other. Our individual norms are shaped by the cultural context in which we live, the people we see, the stories we hear, etc. – and hence are shared to great degree. Erik Assadourian proposes a plausible strategy that begins with reorienting institutions such as education and medicine toward sustainability. Here, economic profit should be of less concern and social goals should already be paramount (although contrary, worrying trends can be observed).

I wonder whether we can beat consumer culture with its own weapons: media engage in clever campaigns for downshifting and consumption reduction; news outlets present positive achievements in sustainable living instead of solely reporting on high costs and technical challenges related to transitioning; schools and eco-clinics do as Erik Assadourian suggests; (even more) artists challenge prevailing consumption norms; small (and then growing) businesses prove that money can be made in the pursuit of social and environmental goals. Indeed, visions, exemplars, and practices are needed, but many of them and different ones for different people. I would very much like to see processes set in motion – by citizen groups and local policymakers, for example – that engage people in developing a local vision, finding local exemplars, and reinventing local practices. These groups should not be isolated; they can inspire and learn from each other – perhaps by using social media, which offer powerful tools to connect across time and space. These local processes are arenas for »culture samplers«, who experiment with new and revive old norms for sustainable lifestyles.



## Will the Sustainability of Life on the Planet Be Maintained by a New Generation of Heroes?

Comment on «Converting Consumers to Cultural Pioneers and Eco-missionaries» by Erik Assadourian

*Juçara Portilho Lins (Jô Portilho)*

In the paper «Converting Consumers to Cultural Pioneers and Eco-Missionaries», Erik Assadourian reflects on the demands of the sustainability of Earth, and looks for actions to mitigate a grim future. According to Assadourian, the equitable division of the planet's wealth would reduce the consumption per capita capacity to a level similar to the Cuban standards. Perhaps he is being optimistic! Anyway, this exercise would not mean that we would have Cuba's «excellent education and health care» for all, as he himself remarked. It is necessary to have a hegemonic<sup>9</sup> societal option, so that when there is a milk shortage, for instance, children and the elderly may be prioritised without everyone else feeling wronged...

In this sense, the role of public politics is as fundamental as the international governmental agreements, such as signing the Kyoto Treaty! Local solutions for global problems will not be able to handle the socio-economic inequalities between countries and inside each country! Nevertheless, the aggregation of local knowledge is critical in tackling global problems.

Thus, simply centring the discussion in dichotomies – such as the production of organic food versus large-scale agriculture – will not help to solve the complexity of the problem either, especially because the rise in productivity derived from new scientific discoveries is not in itself an element of environmental destruction. It is the private appropriation made of this scientific knowledge that will determinate if the impact of its application on the environment is capable of being naturally and socially absorbed or not; and furthermore, if they will benefit only a few or the majority. The issue, therefore, is the political definition of how to promote the equitable distribution – that is, in the decision to be taken democratically and collectively by societies, and not centred in the hands of a dozen «owners of the world»!

Based on the ideas defended by Erik Assadourian, I ask: will the sustainability of life on the planet be maintained by a new generation of heroes unrelated to our history and, consequently, from the process of class struggle? When I refer to class struggle, I speak of the antagonism between social classes, derived from the capitalist mode of production, since it is in this confrontation that we become aware of our role in society and how we want it to work.

In relation to culture, the messages about preserving the environment present in the movie *Avatar*, cited by Assadourian, are important and impact the audiences. However, putting aside the 3D hi-tech, its discourse was not too different from the traditional one propagated by Hollywood. The horrors of the colonisation of the USA have already been exhibited on the silver screen through the extermination of native populations. It was always the pain of the individuated conscience of some «protagonists» that promoted the «mea culpa» that closed the matter.

To sum it up, the fundamental difference between Assadourian's point of view and my own is his Weberian analysis of the problem. Assadourian maintains that it is possible for a group of beings – enlightened by an ecological philosophy – to have all the answers to guide society to a new sustainable paradigm. Max Weber's classic essay, «The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism», argues that Puritan ethics and ideas influenced the development of capitalism, because its cultural and religious philosophies were conducive to economic rationality.

In the same way, the ecological philosophy suggested by Assadourian will have to promote its own ethics on the importance of changing habits towards sustainability. In other words, it will be a philosophy compatible with the new sustainable rationality. This rationality of an «ideal type» that will guide the populace, however, is outside it. In Assadourian's proposal, such an ideology would be propagated by «cultural pioneers or missionaries of this ecological philosophy».

In my view, human beings are an integral part of nature, but thanks to their teleological characteristics, they are able to think about nature and affect it. As demonstrated by Karl Marx in *Capital* (vol. I, ch. VIII), as man interferes with nature to transform it to his benefit, he changes himself as a part of nature.

9. The reference is Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony.

We must also keep in mind that man is not an isolated being. He develops social organisations when a new need arises, such as finding food, shelter, etc. His solutions, then, are found collectively, as the fruit of the process of choices determined in each historical moment, according to the mediations present. And, in these terms, the mediation of the sustainability of the planet is to the present society, what scarcity was to previous societies. For there was a time when we were not able to produce food on such a large scale as is possible today. Hence, what we need is to find an equitable mode of distribution for these increments of productivity, taking in account that contemporary society is more complex and quantitatively larger than the previous ones.

I share the opinion of British historian E.P. Thompson, who understands that class configures itself according to the way men live the production relationships, according to their experiences in social relationships as a whole. These collective experiences cause change, even if some groups believe that they alone are able to guide all humanity!

In the words of Thompson: »Intellectuals frequently dream about class like a motorcycle with an empty seat. Jumping on it, they take the wheel, since they have the true theory. This is a characteristic illusion; it is the ›false consciousness‹ of the intellectual bourgeois. But, when similar concepts dominate the entire intelligentsia, can we speak of ›false consciousness‹? On the contrary, such concepts are very convenient to it.« (Thompson 2001: 281)<sup>10</sup>

So, if we only think in terms of individualistic solutions for centuries-old global problems, we will not find an answer at the end of the tunnel. For this reason, I believe that we will continue to lose a great part of our natural resources and quality of life, which already seems scarce, until we join forces to break the logic of the market to change society from the inside – by engaging with history and employing a democratic fight taken to the last consequences.

10. Free translation from the Brazilian edition of, Thompon, E.P (2001): *As peculiaridades dos ingleses e outros artigos*, in: Antônio Luigi Negro and Sérgio Silva (eds.), E.P. Thompson. Campinas, SP: Editora da Unicamp.

## 2. Sustainability and Consumption of Human Life

Juçara Portilho Lins (Jô Portilho)

The mantra reverberates in the world that the way consumption has been presented since the twentieth century is unsustainable. Indeed! Luxury consumption, and its pseudo-democratisation – as well as consumption below the minimum of the miserable populations spread around the planet (visibly found in developing countries, but now crowding the fringes of those developed) – are Siamese twins of the state of barbarism. According to Eduardo Galeano,

»(...) those who run the game pretend they do not know it, but anyone with eyes can see that most people consume little, very little or nothing, necessarily, to ensure an existence of the little nature we have left. Social injustice is not an error to correct or a defect to overcome: it is an essential need. There is no nature capable of feeding a shopping mall as big as the size of the planet.«<sup>1</sup>

These two extreme poles are unsustainable in the opinion of a growing universe of people.<sup>2</sup> Maybe that's why public policies that focus on helping people from below the poverty line rise to middle-class status are so celebrated today in Latin America, especially in Brazil.<sup>3</sup> Can the much-touted social rise of 27 million Brazilians who have previously been living in extreme poverty<sup>4</sup> and can now afford at least »three meals a day« – as defended by former President Lula – be blamed for the destruction of the country's environment? The logic of combating poverty, which is absolutely fundamental, ends up blam-

ing environmental degradation<sup>5</sup> on social advancement rather than blaming it on the social relationship that produces it. The logic of capital as a social relation of production interferes in the areas of economy, politics, and culture. As a result, the transfer of income policies that facilitated the current level of social mobility in Brazil is only a government policy, not a state policy: introduced by the government of former President Lula, it has been maintained by the current President Dilma Rulsoff, but since it is not a law, future presidents may stop it at any time. So, what do we have to produce, and from which resources, to ensure this »minimum« level of access to consumption? Or rather: what are »basic consumption needs«?

In Brazil, according to the Ministry of Cities, about 60 million Brazilians (9.6 million urban households) are not served by the network of sewage collection and, of these, approximately 15 million (3.4 million households) do not have access to piped water. Even more alarming is the information that when it is collected, only 25% of sewage is treated, the remainder is being dumped »in nature«, i.e., without any treatment, into rivers or the sea. (...) 65% of hospital admissions in the country are due to waterborne diseases.<sup>6</sup>

According to the Oslo Ministerial Roundtable Conference on Sustainable Production and Consumption in 1995, sustainable consumption is »the use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimising the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardise the needs of future generations«.

1. See: Galeano, Eduardo (2008): *O Império do Consumo*, in: Reflections about Sustainable Consumption. Vol. 3 *Le Monde Diplomatique Brasil* and in, *Reflections about Responsible Consumption*. São Paulo: Instituto Paulo Freire. Available at: [www.cartamaior.com.br/templates/postMostrar.cfm?blog\\_id=1&post\\_id=90](http://www.cartamaior.com.br/templates/postMostrar.cfm?blog_id=1&post_id=90) (last accessed on 18/01/2013).

2. For further information, see Portilho, Fátima. *Sustentabilidade ambiental, consumo e cidadania*. São Paulo, Cortez, 2005. IDEC: [www.idec.org.br](http://www.idec.org.br)

3. The Official Document of the United Nations Conference for the Environment, known as Rio+20, contains fifty-eight clauses on combating poverty. Available at: <http://www.rio20.gov.br/documentos>; <http://tvmeioambiente.com.br/tvrio20/documento-oficial-da-rio20-na-integra-em-portugues> (last accessed on 24 January 2013).

4. On 19 July 2012, the ILO office in Brazil posted a report showing data compiled between 2002 and 2009 showing a decline of 36.5 per cent in the number of people living below the poverty line – i.e., 27.9 million Brazilians.

5. In the Brazilian case, it should be noted that economic growth increased the demand for energy, leading, for example, to the construction of more hydroelectric dams on indigenous lands and pristine ecosystems, exploration of pre-salt layer, etc.

6. Consumers International/MMA/MEC/IDEC (2005). *Sustainable Consumption: Education Manual*. Brasília: 31. Available at: <http://portal.mec.gov.br/dmdocuments/publicacao8.pdf> (last accessed on 20 January 2013).

Human beings have been taught that it is their exaggerated individual consumption that has destroyed the planet, and that the solution would therefore involve the review of this consumption in terms of both post-consumer waste (recycle your domestic trash!) and use of resources (use less water!). As a consequence, after the capitalist social relations have managed both to degrade the environment by polluting and plundering lands and seas, and to demean human relationships over the last two centuries, concerns about the sustainability of the planet are shifted from production to »unconscious consumption«. However, assigning accountability this way does not take into account that, in capitalist logic, the production process is dialectically interwoven with the social reproduction, which makes it impossible to separate the logic of production from that of distribution.

