

*Rethinking consumer behaviour
for the well-being of all*

**Reflections on individual
consumer responsibility**

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Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities of the European Commission



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FOREWORD

The Council of Europe invites reflection on consumption and proposes that it be viewed in terms of its capacity to further the difficult construction of cohesive, sustainable societies founded on an ethic of well-being for all. Consumption is a daily act which – over and above the fulfilment of material needs - is laden with symbols of belonging. It encroaches on the areas where social values and relationships find expression. Nowadays we are coming to think we are what we consume, and our status in society depends on it.

The Council of Europe invites us to think consumption over in a fresh light and to discover together how in our everyday lives we can sharpen our sense of belonging to a shared planet towards which we must exercise our responsibility.

“Rethinking consumer behaviour for the well-being of all” signifies that we rationalise our acts and explore the broader implications of our choices, that is we look beyond individual constraints and tastes to consider the positive or negative impact of a purchase on the reinforcement of human rights, decent working conditions, use of resources, and the legacy left for future generations. Consumption creates a bond between each one of us and all others, between each person and nature. Far from being an impersonal reflex as appearances might lead us to believe, consumption is a relationship, and not an impartial one.

Rethinking consumption as an instrument of general well-being restores a ‘societal’ connotation, so that we can give it new meaning and assert its inherent qualities of responsibility and solidarity in the public sphere. This is a matter of urgency, an urgency which each citizen must perceive not only individually but also co-operatively.

This guide, like most of our publications, is the outcome of a collective process. Its first instigators were the members of the Inter-network of Ethical and

Responsible Initiatives (IRIS),¹ formed under a co-operation agreement between the European Commission Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities and the Council of Europe Directorate General of Social Cohesion. Researchers and practitioners with different outlooks helped write the texts. Trainees participated in several stages of the conception of the guide, particularly Romina Marconi and Silvia Puente-Rodriguez in identifying the authors, and Vincent Biechlin who worked on the introduction and devoted long hours to rereading, layout and finalising the contributions. The illustrations are drawn by Nicolas Wild, and we value his imagination and subtle skill at transforming the concepts into forceful pictures. Lastly Irène Malki-Botte, Assistant in the Social Cohesion Development Division, enthusiastically took on the ‘unseen’ work.

This guide is intended as a ‘prototype’: everyone is free to adapt it to his or her own context, adding appropriate examples and bringing it to life.

Gilda Farrell

Head of the Social Cohesion Development Division

1. Members of the IRIS Inter-network:

FEBEA (European Federation of Ethical and Alternative Banks);
INAISE (International Association of Investors in the Social Economy);
IFAT (World Fair Trade Organisation);
URGENCI (Network Urban – Rural: Generating New Commitments between Citizens);
ASECO (Alliance for Social and Ecological Consumer Organisations);
ENSIE (European Network for Social Integration Enterprises).

INTRODUCTION

This book, which deals with the subject of responsible consumption, attempts to understand how **consumption is an act that can contribute to everyone's well-being**² and to stimulate some thought about the individual and collective responsibilities that this entails.

The worldwide deterioration of the environment is a cause of ever-increasing concern, and every day brings something that draws it to our attention. There is evidence enough in our frequently grey city skies, the waste that fills our bins and litters our streets and the recent upsurge in natural disasters. At the same time, it is clear that the social and material disparities between the planet's richest and poorest are growing wider and wider.

In this context, there is no denying that our current lifestyles and development are unsustainable (causing damage that will also affect future generations' development potential) and incapable of contributing on an equitable basis to the well-being of all the world's inhabitants. Unthinking consumption is one of the many causes of this problem, particularly in the West. In response to this realisation, many people have been looking into ways of adopting reduced or alternative consumption patterns. A large number of practical guides on the subject are available free of charge on the Internet.³ These provide useful information to complement this guide and offer approaches from different angles to the issues involved. The main thing that may well distinguish this publication, drafted by a group, from others on the subject is that, while it does deal with practical issues, its main aim is to provide food for thought about responsible consumption.

2. In the Council of Europe's view, building up the capacity of society to ensure the welfare of all its members is the very goal of social cohesion, as stated in the revised Strategy on Social Cohesion, approved by the Committee of Ministers in 2004.

3. A non-exhaustive list is appended.

This collective approach to the drafting process makes it possible to juxtapose all the authors' views and identify a number of key concepts that are vital to a proper understanding of the implications of consumption for the future.

Part I of the guide is made up of articles by Lucia Reisch, Michele Micheletti, Tim Cooper, Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier and Federica Volpi, which show how **consumption can be an expression of citizenship**. A survey of the political role of consumers throughout history shows the importance of their actions in the functioning of democracy and highlights the two main means by which they can exert economic and social influence:

- by identifying their needs;
- by making choices.

The combination of the two will shape the demands that consumers make on producers, who, in return, will make supplies available. The interaction between supply and demand determines prices. In this context, it is generally considered that consumers exercise sovereignty as, at least in theory, they make their choice freely.

The mechanism can be illustrated using the following simple example: when I decide to go shopping, I must first decide what I need (either by writing a shopping list beforehand or by selecting what I need once I am in the shop). When I arrive in the appropriate part of the shop, I must choose between a range of different products at different prices. I alone can make this choice and I make it freely, and it is in this respect that I exercise consumer sovereignty.

However, some of the authors' arguments raise questions about this simplistic view of consumer behaviour.

Firstly, in order to stimulate mass consumption, there is a never-ending campaign to inflate individuals' desires, as is clear from all the inventive

advertising and marketing. This non-stop creation of new desires needed to sell ever-greater numbers of products makes it more and more difficult for consumers to identify their real needs. In other words, they have to think carefully to distinguish between what is essential and what is superfluous.

And consumer choice is still limited by the range of products on offer. Purchases still involve mediation, and consumers practise delegation when taking their decisions. It would seem therefore that consumers' freedom of choice is more limited than it first appears. There could be a case for calling consumer sovereignty into question and, through the joint action of producers and governments on the markets, restricting consumer choice to ethically and environmentally sound products according to the principle of 'choice editing'.

The final proviso concerns the way in which prices are determined. Responsible consumption and fair trade prove that consumers do not necessarily behave ego-centrally, but that mutual support, sympathy and a concern to protect the environment may prompt them to reassess their needs and alter their choices. This reassessment has a direct effect on the mechanisms by which prices are determined, as responsible consumers will be prepared to pay a 'fair price', which will not necessarily be the lowest one. Furthermore, although the constraints of responsible consumption do limit consumer choice, they also give rise to new freedoms (such as the ability to choose a particular producer, increased traceability of products, and the opportunity to buy a higher quality or hand-made product or an item produced at a higher price, but with due regard for human rights and environmental needs).

Once the various factors which make consumption a way of expressing citizenship have been investigated, there is a need to look into the various means available to consumers wishing to promote collective well-being. The guide contains three further sections that deal with this issue.

The first looks into overall consumption levels. In a society in which the rule that 'more is better' seems to prevail in all spheres, it is worth asking how the goal

of "**contributing to general well-being through a more balanced approach**" can be achieved. This is the subject of the second part of the guide.

Francesco Gesualdi introduces this section with a description of the damage caused by overabundance and some suggestions as to how its adverse effects can be curbed, centring on the 4 Rs: Repair, Reuse, Recycle and Reduce.

Tim Cooper looks more deeply into the problems of the waste engendered by our habit of replacing objects ever more frequently, highlighting the fact that a new responsibility to take a more sustainable approach will inevitably arise. In his view, putting an end to wastefulness means the 4 Rs and more commitment on the part of the authorities.

In the last article of this section, René Kalfa talks of the need to raise awareness of the consequences of unthinking consumption and for consumers to regain control of their own choices. The legitimacy of consumer sovereignty may perhaps be called into question, particularly as personal freedom of choice is always relative, influenced by various outside factors. If we assume that consumers no longer have true freedom to choose, it is crucial to ask how they are to get it back: by what means can they regain control over their own choices in order to help to improve societal well-being?

The second main issue that is looked into is the choice of products and services to purchase and use. Part III of the guide therefore focuses on "**contributing to general well-being through a better choice of goods**" and provides some relevant guidelines and insights.

First of all, there are goods and services which are unacceptable or should not have the right to exist in the context of collective well-being. Tim Cooper takes a general look at these, focusing on the question: should all the products that exist have the right to exist? For there are such things as harmful, useless 'products' that cause much more damage and ill-being than well-being.

Frank Trentmann focuses on the historical aspect of consumption, showing that consumers' choices

already reflect concern for the public interest. He believes it is wrong to sum up consumers' behaviour as based on selfish, utilitarian calculation, as consumer choice has, historically, often been dictated by altruism and has often contributed to social well-being. On the other hand, consumers cannot be expected to shoulder the burden of bringing about change on their own.

The articles by Massimo Lori and René Kalfa describe areas in which consumers have a potential role to play and tools that may guide them to better choices. Consumers can act on several different levels. They can change their purchasing habits and lifestyles for the sake of human rights and the environment or simply to improve their own well-being and that of their family and friends.

Boycotts or 'buycotts', in which consumers either refuse or prefer to buy particular products in support of a cause or in protest against abuses, are still practised. At the same time, new forms of political action and social movements have begun to emerge, based on local or transnational networking among different partners. Notable examples are the Community-Supported Agriculture groups, support and protest campaigns and the fair trade movement. Various tools are also available to ethically and environmentally aware consumers, such as the ecological footprint and ecological rucksack models, which are designed to gauge approximately what environmental impact our lifestyles are having. It should also be said that responsible consumption implies not only using particular purchasing practices, but also changing the way in which we use what we buy, as illustrated by the problem of the waste caused by premature obsolescence and short product lifespans. For example, if individuals think before they buy, they may identify objects that are unnecessary and then consume fewer of them, and this, far from being a sign of isolation, seems to demonstrate civic commitment.

As a result, consumers have a variety of levers that they can pull, but there are still many obstacles in the way of both the democratisation of responsible consumption activities and progress towards sustainable development:

- consumption patterns still reflect social class and differences between individuals;
- responsible action is still easier for better-educated people with higher incomes;
- concerted action by all those involved and a transformation of the market are prerequisites of sustainable change.

The latter point appears to be crucial. Here again, it is clear that, although consumers do indeed have some room to manoeuvre, under no circumstances should their role be overestimated, as they are just one link in a very long chain. It goes without saying that private firms, governments and international bodies (which are also consumers!) must establish partnerships with consumers on the basis of joint responsibility for change to be conceivable in the long term.

From an economic viewpoint, consumers are often regarded as individual operators, who are in complete control of their own decisions, because they are perfectly informed. As René Kalfa shows using the examples of co-operatives and other modern movements, information is generally asymmetrical and fragmented (not everyone has the same set of information and excessive amounts of disjointed information make real choice impossible). Faced with too much choice, some people have decided to take collective action and exercise their citizenship to curb the impact of the asymmetries and the excessive fragmentation of supply.

This brings us on to the third area in which consumers can act for the well-being of all, namely their relationships with producers. Part IV, on "**contributing to general well-being through prior links with producers**", provides an interesting complement to the preceding sections by highlighting the importance of establishing links with producers (particularly those who are isolated or in danger of going out of business), the collective nature of the means of fostering responsible attitudes and the role of the local level as the starting point for socially aware consumption schemes.

The involvement of consumers in the production process is the specific subject that Marco Servetini

deals with in his article. He explains that the process begins with local relationships, in which consumers become involved collectively and start to play an active role in the consumption process. As demonstrated by various examples in Italy, these local schemes are able to spread as a result of the development and interaction of networks. Through partnerships based on joint responsibility, consumers and producers unite to create new companies in systems based on co-production. However, this kind of approach is not yet very widespread.

Christophe Mالدیدier points out how purely commercial relationships have broken up the social fabric and dehumanised trade. This anonymity destroys feelings of solidarity. One of the challenges facing our societies is that of associating a human face with products, so that we can more readily appreciate the problems encountered by producers, particularly those most vulnerable to the vagaries of the market.

In his article, Daniel Vuillon focuses on the benefits of geographical proximity as a means of fostering trust between consumers and farmers, as well as the positive repercussions of transforming what are generally regarded as commercial relationships into partnerships.

The question of the reappropriation of consumer choice can also be considered from a monetary viewpoint as money used to serve essentially as a means of exchange but is now more and more frequently an end in itself. In her contribution, Nadia Benqué endeavours to show that various alternatives, set up and managed collectively by consumer groups, are available to consumers, such as complementary currency schemes, Local Exchange Trading Systems and Fair Share. Operating alongside the commercial market, these schemes make it possible to give consumer activities a more human aspect and can be a means of promoting integration and mutual assistance, although their scarcity does, once again, raise the problem of dissemination.

The fifth and final part of the guide suggests possible ways of “**making consumers more aware of their responsibilities**” by helping people to understand the relevant principles. This is crucial because none

of the developments described in the previous parts of the guide affect more than a relatively small share of the world population, and people attempting to alter their consumption patterns are often regarded as utopians. While possible means of dissemination are proposed throughout the guide, for instance through the concepts that are described, there are still some undeniable obstacles.

Jean Huet and René Kalfa look at the question of dissemination through the prism of education and information respectively.

Education does have a role to play in making individuals take a responsible attitude. It can help them to start thinking and build up critical skills, as responsible consumers need to be able to stand back and assess both their real needs and the impact of what they do on everything around them. It seems vital to alert young people to current social and environmental issues, as each and every person may be able to make a contribution. Using examples from the classroom, Jean Huet endeavours to prove that it is possible to get children to think for themselves, particularly when it comes to consumption, inequality and the environment.

Information can also have a real impact on behaviour. The abundance of information, which is often issued directly by producers and distributors, misleads consumers more than it helps them to make choices, it being difficult to find a needle in a haystack. René Kalfa addresses this issue by looking at eco-labelling, other forms of labelling and comparative testing. He describes their advantages and drawbacks and highlights the part that communication has to play in the process.

Pauline Rivière’s article takes the previous contribution a step further, looking at how information can be made accessible to everyone and how proximity can be used as an instrument for getting information across effectively. In her view, it is more than desirable to extend responsible consumption habits to all categories of the population, excluding as few people as possible. She identifies four main types of information asymmetry which inhibit the dissemination of information, and emphasises the need for improved

access to reliable and relevant information and the importance, but also the current lack, of communication at local level. She also reiterates that the same commitment must be made by all those involved, on the basis of shared responsibility.

Francesco Gesualdi therefore invites us to “**convert to sobriety**”, which is not a sad state but a state of shared joy, non-violence and fulfilment through means other than unthinking and harmful consumption.

To conclude this foreword on a personal note, I would like to mention a few factors which in my view are hampering attempts to disseminate the simple idea that we must adopt reasonable consumption habits which respect both our environment and our fellow citizens near and far.

Firstly, we have reached the point where we must reconsider our current development process, based on that unthinking consumption without which it would grind to a halt. This is an infinitely complex change, and many of the solutions that appear at first sight to be very simple bring their own disad-

vantages with them. However, there is nothing to prevent us from discussing them and thinking about them, as this guide proves. Certain values also appear to be universal and definitely deserve to be upheld. Honesty, a willingness to give, mutual support and respect are not the preserve of any particular political leaning or ideology, and it would be foolish to try to do without them.

Lastly, I would like to draw attention to the educational importance of the examples given in the guide, because they make some key ideas understandable to most of the world’s citizens without resorting to the pomposity and stock phrases which make many interesting arguments inaccessible.

Unfortunately, in focusing on style, we often forget the substance, which is concealed by the ‘aesthetics of consumption’.

I hope you will very much enjoy reading this guide.

Vincent Biechlin,
Trainee at the Council of Europe (2008)

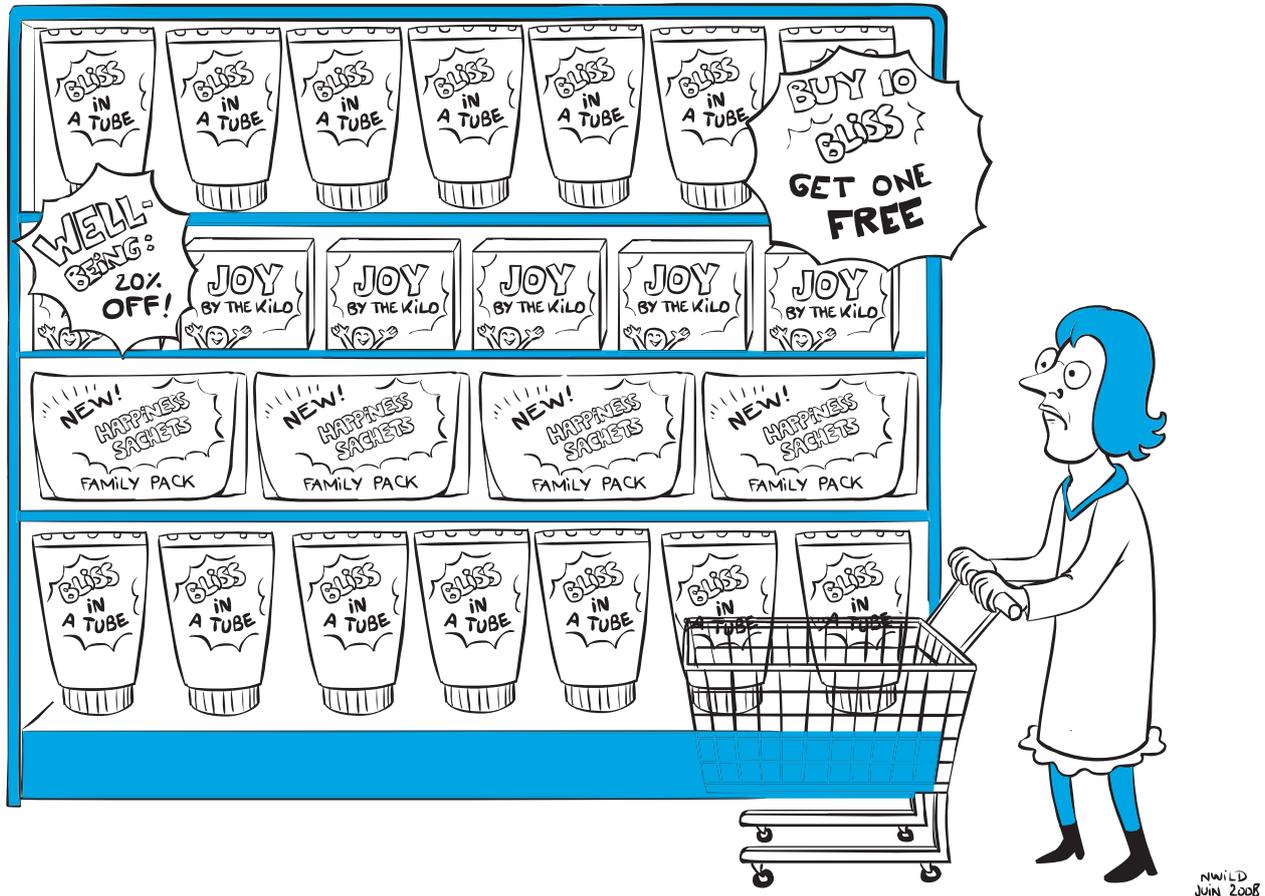
Part 1

Consumption as an expression of citizenship



THE NATURE AND CULTURE OF CONSUMPTION IN CONSUMPTION SOCIETIES

Lucia Reisch, Copenhagen Business School (Denmark)



Western societies are essentially defined by mass consumption and stratified by the possibilities of such consumption. While some nations may be ahead, and some – such as the EU newcomers – may be lagging behind in the consumer race, the general consumer experience within Europe and the western world is quite similar. When the term ‘mass consumption society’ was coined in the US in the 1960s by the founding father of consumer psychology, George Katona, markets were not yet globalised, private and public spheres of life had not been commercialised to the current extent, and the digitalised information and communication society had not been born. Today, it is not just the sheer amount of time and money which is spent on products and services and shopping for

them that makes it a consumer society; it is because the values and beliefs, the economic, cultural and legal system, as well as the institutions of consumer society, are primarily geared towards supporting consumption. Moreover, shopping and consumption have assumed key psychosocial functions for the members of consumer societies as a favourite pastime, an exciting and stimulating outing for the whole family (‘mall mania’), a source of identity and even as ‘retail therapy’.

The duty to consume

At society level, there is a strong historical and cultural legacy of high-throughput consumption

styles in European cultural and intellectual developments. Since the post-war years, strong increases in consumer purchasing power, technological innovation and access to the market supply of a formerly unknown variety of products and services, have met with socio-cultural changes in the individual and social motives of consumers. 'Economisation' has gradually led consumers to adopt or aspire to a prevailing lifestyle of high-quality material possessions and facilities, and of fast, short-term consumptive behaviours. The social pressure to produce which is inherent in industrial market regimes, the constantly rising productivity of labour, and the job-creating effect of economic growth, accelerate cycles of production and consumption and fuel the myth of 'consume or decline'. Many consumers across the world comply with their 'duty to consume' in order to keep the economy growing. Yet, those consumers without the adequate financial means or with alternative consumptive motivations are sometimes regarded as 'inferior citizens', since they do not contribute to fuelling the engine of the economy.

From work ethics to consumption ethics

In the past century, European cultures have shifted from societies where people defined themselves by what they do and what they produce to societies where consumption is the major means of self-definition. The 'hidden agenda' of consumer culture teaches consumers to choose products and brands which fit their constructed self-image, promise symbolic self-completion and provide pseudo-therapy and meaning. As Erich Fromm, one of the most prominent social philosophers of the last century has observed, at one time products were meant to match consumers; now consumers try to match them. And whereas once, people gave sense and life to products, in a consumer society, products are expected to inspire people and complete their empty selves – a phenomenon which has been called 'reversal of relatedness'. More is better than less, fast is better than slow and new is better than old. These rules hold true for the masses in spite of intellectually driven

XVIIth CENTURY



XXth CENTURY



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counter-movements from ‘slow food’ to ‘simple living’. In addition, in these somewhat elitist movements that pronouncedly oppose mainstream consumer culture’s buying mania, people’s identity is largely constructed by their style, ability, and competence as consumers. The wearing of brand names is a way of positioning oneself close to attractive reference groups, looking for acceptance and affiliation, and distinguishing oneself from disapproved others – in one way or another.

Psychosocial functions of consumption

Consumption is a deeply culturally embedded activity bestowing identity, self-respect, social participation, meaning, and acceptance. Drawing on studies of diverse research fields – such as the anthropology of consumption, the sociology of consumption, consumer economics, the psychology of consumption, and the history of consumption – five psychosocial functions of consumption can be distinguished:

- firstly, conspicuous consumption can symbolise, create, and signal social position and status;
- secondly, it can add to people’s consumer competence, respectability, and expertise;
- thirdly, it can be a means of expression and identity;
- fourthly, consumption may facilitate imaginative hedonism and daydreaming and is an ideal means to escape from it all;
- finally, consumption can be used as compensation and act as pseudo-therapy for disappointment and a crutch for low self-esteem.

The salience of these psychosocial functions of consumption partly explains why ‘irrational’ forms of consumption such as compulsive, addictive, and compensatory buying that often lead to household indebtedness are becoming major problems in affluent societies. While it might be possible to refrain from other means of addiction, it is impossible to refrain from building one’s identity. It also explains why increasing taxes and prices have only little effect in symbolically loaded or culturally salient consumption

areas, such as individual mobility or housing styles. And it also helps to show why those who are too poor to play their part in consumer society are deprived not only in a material, but also in a psychosocial sense which deeply impacts on their quality of life.

The socialisation function of the market

Taking on a consumer identity and becoming a ‘purchasing consumer’ today starts earlier in childhood than ever before. It takes place within a highly commercialised childhood context under the influence of ubiquitous mass media, as powerful socialisation agents target an ever-younger audience with increasingly wily ‘stealth marketing’ techniques. While advertising aimed at children is hardly a new phenomenon (by 1912, boxes of Cracker Jack already came with a toy inside to encourage children to ask for them), the message and methods have changed profoundly in the past 20 years. This is in particular due to the technological advance in audio-visual media, the liberalisation and privatisation of television in Europe, and the increased relevance of children as consumers. Parents are referred to as ‘gatekeepers’ whose efforts to protect their children from commercial pressures must be ‘circumvented’. In fact, the whole idea of TV for children programming came because advertisers were looking for new ways to promote their products.

Today’s children are exposed to 200-300 commercials a day, and 80-90% of the ads in children’s prime time hawk high-calorie, sugary, or salt-laden food items. While the relationship between advertising pressure and the obesity epidemic in children is not clear, the combined mass of commercial messages undoubtedly influences children’s knowledge of and preferences for food. With the new European Directive on audio-visual media (“Television without frontiers”), the European Commission has lately opened up even more possibilities for product placement and sponsoring. While children’s programmes are explicitly exempted from this act of ‘liberalisation’, children do in fact spend about two-thirds of their TV time watching other programmes such as

soaps, cooking shows or quizzes where these subtle techniques will thrive in the future.

For the older age-group of the tweens (11-13 years) and teens, traditional TV has become a less important form of media. Computers, mobile phones and diverse audio-visual media have become more popular pastimes. Here, marketers' possibilities are virtually endless, and parental control is minimised. Text message marketing, e-marketing, viral marketing, buzz marketing, and hype marketing are accepted forms of commercial communication to reach younger age groups.