In this same sense, focusing primarily on the »passive and active consumers« while disregarding the power of advertising efforts and the media seems somewhat idealistic. The solutions are not in the hands of those who allow themselves to be seduced, or not, into following a false need for consumption. The consumer is not an extraterrestrial being – he is a worker in the factory, a schoolteacher, businessman, politician, citizen! Once the consumer is part of the social relations permeated by a capitalist logic, which requires consumption as its safeguard, there will not be individual solutions. Even when organised into associations that push public policies to promote so-called sustainable consumption, consumers cannot be sure that such policies will end the existing power inequalities in national and international trade relations.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, we cannot underestimate the resilience that organised consumers have to say »no« to the products they do not wish to consume or that do not meet their needs. But neither can we assume that all consumers are part of a homogeneous category, randomly scattered across the globe – despite the assertion by Eduardo Galeano that the market imposes »on the whole world a way of life that reproduces human beings like photocopies of the exemplary consumer«.

If all consumers corresponded to the same North American standard, African populations could refuse to consume the medicines distributed to them in human

testing regimes, or refuse to eat GM food offered as humanitarian aid.<sup>8</sup> However, due to the unfair resource distribution in a class society model, the competition for access to food and essential goods precedes the awareness of destruction. Hunger is a bad counsellor!

Nevertheless, we believe that the struggle and resistance of social and workers' movements, which have persisted throughout history, have prevented things from becoming even worse. If we consider the Latin American example, we observe that the structural impediments, which originated during centuries of agrarian export economy based on slave labour, subordinated the region to a growing dependency on the central capitalism. This model of uneven development guaranteed the self-support of developed countries at the expense of underdeveloped ones, subjugating multitudes of human beings to the status of »social waste«. Obviously, all of this transpired with a lot of fighting and bloodshed.

Unlike what happened in the restructured countries of central capitalism after the Second World War, poverty and perverse, degrading working conditions were imposed on countries at the margins, where natural resources were exploited for the purpose of capital appreciation in the centre. This same logic impeded an agrarian reform in Brazil that would dignify the peasants' living conditions. In this context, people who were forced off their farms joined the urban unemployed and swelled cities and slums. The struggle of the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST), therefore, is a fundamental part of the process of social reaction against the expansion of local and global inequalities. The increasing concentration and centralisation of income marginalised the human being, turning those who are not used by the circuit of capital into »rejected goods without use«. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman refers to these people as »human garbage', inescapable by-product of modernisation«, and regrets that today they are present in all parts of the world because there is nowhere else to dump them.

Bauman draws our attention to the irony that although we live in a society that developed the knowledge allowing us to offer sophisticated solutions for the processes

7. Ibid., 21.

8. As an illustration, I suggest the film *The Constant Gardener* (2005) by Fernando Meirelles, which analyses the political influence of pharmaceutical companies in poor countries.

of production/consumption, and the mobility to move around the planet as never before, we cannot create space for all. Now, the »surplus people« have to stay where they were »produced«, even though there is no room for them.

The sociologist reflects on the »refugee status« and makes an important statement about its function (or total dysfunction) in the »liquid society« at the beginning of the 21st century. The article<sup>9</sup> mentions the existence of 12 million »people in transition« and the prospect of at least one billion »refugees transformed into exiles« by 2050. The author mocks the euphemism of »people in transition« for expressing the exact opposite of the reality of refugee camps: »The unique meaning of being sent to a place called 'refugee camp' is that all other conceivable places are out of the refugees' limits.«

Based on the research of Michel Agier, Bauman notes that the refugee status is often assigned even within the country in which the »refugee« was born, the country in which he was living: »Agier has every reason to merge refugee camps, homeless camps, and urban ghettos in one category – that of the 'corridors of exiles'. Residents of this place (...) are all redundant. Rejects or refuse of society. In short, waste.« From my point of view, one does not need to visit some miserable country in Africa – whoever has been to Brazil knows that peripheral capitalist development and these »corridors of exiles« share the same surroundings. It also happens in France or the US where we find a large number of ghettos.

Bauman estimates that in the context of a society generating surpluses, those who are not compatible with the capital ethos are considered redundant. This is the genesis of the social question: it is necessary to put out »classes of human beings considered, for one or other reason, suspects to resist this manipulation, or who refuse openly to submit to the patterns. In other words, the categories accused of generating uncertainty, and therefore disturbing and undermining the future order«. As for the rest, they try to escape this hell by dedicating themselves to finding new and constant ways to increase the productivity of labour, which are often

transformed too quickly into ideal conditions for their own elimination from the production process. Thanks to technical progress, entire sectors become useless and are discarded every day – »the collateral losses side of economic progress«.

Bauman believes that this state of affairs is inherent in modern society and has been presented as a source of garbage, »the local governance, or what is left of them that face the daunting task of seeking, finding and implementing local solutions to the problems generated globally, of universal character. In essence, this problem is resumed in the management of the industry of removal and recycling of waste and scrap«.

The concept of sustainability is linked with sustainable development, which has been discussed in world conferences on environmental issues for the last decades. The debates basically point to the extremes of world consumption and emphasise the need for urgent actions. However, they remain rooted in a model where the market controls the people; which is intolerable for miserable people in poor countries and unsustainable even for the people from the so-called developed countries. Some European Union State members have been implementing all the »immutable« commands of the market, destroying the fundamental human and labour conditions as imposed by international institutions.<sup>10</sup> In the name of market sustainability, governments forget the »sustainability of societies«.

While global solutions are needed, the great difficulty lies in determining the margins of independence nation-states can have under the imposition of policies designed by international institutions. Otherwise, the line defined between local development and the well-being of its population, on the one hand, and environmental preservation, on the other, will not be fair. The difficulties increase in the case of those countries that are considered poor but are curiously rich in natural resources – such as ore, water, and/or biodiversity. Should they be forced to preserve these resources even if that means not attending to their populations starving for the resources fundamental to human existence?

9. The article »Sobre estar fora dentro, e dentro, mas fora« (On being out inside, and inside but out) was published in the international press on 19 February 2011 and later included in the book *Isto não é um diário* (*This is not a diary*) by Zygmunt Bauman (2012): 201–211.

10. International bodies created from Breton Woods to regulate the liberal greed of capitalism after the crisis of 1929 and World War II have not shown to be sufficiently democratic or independent of global economic forces and politics. These institutions are the breeders of mankind's largest social inequalities.

Yet however terrifying the picture, the greatest danger is that we believe that things cannot be changed and that it is no longer possible to find democratic solutions for human existence.

Perhaps the gateway to the preservation of life on the planet is not yet well signposted, but it will certainly be found on the wall opposite the shining lights of the market.

## A Reform of Institutions Would Spare Us a Demoralising Debate

Comment on «Sustainability and Consumption of Human Life» by Jô Portilho

*Lewis Akenji*

Two words that make international political discussions of sustainable consumption seem like a game of dodge ball: population and equity. Juçara Portilho's paper encircles both. She juxtaposes «luxury consumption» with «consumption below the minimum» level of human need and calls them the «Siamese twins» of unsustainable consumption. In the course of their growth, rich countries have historically caused more environmental damage, which, ironically, is affecting poorer countries more, and is further hindering their chances at economic growth. The population argument is made along the lines that fertility rates in poorer countries tend to be higher, and that the continuous increase in population (especially while many Northern countries are experiencing population decline) is and will keep driving unsustainable consumption.

Implicit to the need for sustainable consumption, especially when comparing consumption levels across different social classes or geographic regions, is a moral call for people to act upon the common foundations of humanity; to step beyond their individual selves and behave more responsibly. This deceptively simple call for nobility can be a source of conflict – at individual and larger societal levels. People have been known to become more responsible consumers out of altruism; some because there is no other option (but to limit their consumption to what is available); some out of guilt (towards under-consumers, for example, or a warming planet, or for the sake of their kids, etc.). Some who consume within

ecological limits have been known to act in self-righteousness towards others – perhaps assuming they've earned a moral licence.

Living in a (global) society can very easily pit individual values against societal momentum. So one encounters a situation where the Greens get upset, because while they're saving the planet by using public transportation and carrying their eco bags when shopping, the Joneses and the Simpsons are guzzling it up with their SUVs and ski trips to winter-themed malls in the Arabian Desert. All the while, it is the most vulnerable groups of society that suffer even more.

These issues have dogged negotiations towards international approaches to sustainable consumption. The first attempt to address this at the global level was at the first UN sustainable development conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. There, sustainable consumption was declared as one of the overarching objectives and essential requirements for sustainable development. Chapter four of Agenda 21,<sup>11</sup> the blueprint for action resulting from Rio, was dedicated to «changing consumption patterns». It recognised the imbalances in consumption patterns between Northern and Southern countries, acknowledging that: «Although consumption patterns are very high in certain parts of the world, the basic consumer needs of a large section of humanity are not being met. This results in excessive demands and unsustainable lifestyles among the richer segments, which place immense stress on the environment. The poorer segments, meanwhile, are unable to meet food, health care, shelter, and educational needs» (§4.5). Heads of states agreed that in pursuing environmental protection at the international level, any measures «must take fully into account the current imbalances in the global patterns of consumption and production» (§4.4). Therefore what is needed is a «multi-pronged strategy focusing on demand, meeting the basic needs of the poor, and reducing wastage and the use of finite resources in the production process» (§4.5).

Little has improved with the above declarations – far from it. In fact, UN member states acknowledge that there is an «implementation gap» between their policies and actions taken. Trends are becoming worse. Societies where consumerism had not been a way of life are now being exposed: we are not protecting

11. See Agenda 21, available at <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/Agenda21.pdf>

those living within ecological limits. Instead, in emerging economies where most of these traditional societies are found, all is being done to urge them to join the economic consumerism rush – consumer loans, credit cards, and other credit systems are being introduced. Capitalist institutions and rules that thrive on distinctions in consumption status are gaining hold.

So much so that the traditional North-South divide in consumption level is blurring. There is an emerging consumer class in developing countries that has copied and sometimes surpassed affluent lifestyles of the North. While this consumer class is growing, poverty is also becoming more entrenched. I have written previously about a »dichotomy of social existence« in developing countries, where income distribution among the population is »lopsided, leading to conspicuous consumption by the rich, an emerging consumer class cast against the many slums in cities and large pockets of poor rural areas.«<sup>12</sup> Yet poverty is not a trademark of just developing countries. In industrialised countries it is on the rise – at the same time when the top percentile of rich people is amassing even more wealth. It is a perverse system!

And clearly at this juncture, it would be unproductive to abandon individuals at the centre of the moral maze. Labour codes, international trade agreements, pricing and exploitation mandates for resources, representation in international institutions ... a reform of institutions would spare us a demoralising debate, not the least by taking away the bad options that pit societies or individuals against each other. As Portilho puts it, »...competition for access to food and essential goods precedes the awareness of destruction. Hunger is a bad counsellor.«

12. See: Lewis Akenji, Magnus Bengtsson and Simon Olsen (2012): *Global Outlook on SCP Policies: Asia Pacific*, in: *Global Outlook on Sustainable consumption and Production Policies: Taking Action Together*. UNEP: Chapter 5, 108 – 129.

## Missing Strategies on How to Break Through the Systemic Failing

Comment on »Sustainability and Consumption of Human Life« by Jô Portilho


*Erik Assadourian*

The paper makes it clear that the challenges of consumption are systemic, not a problem of uneducated consumers. Social injustice is »an essential need« of our current consumer-capitalist system. Indeed, the global consumption and production system is so fully stacked toward wasteful exploitation and extraction – including as the author notes the discard of »human waste« – that it may be beyond our collective ability to stop. And certainly far beyond that of individual consumers' agency to address in any meaningful way (at least if they focus on their power to consume differently rather than their power as political, social and cultural actors).

The concern though is that the paper concludes without strategies on how to break through this systemic failing. As Jô notes, »the greatest danger is that we believe that things cannot be changed and that it is not possible anymore to find democratic solutions for human existence. Perhaps the gateway to the preservation of life on the planet is not yet well signposted, but it will certainly be found on the wall opposite the shining lights of the market.«

This is the heart of the paper and yet is only included as a concluding remark. What can be inferred from these points? If I understood correctly, it is that a sustainable society will emerge through abandoning capitalism and its alluring complementary ideology of consumerism (i.e., the shining lights). But will socialism in some new form replace capitalism, or will a new untried system take its place? What will that new system look like?

And how does that reconcile with the point before, which assumes democratic solutions are necessary? Is it realistic to think that there are democratic paths to such major governance and economic transitions? Perhaps modern democracy has merely been an extravagance of



the elite, propped up by the abundance of freely flowing fossil fuels? With 9 billion people, climatic changes of four to six degrees Celsius, and other environmental disruptions, what are the odds that even basic human rights and decency can be sustained in the centuries to come, let alone democratic institutions.

What is clear is that the faster the transition to a sustainable world – possibly even using means currently too taboo to even consider, whether that’s political, economic, cultural, or religious revolution – the more of our humanity we’ll be able to sustain in the centuries to come. While Jô’s paper explores the problems effectively, exploring these questions in depth could strengthen her paper significantly.



### 3. Small is Beautiful: Enabling and Enjoying Sustainable Consumption

*Julia Backhaus*

People have the choice! Business and government like asserting this claim suggesting that what is being produced and consumed in our global economies solely caters to people's wishes. Thus, following this logic, the responsibility and power to bring about change towards sustainability lies with all of us – individually. Supportive arguments put forward by industry and government include: »we only supply what people demand« and »we should not tinker with people's choices«. A counterargument is not found easily. Who would like to question the freedom of choice?

But let's take a closer look at freedom of choice, this grand good, in theory and in practice. In reality, the choices we make are influenced by a myriad of factors, both internal and external. The food we eat, the clothes we wear, the way we travel, and how we live depends on what we like, what is available to us, and what we can afford. Internal factors affecting our behaviour and choices include, for example, our knowledge, habits, attitudes, norms, and values. Examples of influential external factors are the infrastructures, culture, policies, and institutional frameworks that surround us, and the monetary assets available to us. The distinction between internal and external factors is more theoretical than actual, because they are so mutually dependent – for instance, values, culture, habits, and infrastructures influence one another. Nevertheless, differentiating between internal and external factors helps to make the point that the individual and its norms and values considered in isolation hardly has the power to bring about the changes needed to foster sustainable consumption.

The changes required involve internal and external choice influencers that cut across scales and domains in the form of systems and institutions of production, distribution, and consumption in the domains of food, mobility, housing, clothing, etc. Thus, those changes range from the local to the global, will take time, and require the engagement of many. Granted, there are some people who have comparatively more power and influence

to bring about systemic changes, and there are some with much power but little interest in change. There are a few who already actively pursue change toward sustainability, but there are many who hardly seem to care. Considering the sheer scale and complexity of the issue, systemic changes for sustainable consumption appear to be a daunting task.

Across cultures, countries, and communities, however, we can observe numerous people who are already engaged in more sustainable ways of living. They hardly fly, holiday close to home, eat less meat, grow their own veggies, use renewable energy, buy second-hand, share or barter, etc. Some do so because they cannot, others because they do not want to afford high-impact consumerist lifestyles. Moreover, we already observe systemic changes of all sorts. There are plenty of examples of energy or food cooperatives, car- or product-sharing networks, co-housing initiatives, etc. Nonetheless, it is too early to get excited, because these changes are taking place in niches, among small yet growing population segments and still need to prove their upscaling and hence sustainability potential. In other words, large-scale, mainstream changes are still outstanding.

One might assume that it cannot be too difficult to foster alternative ways of living, because all signs seem to point to some inevitable future challenges that simply require change. In the face of climate change, resource scarcities, environmental degradation, growing inequalities, biodiversity loss, etc. alternative ways of production and consumption are not a possibility but a necessity. This enumeration of challenges may appear random and disconnected, but all are in fact symptoms of a single phenomenon: global consumer culture. And this phenomenon is firmly embedded in and held in place by socio-technical-political-economic systems aimed at GDP growth – i.e., growth in the consumption of products and services. In short, it is spurred by capitalist economies. These systems operate in overshoot and exploitation mode, but their harmful effects are felt with

significant delay,<sup>1</sup> and most strongly by those who are most vulnerable yet less visible – i.e., marginalised.<sup>2</sup> No wonder that the climate and the environment currently rank rather low among public concerns in – in monetary terms – wealthy, developed societies.<sup>3</sup>

Ironically, consumer culture does not even hold its promises. Economic systems aimed at continued GDP-growth supposedly make us all better off, happier, healthier, etc. And they do – but only some of us up to a certain threshold and at enormous environmental and social cost. Beyond that threshold, continued increases in consumption levels do not deliver continued increases in happiness and well-being.<sup>4</sup> For most people living in developed countries, consumption reduction will not entail significant constraints. The opposite is frequently the case: people who reduce their resource and energy consumption find their lives enriched in many ways.<sup>5</sup>

To backtrack and summarise: we are faced with enormous global environmental challenges, with a multitude of interlaced causes and effects. Consumer culture is at the heart of the problem, yet systemic change involving the mainstream of society is hard to achieve. It may be tempting to point at national governments, industry, and business as the key players to bring about change, but they have sufficiently demonstrated their unwillingness or inability to act over the past decades. So what to do? How can current niche practices become the new mainstream?

I would like to argue that small (read: local) is beautiful (read: effective). Of course, supportive framework conditions on national or even global scale – including appropriate policy agendas, subsidy schemes, indicators, etc. – are helpful, but not essential. There are examples of cities, municipalities, and communities that are successfully pursuing ambitious sustainability plans without

much national support. They are looking for the most suitable bottom-up solutions, gathering the necessary support as they go. Frequently, they operate under the radar of powerful actors profiting from »keeping things as they are« and do not even consider themselves as change agents towards sustainability but as a group of people collectively grappling imminent, local problems. In fact, their existence in niches and at the margins may constitute part of their success.

What makes these initiatives successful is their context-embedded approach. Instead of offering one-size-fits-all options, they are designing tailor-made solutions that take into account local specificities. Not every solution will work in any context, but only in particular geographical, social, political, economic, or cultural settings. Ideally, local actors collaborate to establish a range of sustainable options that entice numerous people to test and experiment. Often, people who get involved in change efforts discover they enjoy doing things in a new way – be it for economic, environmental, or social reasons. The more people are doing things differently than before or differently than most others, the more people will follow. We can speak of a »diffusion of new practices«.<sup>6</sup> Practice already substantiates this hope for natural diffusion: even sceptics can be won over once they see that something is working well for others.

The much-evoked necessary change away from consumer culture toward social institutions, norms, and values for sustainable consumption cannot be induced from the outside, but needs to be felt and appreciated – individually and collectively. Engagement and experience are the most powerful and suitable vehicles for that. In other words, efforts at change solely targeting people's wallets or solely appealing to morale are unlikely to »do the trick«. People's assessment of whether a more sustainable choice works well for them usually comes from personal or valued-others' experience. Therefore, more sustainable choices are more likely to become mainstreamed the easier, more comfortable, and more enjoyable they are.

It may be hard for some to realise that many people are not opting for the most rational choice from an economic point of view. Policymakers frequently fall into the trap of believing the most rational choice will be the one

1. Meadows, D., J. Randers, and D. Meadows (2004): *Limits to growth: the 30-year update*. White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing Company.

2. M.L. Parry, et al., Editors (2007): Contribution of Working Group II, in: *Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Cambridge, UK.

3. European Commission (2012). *Standard Eurobarometer Autumn 2012: Public opinion in the European Union*.

4. Easterlin, R.A (2003): *Explaining happiness*. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences. 100(19): 1117611183.

5. Schreurs, J. (2010): *Living with Less: Prospects for Sustainability*, in: *ICIS*. University Maastricht, Maastricht.

6. Shove, E. (2003): *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience: The Social Organisation of Normality*. Oxford: Berg.

most frequently made, and that price signals are the best approach to change. Marketers have already understood otherwise. Once we pay attention to the myriad of internal and external factors influencing people's choices, we'll be much better at developing innovative, alternative consumption schemes.

Research has shown that success factors of local sustainability initiatives or programmes include the involvement of relevant stakeholders in the design and implementation of such initiatives, clever networking, long-term and integrated thinking across domains, good short-term timing, and constant evaluation and flexibility in planning and implementation. Flexibility is important because developments that occur over time – e.g., changing public opinions, subsidy schemes, or stakeholder engagement need to be taken into account.<sup>7</sup> In addition, successful initiatives greatly profit from inspirational people with charisma and dedication driving efforts forward.

Looking for sustainable solutions locally can also be a way to build more resilient, just, and future-proof communities. Rather than solely relying on money as the medium to trade goods and services in individualistic societies, people can engage in local cooperation and the direct trade of knowledge, products, skills, and services. Under the banner of social innovation, entrepreneurs, policymakers and civil society actors alike are already experimenting with time banks, collaborative consumption schemes, or local currencies that foster local economies and more sustainable living. Instead of disqualifying people without paid employment, everyone is able to participate and contribute, because people are valued in terms of their time and actions in these alternative systems of production and consumption.

How realistic is it to suppose that consumer culture will cease vis-à-vis city, municipal, and community initiatives for more sustainable consumption? From the current perspective, this hardly seems realistic, because although they are growing in numbers, such initiatives are still sparse, compartmentalised per domain rather than integrated, and small-scale rather than dominant. However, creating local framework conditions that make

some sustainable consumption choices the default option and allow experimentation with others is a giant leap towards creating new life worlds. Surrounded by new ideas, options, infrastructures, and different ways of doing things, norms and values are also likely to co-evolve and change. In other words, the cultural shift that is part and parcel of sustainable consumption does not precede but succeed contextual changes.