Marketing has developed an effective toolbox of fine-tuned techniques aimed at steering consumer preferences by creating needs and preventing need reflection, extended information search, and careful product comparisons. Shopping malls and shopping events mean entertainment, adventure, and suspense – ultimately reducing the product, the way it was produced and its functional quality to an unimportant by-product. Refined advertising techniques such as consumer dreams fuelling 'imaginative hedonism', emotional conditioning, and symbolic loading, the use of psycho drama and the creation of artificial scarcity, to name just a few, promote compensatory and impulse buying, and prevent consumers from need reflection. Taking advantage of new technologies, marketing has come up with new selling techniques such as profiling, red lining, radio-frequency identification (RFID), biometric marketing and neuro-marketing. There seems to be no end to the manufacturing of new desires.

In some way, consumer society traps consumers between seduction, compulsion and compensation. While there is something gratifying and rewarding in compensatory shopping, the reward is not satisfaction but rather renewed desire which explains the quest for 'newness'. New products and new styles are endlessly brought onto the market. The cycle is speeding up and commercialisation is spreading in places where once it was excluded. For instance, very young children are targeted for toys, ICT gadgets, and foods. Another example is the services of general interest (energy, security, transport, infrastructure) that have been liberalised and privatised, which often

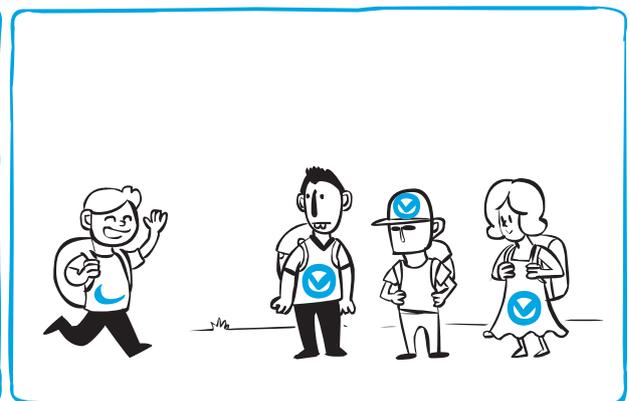
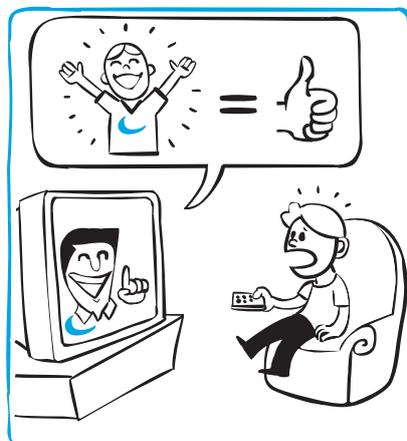
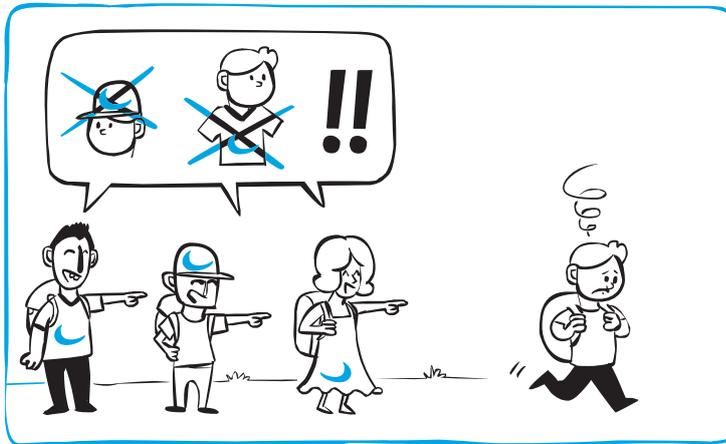
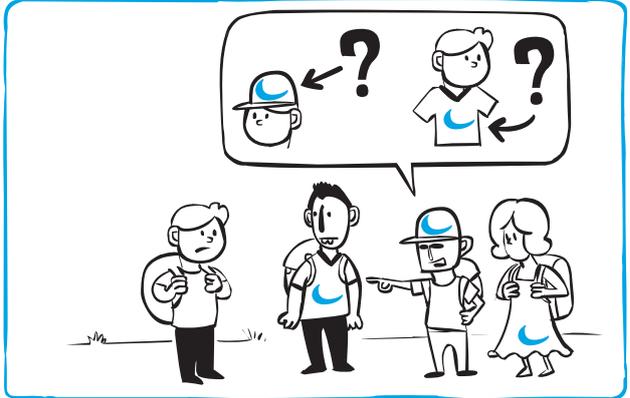
means that quality is decreasing and access for poor people is becoming more difficult. Another instance is the commercialisation of personal relationships which is shown in services like speed dating; and yet another example is the commodification and extensive shaping of the human body by plastic surgery.

The (working) poor

With more social openness and social mobility, conspicuous consumption is more acceptable at all income levels. While this is basically a positive thing, it has its downside. Also for many low-income individuals, the lure of consumerism is hard to resist; feelings of deprivation and personal failure result – the alternative often being overspending and indebtedness.

Not being able to consume is a profound social disability in consumer society. If being a purchasing consumer is the key to identity and affiliation in consumer society, the poor are deprived in a multiple sense: they are not able (or have to invest all of their resources) to participate in the race for status, relative social standing and affiliation. They are also not able to compensate for a loss of working ethic with a better material position, and they are regarded as basically useless 'under-consumers' who do not comply with the social duty to work and consume. Moreover, they are taunted by television programmes and commercials that flash before them images of consumption standards that are considered typical of the average American(?), but which they have no possibility of achieving. As Juliet Schor has shown in *The overspent American*, heavy TV watchers have quite an unrealistic view of the material status of the average American consumer: they significantly overestimate the ownership of luxury cars, swimming pools, and large homes.

Children pester their parents for unaffordable designer clothes, because these are the benchmarks of acceptance in their peer groups. Peer pressure can even lead to property crimes and criminal modes of acquisition such as shoplifting, robbery, and even killing for brands when the sense of deprivation and desperation is strong enough. As research shows, the



ethic among low-income youths in American cities is to have the 'hottest product' by any means necessary. The status and prestige of these products help them to compensate for their racial or economic exclusion. This is also why 'street-level marketing' of companies such as Nike or Converse is so successful; it works with social pressure and social exclusion right at the location where peer pressure is the biggest: on the streets.

Finally, being poor in a wealthy consumer society also means being more exposed to environmental consequences. The poor live disproportionately in areas where environmental contaminants and pollution are most severe. Rising housing costs move beyond reach of even average wage earners. Many of them have to leave the community where they have spent their entire lives.

The international demonstration effect

More and more people throughout the world are aspiring to copy the western lifestyle. Television exposes millions of people in the developing world – that come from quite different cultures of consumption – to western consumerism, creating new levels of consumer aspiration. This is particularly detrimental because the local elites, often educated abroad, do emulate western consumption styles which deprives their states of urgently needed capital – the so-called 'international demonstration effect'.

While consumer society, democracy and capitalism have co-developed in a dialectic, intertwined way in the 'North', in the developing world, commercialisation and globalisation are coming at a fast pace, often sweeping away local cultures, civic virtues and notions of dignity and status. Here, the above-sketches argument of 'erosion' and 'undermining' through commercialisation is much more valid than in fully-fledged consumer societies that have developed within the timescale of two centuries. About one-fifth of the world's people live in abject poverty, slowly dying of hunger and diseases. They are in desperate need of more material goods and services. Yet,

were they to consume on the western level, the result would be an environmental catastrophe. It has been shown that the global footprint of consumer societies is so large that even if one were to lower the standard of living, it would need four planets to accommodate everyone.

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DEMOCRATISATION AND CONSUMPTION

Lucia Reisch, Copenhagen Business School (Denmark)

Modern conceptions of capitalistic consumer society and of democracy developed at the same time. While there are obvious tensions and assumed rivalries between them, they nonetheless share a common historical ground. Indeed, in a time of diminishing public interest in politics, it might be surprising to learn from the history of consumption that the agenda and rhetoric of consumerism and democracy have quite a complex inter-related history. Today, more than ever, the two domains of 'the private' (that is, consumption) and 'the public' (that is, active democracy) are competing for people's interest, time and attention – with the realm of consumption undoubtedly winning the palm in western consumer societies.

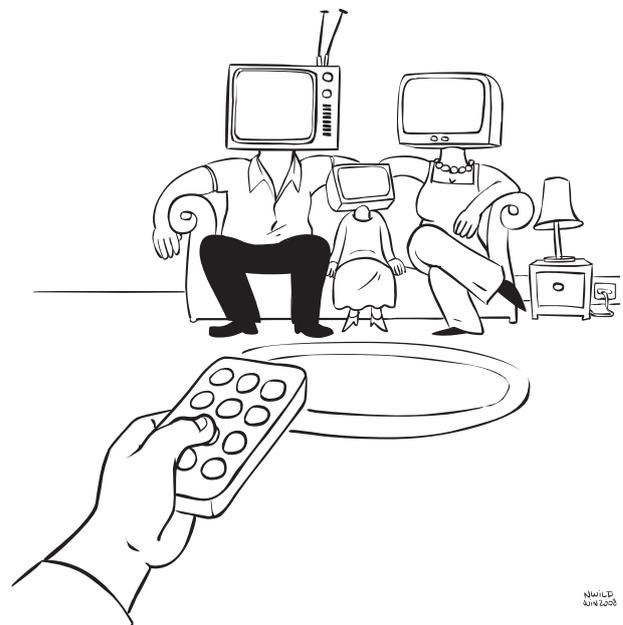
Basically, there are three relationships between democracy – understood as a meta-norm – and consumer society: erosion, emancipation, and re-democratisation:

1. From the late 19th century onward, consumption carried a negative connotation as a wasteful and unproductive practice and selfish pursuit of novelties which found its continuation in the modern critique of the wastefulness of 'mass consumption society' and the 'McDonaldisation' of society which accompanied the post-war triumph of consumer culture in the West. This is the backcloth against which the 'erosion' argument is built.
2. Yet, consumption and the development of the concept of being 'a consumer' have also been an important basis for 'emancipation' and 'democratisation' in the sense of access to and participation in public life for all citizens, including women and all kinds of minorities. Here, consumption has provided a new source for legitimacy, respect, and identity. Historians tell us that it was in early and mid-19th-century Britain where political agitation even began to assign 'the consumer'

the place as guardian of the public interest. As taxpayers and purchasers, consumers increasingly demanded to be heard and represented – rights that half a century later, in the 1960s, were proclaimed as 'consumer rights'.

3. At the same time, consumers not only fought for their own rights but also for the rights of those without the right or possibility to raise their voice – such as workers in less developed countries – or for the environment. Using their wallets as ballots and raising their voices, empowered consumers resist the rules of globalisation and help to re-democratise the markets, at least partially.

The following expands on these three proposed relationships.



Erosion

There is a long sociological tradition that warns against consumerism as eroding community and solidarity. One of the earliest adopters of the term ‘consumerism’, Vance Packard, in his book *The Waste Makers*, linked the term consumerism with strategies for persuading consumers to quickly expand their needs and wants by making them “voracious, compulsive and wasteful”. Based on the debates over luxury and Galbraith’s western ‘affluent society’, the argument of ‘erosion’ claims that (capitalistic) consumer societies follow a steady path of growing selfish materialism and declining civic mindedness. In the long run, as the argument goes, this leads to an erosion of social values and an increase in individualistic materialistic values, which promotes an unequal distribution of material wealth and social inequality. This, in turn, weakens social cohesion and ultimately political democracy. In a nutshell: the ‘I want’ of the market undermines and dominates the ‘we need’ of the common good, symbolised by the state.

The US and the UK are often taken as examples of unbounded consumerism, large differences in wealth and a cadaverous public sector. These tendencies are increased in a globalised consumer world where markets and firms have become powerful free-floating entities sovereign of national states and their restricting regulations. However, while true in some regard, this argument ignores the fact that still today a lot of consumption continues to be about sociality, community, sharing and caring for others. Just consider shopping for gifts or consuming practices such as sports, hobbies, barter circles, co-ops, or virtual communities. One might also think of shopping for ethical products and ethical investments, as well as a general sense for ‘fair prices’ and the important role of charities. Critiques often ignore the fact that there are many diverse ‘cultures of consumption’ which use consumption in diverse ways. An important one is using goods or consumption practices as an element of social bonding. Moreover, there is no valid empirical indication that people in less affluent societies are less materialistic per se. Rather, it seems to be that they are even more preoccupied with goods

due to their backlog demand and influences such as the international demonstration effect.

Overall, it is wrong to presume that commercialisation produces an acquisitive mentality that necessarily saps civic life. On the contrary: commercialisation also opens up new spaces and possibilities, and offers new freedoms and fulfilments for groups who suffer under a more hierarchical and paternalistic culture. Moreover, it is a Eurocentric view. For people in the BRICs countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China), for instance, more market and less state regulation means an increase in rights and choice and less corruption and harassment from the state. Choice, in turn, can foster both the flourishing of the individual self as well as social and civic awareness.

Emancipation

While in post-war Europe the weakening of the interest in public issues came along with a growing importance and omni-presence of leisure and private-sector consumption, there was a time when access to and active participation in the nascent market economies provided the basis for participating in public life. At first, liberal politics looked exclusively to the male taxpayer and local citizen, not to the end-user. Then, social groups that were formally excluded from the political life – notably the women’s movement – used their position as consumers to stretch into public politics. For the ruling social elites, it became ever more difficult to exempt empowered and emancipated consumers from voting with a ballot. As research into the history of consumption and in the development of political and social rights has shown, the political subjects of representative democracies and the consuming subjects of consumer culture are historically closely connected, and political emancipation was often reached via consumption.

The consumer as a project of social identity developed differently in the different European traditions, in types of economic and political developments and social milieus. According to Frank Trentmann, a distinguished historian of consumption, it was in Victorian Britain that ‘the consumer’ as a political subject with citizen rights and political participation

and power first developed. Here, struggles over taxed consumables – in particular water, gas and bread – provided the base for the development of a universal idea of the consumer as private end-user with needs, rights, entitlements, and a specific awareness, irrespective of his/her specific position in the economy, and irrespective of his/her gender.

A good illustration is the case of the water politics of metropolitan Victorian London. It shows the increasingly powerful mobilisation of water ‘users’ turning them into ‘consumers’ as a category of identity. The battle between consumers and water companies during the 1895 East London ‘water famine’ marked a breakthrough of a new consumer identity. Within the fight for water access, the idea of ‘the consumer’ developed from the tax-paying, mainly male property-owning citizen across class and gender, as users from different classes came together in consumer defence leagues to find their common interest against monopolistic providers.

At the turn of the 20th century, reformers organised themselves in the name of the consumer, both in the United States and Europe. Boycotts flourished, consumers organised themselves, and the politicisation of consumption took place. Consumption was now defined as a mode of public expression and political action. The history of consumption provides a range of interesting illustrations of this redefinition. Influenced by American counterparts, consumer leagues and co-operatives were created and multiplied between 1890 and 1910 in France, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, and Belgium. The French “Ligue Sociale d’Acheteurs” (LSA), for instance, was established by men and women who wanted to educate consumers, focusing on the ethics of consumption in general and the working conditions of the workers specifically. As in other countries, consumer activism emerged as one response to the ‘social question’.

Like other female activists at the turn of the 20th century – from socialist, protestant, or feminist backgrounds – the social Catholic women of LSA transformed consumption as legitimate feminine-domestic responsibility into a case for a public-political role for women. Consumption was seen as

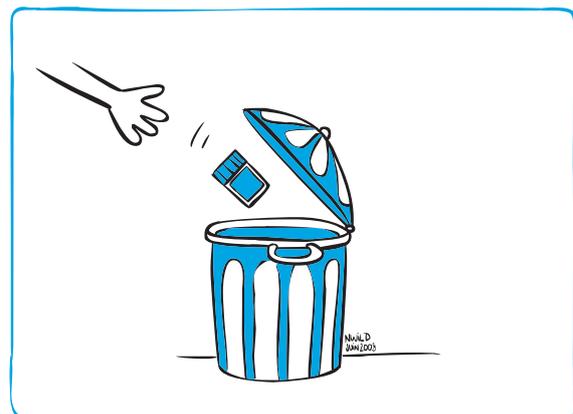
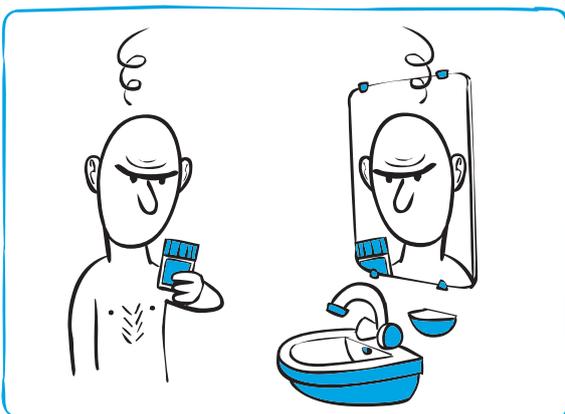
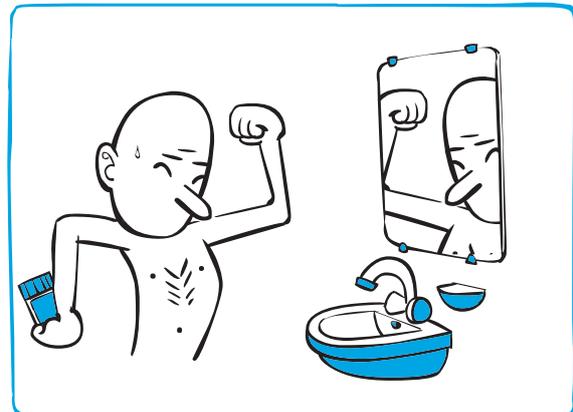
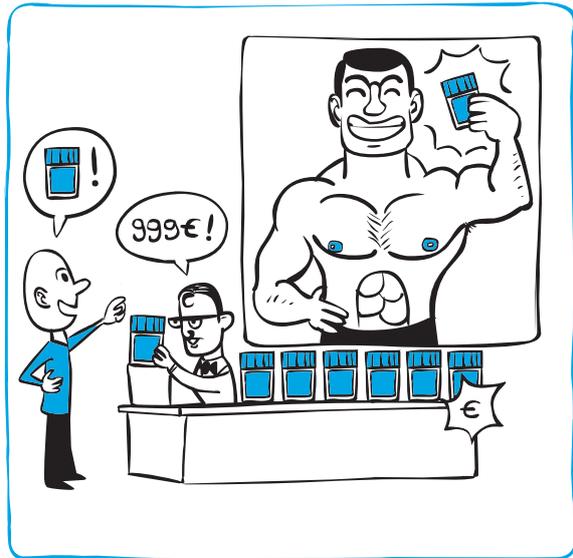
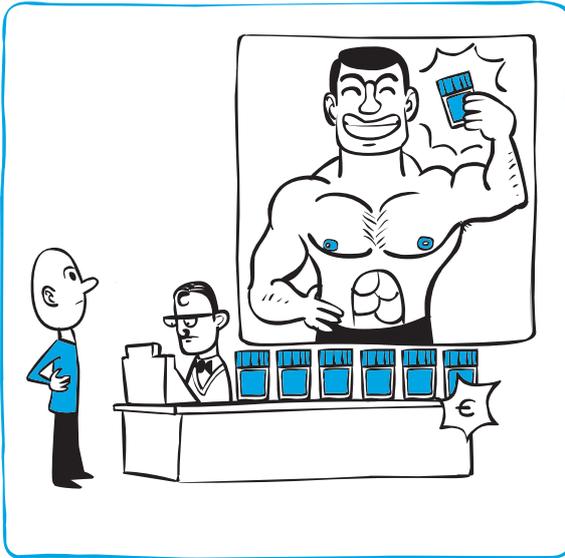
participation in the capitalist system and the market economy (that is, factories, banks and department stores) and legislation (for example, as regards working hours, working conditions) which brought along social and political empowerment and women’s emancipation. Offering new roles for women in the public sphere, these activists acted as citizens well before women secured the right to vote.

As a spatial representation of the stepwise appropriation of the public sphere by middle-class women, it is documented that back rooms of the newly developed department stores – as one of the few public places where women could legitimately go without male company – offered the platform to convene political meetings. These ‘cathedrals of consumption’ which by the late 19th century had become prominent spaces in many large cities, opened up public spaces to women, who previously had been excluded from political life. More generally, many social reformers and social movements envisaged consumption as a form of civic participation.

The emancipating effect of consumerism is still valid today. For instance, the social acceptance of the gay community in the US and South America is largely due to the fact that they have been discovered as a financially potent and consumption-oriented target group. Similarly, in India, the caste system is increasingly under threat of being ‘undermined’ by rising levels of wealth in the lower castes who are buying their way into more influential layers of society.

Resistance and re-democratisation

The third relationship is the one of ‘counter-movement’ via so-called political consumption. Today’s ‘sustainable’ or ‘political consumption’ movement calls on consumers to ‘vote with their wallets’ for ethical issues such as organic farming, fair working conditions, and feminist and children’s rights and to fight the inappropriate economic and political power of multinational corporations which deny poorer countries fair access to world markets. This can be interpreted as a ‘re-democratisation’ of capitalism.



While only a small segment of ‘political consumers’ habitually act according to their reported positive attitudes towards fair trade issues, polls show regularly that the notion of supporting worldwide democratisation via market choices is widespread. The global brands from Nike to Shell have learned to fear critical consumerism empowered by the new possibilities of organising (virtual) boycotts and the increased transparency and access to information that the Internet provides. As historical case studies of consumption show, this type of ‘citizen consumer’ – as opposed to the unpolitical ‘purchasing consumer’ – has been around for more than a hundred years in different cultures of consumption. Already then, moral and public causes were advanced by consumers, such as the boycott of slave-produced sugar or support for free trade.

Political consumerism can be appreciated as part of a more flexible and pluralistic mode of acting that mediates between the private and public, expanding the modes of participation outside traditional representative democracy. Consumers increasingly become aware that many products they buy are produced in less developed countries and might have been produced by child labour or in sweatshops, with workers suffering unsafe working conditions and employment conditions close to slavery. About 90% of the worldwide production of toys, for instance, is produced in some regions of China where – in contrast to official rhetoric – many workers are forced to endure working conditions that would seem intolerable in the West.

Such concerns have led to an increase in the market share of fair trade products (such as certified by Rugmark, Fairtrade, or Max Haavelar), more ‘mainstream’ companies developing codes of conduct on employment, working conditions and environmental management, as well as to a pronounced pressure on supply chains to control for a decent and more sustainable ‘process quality’. Although fair-traded goods still comprise a small market share, they are one of the fastest growing food segments in Europe and

the United States. Today, they can be found in large supermarkets, and are procured by large consumers such as McDonalds, Starbucks, and food discounters all over Europe.

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CONSUMERS AND CITIZENSHIP

Michele Micheletti, Karlstad University (Sweden)

History shows that citizens employ their consumer choice to promote democracy. For centuries now, citizen politics has entered the market through the consumer's wallet. Refusal to buy certain goods for political and ethical reasons – consumer boycotts – played a vital role in the struggle against slavery and for colonial independence in America. In India, Mahatma Gandhi integrated *swadeshi*, meaning the use of things belonging to one's own country (that is, indigenous goods) in his strategy for independence from British rule. Government propaganda in the Second World War taught citizens that 'boycotting' or choosing certain consumer goods over others and consuming less were part of their patriotic duty (Cohen, 2003, James and Thomson, 2007). Consumer issues were also important in the post-war years. Cold War warriors in the West were convinced that consumer choice distinguished the free world from communist oppression. East European consumers seconded this view. Their desire to wear western jeans and purchase common western consumer goods became everyday evidence that they lacked capitalist freedom and liberal democracy. Jokes about consumer goods – the Trabant car and the shortage of bananas in the German Democratic Republic, for instance – began to spread (Hammer, 2007, Menzel, 2004, Wikipedia East German jokes, no date). Citizens in the West put their money where their mouth was and used consumer choice to fight political oppression at home and abroad. In these and other ways, common consumer goods and services were turned into tools in domestic and international struggles for civil rights, women's rights, workers' rights, and human rights.

Market-based political action by and for marginalised groups

The market has, at times, been an important venue for civic engagement and social solidarity. The boycott of South Africa is just one case of citizens using their

consumer choice to express solidarity with oppressed people whose desire for freedom and human rights puts them in physical danger. Consumer choice has also been an important tool for oppressed groups in democracies (see, for instance, the previous paper by Lucia Reisch "Democratisation and consumption"). Particularly citizens who are marginalised in political processes – women, ethnic and racial groups, and young people – find consumer-related activities a feasible form of political involvement to raise consciousness and support for their cause (Friedman, 1999, Klein, 2000). Historical studies find that the marketplace was an arena that was more open for women to activate themselves as citizens. Before they received the vote, women could express and act on their political beliefs through consumer choice. Today surveys show that more women than men boycott and buycott (that is, purposefully choose certain goods over others for political, ethical, and/or environmental reasons) (TemaNord, 2005). Another group that has benefited from consumption-related politics is the youth. Young people now boycott meat and other farm products to show their support for animal welfare and animals' rights (Welfare Quality, no date a).