If the most doable and effective way towards sustainable consumption is the establishment of frameworks that render sustainable choices in people's everyday lives more possible and fun, several steps to be taken here and now on the local level:

- Courageous policy-makers are needed! Do not wait for national governments or businesses to pave the way, but develop ideas for liveable and sustainable cities and communities involving all relevant stakeholders and step-by-step approaches to foster change.
- Support those that already have clever ideas and initiatives. Connect and inspire them.
- Do not expect change to happen overnight – haste brings waste! Take your time to involve others, to listen, to plan, and replan. The more people become professionally or privately engaged, the more self-perpetuating change becomes. Keep track of developments, making sure they add up, and be flexible.
- Enabling sustainable consumption cannot and should not, however, be left to local policy initiatives alone. Complaining and worrying is easy, but taking action is more fun! Each of us should feel responsible for engaging in changes toward more sustainable consumption. Let's start change today!

7. Breukers, S.C., et al. (2011): Connecting research to practice to improve energy demand-side management (DSM), in: *Energy*. 36(4): 2176–2185.

## We Need an Army of Do-Gooders

Comment on »Enabling and Enjoying Sustainable Consumption« by Julia Backhaus

*Lewis Akenji*

*»... the individual hardly has the power to bring about the changes needed to foster sustainable consumption.«*

Julia Backhaus

The paper by Julia Backhaus starts by ticking off some of the easy talking points used by business and government to justify practical promotion of consumerism, while at the same time talking about the need for consumers to act more sustainably. The typical excuses include: market supply as a direct response to demand, freedom of choice, and consumers as rational economic actors. Notice they are mostly market related; the individual reduced to an economic actor. These talking points have been debunked in research paper after paper, though that has not stopped the excuses being used.

To show how constrained consumers are, Backhaus differentiates between »internal« factors (knowledge, habits, attitudes, norms, and values) and »external« factors (infrastructure, culture, policies, and institutional framework) affecting choice and behaviour.

Take the example of a city dweller with pro-sustainability values (e.g., likes riding a bicycle to work) but comes up against the limits of infrastructure (e.g., no bike lanes on roads). The reality: you can buy all the bikes you want, but you will not use them on our roads – unless of course you want to be crushed by »legitimate« road users: car owners!

Backhaus acknowledges that changing the current social and physical configuration to ensure sustainable consumption is a big challenge at the broad systems level. Disillusioned with government inaction, she reverts to the power of local communities, the impact of actions at the local level, and the need to learn from successful initiatives with »context-embedded« approaches.

Initiatives such as community-owned farms and local currencies foster ownership, and encourage meaningful engagement and trust among members of the commu-

nity. Community activism also allows members to – at least in the domain of activity where there is local action – avoid participation in the mainstream aspect of society considered unsustainable.

While community action and small-scale activities do not address the global scale of sustainability, they provide glimpses of possibilities, serving as social experiments that can then be brought into the mainstream. The challenge here is what is often referred to as mainstreaming; the other is upscaling. Can these local examples be broadened enough to apply at broader societal level? Or, indeed, is it necessary to do so? While I regretfully cannot answer these questions, and while agreeing with Backhaus on the importance of local actions, I would perhaps want to caution that isolated instances of sustainable consumption would not be enough for living sustainably on the planet.

Hopefully, however, these beacons of sustainable sustainability can start a momentum towards reconfiguration of our mainstream social infrastructure (churches, hospitals, neighbourhood bars, PTAs, sewing clubs); inspire new, determined types of politicians and policies (choice editing, ecological tax reform, focus development on achieving well-being); and demand a different design of physical infrastructure (shared transport modes, joint ownership of housing facilities, etc.). And all of these in a time frame that allows us to address the challenges of unsustainable consumption, while we can still revert to ecological limits of the planet.

We need an army of do-gooders, assemblies of small, meaningful actions that chip away at the core of the hardened consumer culture. This includes seeing out-of-market solutions, not being locked in the ultra-capitalistic view of life – what propagated the problem in the first place. Barter, skills trade, time banks, farming collectives, poets, village actors, and (yes, call me naïve) lovers! The real test though is to see results beyond individual or local regimes. Effects of unsustainable consumption are not localised; a bad local environment has global effects. Ultimately, we need to see solutions at a global level. So while we push a few »green« individuals and communities, we must also find a way of connecting those individual initiatives, in order to create a comprehensive movement toward a one-planet accommodation for humanity.

## We Cannot Expect the Transition to Post-Consumerism to Be »Easy and Fun«

Comment on »Enabling and Enjoying Sustainable consumption« by Julia Backhaus

*Erik Assadourian*

Julia makes some very important points in her opening: while industry and government convey that they are not shaping people's choices and broader norms, it is very clear that they are. Thus, considering that they're shaping the system to make people into consumers, sustainable consumption demands reshaping the system, not empowering individual consumers. As she notes, »consumer culture is at the heart of the problem«; a statement with which I very much agree.

Unfortunately, I do not fully agree with her solutions. Take localisation. Julia suggests localised solutions would be more effective. While contextualising can be useful, marketers have shown that they can manipulate context and force a homogenised product across cultures and have a much larger impact in the process. Look at McDonald's or Coca-Cola – with the right strategies, you can get just about anyone to eat burgers and fries. A bit of marketing, some in-store playgrounds, some toys for the kiddies, and voila: in less than a generation or two, the taboo hamburger becomes the iconic meal of first the USA and now many parts of the world. While local efforts would probably make the communities that adopt them more resilient – for example, if a sharing ethic is created, if neighbours know and help each other, if some of the food is produced locally, etc. – changes implemented locally won't be enough to stop runaway climate change or probably even slow its rapid movement forward.

Moreover, due to the sheer scope of the changes we need, we cannot expect the transition to post-consumerism to be »easy and fun«. Sure, community gardens and tool libraries can be the positive face of our transition, but at the same time we will have to »give up« so much. If we really want to prevent climate collapse and not just assuage our guilt and pretend that we are doing our part, we will have to rapidly abandon air conditioning, long-distance vacation travel, most of the meat we eat, our cars, our beloved dogs and cats, and many oth-

er consumer entitlements. That suggests the need for bolder strategies to get people to adopt these changes. Perhaps then what we really need are not an abundance of small local efforts, but a committed minority that acts boldly. How many Americans were an active part of the Abolition or Civil Rights movements? Very few – but they were deeply committed – willing to risk life, limb, and their freedom. I give more chance of success to the actions of a small, committed group, than a plethora of small-scale efforts around the world. Especially because for every one of these small efforts, there are hundreds of small-scale efforts to get more people flying, buying pets, eating fast food, or thousands of other ways to convert one to two billion individuals into new consumers over the next 25 years – as economists have estimated and companies work toward making happen.

## 4. Sustainable Consumption or Consumer Scapegoatism? A Provocation

Lewis Akenji

*»The fact is, though, that we can be law-abiding and peace-loving and tolerant and inventive and committed to freedom and true to our own values and still behave in ways that are biologically suicidal.«*

Malcolm Gladwell

The objects we admire the most from the lost worlds are artefacts of the cultures that consumed their great civilisations.

The Maya civilisation had elaborate and highly decorated ceremonial architecture, including temple-pyramids, palaces, and observatories. Jared Diamond notes that Mayans were skilled farmers, clearing large sections of tropical rain forest and, where groundwater was scarce, building sizeable underground reservoirs for rainwater storage.<sup>1</sup> Yet, today their story is told from ruins of their majestic pyramids scattered around Central America, standing as symbols of their former greatness. Similarly, 16th-century Easter Island was a healthy, thriving civilisation flourishing with abundant sea life and farming to feed a growing population until as recently as the 18th century. Since their sudden collapse, cultural traits of their hitherto power have been held up by remains of nearly 900 gargantuan stone statues, *moai*, some weighing 80 tons. The same tragic historical trajectory applies to the Norse. The Vikings who inhabited the Eastern Settlements of Greenland a thousand years ago established law-abiding communities with a viable economy; fostered great trade relations with their neighbours; and cultivated the land successfully to feed their population. To celebrate their cultural superiority, they flaunted the typical wealth flags of the time: church bells, stained-glass windows, bronze candlesticks, etc. The Norse civilisation lasted for 400 years and then vanished.

The message from history: societies that institutionalise cultures of consumption might have, in their heyday, seemed infallible but today we know that ecological limitations are unforgiving to those that think they can consume and grow forever.

And yet we think we are different, better. Our technology is more sophisticated, our military has stronger firepower, our food is genetically modified, our plastic is more versatile, and our machines and medicines keep us alive longer. This is the refrain repeated from our parliaments, our quick-fix TV stations, our corporations, our schools – the institutions that guard our culture. Anyone who reads similarities from history is ridiculed as a doomsday Malthusian. All responsible individuals have to do is consume more, to contribute to the economy that supports this great civilisation.

Be it green or brown consumption, government and institutional embrace of any new label is circumscribed by the inability to imagine a world beyond consumer spending and economic growth. To pick on the individual consumer here is not entirely wrong, but it misses the stronger drivers and guardians of ever-increasing consumption patterns: institutions are custodians of ways of life, of cultures.

An axiom that has shaped policy approaches to sustainable consumption (SC) is that if more consumers understood the environmental consequences of their consumption patterns, they would inevitably put pressure on retailers and manufacturers – through their market choices – to move towards sustainable production. The result is a proliferation of the consumption of »green« products, eco-labels, consumer awareness campaigns, etc.<sup>2</sup> In designing strategies and activities for sustainability, governments have relegated the role of consumers to the end users.

1. Diamond, Jared (2005): *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. New York: Viking.

2. Akenji, Lewis (2012). Consumer Scapegoatism and Limits to Green Consumerism, in: *Proceedings: Global Research Forum on Sustainable Consumption and Production Workshop*, 13–15 June 2012, Rio de Janeiro Brazil.

Hobson has noted in this approach the perverse framing that »all individuals possess a utility function«, to which the free market simply answers.<sup>3</sup> Applied by producers, being green strategically provides a market for products. Confirmed by de Boer through marketing research, companies are mainly motivated to use tools such as eco-labelling if they can »always be translated into traditional business criteria, aimed at short-term and long-term profits«.<sup>4</sup>

The distorting lens here is continuous economic growth being the dominant paradigm; one that remains central to government legitimacy. Conceptually, at its most effective, SC needs people to consume as little as necessary, in order to reduce environmental pressures and to free up consumption space for others. Conversely, market-economy systems need to constantly increase consumption in order to sustain the economy. Consumption drives production, which drives economic growth. Witness the encouragement through advertisements, consumer loans, and credit systems that have seen steady increases in consumer debt. Sociologist Nick Turnbull surmises that, »the state, rather than undertaking the risk of deficit spending to stimulate growth itself, is using policy mechanisms to encourage households to do this«.<sup>5</sup> Government and market conceptualisation of SC is thus carefully calibrated to not slow down the economy, but to operate as a peripheral activity that safeguards only against the most damaging and immediate environmental problems. Consequently, an increased emphasis is being put on efficient production and green consumerism, which allows governments to walk a fine line that pays lip service to SC, while encouraging continuous consumption. Moreover, this places responsibility on consumers to maintain economic growth, while simultaneously, even if contradictorily, bearing the burden to drive the system towards sustainability. This is consumer scapegoatism!

A paradoxical consequence of promoting green consumerism, well demonstrated by the case of eco-household appliances, is the so-called rebound effect: although

washing machines and television sets have become more efficient, savings per unit have meant that people buy even more; thus the absolute amount of consumption has increased, outstripping the efficiency gains.

Princen and Clapp<sup>6</sup> have used the concept of »distancing« to explain one of the consequences of isolating consumers from a holistic view of the production-consumption system. To Princen, physical, cultural, and other forms of distancing keep the consumer away from understanding how lifestyle purchases affect resource extraction for production. Similarly, Clapp argues that because household waste is conveniently and regularly collected and disposed of, people have little understanding of where the waste associated with the production of their purchases ends up. This leads to a growing mental, cultural, and geographic distance between consumers and their waste. The more people are isolated as final-end consumers, green or otherwise, distancing causes ecological feedback to be severed, leading to decisions that perpetuate resource overuse and increased waste generation.

The intention with end-of-pipe green consumerism is not to change production processes, let alone the institutions that prop overconsumption, but to modify the products that are consumed. Sustainability is thus based on the subjective perception of the producer and the consumer, not necessarily on the facts of whether such behaviour would achieve the end objectives of sustainability. Activities such as buying energy-efficient drying machines rather than using natural sunlight to dry clothes, or buying bottled tap water packaged in recyclable PET bottles begin to take on a higher meaning under green consumerism. For the green end-consumer, a warm glow is derived from believing the green-marketing hype and buying sometimes unnecessary eco-products, and not from any realistic understanding of the ecological consequences – especially as consumption accumulates.

To achieve sustainable consumption, the appropriate level of meaningful action is institutional; to change the logic and modify the social and physical infrastructure that promotes consumerism. This does not relinquish the consumer of his/her responsibility, of which there are many; rather it recognises the limits to individual ac-

3. Hobson, Kertsy (2006). Competing Discourses of Sustainable Consumption: Does the »Rationalization of Lifestyles« Make Sense? in: Tim Jackson (ed.). *The Earthscan Reader in Sustainable Consumption*. Earthscan: London, 305–327. Here page 309.

4. De Boer, Joop (2003). Sustainability Labelling Schemes: The Logic of their Claims and their Functions for Stakeholders, in: *Business Strategy and the Environment*. 12, 254–264. Here page 258.

5. Spaargaren, Gert (2003). Sustainable Consumption: A Theoretical and Environmental Policy Perspective, in: *Society and Natural Resources*, 16:687–701, Taylor & Francis, Inc.

6. Princen, Thomas, Michael Maniates, Ken Conca, Eds. (2002). *Confronting Consumption*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

tion and highlights the risks that continuous consumerism, albeit green, will drive the planetary system beyond recoverable limits of resource extraction, social dissatisfaction, and rampant pollution.

In a study published in 2010, we examined the relative powers of major stakeholders in the value chains of consumer products.<sup>7</sup> Analysing each group's interests, its influence on other actors, the production-consumption system, as well as the instruments it uses to wield its power, we determined that the consumer is not the most salient stakeholder. Brand owners, retailers, and consumers form a nexus of influence of the value chain, but it is the brand owner who is the lead actor. This emphasises why a limited focus on consumers would only render frustrating results. Instead, the lead actor should be targeted so that it can use its power to shift the entire value chain. Beyond this, reform should not be limited to increased efficiency but to transform the corporate culture, to rethink how corporations organise themselves to meet societal needs.

Corporate reform should be accompanied with removing unsustainable products from the market. When it comes to interfering with individual choices, policymakers regard individual consumption as a sovereign domain beyond the reach of public intervention; »neo-liberal thinking cautions against using public policy to unduly manage consumer decision making«. <sup>8</sup> Yet governments have always intervened in consumption – of tobacco, firearms, and alcohol, for instance – by employing such criteria as public safety and public health. Viewing the effects of unsustainable consumption as public concern, choice editing demands that sustainability criteria be used to set minimum standards below which products will automatically fall off the shelf. This might not resonate well with the myopic crowd that espouses the now abused notion of freedom of choice; yet there is hardly any logic in individual freedom that consumes away the livelihood of an entire planet!

Solutions must also address systems of provision. The extent to which everyday household consumption behaviour can change is not only dependent on consumer

attitude, but also on highly interdependent socio-technical networks or systems of provision – i.e., how services or resources are produced, distributed and used.<sup>9</sup> Demand for household services like energy, water, and waste management is structured by the utility companies, manufacturers, and regulators involved in specifying technologies and systems, managing loads, and modifying resource flows. Therefore, a more effective framing of SC policy needs to look beyond individual actions.

Beyond environmentally conscious single-unit designs, we especially need broader physical planning that integrates multiple functionalities of housing, mobility, feeding, and work, to optimise resource (re)use and facilitate healthier community development. This should be combined with a sustainability audit of public utility systems and systems of provision. Possible outcomes include restrictions of unsustainable options (e.g., non-renewable energy sources) and application of eco-friendly tariffs (e.g., progressive charges for water and energy bills).

Above all, we need to construct a new vision beyond economic definitions; one that engages positive attributes in people and inspires new solutions. At the heart of consumption is the drive to be better, for people to lead happier lives. But that is not registered in the parameters we use in evaluating success of a society. The widely used GDP prioritises economic dynamism; in a society where growth has become an end to itself, human well-being has become subservient. A nursing mother's time with the newborn baby does not contribute to GDP growth; neither do non-consumptive leisurely activities like taking a walk; nor does helping a friend in the garden. The things that experience and research show that make people happy without spending money – a sense of belonging to and trust in community, a meaningful contribution to society, physical health, love – have little direct resonance on the GDP. Instead, spending on cancer treatment or paying insurance against robbery stimulates GDP growth. It's ironic: our parameters of economic success come at the expense of our own happiness! And so the ways in which we are encouraged to demonstrate success are ultimately detrimental to the planet upon which we depend.

7. Akenji, Lewis and Magnus Bengtsson (2010). Is the Customer Really King? Stakeholder Analysis for Sustainable Consumption and Production Using the Example of the Packaging Value Chain, in: *Sustainable Consumption and Production in the Asia-Pacific Region: Effective Responses in a Resource Constrained World*. IGES, Hayama, 23–46.

8. Cohen, Maurie J. (2005). Sustainable Consumption in National Context: An Introduction to the Special Issue, in: *Sustainability: Science, Practice, & Policy, Volume 1, Issue 1, Spring*. <http://ejournal.nbii.org>

9. Chappells, Heather and Elizabeth Shove (2003). The Environment and the Home. Paper for Environment and Human Behaviour Seminar, Policy Studies Institute, London.



The Mayas, the Vikings, the Easter Islanders are but a few examples of civilisations that – right at the peak of their cultures, when they were at their strongest – suddenly collapsed! Historical narratives have always preferred to isolate warfare as the cause of the collapse of great civilisations, which in some cases is true. But while the envy of militant neighbouring empires or warring colonialists have sometimes been the immediate cause, this view tends to ignore the preparatory work done by the societies themselves, the long term causes that led to their demise. Where history brings in nature, it has often picked cataclysmic events – natural disasters, epidemics – to claim that these civilisations were destroyed by forces beyond human control. However, mounting evidence from scientific research is beginning to show a more complete picture. It is the way we organise our societies, the institutions that guard our way of life, and our everyday patterns of production and consumption that determine our future.

In the last days of the Norse, as pressures increased on their limited forests and resources, they continued to thrash the trees and to trade in church bells, stained-glass windows, silk, silver – artefacts that showed their society as supreme. On the Easter Islands, the palm trees fell beyond the ecological balance and climatic extremes were the result. Ancient Egypt is yet another example of a collapsed civilisation that we romanticise in our TV documentaries and movies – flashing crafted objects unearthed from burial tombs, measuring perfect geometric dimensions of their pyramids, and offering vivid narratives of their scientific supremacy and ceremonies lush with gold.

War and disasters might contribute, but they only succeed when we have laid the groundwork, by shifting the ecological balance and making the natural system upon which we depend so vulnerable that man-made or human disaster is only a trigger that pushes us over the tipping point. As Jared Diamond shows, our institutions are tuned to think more about our social survival (e.g., fashion, cars, TVs, fountains), and less about our biological survival (e.g., forests, water, energy) – that logic needs to change. The more we shift the burden from the institutional to the individual level, the more we scapegoat individual consumers, the tougher the challenge to our civilisation.

## What Kind of Corporate Reform and Alternative Institutional Logics Do We Need and How Can We Bring Them About?

Comment on »Sustainable Consumption or Consumer Scapegoatism? A Provocation«  
by Lewis Akenji

*Julia Backhaus*

I appreciate how Lewis Akenji's words to describe the shortcomings of our current culture, economy, and institutional arrangements ooze with irony: »All responsible individuals have to do is consume more, to contribute to the economy that supports *this great civilisation*« [emphasis added]. I agree that the phenomenon of »consumer scapegoatism« exists, but prefer to frame it as »responsibility escapism«, arguing along the same lines as Lewis Akenji does. I support his stand that it is rather convenient for policymakers and companies to hide behind the notion of freedom of choice and delegate the burden of responsibility to the individual consumer. In other words, Akenji and I are in agreement when endorsing action to be taken on the level of culture, institutional arrangements, and systems of provision rather than the individual consumer.

Lewis Akenji stipulates that most power to bring about change in our system of production and consumption lies with brand owners. For him, the key to success appears to be corporate reform accompanied, possibly pushed, by policy action. I wonder, though, how brand owners are to be targeted beyond consumer choice editing – i.e., the obligatory phasing out of products and services that do not withstand certain sustainability standards. I support choice editing for the same reason Lewis Akenji puts forward: namely the fact that policy has always interfered with people's choices and has every right to do so if this interference serves the right purpose, such as public safety or health. Then again, choice editing alone cannot be sufficient to motivate corporate reform of the kind Lewis Akenji promotes: specifically, a rethinking of the goals corporate efforts pursue.

A second avenue for action Lewis Akenji proposes is the use of more appropriate aggregate indicators than GDP. This argument is commonplace in sustainable con-

sumption discussions and many alternative indicators are being explored. My question is whether the employment of alternative aggregate indicators would indeed have the desired effects – i.e., whether this instrument will suffice to bring about the desired corporate reform. I find another line of argument put forward by Lewis Akenji particularly intriguing, namely the idea »to change the logic« of consumption. For him, this goes (far) beyond efficiency and the consumption of green rather than brown products and services. Instead, consumption operating by this new logic involves actual consumption reduction, which means consuming »as little as necessary«. This is nicely in line with Erik Assadourian's suggestion to re-engineer consumer culture into a sustainable culture.