Consumers against democracy

Over the centuries, the world has witnessed boycotts of tea, sugar, buses, grapes, batteries, cotton, paper, fruit, coffee, wine, cheese, computers, tourism, brand name corporations, and even countries as a force for democracy and the environment. But, as with all forms of politics, consumer power can also threaten democracy and endanger the human rights of others. The example that has been studied the most is the "Don't Buy Jewish" campaign. It gained momentum in the 1930s after, most likely, starting in Germany and then spreading to other European countries and the United States. The boycott was publicly sup-

ported by national socialist parties and individual consumers privately sympathetic to the cause of anti-Semitism. National socialist parties put up advertisements on stores owned or operated by Jews and in daily newspapers. Local Swedish newspapers carried such advertisements. One declared: "Swedish goods should be bought by Swedes from Swedish businessmen. Do not participate in the international Jewish big business exploitation of Swedish workers and businesses". Scholars call this boycott the cold pogrom of the inter-war years and conclude that it "undermined the livelihood of hundreds of thousands of Jews" (*Encyclopædia Judaica*, 1971, p. 1279). Today similar movements quietly and in underground channels mobilise support against immigrants and other peoples.

Consumers and global responsibility taking

Today globalisation has triggered increased interest in the market as an arena for politics. Individual citizens and numerous civil society associations go to the global market to work on political issues and global problems that do not fit squarely in the national political framework of government. Consumer goods and consumption practices are part of the political struggle to create a safety net for people and nature harmed by the processes of globalisation. Market actors are engaged in efforts to create sustainable responsibility, regulate the global economy, and promote sustainable production and consumption (Young, 2006). Social movements working to promote global environmentalism and social justice use commodity chain goods to construct market-based regulatory schemes ('soft laws') to promote the three pillars of sustainable development: responsible economic, political, and social growth. Eco-labels, organic labels, fair trade labels, marine and forest stewardship certification as well as joint efforts to design ways to end sweatshops in outsourced manufacturing are contemporary examples of how citizens put their consumer choice and voice to work for sustainable development (Cashore et al., 2004, Jordan et al., 2003, Micheletti, 2003, ch. 3). The use of consumer choice to promote

citizenship has even reached the electoral arena. Supporters of the US Democratic Party frustrated with the outcome of the presidential election in 2000 and 2004 created "BuyBlue.org" to mobilise "conscientious consumers" to support "businesses that abide by sustainability, workers' rights, environmental standards, and corporate transparency" (BuyBlue, no date).

Political consumerism

The phenomenon of political consumerism shows even more clearly how consumption and consumer choice have important citizenship qualities. The Copenhagen Institute of Futures Studies coined the term to focus attention on how consumers became involved in the struggle for social and environmental justice. In its 1998 report, the Swedish SNS Democratic Audit called political consumerism a trend in political participation, and the term was the title of a book on citizen involvement in Danish democracy published by the Danish Study of Power and Democracy (Larsen et al., 1998, Petersson et al., 1998, Goul Andersen & Tobiasen, 2001, Micheletti et al., 2003, 2006). Political consumerism is defined as the use of the market as an arena for politics. Sometimes it is called ethical consumption to distinguish it from another usage, prevalent in the United Kingdom, reflecting criticism of the growing use of consumer choice in welfare provision and privatisation. People applying the second usage argue that there is a sharp divide between democratic politics, which they see as having community and inclusion as its mission, and the market, which they say involves choice and exclusion (see Soper & Trentmann, 2007, Micheletti, 2004). But this is both an exaggeration and a misunderstanding. Market anthropologists and cultural sociologists find that consumers are engaged in and develop a large variety of communities and networks. For them, consumer culture and spaces of consumption are legitimate spheres of action (see Sassatelli, 2007). And choice, in the form of voting and the fundamental freedoms of speech, press, religion, and association, is the basic of liberal democratic politics. Without choice of what to think, believe, say, and support, there is no true democracy.

Political consumers are defined as people who consider the 'politics of products' or the ethical, environmental, and political aspects of commodity production when making decisions about their consumer practices. The three basic forms of political consumerism – boycotts, buycotts, and discursive actions – have grown in importance over the years. In the early 2000s, 13% of adult Europeans had engaged in at least one boycott and 22% in buycotts. Higher levels of boycotting and buycotting are noted in northern Europe than in southern and eastern Europe. (The survey question concerned political action in a designated twelve-month period to bring about improvements or counteract deterioration in their own societies.) In the United States in roughly the same time period, 18% boycotted and 22% buycotted (see van Deth et al., 2007, Neller & van Deth, 2006, US CID, no date).

To spur on buycotting, civil society together with the corporate world and, at times, governments design market-based regulatory tools in the form of consumer-oriented labelling schemes. Global schemes now exist for environmentally friendly household goods, organic food, sustainable fish and shellfish, forestry and wood products, and fairly traded food and basic consumer goods. A few national ones exist for animal welfare and animal rights. Soon there may be a European scheme for animal welfare that certifies the fair treatment of animals before slaughter (Welfare Quality, no date b, Foreign Agricultural Service, no date). Although still very modest when compared to conventional shopping, political consumerist shopping shows dramatic increases in market share. Even socially responsible investing (SRI) or ethical investment with its long historical roots in moral political activism have taken on in certain parts of Europe (particularly the United Kingdom) and the United States. SRI and shareholder activism were an important way for middle-class people to show their opposition to apartheid and the Vietnam war. Now, again, it is a form of political expression on the war in Iraq.

Survey researchers have yet to find a way to measure discursive actions, which complement and at times replace consumer boycotts and buycotts when they

are not an advisable or available option. Discursive actions communicate the values of citizen-consumer responsibility taking in culture jamming that takes a critical and humorous look at corporate marketing slogans and logotypes, dialogue with market actors to pressure them to assume social and environmental responsibility in their commodity chains, public opinion formation on the responsibilities of consumers and corporate producers, and an array of electronic urgent alerts that urge citizens to see and act on the relationship between consumer choice, corporate production, and global equality. Today discursive political consumerism dominates the anti-sweatshop movement whose mission is to convince corporations, consumers, and others that they have moral obligations of justice to the distant others whose physical labour ('sweat') provides us with affordable apparel without the benefit of what the International Labour Organization calls a decent wage, decent life, and better work.

Political consumer pressure and the ensuing media attention are convincing brand name (logo) corporations that values-based thinking is in their best interest. IKEA, targeted earlier for its use of child labour in rug manufacturing and procurement of rainforest trees for its wooden furniture, now claims publicly that all its suppliers must follow rules about acceptable working conditions, no child labour, and assume a responsible attitude to the environment (IKEA, no date). After years of being the focus of outraged consumers and political consumerist action for the treatment of garment and sports equipment workers in its outsourced manufacturing, Nike announced in its latest corporate social responsibility report that it has "the greatest responsibility" to bring about positive systematic change in the entire global garment industry (Nike, no date). The large affordable clothing transnational corporation, H & M, also targeted by the anti-sweatshop movement in past years, now says that it has responsibility for how people and the environment are affected by its activities (H & M, no date). Other examples of the impact of political consumerist pressure come from the retail market. The British-based international grocery and general merchandising retail chain, Tesco, has decided to take responsibility for climate

change by transporting wine by water. It also sells over 1 200 organic products and offers consumers 130 fairtrade lines (*The Guardian*, 2007, Tesco, no date). And the consumer success of such ethical businesses as The Body Shop has spurred on small-scale capitalists to fuse citizen and capitalist values to turn a profit by offering sustainable consumer goods for sale. A flamboyant one established by the Adbusters Media Foundation is the Blackspot 'sweat-free' shoes. This shoe manufacturing endeavour is part of its grassroots movement to make consumers into active citizen-consumers who participate in shaping the social enterprises of the future. It has received considerable media attention for this effort, which to date has sold 25 000 pairs of shoes (Adbusters Media Foundation, 2008).

Why political consumerism?

Global problems 'tug and pull' at states and societies.⁴ World developments show that more needs to be done to protect the environment and to promote human rights globally. Finding new ways to solve global human rights and environmental problems and for appropriate actors and institutions to take responsibility for global problem solving are top priorities today. Because of free trade and weaknesses of governmental political responsibility to attend to these problems, concerned citizens and civic associations focus their attention on market actors who can act more freely across territorial borders. Today civil society and governmental organisations from local to global level charge consumers and transnational corporations with responsibility to consider how they affect the condition of the environment and human rights around the world in negative ways and how they can use their productive and consuming power to bring about positive change in production and consumption. Global Compact, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Amnesty International, the International Labour Organization, the World Resources Institute, the European Commission, Greenpeace, Global Unions, Oxfam, Christian Aid,

and WWF – to name but a few – urge both corporations and consumers to act as sustainable citizens and play their role in helping to find and form ways to develop responsibility and accountability to fit global problems. Effort is even put into convincing governments as consumers to play a part here. In Europe and North America, the 'Fairtrade town' effort and similar civil society campaigns ask voters to consider how their tax money is spent and pressure government to see the 'politics of products' in their procurement policies and practices (Fairtrade Foundation, no date, Swedish Clean Clothes Campaign, no date).

This starting point differs considerably from that of the proponents of neoliberalism who want to transfer control of the global economy from the public to the private sector. Political consumers generally decry the weakness of government to deal with global problems. Their shift to the market reflects the political reality of free trade doctrines and the borderless quality of global problems. Some unions have even – for the time being – given up on government (Dirnback, 2006). Politicising consumption and designing market-based labelling are a way to fill the responsibility vacuum in a world that lacks a global governmental framework with sufficiently strong regulatory power to deal with the global problems at hand. The developments as political consumerism and corporate social responsibility along with institutional initiatives like the Global Compact, Fairtrade Labelling Organization, Forest Certification Council, Sustainable Business Institute, Fair Labor Association, Human Rights Watch, and others are innovative attempts that take their point of departure in current political realities concerning the problems of governability in the world today. Governability problems include internal complications within representative democracy that create gridlock, overload the public administration, and produce weak regulations as well as the lack of mandate and resources for borderless enforcement of human and environmental rights.

Four roles for citizen-consumers

This paper shows that there has always been a dynamic and integrative relationship between the role of cit-

4. The phrase "tugging and pulling at states" is taken from Princen & Finger (eds) (1994), p. 225.

izen and the role of consumer. Throughout history governments and political leaders have called on consumers to consider the citizenship aspects that are part of their private consumption. Not surprising, then, that the term ‘citizen-consumer’ was coined a century or so ago to capture the dovetailing of the role of the citizen and consumer. Citizen-consumers play four roles in the global struggle for social and environmental justice:

- First, as well-illustrated in the South African boycott and many trade union appeals, consumers are called on to boycott, buycott, and advocate certain consumer practices to support a civic association’s cause.
- Second, citizen-consumer buycotting choices can be channelled into a critical shopping mass that confirms and furthers corporate endeavours to invest in good human rights and good environmental practices.
- Third, citizen-consumers can be mobilised as a ‘spearhead force’ to pressure buyer-sensitive logo brand name corporations (as in the case of IKEA and Nike) who need goodwill to keep up a positive image in consumer society to take action to promote sustainability in their commodity chains.
- Finally, some advocates go so far as to argue that consumers can be a paradigmatic force for societal change. This bold idea means that if the citizen-consumer changes his/her predispositions and world view about consumer culture and corporations, s/he can shift present power alliances, shake up governments, and force corporations to change.

Consumers and sustainable citizenship

Global developments over the last few decades show that global politics and the global economy are intertwined in new and challenging ways. Among other things, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between the role of consumers and the role of citizens on the one hand, and the responsibility of government and the transnational corporation on the other, in and for global political and societal developments. Consump-

tion is more than a matter of choosing the best price and material quality among a vast array of products, brands, and services. More so now than in the past, consumer choice is choice of values in global society and, therefore, choice that affects the future of the world. The new idea of ‘sustainable citizenship’ recognises this development. It takes its point of departure in the civil, political, and social rights now conveyed to many – but far from all – citizens worldwide. But it goes further by claiming that these rights, which guarantee citizens within a country democratic and social security, also empower them to play a greater role in global democratic governance.

Sustainable citizenship means that the values of citizenship – political, social, economic equality, multiculturalism, and solidarity with and responsibility for others – are general goals that must characterise both public and private life.⁵ All societal roles – being a parent, teacher, employer, doctor, consumer, neighbour, a student, and so on – must learn and apply these norms. Some societal roles already do. Workers united over a century ago into international federations of solidarity. More recently, the medical, teaching, and legal professions have established associations ‘sans frontières’, and ‘soccer moms’ not wanting to dirty their hands with sweatshop-produced goods demonstrated outside Niketowns and other retailers to protest their treatment of global garment workers. These examples illustrate how societal roles have found ways to infuse the norms of citizenship in their deeds and actions. Political consumerism shows how people in everyday shopping situations can apply the norms of democratic citizenship to help solve global environmental and human rights problems. These norms may even mean that they slow down and downsize their private consumption. Attention is cast on consumers in the western world. It is here where the freedom of association, speech, press, and religion, the political rights to vote and be elected, and the social rights of education, health, and employment are most institutionalised and can be utilised most fully to develop sustainable citizenship for today’s and tomorrow’s world (UN, no date, Marshall, 1950).

5. For information on citizenship norms, see Olof Petersson et al. (1998) and van Deth et al. (eds) (2007). For information on sustainable citizenship, see Lister (2007).

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NO NEED TO EDIT? IS FAITH IN CONSUMER SOVEREIGNTY JUSTIFIED?

**Tim Cooper, Centre for Sustainable Consumption,
Sheffield Hallam University (United Kingdom)**

In the face of environmental threats and social injustice, people in industrialised countries need to modify their patterns of consumption. The need for such a change has only relatively recently been prioritised by governments who had been focusing on the production of sustainable goods and services. Some are now switching their attention to behaviour and lifestyles and are energetically promoting the use of tools such as carbon calculators and fair trade initiatives to engage consumers in the debate.

This development is long overdue. In the wave of environmental concern that surfaced some thirty years ago there were already warnings that pressure upon the planet's life support systems caused by consumerism demanded a response. Indeed, the term 'responsible consumption' was coined by one of America's more critical marketing academics as long ago as the early 1970s (Fisk, 1973). Nonetheless the significance of consumption to sustainable development was only widely recognised in public debate following the 1992 Earth Summit, the key report from which had a chapter entitled "Changing Consumption Patterns", and most governments only started their strategic thinking in this area following an agreement at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 to adopt "a 10-year framework of programmes in support of regional and national initiatives to accelerate the shift towards sustainable consumption and production to promote social and economic development within the carrying capacity of ecosystems".⁶

Early approaches to sustainable consumption⁷ from a consumer perspective focused largely on information provision through environmental labelling and

measures to encourage products with reduced environmental impacts, notably energy efficiency. The European Union eco-labelling scheme was introduced in 1992, preceded by national schemes such as Germany's Blue Angel (1977) and the Nordic Swan (1989). The Energy Labelling Framework Directive, also introduced in 1992, paved the way for energy labelling requirements for specified appliances and, for refrigeration equipment sold from 1999, a minimum efficiency requirement. It was implicitly assumed that sufficient progress towards sustainability would be made if only the environmental impacts of key products were reduced (whether through increased energy efficiency, miniaturisation, recyclability or the use of recycled materials) and consumers were better informed about how to choose the redesigned, less damaging, models.

Despite the ever increasing amount of information available on the negative impacts of consumption, particularly relating to climate change, many consumers remain confused and say that they want more, or at least clearer, information (Krarup & Russell, 2005). Yet the potential weaknesses of such an approach are clear. Consumers may simply disregard information, either because they are disinterested or suffering from information overload. The provision of better quality information is only effective if consumers are inclined to utilise it. More fundamentally, any reduction achieved in the environmental impact of individual products may be offset by increased consumption (enabled, in part, through the rebound effect). A stronger approach to the sustainable consumption imperative is required (Fuchs & Lorek, 2005).

6. World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, Chapter III.

7. As sustainable consumption implies recognition of individual and collective responsibility for the welfare of all, it is used interchangeably with responsible consumption.

Consumer sovereignty as descriptive and prescriptive

Strategies to promote responsible consumption need to be explored with reference to the concept of consumer sovereignty in order to consider the implications for freedom within liberal western cultures. To what extent might government intervention to promote more responsible consumption patterns be justified in order to increase human well-being?

The term ‘consumer sovereignty’ is used in either a positive (that is, descriptive) or normative (that is, prescriptive) sense to suggest that consumers are, or should be, powerful because societal welfare is maximised when they are given the greatest freedom to choose products. Alongside other principles that originate from traditional neoclassical economics, consumer sovereignty is subject to criticism from heterodox and post-autistic schools of economic thought, who argue that the concept is flawed because it does not reflect the complexity of the real world. Two specific assumptions are subject to criticism: first, that suppliers are responsive to consumer preferences and second, that any divergence between private cost and social cost is not significant.

As long ago as the early part of the 20th century Joseph Schumpeter disputed the dominance of consumer power on the grounds that in many markets, particularly those with oligopolistic characteristics, powerful suppliers appeared able to influence consumer preferences. His critique has become even more persuasive today. Moreover, the traditional neoclassical economists’ assumption of rational choice, that consumers are well informed and able to predict benefits and costs, is increasingly viewed with scepticism. In short, critics of consumer sovereignty argue that consumers lack power and competence.

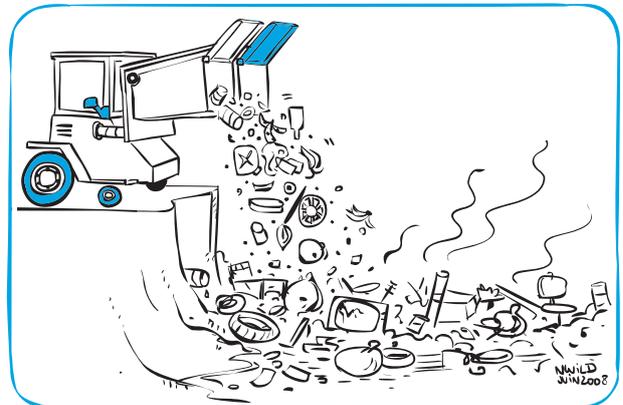
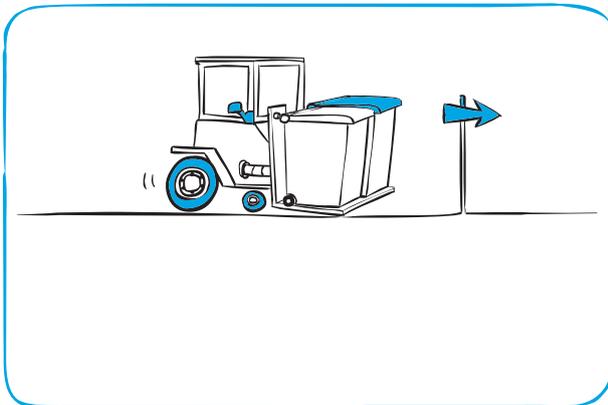
Nor would society necessarily be enhanced if consumers became more powerful. Consumers who choose products for which the social cost exceeds the private cost may be behaving rationally at an individual level, but collectively their actions reduce social welfare. Economists have long been aware that part of the cost of certain economic transac-

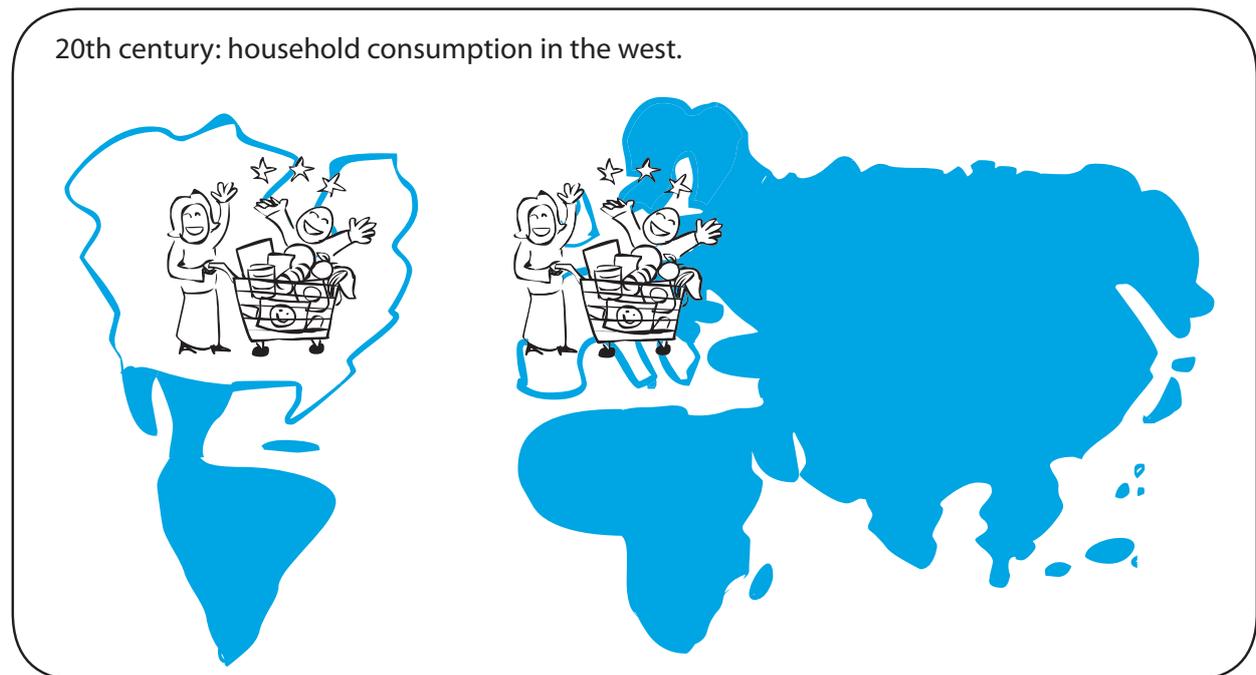
tions, notably the negative environmental or social impacts, is externalised to society; hence society, in the form of taxpayers, has to fund public services to counter these impacts. Writing in the 1920s, A.C.Pigou argued that such costs should instead be internalised into the price of the relevant product through taxation. European governments have, however, remained reluctant to introduce ecological tax reform, fearful of offending certain interest groups or being accused by the electorate of increasing taxation. Consequently product prices often do not, in Ernst von Weizsäcker’s phrase, “tell the ecological truth” (Weizsäcker, Lovins & Lovins, 1997) and consumers are not given an economic incentive to behave more responsibly.

The value of consumer sovereignty as a normative principle is that it may be used to justify demands for increased information to enable people to act as responsible consumers. Yet even if markets were operating efficiently, social costs internalised into product prices and information readily available, consumers may express a preference not to act ‘responsibly’. Consumer sovereignty treats individual choice behaviour as ethically neutral.

Changing consumption patterns

One weakness of a market-focused approach towards responsible consumption is that environmentally and socially benign goods and services tend to attract a premium price or are not accessible. The justification for the former may be that the production method is more expensive due to its innovative nature or small, local scale. The premium clearly acts as a barrier: in a MORI survey of twelve European countries, only around one in five consumers said that they were willing to pay more for products that are socially and environmentally responsible (Harrison, Newholm & Shaw, 2005). Higher prices are especially problematic for poorer consumers, who have less freedom than others to choose premium-range products. The availability of these products is another concern. For example, fairly traded coffee has become well established but for many other types of product, such as clothing, the fair trade range remains very limited.





Nor is there evidence that many consumers are seeking to restrain, still less reduce, their overall consumption. Despite a growing awareness that the quality of life is not necessarily improved by increased consumption, few consumers appear to have changed their aspirations or behaviour substantially (Layard, 2005). People construct their social identities around consumption and most still aspire to ever-rising affluence even though, as Hirsch pointed out in the late 1970s, “if everyone stands on tiptoe no one sees better” (Hirsch, 1977). ‘Downshifting’⁸ has not attracted the masses and even where it occurs the driving force appears to be lifestyle preference as much as ethical argument. Pockets of resistance to materialism, of counterculture, remain small.

If responsible consumption is to become normal and ordinary, rather than the preserve of a few, it is important that environmentally and socially benign goods and services are no longer in a niche market but in the mainstream and that people can identify

viable lifestyle options between the extremes of profligacy and frugality. How, then, is it possible to break into prevailing norms of consumption and achieve the radical change necessary in society?

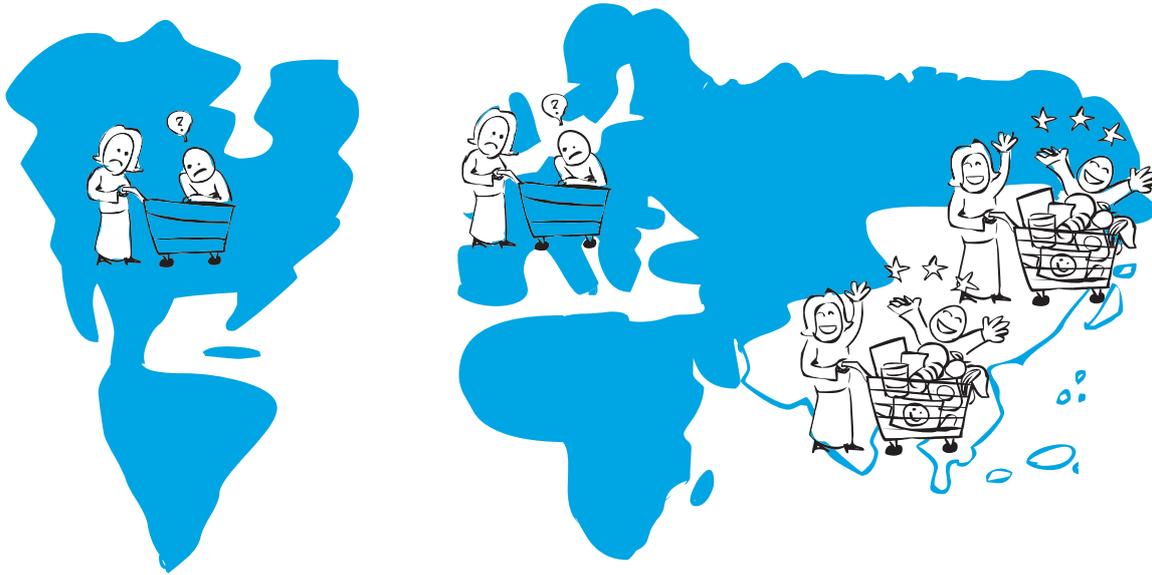
Much debate in this area has adopted as a starting point the proposition that many people have values and attitudes that are positive towards sustainability but do not act consistently; this is variously described as the ‘attitude-behaviour gap’ or ‘value-action gap’. Research designed to explore possible means of bridging this gap has revealed a complex range of influences upon behaviour: values, beliefs, social factors (that is, norms, roles), intention, habit – all of which may interact. Recent academic work on pro-environmental behaviour change has focused on the social context of consumer choice. Meanwhile the British Government is developing a market segmentation model which clusters consumers according to their ability and willingness to act sustainably (Defra, 2008).

Perhaps what is additionally needed is recognition of the need for personal, critical, self-reflective consumption. Consumption, whether at a national or individual level, has a momentum of its own and is often undertaken with little reflection. People routinely and habitually buy the same kind of products; their choices reflecting long-established values and

8. Downshifting is a movement questioning the real development potential of growth and advocating a return to a simpler lifestyle. For further information, see:

– http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simple_living: this Wikipedia link in English describes the principle.
– www.decroissance.org/: site available in French only.
– www.ibreathe.org.uk and www.livesimply.org.uk: two UK-based Christian networks promoting simple living.

21st century: household consumption moves east.



their social identity. The successive stages of consumption described by consumer behaviour theorists – problem recognition, information search, information evaluation, decision and post-purchase evaluation – are in practice often carried out perfunctorily. By contrast, self-reflective consumption is a critical and discriminating art that demands time to allow prospective consumers to utilise new knowledge and understanding and to carefully and deliberately refer to their environmental and social values.

Reflection may lead to a recognition that the distinction between the roles of consumers and citizens is becoming blurred and that consumers “should no longer tolerate and bring about” what they object to as citizens (Hansen & Schrader, 1997). In other words, citizens have responsibilities as consumers to take account of the impact of their consumption upon other people, which may require abrogating their ‘right’ to consume and restraining their consumption or, at the least, limiting their choices to low impact (that is, environmentally and socially benign) products and services.

Limited behavioural change is possible, however, as long as low impact goods and services are expensive or inaccessible. A role therefore exists for governments, which can influence the market through, for

example, ecological tax reform (thus making responsible behaviour more economically attractive) or by requiring industry initiatives to overcome inadequate provision (thus increasing supply). By helping to transform the market for low impact goods and services from niche to mainstream they may fulfil an important role in achieving cultural change.

Cultural change and responsible choice

How can the necessary cultural change be achieved, such that unsustainable consumerism gives way to a new way of ‘being’? What are the options for a society which no longer wants to be dependent upon profligate and unjust forms of consumption and, more specifically, what are the respective roles of governments and consumers? In answering such questions it is helpful to return to the consumer sovereignty principle and consider how much power the consumer actually does have in our consumerist culture and how much freedom the consumer should have in a finite world.

In theory, consumers play an important role in shaping markets and in practice there is evidence that their concerns about particular forms of production

(such as testing cosmetics on animals, intensive farming and the exploitation of workers in poor countries) and the impact of products in use (as with inefficient appliances and lighting) have led to market transformation. Many people, embracing a sense of responsibility as consumers, have modified their expenditure as a result of greater awareness of the social and environmental impacts of consumption. In Britain around 80% of the public have heard of fair trade and of these around one-half claim to make an effort to buy fair trade products (Defra, 2007). The total market for ethical goods and services has been growing at 15% per annum over the past five years, three times the rate of household expenditure generally, and is now worth £32bn (Co-operative Bank, 2007).

That said, less than a quarter of the population would describe themselves as 'ethical consumers' and only around 5% consistently make purchases based on ethical criteria. The majority of consumers only take ethical criteria into account occasionally when purchasing products, if at all. Growth in ethical markets is being made from a low base and took a long time to develop. Thus fairly traded products may be increasingly visible in retail outlets, but their origins can be traced back to the 1960s, when Oxfam started importing Third World crafts to complement their lobbying activities on aid. Likewise, proponents of organic food were active for several decades before the market expanded in the late 1990s and although the market has typically been growing at 15%-30% per annum in OECD countries, organic sales still only account for a small fraction of total food sales (OECD, 2003). It is thus reasonable to question whether education and campaigning tools alone will be effective in enabling adequate progress towards more responsible consumption.

It may also be argued that consumer sovereignty places an unfair burden on individual consumers, exposing them to undue criticism by wrongly asserting that they have sufficient market power to enable the rapid progress towards sustainable consumption that is needed. The strategic debate thus needs to extend beyond information provision and individual exhortation to understanding the social psychology of con-

sumption and the nature of the supply system: hence proposals for system innovation, new infrastructures and support groups (for example, the Global Action Plan team model) (Tukker, Charter, Vezzoli, Stø & Munch Andersen (eds), 2008). In the words of a recent report aimed at government: "The focus needs to be on creating a supportive framework for collective progress, rather than exhorting individuals to go against the grain."⁹

One means of taking the pressure off consumers is through 'choice editing',¹⁰ whereby manufacturers, service providers, retailers or governments phase out the option to buy products or services with unduly negative social or environmental impacts. The Sustainable Consumption Roundtable has argued that "historically, the green consumer has not been the tipping point in driving green innovation". Rather, "manufacturers, retailers and regulators have made decisions to edit out less sustainable products on behalf of consumers, raising the standard for all"¹¹ using a range of measures to 'shift the field of choice'. These have included mandatory and voluntary labelling schemes, voluntary decisions by manufacturers and retailers no longer to stock certain products below a particular standard, and government regulations that ban the most unsatisfactory products.

The aim of choice editing is to make responsible consumption easy and not unduly expensive, so that choosing low impact goods and services becomes the norm for ordinary consumers. It has particular significance for poor and vulnerable workers in non-industrialised nations, who would benefit hugely if working conditions under 'fair trade' principles were the norm. It would also benefit consumers in low income groups in Europe, who are less able to afford

9. Sustainable Consumption Roundtable (2006), *I Will if You Will*, London: Sustainable Development Commission/National Consumer Council.

10. Regarding "choice editing", the example of European refrigerators and freezers seems conclusive: government incentives can prompt action up the line by producers to cut out the less sustainable products, and help consumers make environmentally benign choices. See Ed Mayo, "How consumer groups can champion sustainable consumption": www.ncc.org.uk/nccpdf/speeches/NCC073_Ed_Mayo_CI_Congress_Sidney.pdf

11. Sustainable Consumption Roundtable (2006), *Looking Back, Looking Forward: Lessons in Choice Editing for Sustainability*, London: Sustainable Development Commission/National Consumer Council.

the premium prices typically levied on low impact goods and services.

Is a policy such as choice editing an affront to human liberty, or an imperative in a finite world? From a neoliberal perspective, restricting the choice of goods and services (except perhaps on personal safety grounds) or allowing market intervention by government to encourage the development of low impact alternatives is unacceptable. In a free society consumers have the right to make 'wrong' choices and learn from mistakes; a state of affairs preferable to having values imposed upon them by government. Other critics might welcome government support for environmentally and socially benign goods and services, but would baulk at 'manipulating' consumer choice by choice editing. In an unjust and environmentally threatened world, however, if individuals do not have the knowledge, means or motivation to make the 'right' choices, perhaps choice editing will increasingly be seen as a necessary strategy for achieving responsible consumption.

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FROM CONSUMER SOVEREIGNTY TO CONSUMER GOVERNANCE. ROOM FOR CHOICE IN CONSUMPTION

Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier, Centre de Sociologie des Organisations
(CNRS – Science Po, Paris) (France)

The question of choice is central to the political and economic construction of the role of consumers in our societies. It is precisely by exercising their right to choose that consumers fulfil their role in the Social Contract. This ‘consumer sovereignty’ has been built through history, while states, enterprises and consumer associations have reached a consensus on defining economic citizenship on the basis of the exercise of individual choice. Yet the latter can only be exercised in an environment controlled by the supply side, because consumers can only choose among product characteristics as presented by the various mechanisms of ‘market delegation’ (brands, logos, standards, advertising, etc.). Some proposals relating to responsible consumption have broadened this range of choice, incorporating into the market such non-market values as ethics, fairness and respect for the environment, although they have stopped short of challenging the principle of individual choice. Other recent proposals, however, are striving to restore the collective dimension of consumer choices by establishing new forums where consumers and producers can get together to decide on the framework of consumption. This requires us to look at the democratic capacities of such systems, particularly their ability to promote social inclusion for the benefit of deprived population groups.

The question of choice is central to the political and economic construction of the consumer’s role in our societies. It is precisely by exercising their right to choose that consumers play their part in the Social Contract. Variations on this principle are to be found in many social environments. Not only in enterprises but also in other types of organisation, managerial theories have posited ‘the customer is always right’ or ‘the consumer is always right’ as the decisive element in most forms of governance and management techniques. On the markets, the ques-

tion of efficiency is directly settled by the concept of consumers’ choice as a mode of expression of their preferences. Lastly, in the political field, consumers-cum-citizens can also use their informed choice to exert some influence over specific public regulations. We must attempt to improve our understanding of how this margin for consumer choice has gradually been created and analyse how different civil society movements are proposing to redefine the conditions for exercising this choice on the basis of a Social Contract formulated on slightly different terms and conditions. Consumer choice is currently split between highly specific alternatives and strongly controlled by market operators. This has prompted a series of critical proposals aimed not only at broadening the space for individual choice but also at restoring a collective framework for consumer choices.

The first section below will deal with the historic conditions for the construction of economic citizenship, and the second will present the framework for exercising choice, operating mainly on the ‘delegation’ principle. The third and final section will show how social movements are currently proposing a redefinition of the role of consumer choice, highlighting the capacities of such projects for improving the social inclusion of the more deprived population groups.

The historic construction of the sovereignty of individual choice

The role played by consumers in modern societies did not develop exclusively in the context of relations between businesses and their customers: it also largely stemmed from the manner in which states mobilised consumers and helped define both their rights and their duties. These aspects have been well documented by English-speaking historians, who

stress the way in which consumption and citizenship gradually became interlinked in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The British cases, focusing on bread and milk, which have been studied by Frank Trentmann (2001), very clearly illustrate this fact. The view of the role of consumers which established itself during the industrial revolution in the wake of certain consumer movements was rather radical-liberal in nature. It was a case of constructing a political model in which the state's main goal was to create the conditions for free trade as the only way to guarantee access to cheap high-quality bread for all consumers. The two world wars transformed the conditions of access to and the characteristics of consumer goods, which constituted a crucial turning point. In 1940 the consumerist movements' demands of the state raised the need for stringent regulations in order to guarantee access to high-quality milk subject to strict health controls. The two world wars changed not only the modes of regulation of consumption but also the terms of the Social Contract between consumers and the societies in which they live. By protecting their interests and granting them specific rights, the states developed new forms of democracy based on economic citizenship, which consumers could exercise through their individual choices.

The historian Lizabeth Cohen (2004) proposes a similar analysis for the United States of America. At the time of the New Deal, the government decided to protect consumer interests against other interests which had already been organised (particularly corporate and workers' interests) by adopting the first ever major drive to regulate consumption. However, these new consumers' rights were accompanied by new duties, particularly during the Second World War, when consumers were asked to contribute to the war effort, and subsequently the work of rebuilding the country, by adopting specific consumption practices (limiting consumption during the war and then promoting mass consumption in the post-war period). Lizabeth Cohen uses the expression "a consumers' republic" to describe this form of citizenship, which is squarely based on the role of consumers in society, that is, their direct contribution to national wealth.

This new Social Contract emerging from 1945 onwards linked up the market, consumption and citizenship, and helped develop a specific 'consumer identity' to be defended and developed by various bodies within the state, enterprises and civil society.

For all their differences, these players got together to define the primary interests of consumers on the basis of their freedom to exercise their individual choices. State agencies, as well as consumers' associations and major companies' marketing departments, began to envisage consumers in a fragmented manner, primarily individualising their freedom of choice. These analyses were also applied to European countries (Kroen, 2004), where the consumer society did not really arrive until the 1960s.

The consumers' social identity stems directly from their capacity to choose, purchase and consume products specifically designed for them. This is a remarkable fact, and although interests often diverge (among firms, states and consumer organisations) and organisational methods vary widely from one country to the next (Maclachlan, 2004; Trumbull, 2006), they all contribute to the fragmentation of consumers and of the perception of their needs. Consumers are characterised as individuals whose choices must be both directed and fleshed out by a range of market or institutional measures such as brands, standards or labels. The consumer's mode of expression is thus reduced to a fragmented demand for products, services and/or protection. Corporate marketing departments have refined their tools to produce ever narrower segmentation. As early as the 1950s, such departments in the US were analysing critical proposals from alternative movements regarding the demands of young, elderly, ethnic or anti-establishment consumers as potential market sectors. The major consumer organisations, for their part, have gradually built up expertise to help consumers to choose among the ever-expanding products on offer the one best suited to each individual by providing classifications, with 'segmentations by use' also being supplied today.

The individualisation of choice as a means of exercising not only citizens' rights but also consumer sovereignty has stemmed from an historical process

combining action by states, corporations, civil society and also the consumers themselves. This situation not only makes it difficult for consumers to initiate collective action but also actually challenges their right to exercise choice. This is why the critical proposals being formulated today by various politically aware consumer movements to re-collectivise choice (for example, local contracts between producers and consumers and the North American food circles) or to cast doubt upon such choice (for example, the various 'de-growth movements') occupy such a special niche in the social environment. Before going into the exact discrepancy inherent in these movements, we shall reconsider the conditions for exercising individualised choices in the commercial environment.

Conditions for consumer choice: the role of delegation

Various economic sociology projects have emerged in recent years, not only in France but also in the English-speaking countries, highlighting the fact that market encounters between a product and a consumer are mediated. This means that they involve a varying number of fairly diverse mechanisms to facilitate both identification and evaluation of the supply of a given product (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2006). A random selection of such mechanisms might be brands, advertising, logos, standards, labels, packaging types and tags, design, merchandising, marketing techniques, and also the wide range of prescriptions from not only the commercial world but also other fields, for example, guides, classifications, car price indexes, reviews, general advice and recommendations.

There have been several attempts to organise an analysis of these different market mediation mechanisms. They can be differentiated in accordance with their 'authoritative space': Franck Cochoy (2002), for instance, differentiates the brand, which is the commercial property of an economic player who thereby stakes his/her reputation, from the standard, which governs inter-corporate co-ordination and sometimes the intervention of a certifying third party; and we might add the official quality symbol, which is based

on public action. Lucien Karpik (2007) proposes drawing a distinction between substantive mechanisms describing the specific contents of products (for example, wine guides) and formal mechanisms classifying the specificities of such products as pop record hit parades. We can also identify mechanisms that enable us to objectify qualities with an eye to incorporating them into various calculations (for example, prices, quantities, use-by dates and engine capacities) and others which facilitate individual judgments (for example, car colours, yoghurt texture or film reviews).

Nevertheless, all these analyses highlight the obvious role played by such a profusion of mediation techniques in consumer choice operations. They stress that the great majority of such operations are effected in line with the delegation principle, whereby the consumer agrees to stand down momentarily as the sole operator of his/her choice and resorts to these mechanisms as delegated to him/her to help effect the choice.

So we see that the presence of such 'delegated mechanisms', or 'delegates', has two major results. First of all, their profusion forces consumers to make a choice, to select one or more of them and reject others. The process of choosing products is therefore accompanied by a further one of choosing 'delegates': choosing a car means choosing among several models and makes, but also among several forms of advice (from a friend or relative, a salesman or a car magazine). Furthermore, these 'delegates' provide information on a very specific selection of the characteristics on which the choice is based, excluding other features, which are thus also excluded from the choice. Coming back to the example of a car, when consumers look at particular car makes they can consider the reputation of individual makes, which is a highly composite characteristic combining car performance assessments by various players; when they read a magazine article they will take account of the characteristics as assessed by a third person in whom they place a greater or lesser degree of trust; and when they look at prices, they have recourse to their own economic judgments and, once again, to the specific features of the car. No detailed study has ever been made of this subject, but the process of buying

a car probably combines all these different considerations and induces consumers to link up their own budgetary constraints with the features of the vehicle, information on its reputation and the amount of trust they place in the advisers involved. This shows that consumers have to juggle with various choice criteria relating to prices, characteristics and advisers.

However, if consumers wish to choose their cars in accordance with their place of production, can they do so? A careful look at car magazines and a few questions put to sales staff would probably help direct their choice as based on this criterion. But what if they wish to choose on the basis of the average wages of workers in the factory producing the car, or of the rate of CO₂ discharge from the process of manufacturing or transporting the car from its production site to the consumer? Obviously, while this information does exist (possibly in the increasing numbers of corporate social and environmental responsibility reports), it is hardly likely to be available in the market environment, and consumers today can only choose in accordance with the characteristics covered by the market mediation 'delegates'. If I wish, I can choose a plain or fruit yoghurt, made with cow's or ewe's milk, in 125 gram or 180 gram cartons, in packs of four or twelve cartons, etc.; you will note that the range of choice has extended considerably, reflecting the drive to differentiate products and segment the markets, but this range is still controlled by the supply side, and I cannot personally decide to introduce new criteria such as carton recyclability or the average salaries of female executives working in the multinational owning the yoghurt brand.

Obviously, this area is not frozen in time and space and has expanded under the impact of various measures implemented by social movements: I can choose organic, fair trade or conventional products, thus bringing in new characteristics which originally had nothing to do with the market but are now relevant to it, as highlighted by the new 'delegates' that have come in (labels and brands). It is not inconceivable that the various recent attempts to promote ethical products will ultimately manage to turn new market features into actual social rights. The fact remains that this range of choice, understood as characteris-

tics represented by 'delegates', on which consumers can base their choices, is not only finite but also politically and economically controlled by the supply side, that is to say the market.

From individual choice to collective and democratic choice

This demonstrates the capacity of civil society or public action to broaden the range of choice. The consequent proposals, after various protracted processes, are helping to extend the market characteristics to cover aspects which were originally non-market features, such as social justice, economic fairness and respect for the environment. The commercial environment comprises direct traces of the outcomes of these activities: organic labels, fair trade brands, environmental labels, carbon labels and ecological classifications of electrical household appliances bear witness to this extension of 'delegation' to new characteristics. Nevertheless, it will be agreed that none of these efforts presents any fundamental challenge to the consumer's sovereign choice. While the consumer can now take account of new market criteria, as an individual s/he is still actively responsible for his or her own choice. Much of the discourse on the consumer's political responsibility, precisely, emphasises this individual capacity on the part of consumers to influence collective choices thanks to the aggregative potential of their individual choices: this is what political science calls individualised collective action (Micheletti, 2003), which is particularly consonant with contemporary forms of political mobilisation. Nevertheless, the choices, even political ones, remain individualised in all these configurations.

A number of projects launched by civil society are aimed precisely at such individualisation of choice. The idea here is not so much to negotiate with market operators on incorporating non-market values into trade operations, developing new 'delegates', as to redefine the Social Contract between consumers and their societies by partly abandoning their right to the sovereign exercise of individual choice.

Three current approaches might be reinterpreted in this way. Firstly, the ‘de-growth movement’ approach which endeavours to secure drastic cuts in consumption levels by directing demand towards forms of collective organisation facilitating recycling and reuse, sharing and solidarity within citizen networks, and inviting individuals to give up some of their individual preferences in order to redefine more collective choices. Secondly, local contracts between a consumers’ group and one of more producers, for example, the *Associations pour le Maintien d’une Agriculture Paysanne* (AMAP – “Associations for the maintenance of agriculture with real farmers”) (Dubuisson-Quellier & Lamine, 2004) are now providing collective participative frameworks for consumers to get together with the producers to negotiate choices relating to products (choice of varieties) and also trade terms (conditions for pre-funding farming activities by taking out a subscription) and production conditions (biological, integrated or conventional agriculture, use of greenhouses, use of water resources). This collectivisation of choice is accompanied by collective action relating to distribution and sometimes production (farm work) or involvement in activism (purchasing farmland, lobbying politicians and taking part in national protest events), often blurring the boundary between commercial and civic commitment.

Lastly, we should also mention the experiments conducted in the 1980s and 1990s in North America on food circles, food policy councils and Community Food Security (CFS) (Lang, 1996; Hendrickson & Heffernan, 2002), involving setting up discussion forums in various neighbourhoods, sometimes going on to network them at municipal level, with an eye to organising a local food democracy in which the various member consumers and citizens can decide together on their food choices, restoring fairness, social justice and environmental sustainability as criteria for collective choices. From this angle, food producing systems, rather than being centralised and controlled by a small number of operators, are directly organised and managed by the local communities, which therefore guarantee access to food by the whole community by organising democratic supervisory mechanisms. The CFS method is thus

applied directly in the neighbourhoods, or even in individual households, by developing such practical projects as community gardens or food banks geared to building up solidarity-based social networks based on food production and distribution.

The collective dimension of such approaches make them priority fields for investigating their democratic capacity, in particular examining how they manage to produce a form of social inclusion benefiting the more deprived groups. Nevertheless, they are evidently having trouble finding practical solutions to meet this requirement. Some AMAPs supply underprivileged families with cheaper or even free baskets of fruit and vegetables, but they cannot claim that such makeshifts solve any problems of accessibility given the small number of beneficiaries. As for the various ‘de-growth movements’, by considerably reducing their living standards they tend to blur the boundaries between social classes as reflected in levels of not only income but also consumption. In doing so, however, they also frequently obscure the differences in cultural capital characterising these different classes, and today’s ‘de-growth’ lifestyle involves a high level of competence (although the promoters are not fully aware of this fact). This attitude is fairly irrelevant to the problems of the poorer classes, which paradoxically see it as a luxury reserved for the well-off. The North American CFS movement has adopted an explicit mission to provide practical resources to enable underprivileged groups to participate both in projects and also in decision-making forums.

However, despite their highly innovative stance in terms of local democracy, these approaches have attracted criticism, often from the specialist academic circles which originally protected them but which are now also highlighting their potential for restoring areas for politically controlled choices. Some CFS efforts might be reinterpreted as attempts by the middle classes to control the consumption of the working classes, forcing them to consume a diet comprising local market garden produce which has nothing to do with their usual eating habits. In my view, the value of such positions is that they open a debate on the very nature of ‘food democracy’ and the problems of associating the most vulnerable

groups with collective demarches in this field. This social accessibility issue is currently central to all the problems tackled by these various approaches striving to make consumer choices both more collective and more democratic, although the practical means to this end are still proving elusive.

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CONSUMERS' CONCERNS AND ALTERNATIVE CHOICES

**Federica Volpi, IREF Istituto di Ricerche Educative e Formative
(Institute of Educational and Training Research), Rome (Italy)**

In contemporary society, individuals lack the clear reference points that once orientated their choices. Citizens face this uncertainty also in their role as consumers, increasing their concerns and responsibilities. However, this situation allows the growth of alternative experiences within society, which seek to combine the quest for personal well-being and the expression of a sense of solidarity starting from the field of consumption. The spreading of responsible consumption extends the confines of traditional economic models and brings ethical and social discourse back into economic theory, also through the analysis of 'fair prices' and the willingness of consumers to pay them.

Contemporary society is also characterised by a progressive process of individualisation and privatisation. These two concepts sum up the process of enfranchisement of individuals from socially-binding historical forms of belongingness towards a situation characterised by the predominance of fluid and individualised management of the various aspects of human life. This process gives rise to a society that is increasingly fragmented, unstable (changeable) and flexible, in which the collective protections present in the past cease to exist without being replaced by any others.

In this new scenario, consumption tends increasingly to replace production as the predominant dimension and the instrument that can define the social identity of individuals. Following the disappearance of clear and generalised identification processes, the capability of socially constructing one's identity has expanded, also through the possibilities afforded by consumption.

The promises of the consumer society are indeed many: it proposes to satisfy human needs to an extent far beyond that of any past society. In this process it removes from individuals' minds the conviction that human desires are subject to objective limits, and it constantly reduces the transition time

from one set of nourished expectations to the next, shortening "the path from the shop to the garbage-can" (Bauman, 2006, p. 30) through a cognitive and cultural attitude that abbreviates the gratification time-cycle. The world view on which it is based causes its members to consider objects as things and events from the standpoint of the possibility of consuming them. The market propagates the conviction that everything can and should be viewed as a commodity and that it is better to reason in these terms: any resistance to such assimilation is suspect.

New risks and forms of dependency?

The rapid substitution of goods typical of the present consumer society generates excess and waste. Social actors need objects to secure their certainties and safeguard them from the unexpected, but excess ends up increasing the uncertainty inherent in every choice. Hence the contemporary individual is faced with the fact that, in the sphere of consumption as elsewhere, there are no precise and reliable rules that can free the decider from the negative and undesirable consequences of his or her choices. Each choice entails the anxiety of feeling inadequate and the doubt (if not actual regret) due to rejecting other options present in the assortment along with the fear of having missed other still-unknown possibilities. The experience of bewilderment and fear of the future accompanies the consumer's life.