I would be curious to learn about the alternative cultural logic (or logics?) Lewis Akenji had in mind when composing his position paper. In my own research, I am studying principles that organise our socio-technical systems and that are safeguarded by institutions – the »custodians of ways of life« as Lewis Akenji so eloquently phrased it. The currently dominant logic or paradigm governing our norms, values, culture, systems of provision, etc. is continuous growth, rightly blamed for the potential downfall of our *great civilisation*. The alternative political-economic paradigm most prominently discussed in the policy arena is efficiency, frequently tied to notions of »green growth« or »de-coupling«, which is important but considered insufficient by the sustainable consumption community if we are to live within planetary boundaries. Because the search for alternative logics is the focus of my own work, I would have loved to read more about how Lewis Akenji would characterise the current logic of our institutions, the alternative logic he would endorse, and how he thinks that changes in logic can be supported, or facilitated.

Contrary to what he seems to suggest (although this may be my own, mistaken interpretation of his writings) – that dominant institutions such as parliaments, TV stations, corporations and schools safeguard the logic of growth – I hope to find in my research that alternative logics are in place already, also within these institutions. Luckily (for us and our planet), there are numerous institutions – including civil society, medicine, education, religion, family – that exist to safeguard comfort, health, prosperity and happiness; the kind of goals Lewis Akenji

considers to be signposts for desirable corporate reform. Instead of also subordinating these institutions – which are sustainability's last resorts – to market mechanisms, policy aimed at supporting sustainable societies would strengthen them by accounting for all, not only economic profits to be made. Here, I have come full circle to Lewis Akenji's arguments in favour of using other indicators than GDP, yet translated into more concrete policy objectives and transferred into practice.

The notion of »social survival« also calls for some pondering. Certainly, advertising wants us to believe that only the latest fashion, the hippest music, and the sportiest car underline our sex appeal and success. And indeed, people consume to engage in social conversations, to tell others who they are or want to be and what they value. If we look closely, however, we can see trends that demand no or less consumption for »social survival« and instead rely on sharing and caring, such as collaborative consumption, repair cafés, or community gardens. Each of these examples relates to the challenge of »distancing« that Lewis Akenji addresses as well and gives reason to believe that our future economic system can look very different from today's.

## The Biggest Question Is Left Unanswered: How Do We Get There?

Comment on »Sustainable Consumption or Consumer Scapegoatism? A Provocation«  
by Lewis Akenji

*Erik Assadourian*

Lewis makes an excellent point that while our global consumer culture seems infallible, so did other now collapsed cultures. And I would add that more recently, so did the powerful Soviet system, which collapsed so speedily. The idea that our current global consumerist system isn't fragile is absurd and this paper effectively draws attention to this point.

Moreover, Lewis makes the valuable point that »our institutions are tuned to think more about our social survival (e.g., fashion, cars, TVs, fountains), and less about our biological survival (e.g., forests, water, energy)«. He

also makes it clear that focusing on the consumer's role in changing behaviours will fail to fix this skewed focus or our obsession with economic growth as the dominant system paradigm.

Lewis makes some good suggestions on how we can start to change the system: choice editing, moving beyond GDP to shift what we understand as success. But truthfully, these types of changes depend on the very institutions that have been captured/co-opted by those entities (such as corporations) that have so much to lose if we move to a post-consumer orientation. Thus the biggest question of how do we get there – Reform? Evolution? Revolution? – is left unanswered. Or perhaps that omission was intentional. Perhaps the inability to make these changes is so overwhelming that the only option left is to wait for our collective collapse and pick up the pieces once that process wraps up. But in that case, the reader deserves suggestions on how to ready himself for the rebuilding process that will inevitably follow.

## We Need Strong, Democratically-Managed Institutions, Permeated by the Paradigm of Global Solidarity

Comment on «Sustainable Consumption or Consumer Scapegoatism? A Provocation»  
by Lewis Akenji

*Juçara Portilho Lins (Jô Portilho)*

With his article «Sustainable Consumption or Consumer Scapegoatism? A Provocation», Lewis Akenji raises fundamental questions for those who want to move the debate about sustainability and consumerism from the pure field of ideas, to the social commitment to necessary change.

His analysis covers the importance of deeply «listening» to the inexorable message left to us by history, while making us remember that nothing lasts forever in the same form: neither the very good nor the very bad!

Among the «provocations» identified by Akenji, the role of society's institutions – especially those involved in the creation and implementation of public policies – appears


as the central point. The neo-liberal vision of the state defends a reduction of its role as a provider of social welfare («minimal state»), while demanding, at all costs, a posture of protection and incentive to the logic of the market («maximal state»).

Akenji provides a good example of this when he refers to the propaganda on «efficient production and green consumerism» spread by the media together with governmental policies. The author demonstrates that the paradigm of constant growth, implemented by the national states, transfers the responsibility to the consumer to prevent the collapse of the system: everyone must keep consuming without interruption; and, for consumers more committed to the defence of the environment, green production is created – at a higher cost, of course!

This shifting of the responsibility and the risk to the final consumer, which Akenji labels «scapegoatism», is very functional to globalised capitalism, in which the division of the responsibility for a worthy, healthy, and happy life for all is completely unequal. However, we cannot fall in the trap that we will solve the contradictions posited by the unscrupulous relation between big capital and the national states by, devaluing politics. To the contrary, structural changes towards a sustainable planet can in no way exist without strong, democratically-managed institutions, permeated by the paradigm of global solidarity.

According to Akenji, we understand that «to achieve sustainable consumption, the appropriate level of meaningful action is institutional». But I would like to stress that I conceive the institutional field represented by decisory instances that reflect society as a whole, and not only as fractions of social classes with a higher income! Consequently, this is not about patronising consumers, but conceding them the right to be citizens before they are labelled as just consumers.

In this sense, Akenji again touches on an essential point when he discusses the production chain and the important role of the brand owners. According to the author, even though the consumer is an important stakeholder, he does not have the same power of influence in the value chain. I agree with him that the impact of unsustainable consumption is a problem of public interest. It would be essential, for this very reason, that government-



tal decisions prohibiting the sale of products harmful to the environment and the health of the people who make, sell, or consume them, should not be so »carpet bombed« in the media by the neo-liberal logic. According to this logic, public interest must bow to individual desire, as the isolated individual is the only one with power of choice and veto!

Another point that Akenji and I both, judge essential in the discussion on sustainability is the system of delivering services, such as supplying water and energy. Because it is a service used by the entire population, it is indispensable to have public and transparent control over its management, quality, and costs.

I would like to stress my agreement with Akenji's ideas about alternative evaluation criteria that go beyond a purely economic vision. The way to overcome the process of environmental destruction cannot be to prioritise the »inexorable« economic dynamism of the GDP over the well-being of people and nature.

I conclude with a textual citation of Lewis Akenji that I consider the inflection point for changing direction to a sustainable world: »The things which experience and research show that make people happy without spending money – a sense of belonging to and trust in community, a meaningful contribution to society, physical health, love – have little direct resonance on the GDP.«



## Part 2: Joint Paper

# 5. NowHere, NoWhere – Where and When Is Utopia?

*Judith Gouverneur*

This paper summarises crucial aspects of the discussion about sustainable consumption. Based on the papers and comments by Erik Assadourian, Jô Portilho, Julia Backhaus, and Lewis Akenji, it carves out both commonalities and central conflict lines and diagnoses urgent areas of action.

## 1. Points of Convergence

To start with, there's a lot of agreement. First, on the challenge: »In the face of climate change, resource scarcities, environmental degradation, growing inequalities, biodiversity loss, etc., alternative ways of production and consumption are not a possibility but a necessity« (Julia Backhaus). Second, on the problem behind the challenge – and thus on the central target for action: »[These challenges] are in fact synonyms of a single phenomenon: global consumer culture. And this phenomenon is firmly embedded in and held in place by socio-technical-political-economic systems aimed at GDP growth (...). In short, it is spurred by capitalist economies« (Julia Backhaus). Third, there's agreement on the fact that there is a tendency to shift responsibility from the production to the consumption side, from system to individual: »After the social relations of capital have managed both to degrade the environment (...) and to change human relationships (...), concerns about the sustainability of the planet are shifted from production to 'unconscious consumption'« (Jô Portilho).

According to Lewis Akenji, the described shift of responsibilities involves a problematic doubling of demands, »plac[ing] responsibility on consumers to maintain economic growth while simultaneously, even contradictorily, bearing the burden to drive the system towards sustainability«. Whether this blame shifting towards consumers is another coup of the capitalist system, opening up new, »green« market areas which allow consumers »[to] delude themselves into believing that they're doing their part to consume sustainably, when they are not« (Erik Assadourian); whether it is purpose-

fully conducted, as conveyed in Lewis Akenji's formula of »consumer scapegoatism«, or rather a matter of »responsibility escapism«, as Julia Backhaus puts it – what is agreed is that »it is rather convenient for policymakers and companies to hide behind the notion of freedom of choice and delegate the burden of responsibility to the individual consumer« (Julia Backhaus).

But when it comes to defining consumers' role within the much-needed transformation of unsustainable lifestyles, freedom of choice is a highly problematic concept – and at least questionable as an argument. Julia Backhaus describes this difficulty as the complex interaction of mutually affective internal (that is, knowledge, habits, attitudes, norms, values) and external (such as infrastructure, culture, policies, institutional framework) influences on the individual, which at least relativises the idea of freedom of choice. For Jô Portilho, the consequences of the systematic entanglement of the individual are very clear: »The consumer is not an extraterrestrial being – he is a worker in a factory, a schoolteacher, businessman, politician, citizen! Once the consumer is part of the social relations permeated by a logic, which requires consumption as its safeguard, there will be no individual solutions.« While there is agreement on the fact that, »the individual hardly has the power to bring about the changes needed to foster sustainable consumption« (Julia Backhaus), both Julia Backhaus and Lewis Akenji also indicate the ambiguity of the concept, pointing not just towards its misuse but also towards the danger of foreclosing potentials for action and innovation, which a more positive reference on the ideal of individual freedom of choice and action as a reclaim of not just social, but also political rights might offer.

## Individualising Responsibility Is Not Just Futile, It Is Dangerous

Lewis Akenji calls attention to another interesting problem which is closely related to the blame-shifting practice, namely that individualising the responsibility to

bring about a more sustainable way of living may not only be unfair and hardly productive, but also dangerous because it threatens to undermine solidarity and social cohesion: »Take the example of a city dweller with pro-sustainability values (e.g., likes riding bicycles to work) but comes up against the limits of infrastructure (e.g., no bike lanes on roads). The reality: you can buy all the bikes you want, but you will not use them on our roads – unless of course you want to be crushed by the »legitimate« road users: car owners!« Against this background, it becomes clear that Julia Backhaus' call for the mainstreaming of sustainable choices and initiatives, which thus far remain »niche practices«, is not just a strategic question. It is also of utmost importance when we want to make sure the »project sustainability« will not be viewed as one that can only be realised outside society or even against it, instead of together with and within society.