It is indeed true that the risks linked to every choice have acquired a weightiness perhaps never before experienced. After planetary events such as mad cow disease, avian flu, the nuclear threat, terrorist attacks, etc., in every individual there is a growing sense of powerlessness and an awareness that in a globalised society the risks we are required to share are of such complexity that in many cases neither science, politics or industry are able to assure

adequate safeguards. And at the same time there is an increasingly widespread feeling that decisions affecting millions of people are not always reached in an aware and conscientious manner and that the threats arising out of technological and industrial development, evaluated using existing criteria, can be neither calculated nor controlled.

Citizens are more and more aware that a great deal depends also on their own choices as consumers. Through these choices, they can in fact help to worsen or improve the state of their health, increase or lessen the level of environmental pollution, impoverish or preserve natural resources, safeguard or compromise biodiversity, etc.

This situation is particularly evident in the field of food choices. Consumers often lack any nutritional or consumer education. Nevertheless, it is now well established that an incorrect diet brings many dangers, as it contributes towards a large number of pathologies such as cardiovascular diseases, tumours, forms of diabetes, osteoporosis, liver problems, allergies and food intolerances, food poisoning, etc. Although food plays a leading role as a focus of collective interest, in which the marked correlation between foods and well-being is particularly strongly perceived, the intrinsic characteristics of the supply range available on the market is largely unknown to the public. This situation tends to disorientate consumers and influences their food habits. The reasons for concern can be many, ranging from the residues of chemical substances used in agriculture that may be retained in produce, to the processing and preservation phases of food products, the presence of additives and preservatives or their shelf-life expiry dates.

Increases in complexity and inequality

This state of affairs also reveals the information gap that separates the world of production/distribution from that of consumption. It is not always easy for the public to know how products are cultivated, processed and distributed before they reach consumers: the information available to the latter is often insuf-

ficient and unclear, and can sometimes be deceptive. Some methods have been formulated to support consumers in their buying choices. For instance, the labelling of food products plays a fundamental role in the food safety sphere, and should guarantee consumers' health by making sure that foods are hygienically safe and nutritionally adequate. However, the number of hard-to-interpret items of information provided can often increase consumers' bewilderment and make comprehension even more difficult. In addition, it is not easy for consumers to defend themselves against the supply and pricing policies practised by major distribution chains or to escape the lures of the dishonest marketing and sales techniques employed by some large distribution groups. And consumers can also be disoriented by the speed of renewal of product stocks on the shelves. Lastly, many of their concerns are linked to the planetary horizon which, through the process of market globalisation, has made us 'familiar' with problems such as the introduction and circulation of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in the environment.

Thanks to the explanatory framework provided by food choices, which can easily be extended to the consumption of other goods and products, it is easy to understand how personal safety, knowledge in a broad sense and physical fitness become primary goals for individuals and families. However, the individual preoccupations of consumers do not involve only the personal sphere but extend beyond it, crossing into the collective and social planes. In brief, the citizen as consumer is looking for certainties because he or she has many perplexities; but the latter are not limited merely to the products to be purchased as they also concern the environment, working conditions, etc., which may not only personally affect him or her but also regard others' lives – and in the age of globalisation, practically the entire world. Indeed, as the consumer is generally a worker too, he or she is also aware that the employment conditions of a person on the other side of the world – to which the production of the goods purchased may well have been delocalised – who is often paid only a minimal wage and lacks all union protection, are bound up with planetary changes in the labour market. These sooner or later make their impact felt on all workers, producing

declining employment opportunities and lower levels of protection for all, because the price reductions are achieved by pushing down labour costs. In addition, again in the employment field, it is obvious that the increasingly massive presence of large concentrations of multinational corporations gives rise to the marginalisation of small-scale local enterprises in both the production and commercial spheres.

The wielding of global power should be accompanied by the creation of universal institutions that can act in the general interest of human beings. However, this is not the course of events we are witnessing. What we are seeing instead is the formation of structures for sharing out global power (and relative responsibilities) on the basis of reciprocal negotiations between states, which often takes place inside certain international organisations. But this mechanism has achieved only limited goals: “many decisions of crucial importance for the future of the human community are allocated to the exclusive powers of political and economic institutions designed to safeguard special interests rather than the common and general interest. At the same time, many groups of human beings are totally lacking in protection by political and economic institutions capable of making their voice heard and defending their interests on equal terms. Some groups today possess a global power that they are able to wield for their own benefit, despite the fact that their decisions may also have major consequences for those whose voice is given no hearing when these decisions are reached” (Mastrojeni, 2002, pp. 19-20). The state of unbalance described here is clearly apparent in the economic sphere: *the progressive integration of financial, labour and production markets has greatly curtailed the balancing role on the doings of business enterprises played by traditional institutional actors and the welfare state*. The latter lost the possibility of using their authority and power to direct the course of events towards sustainable development when it became possible for those enterprises to become global actors (Becchetti & Costantino, 2007).

This situation runs the risk of producing a socio-cultural malaise and a generalised state of depression, which particularly affect the life of the citizen as con-

sumer. The inadequacy of information and feelings of powerlessness experienced by European consumers is attested by many research studies on this topic, especially in those countries which, as in Italy’s case, are especially characterised by a feeling of mistrust towards the actors present on the market. According to a recent survey conducted in Italy, 80.1% of consumers complain they lack adequate information and view advertising as very or somewhat deceptive. And a fifth of the population is convinced that it is not possible to influence the behaviour of business enterprises in any way (Lori & Volpi, 2007). In particular, Italian consumers reserve their most negative judgments for banks and multinational corporations, which are viewed respectively with little or no trust by 64.7% and 73.5% of the population (Lori & Volpi, 2006). This widespread feeling of uncertainty and mistrust could in the long term, in the social sphere, destroy their sense of solidarity and cause them to retreat into more or less marked forms of individualistic egoism.

Nonetheless, although the risks of a global economic system guided by special interests and globalisation without global governance are visibly present, it is no less true that the ‘new’ responsibilities vested in each individual, in this context and to a far greater extent than ever before, are able to focus on planetary interdependencies: global dangers establish global reciprocities, as Beck (2001) has said. As today every single individual is faced with decisions that had in the past been made by others, there is a growing awareness of the interdependency of the human race, and all alike, both individuals and communities, are urgently faced with the need to adopt the types of behaviour necessary to preserve the world and the human species and advance their well-being. At the same time, the potential forms of action that can be taken by individuals and groups are becoming clearly apparent.

The emergence of new roles

In this new scenario, citizens as consumers and savers have realised that they can themselves assume the role of counterweight, can demand that corporations account for their behaviour and the use they are making of the great responsibilities that they

have concentrated in their hands, utilising their consumer and savings choices as the means to achieve this result. By using their wallet as a lever, citizens faced with weak and non-transparent national and international institutions can significantly increase their incisiveness, and can in fact also influence the behaviour of corporations by making their own purchases and investments dependent on the adoption by the latter of behaviour consistent with the values system they express. Even in a context as resigned and sceptical as that of Italy, already taken as a reference, an overall perception of the interdependencies that exist between society and business enterprises has become widespread: a survey carried out in the last few years shows that 63.8% of the population believes that the duties of corporations are not limited to assuring economic efficiency alone, but also include the obligation to contribute towards the solution of the main problems of society (Lori & Volpi, 2006). In addition, the same survey reveals that citizens have a good knowledge of the tools of social accountability, especially quality certification (49%) and the social report (36.3%). The data available indicate a widespread sensitivity to these issues: Italian consumers (but the same can be said of European citizens in general) are interested in the way in which an economic actor communicates its social performance, and express their agreement with the principles of corporate social responsibility.

As Michele Micheletti has just shown with the Nike and IKEA examples (see “Consumers and citizenship”), in more than a few cases consumers all over the world, acting on the basis of ethical principles, have obliged corporations and brands to change their attitude, take a stand on the world’s fate and declare what ideals they believe in. If this is not always possible, at least they can persuade the business enterprise to practise openness and refrain from skilfully persuasive, ambiguous and reticent forms of behaviour rather than risk being shown up and penalised by responsible consumers, who often make good use of the possibilities provided by the Internet and the alternative press to obtain information and communicate it.

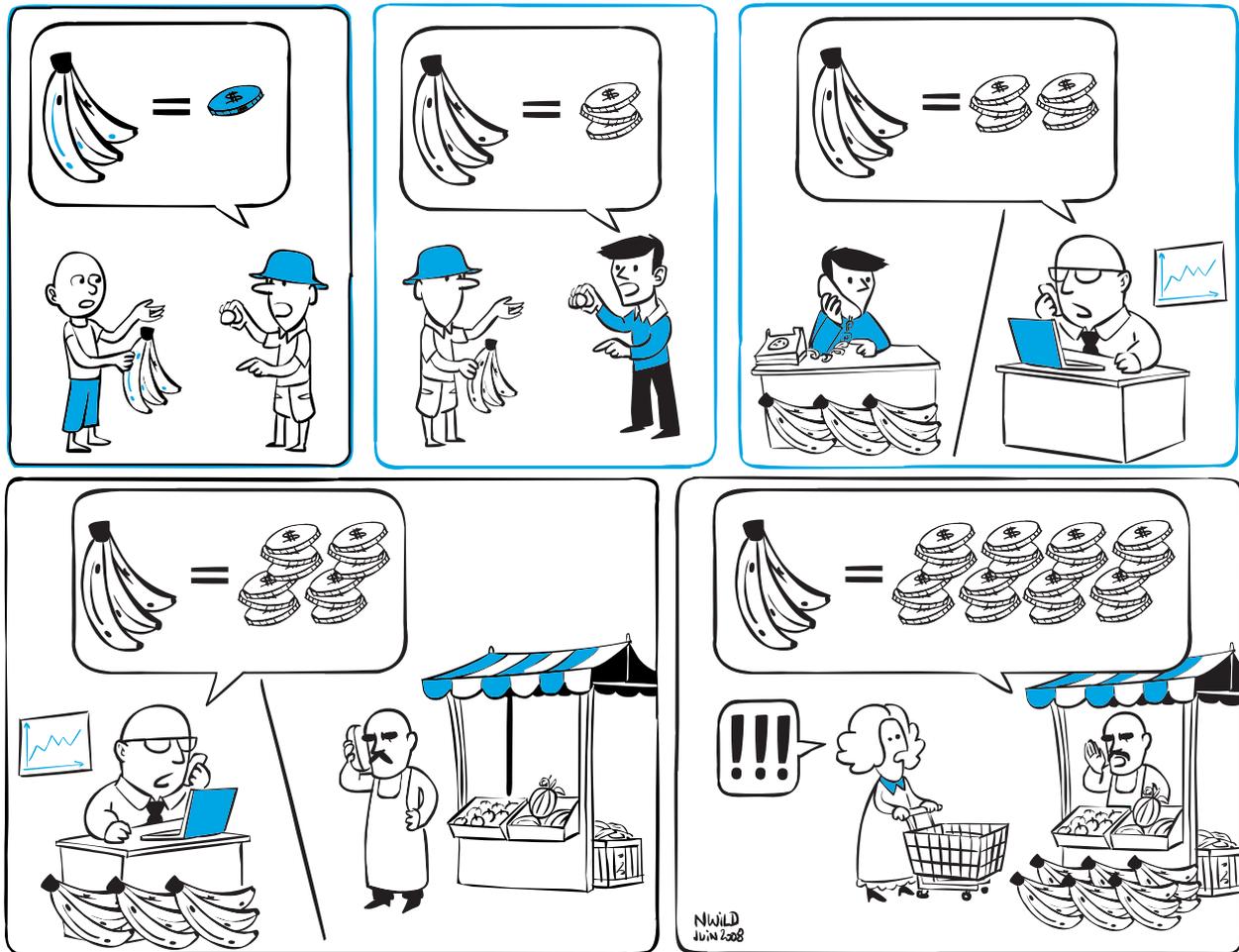
Responsible consumption and investment are thus an “endogenous reaction on the part of civil society”

(Becchetti & Costantino, 2007, p. 48), and may perhaps indicate the birth of “a risk society capable of critical discrimination” (Beck, 2001). In a certain sense, these experiences came about in order to overcome and/or remedy the worries, difficulties and ‘relative inferiority’ of consumers to which we have already drawn attention. But while responsible consumption is able to reduce consumers’ uncertainty, at the same time it is capable of giving expression to their sense of solidarity and their ethical orientations and values. Whether limited to personal fears or founded on a more ‘committed’ social vision, different consumer attitudes can co-exist in the framework of a thoughtful and responsible style of consumption: preferring what is ‘good’ can be expressed in various ways.¹²

Individual well-being and control over one’s own psychophysical integrity may be the primary goals of many individuals in contemporary society,¹³ but they sooner or later give rise to a social unease, because one cannot act effectively for oneself in a context where certain reference points are lacking. Responsible consumption, even when it is inspired chiefly by individual self-interest, still retains a thoughtful nature. And even among the least orthodox responsible consumers, whose lifestyle is not sustained by an organic collective project, there is still an awareness that the act of consuming has repercussions on society and on the ecosystem (Lori & Volpi, 2007). And in any case, it is the individual who must first change his or her behaviour patterns before he or she can even start to exert any social and political pressure on other citizens and on institutions with a view to bringing about significant and lasting changes in international economic and commercial policies. In general, a mentality is developing that considers quality more important than quantity, and responsible consumption can provide a path towards bringing together and integrating different needs.

12. In Italy 14.1% of the population have adopted a responsible consumption approach because they are convinced that by applying careful ethical criteria in selecting products one can reap the benefits of products of higher quality (Lori & Volpi, 2007).

13. In this regard, see for instance the “S system” developed by the Italian sociologist G. Fabris (2003). He draws attention to the fact that seeking healthy food is one of the chief preoccupations of postmodern consumers.



New practices and points of reference

Accordingly, these consumption practices mark the beginning of a phase of economic history in which civil society will participate more actively in economic choices. The consumer intends to participate, through his or her purchasing choices and consumer behaviour patterns, in the construction of the desired supply range of goods and services, by intervening in the relative strategic choices. The social responsibility of the citizen as consumer means that the latter wants to consume, but wants to do so in a critical manner, no longer restricted only to comparing quality-price ratios but also interested in 'how' a given article has been produced. From this point of view, as Latouche maintains, the citizen-consumer has an essential role to play by pressing for responses to his demands. In particular, by expressing aspirations, the consumer brings into being and sustains markets

that can be differently orientated. By putting to use the propulsive force of demand markets can be developed that do not produce profits for those who harm the community and the environment, and that are not founded on mechanisms based on exploitation or violence. The public is a decisive factor in moderating demand and inserting into it requirements alternative to those traditionally envisaged, and in making the actors present on the market follow specific rules, thanks also to the behaviour-imitating effect that develops amongst them.

The initiatives taken by alternative forms of consumption and saving are already showing some positive results, as in the last analysis they aim to confer on the weak and the excluded the political, economic, cultural and social means necessary to participate to an ever-increasing extent in the global decision-making process and create the conditions necessary for this to happen with equal assumption of responsibilities. Through these actions consump-

tion is returned to the interpersonal dimension to which it rightly belongs, in which goods are used “to communicate, build, mark and modify social ties” (Parmiggiani, 1997). The relational component of human life is restored to its proper rank and consumption practices are configured as occasions for socialising and building inclusive and socially cohesive paths in ways unknown in the past. As a whole, they constitute an alternative approach thanks to which politically aware consumers can start presenting the system with their demands, which if picked up by the world of politics would enable it to reassert its primacy over the economy.

Accordingly, as priority amongst the various considerations that guide buying and consuming is assigned to valuations other than those habitually envisaged in economic theory, the matter of pricing, which constitutes an essential aspect of goods, is also viewed in a different light by responsible consumers. The attitude assumed by the latter in relation to the price of goods is particularly evident in the purchasing of fair trade products, which are products (and raw materials) usually from countries in the southern hemisphere. In this context a fundamental aspect of the system is the presence of a ‘fair price’. This term is taken to mean a price that is made up of a series of social items: it must include decent remuneration for work, must take into account the costs to be borne for production in a manner compatible with respect for the environment, and must be efficient from the economic point of view, that is, be competitive in terms of quality/price ratio on the market. To the price determined in this manner one can then add considerations of social justice and redistribution of profits along the line (Becchetti & Costantino, 2007). The market price, meaning the price freely formed by the meeting of demand and supply, hardly ever has these characteristics, and to acquire them it must be corrected to counterbalance the imperfections present in the market. At an international level, the only mechanism that can do this is increasing the price; this operation shifts income towards producers in the South, increasing their potential and, indeed, assuring their right to economic initiative, of which they would otherwise be deprived due to their lack of capital and credit.

In fair trade the importers guarantee, in addition to paying an adequate price, that they will keep it stable for some time, and undertake to pay part of the price in advance, when placing their order, to avoid the need for recourse to the credit market. The producers must of course also provide certain guarantees: the work must be carried out under decent conditions, the production process must have only a minimal impact on the environment and the producers’ organisation must be of a democratic kind.

In this manner fair trade establishes, through its pricing system, a more balanced relationship between producers and consumers. In addition, if the system is applied on a wide scale in a certain area, this price will become part of a pressure strategy, because it induces the traditional enterprises present in the same area to apply the same price. For these reasons, thanks also to the distribution strategies followed, products with a fair price or those established on the basis of social and ethical considerations are usually more costly than the equivalent traditional products. But responsible consumers, thanks to the thoughtfulness underlying their behaviour, are willing to spend more for these products, as has been found by numerous studies carried out in Europe and elsewhere. Several surveys have confirmed the declared willingness of consumers to pay higher prices for products that can be termed ethical: in Italy 60.7% of consumers declare they are willing to buy a product at a higher price than the price current on the market if the producer enterprise follows a corporate policy inspired by ethical criteria (Lori & Volpi, 2006); in Belgium, consumers state they are willing to pay 10% more for fair trade coffee (Pelsmacker et al., 2005); in Denmark, it has been found that consumers are willing to pay between 13% and 18% more for an ecological toilet paper (Bjorner et al., 2004). The same findings are reported internationally: it has recently been established that US consumers are prepared to pay 0.22 dollars per pound more than the current price of 6.50 dollars per pound for fair trade coffee (Loureiro & Lotade, 2005). And what is more, some Canadian researchers (Arnot, Boxall & Cash, 2006) investigated in terms of actual practice, not only declared willingness, the reactions of consumers to price differences between a fair trade

coffee and an 'ordinary' coffee on a college campus. It was thus possible to ascertain that price (and its variations) has less influence on buying in the case of fair trade coffee and more influence in that of 'ordinary' coffee. It was also found that few consumers of fair trade coffee would switch to another product if the price increased. On the contrary, if the price of conventional coffee increases, some consumers are willing to switch to fair trade coffee.

In the light of these findings it is not surprising that responsible consumers are viewed as a paradox in terms of traditional economic parameters, as the latter's concept of 'rational choice' by consumers does not allow for willingness to pay an extra charge for the ethical characteristics of the product. The demand for these products tends to be rigid and may not change when the price of the good increases. In this case the source of additional satisfaction for the consumer does not lie in the process of identification with a status symbol (as in the case of name-brand products) but in the particular relational characteristics associated with an ethically certified product. Moreover, these fair price findings show that price need not be a decisive factor in consumer choices, and that the world of production and the economic system in general should pay attention to other values, following consumers' predilections and developing other markets. For consumers, in their turn, they point to the need – present in all responsible consumption experiences – to reflect and take into consideration when buying a product, certain aspects that may not be visible but are nonetheless important.

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Part II

Contributing to general well-being through a more balanced approach



WHEN OVERABUNDANCE IS DETRIMENTAL

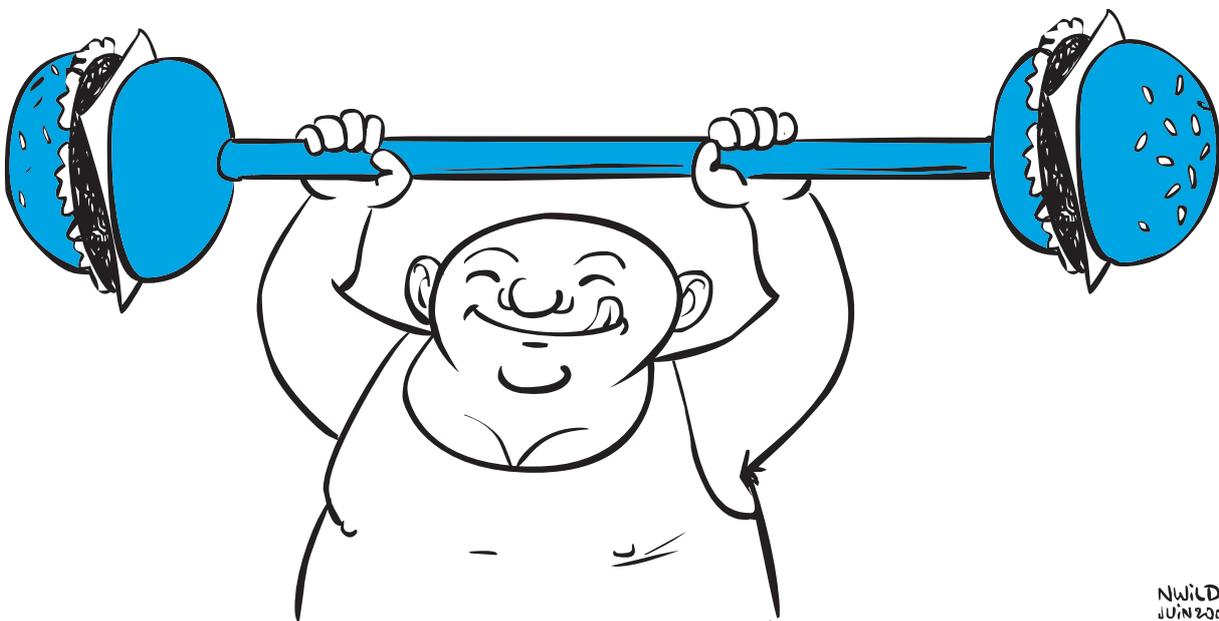
Francesco Gesualdi, Centro Nuovo Modello di Sviluppo, Pisa (Italy)

The time of famines and shortages is no more than a distant memory for much of the north of the world. In 1954 the people of a country like Great Britain already had enough basic material resources (food, clothing and shelter) to lead dignified lives, and by 1994 the amount of goods they owned had doubled. Other industrialised countries followed suit, and virtually all their inhabitants now enjoy the abundance of a person who ingests 856 calories from animal products each day, consumes 150 to 250 litres of drinking water each day, uses some 300 kilos of paper each year, burns 10 to 20 barrels of oil each year and owns a car, television, fridge and washing machine. To sum up, just over 800 million people (14% of the world's population) consume 70% of the paper, 60% of the oil, 60% of the minerals and 40% of the meat produced globally.

Despite such abundance, we are not yet capable of saying 'enough is enough', and keep wanting to consume ever more. There are various reasons for this obsession: advertising is a crucial factor, for as well as heightening our desires it defines the cultural models and social and economic norms to be followed. It is

thus a powerful vehicle for conformity, to which we all aspire with a view to avoiding social exclusion. Among young people, it is often the case that membership of or exclusion from a group depends on the type and brand of clothing one wears. It has always been obvious to ethnologists studying pre-modern societies that material possessions operate as symbols of belonging to a particular social group and of cultural expression. What counts is what commodities reveal, rather than the purpose they serve. Goods are charged with meaning: they represent a system of signs enabling buyers to convey messages about themselves and their family and friends.

Other researchers have emphasised consumption as a psychological refuge: it serves to reassure us and mitigate our dissatisfaction. According to Eric Fromm, the attitude displayed by frenetic consumers is one of wanting to devour the whole world; consumers, he says, are eternal infants crying for their bottles. As well as being a form of compensation, consumption silences our most atavistic fear: the fear of dying of want, which may have left traces in our DNA in memory of a time when survival was a daily struggle



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in an environment where the human being was not always the fittest. It is no coincidence that the deeply ingrained idea that the more goods we possess, the better we feel persists to this day. But is it really true?

A major international forum, attended by ministers and researchers from all over Europe, was held in Istanbul in November 2006 to discuss a problem caused by overabundance rather than want. The problem of obesity affects a billion people around the world, a figure equivalent to the number of starving and undernourished people.

The number of overweight people in Europe has tripled since 1980, reaching alarming levels. Half of all adults weigh more than they should, and many have already tipped over into obesity (8% of Russian men, 24% of Finnish men and 36% of Polish women). One child in five is overweight, and between 4% and 13% are considered obese. Excess weight and obesity cause numerous disorders, including diabetes, heart attacks, high blood pressure and strokes. They diminish quality of life and reduce life expectancy. More than a million people die of weight-related illnesses in Europe each year. Obesity accounts for 2% to 8% of health spending in Europe.¹⁴

Excess weight develops when the number of calories ingested exceeds the number burned; drinks are to blame as well as fatty foods (oil, butter, snacks and hamburgers). For years, dieticians have been doing their best to tell us that orangeade, Coca-Cola and other such drinks contain not only water and colourings, but also sugar, which results in an unbalanced diet. An average can of non-diet fizzy soft drink contains 38 grams (equivalent to 150 calories) of added sweeteners. As well as causing tooth decay, sugary drinks increase total calorie intake, often replacing healthier food. Between 1970 and 2001, annual fizzy drink consumption in the United States doubled to 185 litres per person, while milk consumption fell by 30%. At the same time, a drop in total calcium intake was observed among adolescents, while the proportion who were overweight or obese tripled (World Watch Institute, 2004).

Doctors agree that action must be taken on two fronts to avoid becoming overweight: diet and physical exercise. As far as diet is concerned, we must try to eliminate all those products invented by the food industry in order to make a profit rather than to benefit consumers. At the top of the list are drinks containing colourings and sugar, which can simply be replaced with water. There is another trap to be wary of when it comes to water: bottled water. There are at least three good reasons to shun it in favour of tap water. The first is the cost: a litre of bottled water can cost up to a thousand times more. The second is that it serves no purpose: in many cases, it comes from the same spring as the water in the pipes. The third is a matter of safety: bottled water is monitored less strictly than tap water; not to mention the mountain of plastic generated by the consumption of bottled water and the amount of oil that has to be burned in order to transport bottles to supermarkets, some of them in remote areas.

The second item to be eliminated is snacks, which contain sugar and low-grade fats, are overpriced in comparison with their dietary value, help produce waste and cause addiction among children. In Italy, it has been calculated that there is a commercial break every five minutes on afternoon television. It would be better to switch off the television and prepare healthy, home-made snacks for children, such as bread and jam or home-made cakes.

Doctors' other advice for combating excess weight is physical exercise; sports such as running, swimming and weightlifting immediately come to mind. But why not start with activities relevant to our day-to-day lives? Examples include walking up and down stairs instead of taking the lift, cutting the grass by hand instead of using an electric lawnmower and covering short distances on foot or by bicycle instead of using the car. Indeed, this brings us to the car, which is another consumer commodity full of contradictions.

The car is associated with the idea of going 'further' and 'faster', but the utopia of widespread mobility has been the victim of its own success. In 2004, there were 216 million vehicles on the road in the European Union, a figure that is increasing

14. WHO European Ministerial Conference on Counteracting Obesity, 15-17 November 2006.



by three million a year.¹⁵ There are 472 cars per 1 000 inhabitants on average, and the effects are being felt in cities. Although we own cars able to do 150 km/hour, the average vehicle speed in London is now 11.8 km/hour, which is less than in the age of horse-drawn carriages. Other European capitals fare little better, with average speeds of 15 km/hour in Berlin, 18.7 in Rome and 19.8 in Paris.¹⁶ We sacrifice 9% of our time¹⁷ and 60% of our urban space in the name of such limited mobility; as Guido Viale (2007) writes, urban areas have become thoroughfares rather than the public arenas for meetings, conversation and discussion they once were. Motor vehicles have thereby contributed to the loss of social cohesion within cities.

Motor vehicles are more solitary, slower and in fact less safe: 43 000 people lost their lives on European roads in 2004.¹⁸ That is not all, however; vehicle exhaust pipes release various substances that help to poison city air, namely lead, nitrogen dioxide, sulphur dioxide, carbon monoxide, benzene, ozone and the notorious PM₁₀ particles, which are so fine they penetrate deep into the bronchial tubes and then the blood. According to a 2006 paper by WHO's

Regional Office for Europe, road traffic is a major cause of illness, with the same impact on health as smoking or an unbalanced diet. The European Commission has established that the European Union's transport system is not sustainable, and that in many respects it is becoming less so rather than more. Air pollution, noise, accidents and social consequences cause numerous health problems such as death, cardiovascular and respiratory illnesses, stress-related disorders, tumours and injuries. These risks are not confined to transport users, but affect the entire population, particularly children, the elderly, pedestrians and cyclists (WHO, 2006).

An American company, Oxya, is marketing a small aerosol spray containing compressed, oxygen-enriched air, which provides a breath of fresh air when one finds oneself in a contaminated environment. Is air – the quintessential collective good – already becoming a commodity?

We must not allow our concerns about urban air quality to blind us to the global impact of cars, however. Road transport accounts for 10% of all greenhouse gas emissions worldwide. European motorists are responsible for 20% of this figure, equivalent to two tonnes per EU citizen per year (World Resources Institute, 2007). It is an established fact that the most disastrous effect of the accumulation of greenhouse gases, with carbon dioxide in the lead, is climate change. In April 2007, the IPCC's fourth report confirmed that climate change is responsible for the increasing number of hurricanes, typhoons and other violent weather phenomena. Vast areas, including the Mediterranean basin, are at risk of desertification. Malaria and other insect-borne diseases will become more widespread; various animal species will disappear; hundreds of millions of people will be forced to emigrate in order to escape floods, drought and famine. We should keep this in mind when we turn the ignition keys in our vehicles, and remind ourselves that what is important is not to own a car, but rather to meet our need for mobility. This can be done in various ways, depending on the distance: on foot or by bicycle in the case of short journeys, and by coach or train in the case of longer distances. These

15. Eurostat – Press release 125/2006, 19 September 2006, and Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, 11 January 2006.

16. "Keep moving", Press release, 15 October 2007.

17. This percentage was calculated in the city of Florence, but the World Health Organization, which commissioned the study, commented that the results coincided with other studies conducted in various European cities, and appeared to indicate that the time city-dwellers spent commuting each day was roughly constant, which had implications in terms of the action to be taken (WHO Regional Office for Europe, "Health Effects and Risks of Transport Systems: the HEARTS Project", 2006).

18. Eurostat – Press release 125/2006, 19 September 2006.

are two options that can ensure universal mobility while saving resources and producing far less waste.

Is consumption unlimited?

We always like to focus on the positive aspects of consumption, the problems it solves, the pleasures it procures and the emotions it arouses. We like to have a positive image of ourselves as prosperous, elegant, clean people. Yet vehicle exhaust pipes serve as a reminder that every form of consumption is always coupled with dirt and mess. This is obvious if we piece together the history of any product. Let us take the example of an aluminium can such as those used for beer or Coca-Cola. At just 15 grams, its weight seems insignificant; multiplying it by the million cans consumed in the world every day, however, yields the impressive figure of 15 tonnes of aluminium, which can serve as the basis for a line of argument. It should be stated from the outset that aluminium is not found ready-made in nature. It is extracted from bauxite, a compound weighed down by large amounts of slag. In order to obtain our 15 tonnes of aluminium, a quantity of bauxite weighing four times as much – that is, 60 tonnes – must be extracted from the ground; what with earth, rocks and sand, however, 27 times as much ground is actually turned over.¹⁹ This information may seem irrelevant to people like us who live in areas without any mines. Let us try to imagine ourselves in Brazil, however, where bauxite is extracted. Our first discovery will be that the bauxite is located right in the middle of the Amazonian forest. Roads have been built in order to reach the deposits, and this has made it necessary to fell millions of trees. Our second discovery will be that thousands of Indians have been forced to leave the area. The third will be that mountains of debris and other industrial waste – much of it toxic – are building up near the smelting works. Substances such as arsenic, cadmium, chromium, mercury, nickel and lead can end up in water courses. Industrial waste produced in the Amazonian forest, which is transferred from rivers to the sea, and from the sea to fish, can find its way on to our tables.

19. Data processing: Wuppertal Institute, *Material Intensity of Materials, Fuels, Transport Services*, 2003; International Aluminium Institute, *Life Cycle Assessment of Aluminium*, 2003.

The winds can also help it find its way into our lungs. Aluminium smelter chimneys belch out fine dust, polyfluorocarbons, sulphur dioxide and the usual climate-disrupting greenhouse gases. The industrial sector is responsible for 23% of global greenhouse gas emissions (World Resources Institute, 2007).

Then there are plastics. In order to produce one kilogram of PET plastic, it takes four kilos of oil, including one kilo to generate the electricity needed to power the manufacturing circuit, 300 litres of water and 3 700 litres of air as an auxiliary agent in the chemical and combustion processes. The following waste is also generated: five kilos of greenhouse gases; an unspecified quantity of toxic pollutants (benzene, arsenic and cadmium) which are dispersed into the water and air; and 180 grams of solid slag, 2% of which consists of elements considered dangerous under environmental regulations.²⁰

It is also worth looking at our diet. Much of the food we eat is produced by agricultural undertakings seeking continual improvements in their yield. In order to achieve this, they often resort to mechanisation and the large-scale use of chemicals with a number of potential risks for the environment and human health. The first is the depletion of organic matter in the soil and the resulting changes in soil structure. Basically, the soil becomes more dusty and thus more vulnerable to rain and wind, which wash and sweep away the fertile layer. The second is the emergence of parasites resistant to pesticides and herbicides; moreover, this is one of the factors pushing modern agriculture towards genetically modified seeds. The third is chemical contamination of the water table, which is an even more serious issue in areas with a high concentration of stock farms. This is a good reason to limit our meat consumption, and there are at least three others: too much meat is not good for our health; it is a food of the wealthy, which deprives the starving of grain, and it diverts vast quan-

20. Data processing: Wuppertal Institute, *Material Intensity of Materials, Fuels, Transport Services*, 2003; PlasticsEurope (association of producers of plastics), *Eco-profiles of the European Plastics Industry*, March 2005.

tities of water.²¹ It would be better to focus on pulses and other non-meat foods far richer in protein.

Thinking about limits

So far we have discussed the problems caused by production, but what about the waste generated by consumption? On average, each individual in the European Union produces 537 kilograms of household waste, with a record 869 kilograms in Ireland.²²

Even today, landfills and incinerators are the most common means of disposing of waste, but both raise numerous issues.

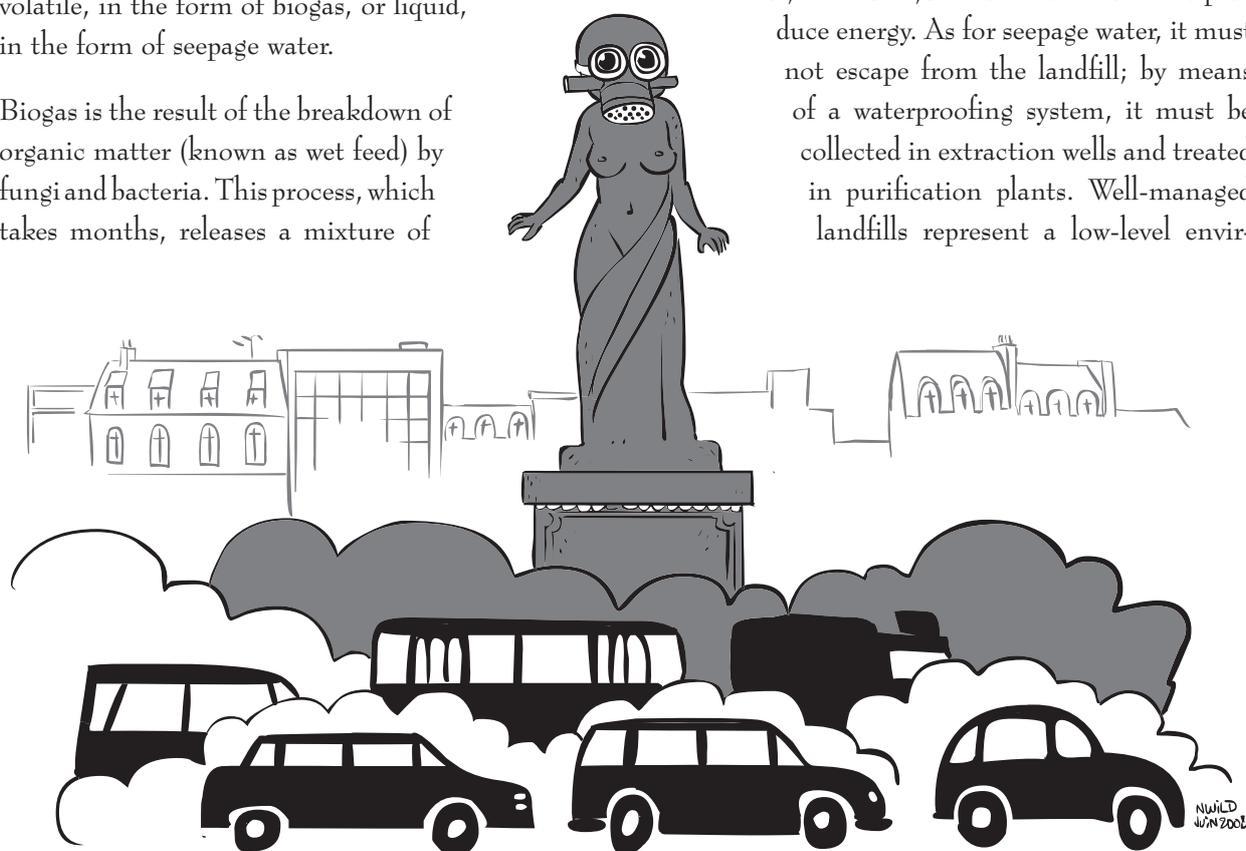
Landfills are the most widespread system because they are the cheapest. Their operation is relatively simple: waste is piled up on a piece of land while time does the work of decomposition. The process is not harmless, however, for it releases toxic substances into the ecosystem; these may be volatile, in the form of biogas, or liquid, in the form of seepage water.

Biogas is the result of the breakdown of organic matter (known as wet feed) by fungi and bacteria. This process, which takes months, releases a mixture of

inflammable, toxic gases with an unpleasant odour, made up primarily of methane (CH₄) and carbon dioxide (CO₂), two powerful greenhouse gases that are the main causes of global warming. Associated materials can release other gases such as benzene, toluene, vinyl chloride, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, chloroform and dichloroethane,²³ some of which are carcinogenic. Each kilogram of waste produces approximately 100 grams of biogas.²⁴

Seepage water is the result of infiltration by rainwater and water contained in the waste itself. As the liquid flows, it absorbs substances released by the decomposing waste, including heavy metals such as arsenic, mercury, cadmium, lead, zinc, chromium and nickel, some of which are carcinogenic.

In view of the environmental impact of landfills, the European Union has introduced legislation designed to reduce the risks of contamination. It has decided, for example, that biogas should be burned or, better still, suctioned off in order to produce energy. As for seepage water, it must not escape from the landfill; by means of a waterproofing system, it must be collected in extraction wells and treated in purification plants. Well-managed landfills represent a low-level envir-



21. Worldwide, 36% of all grain is used to feed stock. It takes 15 m³ of water to produce one kilo of beef (www.waterfootprint.org).

22. Data processing by the APAT (Italian Agency for Environmental Protection and Technical Services) on the basis of 2005 Eurostat data.

23. Landfill Off-Gas Collection and Treatment Systems. US Army Corps of Engineers, April 1995.

24. Estimated figures taken from the 2005 environmental declaration submitted by the Sogliano landfill (Italy).

onmental hazard; on the other hand, if the necessary precautions are not taken, landfills can court disaster, particularly when it comes to the contamination of water tables and water courses. This is a particularly serious problem in the case of unauthorised landfills. The unlawful discharge of waste in Campania (Italy) is estimated to have caused a 9% to 12% increase in mortality and an 84% increase in deformities.²⁵

The other main way of disposing of waste is incineration. Proponents of this method argue that not only do modern systems – known as energy recovery systems – not emit pollutants; they also produce energy. But how much? Experience shows that waste yields a tenth of the energy generated by oil. Given the amount of energy needed to operate the plant, the saving is highly dubious. The main problem, however, is one of safety. Although modern plants are equipped with filters and mitigation systems, the smoke they release still contains pollutants harmful to health. In addition to the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide, the European Commission (2006) has identified more than 20 substances released into the air. These include dioxin, heavy metals and nitrogen, sulphur and chlorine compounds. Many of them are released in the form of fine dust or nanoparticles, making them all the more dangerous. While dust particles with a diameter down to 2.5 thousandths of a millimetre can be expelled along with secretions, those with a smaller diameter reach the pulmonary alveoli, causing respiratory and cardiovascular disorders. Those with a diameter of less than 0.1 thousandth of a millimetre, also known as nanodust or nanoparticles, pass directly from the pulmonary alveoli into the blood and thereby migrate to various organs, which can develop diseases, including tumours. Research on fine dust and nanoparticles is in its infancy, and there is no satisfactory tool for measuring their concentration in the atmosphere. According to the European Commission (2005), however, 390 000 deaths a year in the EU may be attributed to fine dust released by energy recovery centres, motor vehicles and other combustion sources.

In addition to all of the above, the combustion of each kilogram of waste produces 270 grams of ash containing heavy metals and other toxic substances, which have to be released one way or another. In other words, incinerators reduce the need for landfills, but do not remove it entirely.

It is now an accepted fact that neither landfills nor incinerators are the solution to the waste problem. For a number of years, the focus all over Europe has been shifting towards recycling. Recycling is certainly a necessary transition stage, but it would be a mistake to regard it as the only measure to be taken, for it too has a cost. It is true, for example, that recycled aluminium does not necessitate new raw material and allows a 93% energy saving, but its production still requires a certain amount of energy and consequently emits pollutants. It must also be said that food packaging is rarely manufactured from recycled materials, and each time we buy a canned drink we are consuming virgin aluminium.

Can we think about curbing consumption?

All of these considerations lead to the conclusion that recycling must be regarded as the latest phase in a wider process aimed at preventing waste production; this process may be summarised as the 4Rs: Repair, Reuse, Recycle and, above all, Reduce. This means reducing the total quantity of goods consumed and the amount of packaging, opting for loose rather than packaged goods and easily recycled containers such as glass or steel rather than plastic, aluminium or paper.

“Buy Nothing Day”

Buy Nothing Day is a campaign launched in Canada by the Adbusters network (<http://adbusters.org/metas/eco/bnd/>). It involves buying nothing for a day, with a view to raising public awareness of the environmental impact of consumption. While such initiatives have their limitations, more and more consumers appear to have taken part around the world since 1994. This demonstrates the progress made in terms of raising awareness of the need to cut back.

25. Data taken from the Newton online magazine produced by the RCS group, 25 April 2007.

Overabundance is detrimental to the mind as well as the body. One aspect never taken into consideration is time. Firstly, there is the time we spend at work to earn the necessary money for our purchases. In 2007, “Bilanci di Giustizia”, an Italian association that campaigns in favour of responsible consumption, calculated the length of time we have to work in order to buy certain products. On the basis of a net salary of €10 an hour, we have to work for 18 hours (more than two days) to buy a mobile telephone costing €180, 40 hours for a plasma screen television costing €400 and up to 1 500 hours (six months) to buy a car with a medium-sized engine. In the case of cars, purchase is just the beginning. In order to drive, we must pay insurance, road tax and, of course, fuel costs. According to a 2004 study by an Italian motorists’ association, a car costs €4 414 per year on average (Aci-Censis, 2004) or 440 hours’ work. If we add the time spent in traffic jams, looking for parking spaces and doing maintenance, a car takes up a thousand hours of our lives each year. If we do the same calculations for everything else we own, it becomes apparent that we live to consume. It should not be forgotten that each household owns an average 10 000 objects, whereas the Navajo Indians used just 236 (Wuppertal Institute, 1997). For each of these objects, we have to work, go to the supermarket, choose it and queue at the checkout. Once home, we have to clean, dust and tidy these objects. All things considered, hyper-consumption is a form of forced labour that sucks the very life out of us.

We have laboured under the illusion that happiness depends on wealth, sacrificing all our time on the altar of wealth. We go to great lengths, we rush around, we curse the fleeting passage of time. Eight hours’ work is no longer enough; we have to do overtime. The number of hours we spend outside the home is increasing; we no longer have enough time for ourselves, our relationships, our children or a social life. Everything has to be done quickly. This leads to insomnia, neuroses, marital crises and health problems contained by means of medication. 39% of Europeans say they suffer from stress (Eurostat, 2001). This leads to increased petty crime among young people left to their own devices and to more lonely children who throw themselves into the arms

of the television. According to a 2007 study in Italy, children spend one hour and 36 minutes in front of the television screen each day, one hour and five minutes in front of the computer and 55 minutes playing video games.²⁶

If we want to live well, we must revise our conception of wealth, in terms of relationships as well as goods. When we realise that the search for abundant possessions is at odds with the search for quality relationships, we must be capable of stopping. Happiness is not just a question of bank accounts, but also involves walking hand in hand, hugging one’s child, admiring a landscape or smelling a flower’s scent. Several studies have shown that there is a correlation between wealth and happiness only up to a point. The graphs then diverge: the wealth curve continues to rise, while the happiness curve remains constant, or in some cases even drops.

The implication is that even the most appealing things become unbearable when they turn into tyrants who keep us enslaved, when the sacrifices they impose outweigh the satisfaction they bring, when they destroy our capacity for amazement and prevent us from enjoying the wonders hidden in small everyday events. Even the most beautiful things become unbearable when they take away our taste for life.

We must wake up from our trance. One way to do so might be to stop measuring well-being solely in terms of gross domestic product, and to adopt instead the indicator of gross domestic happiness: a measurement tool that assesses both material wealth and our degree of satisfaction in terms of quality of life and the quality of our work, health, family life, social relationships and role as citizens.

At last, we would no longer have petrol cans to fill, but people to respect.

26. SGW survey for the MOIGE association, 2007.

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VALUE, DEPRECIATION AND THE MAINTENANCE OF WEALTH

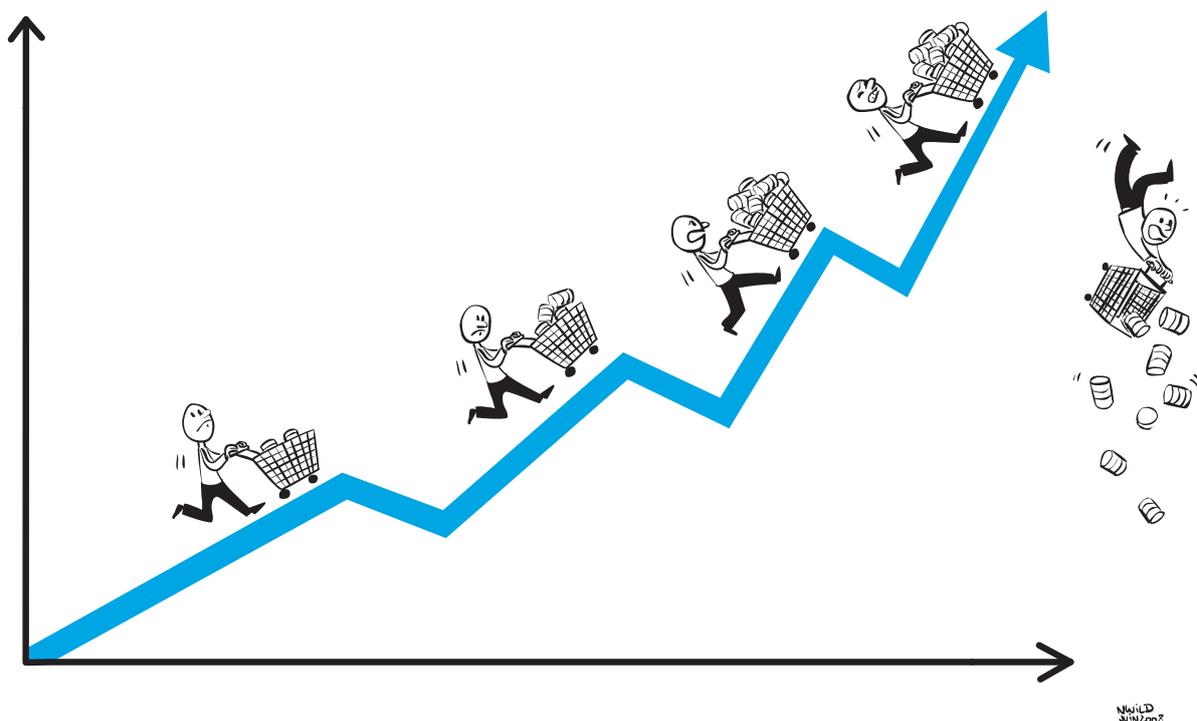
Tim Cooper, Centre for Sustainable Consumption,
Sheffield Hallam University (United Kingdom)

Affluence leads to increased affordability and this is increasingly leading to profligacy in industrialised nations. Consumers can not only afford to own more possessions than ever before but can replace them with ever-greater frequency. Such replacement happens not only when products are broken but when they appear slightly tarnished, their style is considered out of date, or their functionality has been superseded by a new technology. The environmental impacts of this excessive consumption have been well-documented: people in Europe are consuming at such a rate that if the rest of the world's population did likewise three planets would be needed to support their needs (WWF International, 2006).

These consumption patterns, being unsustainable, are thus irresponsible. Economic policy is, however, deeply locked into modernity's vision of progress, which asserts that 'it is necessary to grow to survive.' The idea of 'progressive' obsolescence, regular

changes in style in order to stimulate sales, was promoted as a means of reviving the economy during the American recession in the late 1920s (Slade, 2006). Industrialists argued that it was the duty of Americans to consume more (Packard, 1963). Before too long, planned obsolescence, a deliberate curtailment of the design life of products, was being put into effect. At the time increased consumption was not associated with environmental irresponsibility. Similar arguments are being used today, however. When retail sales figures suggest an economic slowdown, governments are urged to cut interest rates to enable people to borrow more in order to increase their consumption.

Technological advance is another factor that fuels consumption, as people become more inclined to replace products that still function in order to reap its benefits. Some academics have argued that planned obsolescence is an essential means of



achieving technological progress and thus is necessary for a healthy economy: “if products are too durable, potential innovators may lack the incentives to invest in the development of a new technology and the economy may stagnate as a result” (Fishman et al., 1999). By contrast, E.F. Schumacher wrote in *Small is Beautiful* of the need for wisdom to shape economics rather than unrestrained growth. He concluded that “from an economic point of view, the central concept of wisdom is permanence. Nothing makes economic sense unless its continuance for a long time can be projected without running into absurdities. There can be growth towards a limited objective, but there cannot be unlimited, generalised growth” (Schumacher, 1974). In a subsequent critique of American consumerism Alan Durning similarly argued for a “culture of permanence – a way of life than can endure through countless generations” (Durning, 1992).