In this context, there is also the question of whether there is such a thing as the often claimed sustainable consumption, and whether it really serves the environment and the people or rather promotes a moralisation of consumption that underestimates the social relevance of consumption and hence abets the drifting apart of society. »It would be unproductive to abandon individuals at the centre of the morale maze«, says Lewis Akenji. »A reform of institutions would spare us a demoralising debate, not the least by taking away the bad options that pit societies or individuals against each other.«

As a consequence, there is urgent need to strengthen politics, meaning not only the reinforcement of the primacy of (democratic) politics over the markets and a repoliticisation of the concept of sustainability, but also the resolidarisation of consumers. »We cannot fall in the trap that we will solve the contradictions posited by the unscrupulous relation between big capital and the national states by devaluing politics itself«, warns Jô Portilho. »On the contrary, options of structural change towards a sustainable planet can in no way exist without strong, democratically-managed institutions, permeated by the paradigm of global solidarity.« And according to Erik Assadourian, the way individuals conceive themselves will influence the way they address the challenge of overcoming current unsustainable lifestyles: »Indeed, the global consumption and production system is so fully stacked toward wasteful exploitation and extraction (...) that it may be beyond our collective ability to stop. And certainly far beyond that of individual consumers'

agency to address in any meaningful way (at least if they focus on their power to consume differently rather than their power as political and social actors).«

### It's Not Only about What or How Much We Consume – We Also Have to Change What We See in Consumption

Consequently, all authors do not treat consumption primarily as a private action, but as a social activity through which, on the one hand, social processes of identification and distinction and, more indirectly, the allocation of social recognition takes place; and which, on the other hand, acts as both pillar and driver for production, hence contributing to the perpetuation of a system based and depending on continuous growth. Through this, the authors make one thing very clear: those who take seriously the need for changing our ways of living cannot tie this demand to consumption alone – much less to individual, private consumption – but will have to include the production system as well as the existing institutions as crucial and influential pillars of the current system.

Besides concrete action targeted at corporate reform and a reorienting of institutions, actions will also have to be directed towards an at least partial decoupling of consumption from the social functions it fulfils, meaning we will need to find and provide socially viable alternatives. As for the processes for distributing social recognition throughout society, for example, an important step towards the decoupling of social status and consumption would be to restructure the employment and working sector in a way that allows for different mechanisms of recognition-allocation beyond money and its most visible expression, consumption. »Instead of disqualifying people without paid employment, everyone is able to participate and contribute, because people are valued in terms of their time and actions in these alternative systems of production and consumption« (Julia Backhaus).

### Sustainability as Justice

Throughout the discussion, something else becomes clear as well: those who take seriously the need for changing of our ways of living will also have to read the

question of a sustainable living together as a question of justice. On a first level, this is directly comprehensible, for if it were all right with us that in the foreseeable future a decreasing number of people will be able to live under humane circumstances, we would not have to have this urgent debate – at least not here and now. But in the context of consumer responsibility, justice also points to the problem of a highly differential access to freedom of action and choice. »Of course, we cannot underestimate the resilience that organised consumers have to say ›no‹«, says Jô Portilho. »But neither can we assume that all consumers are part of a homogeneous category (...). If all consumers corresponded to the same North American standard, African populations could refuse to consume the medicines distributed to them in human testing regimes, or refuse to eat GM food offered as humanitarian aid. However, since class stratifications exist, the competition for access to food and essential goods precedes the awareness of destruction. Hunger is a bad counsellor!« And finally, the articles show that the growing inequity within societies, as well as at a global level, is not only conceived as unjust, but holds an explosive force that gives fighting injustice a significance beyond the motive of building a more equitable world. Erik Assadourian expresses this very drastically, saying: »(...) eventually, consumer culture will implode as ecological systems break down, and as temperatures rise two, four, even six degrees Celsius higher than pre-industrial averages. At that point, only the richest will be able to afford to live consumer lifestyles, while the vast majority of people will need to look for an alternative cultural orientation; ideally a sustainable one, though at that point any that enable them to survive will in all likelihood be accepted, whether that be fascism, theocracy, corporate feudalism, or whatever other models a dystopian future might bring.«

## 2. Points of Divergence

To sum up, the discussants widely agree on the fact that the challenges of our consumption-driven society are primarily systemic and that therefore, the necessary change will have to be a change of the existing system, including culture, values, and norms at its basis and the institutions in which they are embedded. Without letting consumers off the hook too easily, focusing on the individual for action will most certainly not do. Rather, we need ideas that transcend the borders of the uniform

thinking in which we have established ourselves quite comfortably, often accepting too easily the alleged lack of alternatives as an excuse for inaction.

So, is the search for sustainable ways of life, for sustainable models of society and development taking us to the edge of our imagination? Probably not, but it sure takes the discussants to the edge of accord.

When it comes to the questions of »Where to go?« and »How to get there?« the authors' ideas range from a democratic, bottom-up-driven transformation, to ideas recalling the concept of development dictatorships; from the very practical and action-oriented idea of a plurality of local initiatives developing into the fundamental cultural change identified as necessary to plans for an avant-garde driven reengineering of cultural norms, »to delegitimise the consumer way of life altogether, so that living sustainably feels natural and living as a consumer becomes a societal taboo.« What sounds to Erik Assadourian like a »utopian fantasy« – as opposed to a multitude of possible dystopian futures – is harshly criticised by both its commentators. Interestingly enough, it's the same finding of the inseparability of social relations from the dominant relations of production – although derived from completely different theoretical backgrounds – that lead Assadourian to the conclusion that, »we will need cultural pioneers who can extract themselves from the dominant consumer cultural paradigm and work toward bringing about a new sustainable culture. (...) These pioneers will need to embed themselves in existing institutions – government, business, education media and advertising, social movements, even religions – working to overhaul systems and the cultural norms they reinforce to make them orient on sustainability«. Jô Portilho, on the contrary, strongly rejects this idea on the grounds of its authoritarian approach. Even though Portilho does not say so explicitly, her thoughts about »human garbage« present a strong warning against any kind of utopia that presents itself as a closed and therefore radically exclusive ideology. For any principle withheld from democratic contestation will necessarily produce whole groups of people who are simply not wanted. No such principle will ever be sustainable, not even sustainability itself. »The ecological philosophy suggested by Assadourian will have to promote its own ethics on the importance of changing habits towards sustainability. In other words, it will be a philosophy compatible with the new sustainable rationality. This rationality of an ›ideal

type« that will guide the populace (...) is outside it», while according to Jô Portilho, we »[need] to join forces to break the logic of the market to change society from the inside«.

Arguing along similar lines, Julia Backhaus dismisses Assadourian's approach as a possible road to a »green totalitarian regime«. Her utopia is a pluralistic one, a utopia of many small utopias: »Indeed, visions, exemplars and practices are needed, but many of them and different ones for different people.« Lewis Akenji aligns himself with this, suggesting »assemblies of small, meaningful actions that chip away at the core of the hardened consumer culture. This includes seeing out-of-market solutions, not being locked in the ultra-capitalistic view of life«.

Erik Assadourian's idea of cultural pioneers and eco-missionaries creating a global ecological-philosophical movement »complete with a cosmology, theodicy (...), ethics, stories, and practices that help bind communities together«, understandably enough conjures up fears and historical memories of the worst kind, and respective developments would surely have to be observed with »extreme caution«, as Backhaus says. However, the parallel Assadourian draws to religion and its multiple shapes also allows reading the idea as one directed at an overall consensus within which competition between a plurality of interpretations is possible or even intended.

allel larger-scale changes that lead to »(...) supportive framework conditions on national or even global scale – including appropriate policy agendas, subsidy schemes, indicators, etc.« This means, we need a fundamental systemic change that does not build upon the individualisation of responsibility that will wear out social solidarity and has already distorted our ideas of freedom and community, but rather encourages people to rediscover their actions as meaningful, and to reopen spaces of political action. Because »the greatest danger is that we believe that things cannot be changed and that it is no longer possible to find democratic solutions for the human existence« (Jô Portilho).

### 3. Points of Departure

So, where do we go from here? In fact, one of the most important lessons might be that we will have to come to accept and appreciate that a certain amount of insecurity and antagonism of ideas will always accompany us on our search for more sustainable ways of living together. With the path towards sustainable lifestyles still widely uncharted, for now it makes sense to focus not only on the destination, but also to consider the way ahead already as part of the change we are calling for. Accordingly, we have to make sure the transformation will be a democratic – that is, an emancipative process that does not foreclose, but open up points of access for as broad a public as possible. This process, of course, will take time. For it to succeed, we will have to make sure that all of these actions are being increasingly embedded in society and will be propped up by par-





## Part 3: The Different Perspective

### 6. After the Goldrush Some Remarks on the Influence of Product Design on the Modification of Lifestyles

*Jörg Petruschat*

The message of this text is as follows: designers can be central actors when it comes to freeing ourselves from lifestyles that exploit the planet. The underlying logic of this argument is that certain lifestyles function as drivers of constant, exponential growth. If it were possible to redirect lifestyles from exponentially growing consumption to sufficiency, a key driver of growth would be paralysed, favouring a transition to a kind of steady-state economy. Do designers have the power – and that means the possibility and the competence – to reformulate lifestyles in this way?

What can designers really do?

The profession came into being in the Italian Renaissance, acquiring considerable repute. The term *disegno* denoted a drawing and, because there are also pictures in the mind, »internal drawings« or images. Designers are masters of the power of the imagination and of material performance. On the surface of their drawing boards, they conjure up images of things or states that are supposed to become reality. In this, they work, on one hand, after models that they have observed: ruins and remains of the culture of the Roman Republic, which provided the aristocrats and citizens of emerging trading cities, who were striving for autonomy, the costumes and backdrops for their own democratic endeavours. Carole Cable terms this from documentation to design.<sup>1</sup> This describes the development of skills that led from the documentary recording of ancient, especially ornamental, forms to design.

On the other hand, design is an inventive and projecting activity with its own poetic elements – ranging from free variation in ornamentation to the fabrication of technical arrangements.

I would like to adduce two reasons why designing became a profession and thus historically necessary.

In the Renaissance, aristocrats and citizens, who wanted self-determination and to engage in trade and thus did not want to abide by the boundaries laid down by the medieval system of the estates of realm, encountered craftsmen who were unable to provide them with the products they wanted. This lack of understanding concerned the form in which the products were supposed to be cast and thus the forms of their lifestyle. The craftsmen knew only how to work in terms of traditional know-how. What they could not do was to execute products in ways that deviated from or ran counter to their tradition. Those who sought forms beyond the old order, forms that fostered identification with new republican or even urban-democratic orders, had to turn to those able to think conceptually and in a position to formally direct craft production.