The exact rate of economic growth is a technicality that is far less important than the actual social and environmental impact of consumption and governments seeking to promote sustainable development are inclined to focus on increasing resource productivity by decoupling economic growth from resource use. Nonetheless, the Sustainable Development Commission, an advisory body to the UK Government, concluded that “the overwhelming consensus amongst academics is that resource productivity will not, on its own, deliver the desired reconciliation between the pursuit of economic growth and the imperative of learning to live within the Earth’s biophysical constraints and carrying capacities” (Sustainable Development Commission, 2003). It proposed that attention also be paid to the need to decouple improvements in people’s quality of life from increases in consumption. Moreover, it concluded that in order to achieve the slowdown necessary in mature industrialised economies in the throughput of energy and materials, increased efficiency in resource use must be supplemented by a reduction in consumption.

Such a strategy need not lead to a recession as long as it forms part of a transformation to a new economic model, from a linear economy to a circular economy.

The ‘cradle to cradle’ thinking that underpins recycling is important, but must be supplemented by ‘life cycle’ thinking and increased product lifespans (Cooper, 2005).

If the proposition that ever-shorter product lifespans are essential to a healthy economy is indeed flawed, then new models of wealth will be needed. Ecological economist Herman Daly has suggested that “as we come to an optimal or mature scale of economic activity, production is no longer for growth but for maintenance”, citing Kenneth Boulding’s observation that production “is only necessary in order to replace the stockpile into which consumption continually gnaws” (Daly, 1998). In this vision of the future, responsible consumption involves more repair, maintenance and upgrading of people’s stock of wealth, in the form of consumer durables, and less purchasing of new items.

Time and responsibility

Responsibility has a temporal dimension. Stewart Brand of the Long Now Foundation, a US-based organisation established in 1996 in order to foster long-term responsibility, defines ‘now’ as “the period in which people feel they live and act and have responsibility”. Brand’s concern is that, through acceleration in technological advance, short-horizon perspectives in economics and politics, and multi-tasking that is undertaken to fulfil people’s perceived needs, “civilisation is revving itself up into a pathologically short attention span” (Brand, 2000). Contrasting steady but gradual environmental degradation with the ‘hasty cycles’ of human attention, decision and action, he concludes that there is a need to slow down human activity. This countercultural trend, perhaps most well known through the Slow Food movement but also manifest in other initiatives such as Slow Cities and Slow Travel, reflects a desire to consume more responsibly while experiencing a better quality of life (Honore, 2004).

Brand questions whether the passage of future time increases value or dilutes value, contrasting the empowerment people have over long periods of time (increased abilities and opportunities) with the view

of economists that value over future time goes down, as seen with discount rates. Discount rates reflect uncertainty (a euro today is worth more than the promise of a euro tomorrow) and the effects of wear and tear upon products, but are also determined by a sales imperative: “In the fashion and commercial domains a discounted approach to the future is necessary to maintain the customary swift turnover” (Brand, 2000).

Depreciation and obsolescence

In a consumer culture ‘time is money’ and there is constant pressure to accelerate the rate of production and consumption. Speed is associated with efficiency: the faster the rate that inputs and outputs flow through the system, the better. Mass production systems emerged when industrialists discovered that standardising products in order to increase throughput would reduce unit costs, while in retailing trade-in allowances are a typical means of encouraging consumers to replace products even though still functional.

The outcome is ever-quicker depreciation. People’s desire for the newest model results in the value of products decreasing rapidly, particularly in the case of vehicles, electronic goods and clothing and footwear (Campbell, 1992). Hence many products can be bought second hand from eBay, car boot sales or local newspapers for a small fraction of the original purchase price. Lucia Reisch argues that “timescales of consumption are steadily decreasing” and one manifestation of this is shorter product lifespans (Reisch, 2001). Such obsolescence, whether planned or unplanned, is an impediment to responsible consumption. How, then, does it arise?

There are, of course, a multitude of factors that affect product lifespans. In his highly influential study *The Waste Makers*, Vance Packard distinguished obsolescence of function, quality and desirability (Packard, 1963). The first was essentially concerned with improvements to products and to be welcomed, although the pace of technological advance at the time was perhaps not as fast as it is today, at least in electronics. The second indicated changes in a prod-

uct’s design that were introduced deliberately in order to curtail its working life. The third, also known as psychological obsolescence, described the influence of stylistic change on people’s desire to replace functional products. Other influences include economics, as when the cost of repair relative to replacement is prohibitive, socio-cultural norms (which affect peer expectations) and, more recently, systemic obsolescence (for example, a failure in interoperability within a computer due to new software).

Although many people believe that product lifespans have declined, there is no definitive historical data on whether major consumer durables such as cars, appliances, furniture and floor coverings last as long as in the past (Cooper, 2004). It is widely accepted, however, that there are more and more ‘semi-durables’: small appliances such as toasters and mobile phones that cannot be repaired or upgraded, and clothing and footwear that is not intended to last beyond a season. Consumer durables such as spectacles and watches are now subject to fashion and thus prone to relatively short lifespans. Other products are short-lived because they are of low quality (for example, items purchased from discount stores, novelty products and free gifts) or intentionally disposable (for example, nappies, razors, biro and single-use cameras).

Durability as responsibility

If responsible consumers are to contribute to a trend away from disposability and towards durability, a major market transformation is needed. Market forces continue to drive down average lifespans for many products, not least because the dominant factor influencing consumers’ purchasing decisions is price and this means that there is constant pressure upon manufacturers to reduce costs. Such pressure has a positive effect if it results in production efficiency but not if quality is reduced and consumers get less value for money.

Cheaper is not always better. For example, while discount stores may appear to offer good value when consumers see pristine products on the shelves, if the intrinsic quality of products is poor and lifespans short, the reality is the reverse. This has particular

implications for vulnerable consumers. The consumers who can only afford poorer quality, budget range models are those on low incomes and yet these consumers have the greatest need to get good value for money. Likewise, consumers with low educational attainment are liable to be less able to judge the quality of products and consequently more likely to make inappropriate choices. They are not helped by the fact that the relationship between price and quality is not always clear.

When consumers purchase products they are paying for attributes other than intrinsic 'build' quality. Durability is considered important by some consumers, especially those who are older, but for others the 'symbolic' value of products is as important. They choose particular products in order to create their identity, thereby displaying their values (and perhaps their wealth) to others. This symbolic dimension to consumption, while inevitable, is problematic in a fast-changing society in which cycles of fashion become ever shorter and more pervasive and new role models emerge daily in the media. In the light of this, product designers may conclude that responsible consumption demands a return to the design principle that 'form follows function'.

Responsible consumption is not limited to the point of purchase. Consumption also includes the utilisation of products and, indeed, is sometimes defined as 'using up'. Consumers' attitudes and behaviour have a potentially important influence upon product lifespans. An owner of a product who believes that it is designed to be durable (and may even increase in value over time) is more likely to maintain it carefully, while the owner of a product designed to be short-lived is likely to allow it to degrade, particularly if the marginal cost of waste disposal is negligible.

Little research has been undertaken in this area, although one study found that many consumers do not carefully maintain their possessions and are at best inconsistent in their behaviour. (Evans and Cooper, 2003). Some will buy a premium quality product but not look after it carefully and discard it prematurely, while others will buy a standard range product and keep it for as long as possible. Again, costs will influence behaviour. As countries become

more affluent labour costs tend to rise, making repair and maintenance work more expensive, with the result that replacement becomes more likely when products fall into disrepair.

Policies to end the throwaway culture

The possibility that responsible consumption demands the production of longer lasting products is attracting attention from a growing number of designers, marketers and waste policy experts and fuelling public debate (Cooper (ed.), 2009). Increased average product lifespans would not only provide environmental benefits but, with the right policies, could also enhance economic and social sustainability.

A policy to reduce energy and resource throughput which led either to a rebound effect (with financial savings spent on further consumption) or an economic recession would clearly be unsatisfactory. However, a recent academic paper argued that "longer product lifespans provide a route to sustainable consumption whereby reduced materials and energy throughput arising from eco-efficiency is not offset by increased consumption, and the economy remains healthy because products are carefully manufactured and maintained and there is less dependence on rising consumption for economic stability" (Cooper, 2005).

The reference to maintenance is crucial because such work is labour intensive and is generally undertaken close to home. In recent years product life extension activities such as repair and reuse have become marginalised in industrialised economies. With the exception of expensive items such as cars, it is very often cheaper to purchase new products manufactured in low wage nations than to have broken products repaired, while consumer preference for the latest models means that there is often very little demand for second-hand items unless heavily discounted in price.

As a consequence, repair and reuse often take place in social businesses in receipt of public support on the grounds that, although such activities are not

profitable in commercial terms, they enhance local social capital. This is because many such businesses give employment to people who have previously been out of work because they have low skills, are recovering from illness or have been in prison. In doing so, such projects increase social cohesion. There may be some concern that if consumer durables are lasting longer and being maintained in their country of use there may be fewer manufacturing jobs in poor, newly industrialising, countries, but this effect is likely to be negligible.

What policy mechanisms are available to governments for addressing premature obsolescence and

encouraging longer product lifespans? The range of options available will need to be used selectively because their likely effectiveness will depend on the type of product and the market in which it is sold.

A regulatory approach is one option. Governments could insist on mandatory product standards, for example, and require these to be communicated to consumers through labels indicating the anticipated lifespan of products under normal conditions of use. Such labels would enable consumers concerned about contributing to a throwaway culture to make informed and responsible choices. European Union legislation has adopted this approach in promoting

Repair and recovery: encouraging examples!

One of the basic principles of responsible consumption is to salvage or repair worn items rather than keep buying new goods.

At European level, a network has been created in the electrical and electronic waste disposal sector named “Reuse” (Recycling and Reuse European Union Social Enterprises). Its aim is to promote recycling and reuse by cataloguing current initiatives across Europe. There are members of the network in Austria, Finland, France, Belgium, Germany, England, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and Greece: see <http://rreuse.org/t3/> and <http://rreuse.org/t3/index.php?id=65> (link in English)

“Freecycle” is an international network that matches people who need things with people who have things to give away: see www.freecycle.org/ (link in English)

The charitable association “EMMAÜS”, founded in France by Abbé Pierre, offers arrangements for selling salvaged items at low prices on the second-hand dealing principle. It also repairs electrical and electronic appliances. This type of purchase is worthwhile in two ways by allowing old goods to be salvaged rather than buy them new, as well as passing the profits on to the most underprivileged people. This association is now active internationally in 36 countries: see www.emmaus-france.org/ or www.emmaus-international.org/

In France, the site “RECUPE” is run on a give-away and no-charge basis, so it is possible to offer items online and to obtain others according to a principle of sharing and non-commercial bartering: see www.recupe.net/ (link in French)

The French network “ENVIE”, present in over 40 towns in France, also manages the collection of used appliances, which are mended and resold second hand with a one-year guarantee: see www.envie.org/Historique.html (link in French)

In Austria, the Repair and Service Network R.U.S.Z. operates both as a repair workshop in Vienna and also a network of over 50 private repair enterprises throughout the nation: see www.rusz.at/ (link in German)

In the UK, the FRN (Furniture Re-use Network) supports and assists charitable re-use organisations. Such bodies aim to reduce poverty by providing households with furniture, white goods and other household items at affordable prices and offer training and work placement opportunities to people who are socially excluded: see www.frn.org.uk (link in English).

energy efficiency. Energy labels are required for certain types of electrical appliances and legislation has banned the sale of the least energy efficient refrigeration equipment. As user behaviour can influence the lifespan of products, however, legislation would have to include escape clauses on misuse similar to those applicable to consumer guarantees.

As economic factors often drive consumer behaviour fiscal instruments could be used to give consumers a greater incentive to buy more durable products and maintain them for as long as possible. Options include lower taxation on repair work (as recently proposed in Britain by a House of Lords committee²⁷), variable rates of taxation on household waste in countries where this is not already in place, and higher taxation on disposable products such as nappies, razors, biro's and single trip cameras. The European Commission has already investigated the potential for encouraging employment in labour-intensive activities such as repair work and concluded that reduced labour charges would be more effective than lower rates of VAT (Commission of the European Communities, 2003).

Finally, governments could promote greater awareness of the significance of product lifespans through consumer education and encourage voluntary measures by industry. The latter could include the introduction of lifespan labels, which could either be independent or incorporated into existing environmental labelling schemes; durability is indeed already included within the criteria for certain EU eco-labels. Longer product guarantees are another means by which companies could highlight greater durability, as are codes of conduct concerning the availability of spare parts.

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CONSUMING WITH RESPECT FOR THE ENVIRONMENT AND FUTURE GENERATIONS: TOWARDS MORE SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

René Kalfa, Network for the Promotion of Sustainable Consumption
in European Regions (NEPIM)

Ever since the Rio conference in 1992 it has been generally accepted that the modes of production and consumption of the rich countries are ultimately unsustainable: they are not only unviable from the ecological angle in relation to the Earth's capacity to regenerate, but also unfair as regards access to consumption and the sharing of resources among all. Furthermore, they jeopardise the capacity for meeting the needs of future generations.

Consumer pressure on the environment has increased considerably over the last few years, particularly in the fields of energy, transport and waste. The OECD forecasts a 35% increase in energy consumption, a 32% increase in the number of motor vehicles and a 43% increase in quantities of waste in its member countries by 2020 (OECD, 2002).

Why do we consume so much?

While consumption has always played a major role in human life, the advent of the consumer society between the wars in the United States and from the 1950s onwards in Europe has given it a much more central position in our society than it had in any other society in the past (Siegrist et al., 1997).

What factors influence consumption?

In a 2006 report the OECD noted the following driving factors:

- economic growth and increased available per capita income;
- population growth in terms not only of numbers of inhabitants but also of changing demographic structures, such as growing numbers of single-person households, increasing female participa-

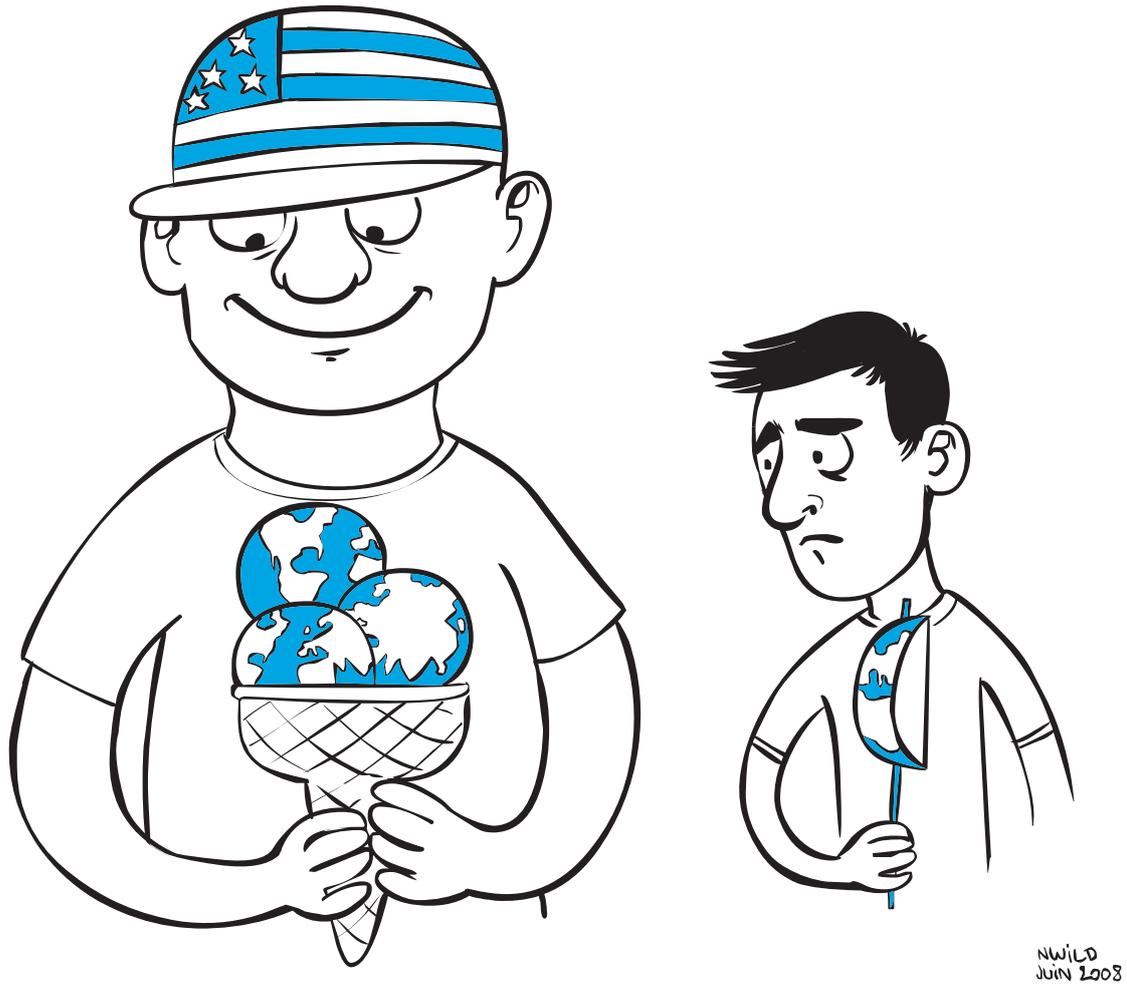
tion in the world of work, longer life expectancy and improved health;

- changing lifestyles: expanding leisure activities and cultural preferences for diversity, facility and rapidity, leading to increased demand for more processed and packaged products and higher levels of amenities;
- these factors should be seen in conjunction with other phenomena such as technology, institutions, infrastructures, the current political framework, the products, services and information available, etc.

While these economic and social factors definitely influence consumption, they still do not explain the processes inducing us to consume. Consumption is a complex phenomenon which can be analysed from a variety of angles, each of which provides a plausible but partial explanation of the phenomenon. We must therefore broach consumption in its entirety, with all its biophysical ('naturalistic'), economic, social, cultural and psychological dimensions (Uiterkamp, 2007).

From the biophysical or naturalistic point of view, consumption primarily corresponds to a transformation of raw materials and energies derived from the ecosystem. The transformation process creates pollution and diminishes the usefulness of the resources thus transformed. This means that consumption creates environmental impacts.

In the economic approach, the act of consumption is a perfectly rational process of well-informed consumers acting to maximise their interests within a fixed, stable reference frame. Consumption here is perceived as part of the overall economic activity, corresponding to overall expenditure on goods and services.



From the sociological angle, to consume is to create bonds and identities. Commodities enable people to form mutual relationships. The importance of brand names for some groups of young people is highly indicative of this fact, enabling them to meet their needs in terms of identity, acceptance and belonging to the group. Another example is the car as a symbol of ‘freedom’ and ‘power’.

In the psychological approach, the act of consumption is part of the quest for status. Material possessions evidently help define the individual’s status. The evolutionist slant would be that higher status improves the chances of survival and reproduction. In this view, material goods are vital for social positioning.

Whatever the reasons for consuming, the consequences of over-consumption are jeopardising ecosystems worldwide.

The impact of consumption on ecosystems – the ‘ecological footprint’

We must be able to measure the effects of our modes of consumption if we are to understand their environmental impact properly. The ecological imprint provides a kind of graphic image to that end.

The ecological footprint

The ecological footprint is a scientific indicator describing the quantity of resources used by an individual, a group, a country or all humankind. The concept was created by Wackernagel and Rees in 1993, and is today being propagated by a large number of scientists and public figures involved in the Global Footprint Network.²⁸

28. See www.footprintnetwork.org.

The Global Footprint Network defines a population's ecological footprint as the biologically productive area of the globe (covering fields, forests, freshwater and coastal zones, pastureland, etc.) required for the production of resources for human consumption and for the absorption of waste, in respect of a given type of technology.

The footprint is expressed in area units, that is, hectares (ha) and numbers of planets. The footprint is generally split into two main parts: the 'food, fibre and wood' part, comprising areas required for cropping, stockbreeding, fisheries and forestry; and the 'energy' part, which embraces areas needed for energy production and absorption of carbon emissions from fossil energies. Where nuclear energy is concerned, the footprint involves calculating the wooded area which would have had to be planted if fossil energy had been consumed in place of the nuclear power actually consumed. The footprint also embraces consumption of built land and other factors such as the area needed for waste disposal.

The ecological footprint is a kind of 'monetary unit' serving to gauge the proportion of the biosphere that is used, for whatever resources and for whatever purposes. This provides every entity, town, municipality, enterprise, nation, etc., with an instrument to improve their management of the biological capital (woodlands, fields, rivers and seas) guaranteeing their subsistence. Using the ecological footprint explicitly highlights human over-exploitation of the Earth. The Earth comprises 11 300 million ha of biologically productive areas, constituting its present 'bio-capacity'. If we divide this figure by the current global population, we obtain a figure of between 1.7 ha and 1.8 ha per inhabitant. But the fact is that each human being already consumes an average of 2.3 ha. So we have already exceeded global bio-capacity, consuming 23% more than the global ecosystem's annual renewal capacity. Moreover, this consumption is obviously very unevenly distributed. A European has an average ecological footprint of 6 ha, a North American 9 ha and an Indian 0.9 ha.

Another equally alarming fact is our planet's decreasing bio-capacity, which has fallen from 3.5 ha to under 1.8 ha per person over the last forty

years. We should also add that if all of the Earth's inhabitants adopted the average European's mode of consumption, it would take the equivalent of three planets to meet all their needs.

The ecological footprint is therefore a measurement not only of ecological sustainability but also of inequality between the North and the South, between the rich and the poor. A study by the European Environment Agency entitled "Household consumption and environment", points to an increase in the ecological footprint of Europeans, albeit with some internal variations among the 25 EU countries.²⁹

To find out more...

- www.earthday.net/Footprint/index.html:
the site earthday.net enables anyone to calculate their ecological footprint by choosing firstly their country or region of origin. The quiz can be consulted in seven different languages.
- www.cleanair-coolplanet.org/action/solutions.php:
the site Clean Air Cool Planet proposes 10 ways to reduce energy consumption and ecological footprints.

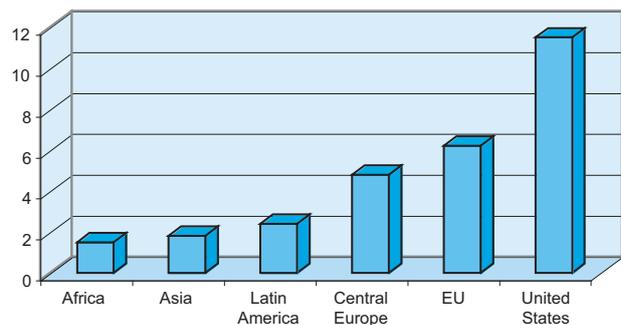


Diagram of ecological footprints worldwide

If the ecological footprint is a good means of apprehending the entire impact of human consumption on the environment, the 'ecological rucksack' shows the environmental effect of a given product. The ecological rucksack is a metaphorical representation of

29. EEA (Nov 2005), "Households consumption and environment", http://reports.eea.eu.int/eea_report_2005_11.

the mass of resources required for manufacturing, exploiting and eliminating (dumping or recycling) a product or for using a service. It must facilitate comparison within the framework of an 'eco-balance sheet' and highlight the ecological consequences of providing such products. The model is based on the work of Friedrich Schmidt-Bleek, which was published for the first time in 1994 as part of a project on resource utilisation by service unit (Schmidt-Bleek, 1994).

With each product we purchase we are also buying its 'ecological rucksack'. For instance, a computer weighing between 6 kg and 10 kg with its screen, keyboard, mouse and printer has an ecological rucksack that weighs between 500 kg and 1.5 tonnes. The ecological rucksack required for manufacturing a medium-sized car weighs about 30 tonnes, with an additional 150 000 litres of water used. An ecological rucksack for a mobile phone weighs some 35 kg, and that for a pair of jeans 32 kg.

Changing our mode of consumption

We must find a way of equitably meeting the needs of 6 600 million people today and 8 600 million tomorrow (forecast for 2050), without endangering the Earth's capacity for regeneration. This complex issue is prompting extensive debate.

Sustainable development

The sustainable development concept first emerged in the early 18th century under the pen of Hans Carl von Carlowitz. At the time it applied exclusively to forestry, deforestation having led to a Europe-wide energy crisis. In his book *Sylvicultura oeconomica*, published in 1713, Hans Carl von Carlowitz laid the foundations for sustainable forestry: "just as one cannot throw away an old coat before obtaining a new one, we must not begin exploiting woodland resources before making sure that new trees have been planted to replace those felled".³⁰

It was not until the second half of the 20th century that the concept began to be applied generally to all

human activities. The starting point was the work of the Club of Rome as set out in two reports, one by Dennis H. Meadows (1972) and the other by M.D. Mesarovic and E. Pestel (1974). Both these reports deal with global economic, technological and demographic development. Mesarovic and Pestel reached the conclusion that only a radical economic and technological change at world level could prevent the ultimate global disaster.