Designers were necessary to break free of the ossifications of craft production and to translate the formal modes of the resurrected antique culture for manufacturers within the horizon of their existing craft production. Whence the concept of modernity. The designers possessed cultural capital, with intimate knowledge of the forms of different cultures and the ability to elaborate this knowledge in designs and present it to conceptually inept craftsmen as rules and a programme.

On the side of the customer, designers functioned as a kind of lifestyle consultant. The basis for dialogue between customer and designer can be depicted, more or less, in terms of the following question: in what forms would you like to present yourself in future and acquire a reputation and recognition?

I would also point to a second reason the profession of designer became necessary: the manufacture of objects, in particular valuable objects – such as cornices on houses, vases, jewellery, goblets, furniture, but also sculpture from costly materials – often required con-

1. Cable, Carole Kay Law-Gagnon (1983): From Documentation to Design. *Trends in Architectural Representation During the Italian Renaissance*. University of Texas at Austin: PhD Thesis.

siderable investment in advance in raw materials and supplies, the extent of which exceeded the means of the craftsman.

Designs provided customers and buyers, as well as the craftsmen, with an authoritative and vivid model of how the object whose manufacture had to be financed up front would look. In this second instance, too, designs functioned as a virtual reality on the basis of which negotiations could be conducted on the future of investments and thus on the matter and form of ensuing production.

Designs that presented the three-dimensional result in advance as a two-dimensional image gave the customers at least a visual idea and guarantee for their investment in the project, and enabled craftsmen to execute the commission by advance payment. Thus, it makes sense to me to view design as a suggestion of the achievable forms of the future and not this future itself.

But here a further, almost paradoxical factor is worth noting: with the object, the design does not thematise the object itself. Objects exist because of the forms of behaviour that need them in order to succeed: ladders to help us climb, buses to travel, spoons to enjoy heavenly delights, and trophies to confer social recognition and repute. All objects that people make, serve and generate forms of behaviour. They embody programmes for behaviour and it is up to the users of these objects to comply with, vary, play with, or reject these programmes. The ultimate basis of objects is the forms of behaviour that induced them. Ultimately, objects are therefore mutual – they convey the reciprocity of human behaviour.

It is the form of objects that prescribe to us our everyday choreographies. We dance with our toothbrushes in a very personal and intimate manner, but a longish handle and bristles on a rounded base make it immediately clear to us which end belongs in the hand and which one in the mouth. Forms enable, evoke, and shape behaviour – however, not only in this directly ergonomic sense. The decision about using a particular material confirms or provokes ideas about the value that will be attributed to the activities the object invites us to engage in. We recognise in the form whether hundreds of thousands of the thing have been made, whether it is an assem-

bly-line product, whether it was made by hand or by machine, and how much care has gone into its fabrication and manufacturing.

Things do not speak only of acts of consumption. They are signs of the spending that made such consumption possible. This power of form to shape modes of behaviour is at least as important as a source of design, as the already mentioned need to generate agreement on the purpose of investments and the difficulty arising from not knowing anything about cultural alternatives nor being able to make them trend-setting for production.

The development of industrial capitalism brought designers into a tense political situation. Their existence and the substance of their work were completely dependent on the successful sale of mass-produced goods. On one hand, that gave them the illusion of omnipresence. Observers now talk of »total design«.<sup>2</sup> In fact, designers are only partly responsible for the forms of current lifeworlds. Their task consists of overwhelming customer resistance at the point of sale and reducing the risk involved in the deployment of capital: they arm products aesthetically and semantically with experience values, promises of competence and status functions that are infected with the virus of either modish or technological obsolescence.

In the variety of designs, there has always been an effort to engage the economy and technology socially and culturally. A significant part of the avant-garde in the 20th century not only believed in technology, but also made it their task to evaluate technological achievements in terms of whether and how they are suitable for alleviating poverty and overcoming social exclusion. The avant-garde used the tendency towards serial production to socialise behaviour democratically not only for manipulation, but also for emancipation from the degradations of capitalist production. For that purpose, they developed design concepts in which a sovereign and more playful way of dealing with things was promoted, instead of subjecting the user to style programmes and defining their personality through the possession of things. The ideal of these concepts is a space released from piled-up stuff and kept free for the development

2. Cf. Mateo Kries (2010): Wollt Ihr das totale Design? Die Herrschaft der Designer droht zur Diktatur zu werden: Neben Kleidern, Autos und Möbeln entwerfen sie längst unser Leben von morgen. Plädoyer für eine neue, kritische Designtheorie, in: *Die Welt* (14.04.2010).

of personality.<sup>3</sup> Ideas of richness are a habitual form here; they aim at a free, liberated attitude to things, not at their increasing possession.

Some designers still keep clear of »shark business« by pursuing two strategies: they develop design concepts for durability and lasting appreciation, in other words, for products that can be repaired and are adaptable over the long term because they are subdivided into structures of long-, medium-, and short-term use and allow insights and opportunities for intervention in the functional relationships of their parts and of the whole.

The second strategy begins with a critique of the overall scenario of modern ways of life and leads to a selection of those products that are worth reworking and revising for two reasons: first, their utility values are undeniable for a product culture based on sustainability – in other words, the designers conduct the discourse on the indispensability of products against the background of criteria of global justice (the 20-square-metre living space, 2000-watt society); second, the current material and symbolic forms of products are counterproductive and detrimental to a culture of sufficiency. Thus, the relevant questions are: What is needed from products for a sustainable lifestyle? What is it about products that is exclusive, only a matter of social status and merely symbolic to obtain social distinction? What is it about products that – as we understand things today – is insufficient in a holistic context? Can the veneer of resource consumption through superficial effects be done away with and resource-conscious behaviour be fostered and evoked aesthetically, in sensual experience?

Changing to a product culture beyond growth requires key objects that unlock the new lifestyles. Because these lifestyles will be sequential, formed asynchronously over several product generations and in various product segments. Key objects initiate behaviour that draws other forms of behaviour after it. Demonstrative consumption does not take place only in relation to others. I can also prove to myself the extent to which I can withdraw from a way of life based on dissipation and wastefulness. This needs products that form an anchor for my behaviour (or behaviour in general). Such anchors can be bridgeheads, extending sustainable forms of behaviour over the whole life course.

3. Cf. Lothar Kühne (1981): *Gegenstand und Raum*. Dresden: Verlag der Kunst. especially pp. 262 and 263.

For many people, for example, the acquisition of a laptop is the acquisition of a lifestyle in which work and free time are intertwined. That can be experienced negatively and – given the conditions in which many people earn their livings today – can lead to burnout. However, the experience of such an intertwining of the spheres of work, which requires resources, and of recreation, which requires resources in order to restore consumed resources, as well as the sensory understanding of reproductive connections and cycles can strengthen an aversion to wastefulness and the inclination towards sustainable lifestyles. Is it not exactly because of the alienation of the experience of reciprocal productivity that makes the consumption of things a substitute for human affection? The reduction of the concept of lifestyle to consumption style blinds us to the reproductive whole of life contexts and thus neglects its sustainability dimension.


Design externalises ideas about how things could be and thus opens up the debate. For example, design students have proposed a new waste disposal system for the kitchen, with a box full of microorganisms and compost worms.<sup>4</sup> Vegetable peelings fall into a box under the kitchen table shaped in such a way that it can be hung from any table. The humus can then be put into plant boxes for herbs and peppers that can fit onto any shelf. Thus recycling can be achieved at the level of culinary housekeeping. Such a solution is likely to be tiresome for individual households. Nevertheless, the projection of this prototype is a further step in making an issue of recycling in the urban environment. Here, design operates first of all at the level of a vividly apprehensible proposal. The aesthetic has more than just a tendency towards stimulation and dazzlement. The covert effectiveness of aesthetic solutions involves bringing to bear forms of behaviour from one area of experience into other areas.<sup>5</sup>

In 2011, for example, four London students asked how globally increasing calorie requirements can be met in around 30 years' time. Their answer: »The Art of Eating Insects«.<sup>6</sup> Grasshoppers transform feed into body

4. The concept comes from Charlotte Dieckmann and Nils Ferber; see: <http://charlottedieckmann.de/parasite-farm/> (last accessed on 12.02.2013).

5. I call them transsemantic states. See Jörg Petruschat: *Transsemantische Zustände*; cc-Download at: [http://www.petruschat.dlab-dd.de/Petruschat/Transsemantische\\_Zustände.html](http://www.petruschat.dlab-dd.de/Petruschat/Transsemantische_Zustände.html)

6. The suggestion was made by Aran Dasan, Jacky Chung, Julene Aguirre-Bielschowsky, and Jonathan Fraser; see [http://www.core77.com/blog/case\\_study/case\\_study\\_ento\\_the\\_art\\_of\\_eating\\_insects\\_21841.asp](http://www.core77.com/blog/case_study/case_study_ento_the_art_of_eating_insects_21841.asp) (last accessed on 12.02.2013).



weight nine times more effectively than cows and without the methane. Insects are a dietary staple in many cultures. Can this eating culture be globalised and the cultural aversion be overcome? That is a classic design problem. In their solutions, the students used the alienation that Europeans have acquired over 200 years of the production of food of animal origin and presented the unusual food in abstract cubic form in order not to run counter to European taste habits. This project is encouraging in many ways because it shows that skills applied in consumerism to degrade users to unskilled consumers can also be deployed in the other direction.

The strength – and weakness – of product design as part of upcoming regulations of resource consumption and in the face of ever more tedious moral appeals in information media is as follows: products are life conditions that cannot be shut off. They are present at hand in very direct, immediate ways. Designers can, as was said recently, influence the resource use of a product by up to 80 per cent.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to appeals, which in the best case can anchor new ideals of value, designed products can also supply behavioural dispositions towards sustainability.

Designers, in sociological terms, belong to the »intellectual elite«. If they are in tune with the times, they experiment with and embody patterns of behaviour in their own lives, which they elaborate in the form of objects, processes, and environments.

Design, however, is not change itself, but only the appearance of change. Its realisation compels debate and thus requires cooperation.

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7. See: <http://www.bundespreis-ecodesign.de> (last accessed on 12.02.2013)

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Judging by its frequency of use, sustainability seems to have developed into one of the central concepts of our time. But while, with increasing usage, it suffers from growing emptiness and overextension on the one hand, the concept is simultaneously increasingly deprived of an open debate on possible realisations. The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's (FES) online platform FES Sustainability takes a critical approach to the concept of sustainability and supports the foundation's active work to strengthen the concept's social dimension and integrate social justice, solidarity and democracy as key elements of models of sustainable forms of society. By offering a space in which a progressive debate on issues of sustainability can develop, FES Sustainability contributes to developing ideas on how the notion of sustainability in political practice can promote comprehensive social change. For more information, please visit [www.fes-sustainability.org](http://www.fes-sustainability.org)

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