In 1987 the Brundtland report officially defined the sustainable development concept: "sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCDE, 1987). This concept was subsequently reworked under the influence of the 1992 Rio Conference on Environment and Development and applied to consumption. This process led to the emergence of the 'sustainable consumption' concept, which is in fact rather a contradiction in terms.

To consume an item is to destroy it, to make it disappear, that is, the exact opposite of that which is sustainable (making the expression oxymoronic). This contradiction is symptomatic of our society, which does in fact realise the dangers of an unbridled growth-centred approach to development.

One of the first French translations of the Brundtland report used the word "*soutenable*" (bearable), which at least avoided the ambivalence of the neologism.

What does 'sustainable consumption' actually mean?

There are many definitions of sustainable consumption, often using terminologies that vary according to the observer's standpoint. The variants include ethical, sustainable, responsible, environmentally friendly, bearable, and economically viable consumption. Sustainable consumption is often broached from the environmental angle, particularly that of resource exploitation.

For example, the definition adopted by the Brundtland Commission (1983) is "ecologically viable consumption", corresponding to a use of services and products meeting essential needs and helping improve the quality of life while minimising the quantities of

30. Quote from Lexikon der Nachhaltigkeit at http://nachhaltigkeit.info/artikel/geschichte_10/index.htm.

natural resources and toxic materials used, as well as the amounts of waste and pollutants throughout the life of the service or product, thus also catering for the needs of future generations (Volker, 1987).

However, the word ‘sustainable’ is not restricted to ecologically viable consumption: it also covers the economic and social dimensions of development (combating poverty, sharing access to resources and consumption, ensuring food sovereignty, respecting human and workers’ rights in the production chain, providing fair wages for work performed and fair trade, etc.). The scope of sustainable consumption is therefore extremely broad.

The definition offered by the Dictionary of Sustainable Development (Afnor) is highly indicative of the issues at stake and fairly representative of the means of action proposed: “sustainable consumption is a demand-based strategy for modifying the use of environmental resources and economic services in such a way as to meet needs and increase quality of life for all, while also regenerating natural resources for future generations” (Brodhag et al., 2004).

This definition comprises the following elements:

- it postulates the need for structural change based on a strategy of long-term modifications facilitating a changeover from an industrial economy to a sustainable economy and lifestyle, thus transcending a mere increase in efficiency (the X factor);
- it advocates fairness in consumption, particularly in access thereto;
- it prioritises services: priority goes to the relationship between environmental resources and the services required for meeting basic needs and improving quality of life (for example, food, housing, mobility, leisure, etc.);
- it calls for reorienting commercial opportunities: it challenges enterprises to market a new generation of sustainable goods and services and to extend their responsibility to all impacts on the life cycle;
- it stresses demand-based action, using such action as a lever for economic, social and environmental benefits on the production chain;

- it addresses lifestyles and the forces underpinning consumption (incomes, demography, culture, consumer behaviour, etc.);
- it pinpoints the North as the starting point for changing modes of consumption owing to the high environmental costs of modes of consumption in industrialised countries, the major impact of such consumption on trade, investment and technological flows and the knock-on effect of northern lifestyles on the South;
- it stresses the sharing of responsibilities and the diversity of possible solutions: sustainable consumption is increasingly a concern confronting both rich and poor countries, and yet there are different priorities and needs for action to be incorporated into different cultural contexts;
- it acknowledges the individual and collective dimensions of consumption, for example, in the supermarket and the library;
- it stresses that sustainable consumption is ultimately propelled by ethical values and activates the sense of broad responsibility for consumer choices.³¹

What is holding up the introduction of sustainable consumption principles?

The basic contradiction in terms (‘oxymoron’) which we have already noted in the expression ‘sustainable consumption’ is highly indicative of the situation in which our societies find themselves. We realise the finality of our planet, but we continue to promote an economic system fundamentally based on growth.

This is why consumers are encouraged to consume more and more in order to support the growth of the economy. In such a context it would be fairly pointless to set limits on consumption. No wonder, therefore, that official discourse and action programmes are mainly based on modifying consumer choices rather than reducing the volume of consumption. While the supply of environment-friendlier products is significantly increasing, the improved efficiency in

31. See “Consommation Durable: Synthèse des recherches menées dans le cluster consommation durable du PADD II: Quel rôle pour le consommateur?”, Politique scientifique fédérale, 2007.

resource use is more or less offset by higher levels of consumption.

Another major obstacle to sustainable consumption is our cultural model, which sees accumulating goods as a means of increasing our happiness. Even though we all know that there is no direct relation between people's level of consumption and their subjective satisfaction with their lives, this idea is perpetuated by relentless advertising. This also partly explains the increased demand for cheap products, often from countries with low wage levels and less concern for environmental issues. This trend is incompatible with the adoption of standards involving more expensive products based on ecological and social criteria (Bosshart, 2004).

But however great the difficulties, they must not prevent us from acting! Our modes of consumption cannot be viable unless they are ecologically viable and incorporate social and ethical dimensions: fair access for all to resources and consumption, support for products and services based on socially responsible production methods, and fair trade.

Waste elimination

The amount of waste produced as an obvious result of our modes of consumption has increased spectacularly in recent years. The advent of the supermarket expanded the use of packaging, and over the last two decades, the amount of solid waste produced in the industrialised countries has tripled, now totalling an average 475 kg per person per year.³²

There are different types of waste, each of which raises specific problems. Biodegradable waste (food and green waste) must be composted. Recyclable waste can be used for manufacturing new products provided a selective system is used for collecting them. Incinerable waste can be burnt in an incinerator, although this process often produces dioxin and leaves ashes that can contain hazardous substances. Non-processable hazardous waste must be dumped.

Although the sorting and processing of waste have progressed considerably, we have not yet even started to reduce waste production. The recycling solution is far from being universally applied. A great deal of recyclable waste is still being dumped or incinerated. And some products, for example various plastics, are difficult to recycle. Of the 2 000 million tonnes of waste produced in Europe, 40 million is considered hazardous.

How are we to tackle the problem of waste production?

First of all, we must consume less and avoid over-packaged products. It is vital that before purchasing a product we consider first of all if we really need it, and then whether it is sustainable. We should opt for non-disposable items which are easy to maintain, repair and recharge and are solid or made of recycled materials. It would be better to hire or borrow a machine which we will not be using regularly rather than buying one. Manufacturers also have a role to play. It is also possible to adapt product design: waste can be reduced by redefining certain products.

Eco-design, a concept developed by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development at the Rio Summit, is geared to creating products and services that adopt a cyclical approach covering the product's whole life cycle from the time of its manufacture to that of its destruction.³³

It is a preventive approach designed to reduce the raw materials and energy used to manufacture products. It prioritises the use of recycled or recyclable materials. It avoids using items from threatened ecosystems. It minimises pollution and waste. It strives to optimise the life of each product, by facilitating its use and maintenance and extending its life cycle as far as possible. Services can sometimes replace product purchase.

32. See www.fee-international.org.

33. See <http://fr.ekopedia.org/%C3%89coconception>.

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Part III

Contributing to general well-being through a better choice of goods



TRANSFORMING CONSUMPTION BY REJECTING THE UNACCEPTABLE

Tim Cooper, Centre for Sustainable Consumption,
Sheffield Hallam University (United Kingdom)

Certain types of goods and services may be judged to be unacceptable in the context of responsible consumption because of how they are produced, their impact in use or, in some cases, the distance over which they have been transported. This chapter identifies the boundaries of acceptability and explores how products that are unacceptable are excluded from the market by governments through regulation and by consumers through boycotts. Such action may lead to new market opportunities for ethically produced goods and services, although experts disagree over whether sustainable consumption could be achieved by changes in the kind of products people buy or whether it demands reductions in overall consumption. Either way, consumer activism undertaken through civil society may add to social capital, aiding social cohesion within industrialised countries while at a global level enhancing social integration between people in rich and poor nations.

The boundaries of unacceptable consumption

Legitimation in consumption takes several forms. Although there will not always be a social consensus, boundaries tend to be established around goods and services considered unacceptable. Some will be banned by public authorities and others regulated, to one degree or another, in order to ensure that they are either manufactured by specific companies or not manufactured at all. Depending on the depth of this consensus, some individuals or groups might seek to purchase banned items (e.g. recreational drugs) or might judge goods and services that are legal and freely available to be ethically unacceptable (e.g. factory farmed meat).

The main justification used by governments to ban or regulate the consumption of goods is on grounds



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of health and safety. Governments may institute an absolute ban on the sale or usage of unacceptable goods and services or may aim to restrict their supply or use and thereby limit or prevent unacceptable consumption. The reasons vary. Military equipment intended for the armed services and armaments or other weapons that may be used by private individuals are regulated on grounds of public safety. Standards are enforced for products such as vehicles, electrical appliances and items made from flammable materials to reduce safety risks in the event of an accident. In the case of vehicles, usage as well as the quality of the product is regulated, through licensing. Food is regulated in order to prevent the sale of items with potentially harmful ingredients. Relevant European Union legislation includes the General Product Safety Directive,³⁴ the General Food Law Regulation³⁵ and specific regulations on certain products, including toys, pharmaceuticals and cosmetics. In short, there is an established principle that governments are entitled to establish boundaries around the supply of goods which most reasonable people would consider unacceptable for sale and, in doing so, governments remove consumers' 'right' to make that judgment.

Governments also impose restrictions on the consumption of goods and services considered unacceptable on ethical grounds in particular circumstances, such as when the act of consumption affects other people (because it causes ill health or is undertaken in a public place) or when children are involved. Alcohol, drugs, gambling, tobacco and the sex industry (pornography, prostitution, shops and shows) are examples. For example, European countries are increasingly restricting smoking in public places in order to protect the interests of non-smokers.

In addition, some forms of consumption are regulated by local authorities through a licensing system in order to protect public safety or prevent sup-

plier disputes.³⁶ Examples from Britain include public entertainment (such as fairgrounds, circuses, boxing, wrestling, film, theatre, music and dance), caravan sites and taxi services. Animal welfare, too, is regulated, through the licensing of zoos, riding schools, pet shops, boarding, animal performances and breeding. Nor can individuals keep dangerous wild animals without a licence.

In setting boundaries around particular types of consumption, governments will want to see a significant degree of social consensus as the issue will often be sensitive because it relates to people's freedom to consume and may involve competing interests. For example, one person's freedom to smoke cigarettes conflicts with another's freedom to breathe fresh air. On matters of health and safety, achieving such consensus is relatively easy, but imposing restrictions on social or environmental grounds tends to be far more problematic. As an alternative to prohibition, governments may impose high and rising levels of taxation on products for which reduced consumption is sought. Thus Britain has witnessed the introduction of a 'fuel duty escalator' (later cancelled) and rising levels of landfill tax.³⁷ Variable charging for waste is another means of signalling that over-packaged goods and other forms of wasteful consumption are unacceptable. The use of taxation to influence consumption on social or environmental grounds will not be effective, however, when behavioural patterns are deeply entrenched or consumers are addicted.

A more effective public policy option may be to regulate products using environmental criteria. An example in the European Union is the use of legislation on minimum energy performance standards to ensure that inefficient household appliances cannot be sold to consumers. This already applies to refrigeration equipment and it appears likely that a wider range of other appliances will be added before long. Other types of product may be banned outright: in January 2008 the European Parliament endorsed a

34. Directive 2001/95/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 3 December 2001 on general product safety.

35. Regulation (EC) No. 178/2002 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 28 January 2002 laying down the general principles and requirements of food law, establishing the European Food Safety Authority and laying down procedures in matters of food safety.

36. Although the regulations are imposed on the supply side, the effect is to restrict consumption.

37. Unless the rate of tax continually rises, the government's revenue falls as demand is reduced.

report which proposed phasing out patio heaters and appliances that use more than one watt on standby (European Parliament, 2008).

In other areas of consumption there are important concerns but governments may take a less direct approach. In the case of imports from poor nations, for example, production conditions may be considered unacceptable but decisions are generally left to prospective consumers.

Governments may nonetheless wish to encourage improved working conditions in such countries, particularly with regard to four core labour standards confirmed in the 1998 ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work: freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining, elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour, effective abolition of child labour, and elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.³⁸ While governments are unlikely to ban goods breaching these standards, they can restrict the availability to consumers. For example, the European Union may use the Generalised System of Preferences scheme to provide market access on a preferential basis to developing countries according to whether they comply with the standards. The standards may also form part of negotiations on bilateral trade deals.

In summary, governments tend to be wary of intervening in the politically sensitive sphere of consumption choices except where health and safety is involved, leaving most decisions concerning whether products are acceptable on social and environmental grounds to consumers and limiting their involvement to regulating the supply of information about products' attributes and potential impacts.³⁹

38. Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament and the Economic and Social Committee, *Promoting core labour standards and improving social governance in the context of globalisation*, COM(2001) 416 FINAL.

39. Producers and retailers, however, may engage in 'choice editing'. In Britain two major supermarkets now stock only fair trade bananas and one stocks only fair trade tea and coffee, while its leading cane sugar producer has announced that by 2009 it intends to switch its entire range to fair trade.

Screening for acceptability

Responsible consumption is rooted in a tradition of consumer activism which has evolved over the past two centuries. Lang and Gabriel (2005) classify four waves of activism, the first starting with the emergence of the co-operative movement in Britain in 1844, which challenged and provided an alternative to over-priced and poor quality, often adulterated, food, and the second being 'value for money' consumerism, which began with the formation of the Consumers Union in America in the 1930s and spread to Europe after the Second World War. This was followed by 'Naderism' (named after American campaigner Ralph Nader), an approach which broadened the debate by generalising from the isolated problems and positing consumer campaigners against corporate giants. Most recently, 'alternative consumerism' emerged during the 1980s with green consumers seeking to use market power in a positive way to reduce environmental impacts and broadened to include ethical consumers with a range of different concerns.

Just as the level of consumer activism varies across Europe, so do perceptions of which products and brands are ethically acceptable. For example, the market research agency GfK undertook a survey of five countries (Britain, Germany, France, Spain and the US) in 2007 to identify which brands were considered the most ethical. In Britain the majority were distinctively 'niche' brands, whether large (The Body Shop, Ecover) or small (Traidcraft), and the others were mostly domestic supermarkets or department stores. In Germany the list was headed by three international sports brands, the remainder including a mix of multinational corporations and niche brands. By contrast, the lists for France, Spain and the US were almost exclusively large multinationals such as Coca-Cola, Nike, Adidas, Sony and Danone. Car manufacturers were favoured in their home country and, remarkably, in Spain the list was headed by Nestlé, the *bête noir* of British consumer campaigners (GfK NOP, 2007).

Leaving aside these differences, how do consumers respond to the presence in the market of goods which



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they consider to be unacceptable or unnecessary? One of the motives underlying responsible consumption is to influence production more generally. Thus consumers who reject certain products as unacceptable aim to contribute to a reduction in demand for such items, thus deflating prices and, it is hoped, profitability and future supply. Similarly, when switching to other products they are using market forces to encourage increased production.

Discourse in this area of strategy is usually constructed around the concept of ethical consumption, for which a well-established model differentiates 'product-oriented' from 'company-oriented'

strategies and negative action from positive action. Through a process of screening, consumers may decide on ethical grounds to boycott specific products or companies, or to choose to buy specific types of product or from a specific company (sometimes described as a 'buycott').⁴⁰ They may also boycott countries, or favour locally or nationally made products. Such behaviour has implications for governance and has been described as 'political consumerism' (Micheletti, 2003).

40. It should be noted that even ethical consumers may disagree over whether, say, locally produced food or organic food is preferable.

Consumer boycotts are a long established strategic response to unacceptable production practices (Smith, 1990). They have grown in number in the past two decades, inspired in part by the highly publicised boycott of Barclays Bank over apartheid in South Africa, which led to its withdrawal from the country in 1986. Other major international boycotts since then have addressed, with varying levels of success, the testing of cosmetics on animals, the promotion of breast milk substitutes, whaling activities, the importation of tropical mahogany and, most recently, commercial activities in Burma.

The impact of such action on market activity is not insignificant. In Britain, a report on ethical consumerism by the Co-operative Bank indicated that boycotts accounted for a shift in expenditure between brands amounting to £2.4bn (around €3.2bn) in 2006. Boycotts in the food and drink sector worth £1.2bn⁴¹ arose from concern about labour rights in the supply chains, irresponsible marketing in less industrialised countries and intensive farming. Travel boycotts (£0.8bn) were linked mainly to petrol retailers, with climate change and human rights issues cited most frequently. Clothing and footwear boycotts (£0.3bn) focused on the use of sweatshop labour by sportswear manufacturers and, increasingly, low cost retailers (Co-operative Bank, 2007).

The impact of consumer boycotts should not only be measured in financial terms. Friedman (1999) distinguishes expressive boycotts from instrumental boycotts. An instrumental boycott is a tactic intended to pressurise a company into changing its behaviour by reducing consumer demand for its products. By contrast, an expressive boycott is a form of consumer protest or resistance that is not targeted at a specific course of action but is a moral act reflecting a desire to shop in a manner that maintains personal integrity. Effectiveness may not be a primary concern; the aim is disassociation in order to avoid being party to an activity of which the boycotter disapproves.

The reverse side of the coin is seen in deliberate decisions by consumers to choose products or companies

on ethical grounds. Examples of the former include organic food and clothing, fair trade products and energy efficient appliances, while the latter might include Max Havelaar, Cafédirect, Green & Black's, Ben & Jerry's and The Body Shop (although the latter two are now owned by multinational parent companies).

It is impossible to know precisely how much consumption is undertaken with reference to ethical criteria. An ethical stance is sometimes absolute, as when consumers consider eating meat unacceptable or support an organised boycott of a company, but often their values influence their purchases without necessarily being the dominant factor. Nonetheless, in Britain an annual report by the Co-operative Bank estimates the amount of ethical consumption undertaken. In 2006 the ethical market was calculated at £32bn (around €42bn), a growth of 82% since 2002 but still a relatively small proportion (around 5%) of total household spending of £600bn. The figure includes £13.3bn of expenditure on ethical finance, £3.6bn on food (including organic, fairly traded, local and vegetarian products) and £3.3bn on energy saving appliances and boilers. It also includes £2.6bn on 'local shopping' and £1.7bn on 'buying for reuse', calculated in each case on a market share basis where the expenditure was motivated by environmental or social concern. The report classified around 6% of the population as 'committed' consumers of ethical goods and services and a further 11% as 'regular' consumers, one in six consumers overall.

The inclusion of local shopping in such data is significant, as purchasing locally produced goods has not always been associated with ethical consumption. Over the past decade, however, public concern at the unnecessary transportation of food (Lucas and Hines, 2001) has led to mounting interest in locally sourced food and, for similar reasons, seasonal food. Food transported over long distances is considered less acceptable than hitherto due to its environmental impact, particularly if air freight is involved, and consequently some countries have witnessed a rapid development of farmers markets. Local markets (whether traditional or farmers markets) also have a social dimension, as consumers are

41. This figure excludes the boycott effect implied by switching to organic and fair trade food.

often expressing a desire to support their farming community, and perhaps a geo-political dimension, in that they are deliberately rejecting imported food in favour of home-produced alternatives.

Such is the power of globalisation, however, that it is questionable whether rising consumer interest in local food might, in future, be extended to other products. Locally produced food offers personal benefits to the consumer, such as freshness, which do not apply to other products. The economies of scale to be gained from mass production in modern industrial society are so substantial that, apart from local food and arts and crafts gifts, production is rarely based on supplying local or regional markets.

In practice, then, 'local' shopping relates primarily to the retail stage in the supply chain. Nonetheless it contributes a significant social dimension to responsible consumption. The New Economics Foundation has described how the closure of village shops in rural areas and stores in poor areas of cities brings inconvenience and reduces the quality of life for many people. It has also criticised the cultural uniformity of high streets that are dominated by chain stores, dubbed 'clone towns'. Consumers who shop locally in order to help small independent shops survive and to preserve 'local distinctiveness', a variegation in surroundings, are challenging and seeking to reverse long-established socio-economic trends.⁴²

Consumption may be judged acceptable, but how much of it is necessary? Sustainable consumption experts at the United Nations have long argued that people need to consume differently but not less, whereas critics respond that merely changing the kind of products purchased will not be enough to steer industrialised nations with adequate speed toward sustainability (Princen, 2005).

It is possible that self-reflective consumption will lead individuals to screen out unnecessary items and reduce their consumption, perhaps downshifting to a lifestyle of frugality or 'voluntary simplicity'. Reduced consumption is a hard message to sell

politically, however, and rejecting the social norms of a consumer culture is difficult except for highly motivated individuals. It is important, therefore, to discover why, in the face of strong pressures in the opposite direction, some people deliberately try not to consume. Research has suggested that they reduce their needs by using values to override inner desires. Their motives for this behaviour have been classified into four types: asceticism and self-sacrifice (often associated with religious beliefs), deferred gratification (short-term denial in order to benefit in the long term), self-expression (either of personal characteristics such as restraint or dissatisfaction with the outside world) and altruism (a desire to improve the well-being of others) (Gould et al., 1997).

Rejecting products, accepting people

What might be the implications for social capital⁴³ and social cohesion when consumers reject unacceptable or unnecessary products? The primary aim of such action is normally to influence producers and production processes, but there are also implications for people as consumers and citizens.

The use of market forces to influence production can add to social capital and promote social integration and cohesion in several ways. For example, the rejection of products made in sweatshops in poor nations (perhaps with child labour) and purchase of fair trade alternatives (whether food, tea and coffee, clothing, rugs, flowers or sports goods) represents an investment in healthy communities of workers. Employees in poor rural economies will benefit from slightly higher wages, better working conditions and, in some cases, community initiatives in the form of new housing and schools. Fair trade is a means whereby consumers in the affluent North may show solidarity with workers in the poor South and reduce (albeit marginally) the gulf in wealth. At the level of individuals it helps to integrate diverse cultures, as people who buy fair trade products thereby express an interest in the overseas producer; the transaction is

42. See www.neweconomics.org and www.commonground.org.uk/distinctiveness/d-place.html

43. Defined here as social contact or networks that increase the productivity of individuals and groups and thereby add value in society.

not merely concerned with a product but ‘the world behind the product’ (de Leeuw, 2005).

Responsible consumption may also have an impact upon the society in which the consumers live. The deliberate rejection of a product or company on ethical grounds typically arises from a community of like-minded individuals, whether a political party, campaign organisation, network of friends or virtual community, in which people share concerns about production processes.⁴⁴ Positive ethical purchasing initiatives, too, can aid social bonds: the leading fair trade company Cafédirect was created to introduce fairly traded coffee from smallholders into British supermarkets out of a collaboration between Oxfam and three partner organisations. As the social dimension to consumption has become better understood in recent years, attention has been drawn to the role of ‘mavens’, key individuals in promoting behavioural change who acquire and then utilise information such that it subsequently permeates through society. Most people engaged in ethical consumption practices want to see them mainstreamed and embedded in society in order that ethically produced goods and services become more widely available and, ultimately, constitute a new norm.

Critics argue that, far from creating social cohesion, consumers who lead boycotts or promote anti-consumerism are isolationist, other-worldly individuals, who cut themselves off from mainstream society. Recent academic research, however, has suggested that while a few may isolate themselves in communes, most people who ‘downshift’ in their consumption, far from opting out of community life, ‘upshift’ as citizens, engaging more in society (Nelson et al., 2007).

For example, boycotting is, by definition, an organised and thus collective act. This kind of social engagement by campaigners, often operating in ad hoc networks, forms a bedrock of ‘civil society’. Working collectively on boycott campaigns or similar activities thus acts as an important source of social capital. Michele Micheletti proposes that

44. Not all responsible consumption happens in this way, of course. Other consumers may deselect goods as a result of being prompted or from their evolving beliefs, without being allied to a particular community of activists.

“political consumerism both needs and generates social capital”, suggesting that effective networks are required to provide a platform for co-operation on consumer campaigns or initiatives but also that “political consumerism links individual citizens and actors together into newly created networks and institutions to pursue their self-interests or public interests” (Micheletti, 2003). She concludes that “participation in political consumerist activities ... builds bridges across different groups in society and bonds like-minded people more closely”, pointing to the creation of co-operative behaviour, trust and norms. More controversially, perhaps, she argues that whereas boycotts were once important to raise public awareness and force companies to engage in debate, in future there may be a less confrontational approach based on identifying viable problem-solving mechanisms with companies, such as labelling schemes designed to inform consumers and increase the market share of less harmful products.⁴⁵

Positive ethical purchasing may add to social capital in various ways. For example, consumers who try to avoid food transported over long distances may be primarily motivated by environmental concern but, particularly when using local markets, are often also expressing a desire to help farmers in their community or region. This is especially apparent in Britain, where a crisis in the farming sector a decade ago led to a re-evaluation of food policy and a government report proclaiming as its central theme ‘reconnection’ in the food supply chain, in particular between consumers and farmers (Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food, 2002). Much subsequent policy in this area has sought to bridge urban-rural divisions and thereby improve social cohesion.

Similarly, consumers who support independent local shops, ethical retailers and farmers markets, deliberately rejecting supermarket culture, find that these are often community-focused places frequented by people with shared values. The same is true for consumers who, rejecting the new, buy at auctions, second-hand shops and car boot sales (Gregson and Crewe, 2003). Suppliers very often live in the

45. In this context labelling may be seen as a means of transferring responsibility from the supplier to the consumer.

community and bring items in person, and customers are more likely to meet friends and acquaintances than in anonymous high street retailers. These retail spaces facilitate networks where people gain far more than the momentary financial transaction that is their main experience in retail chain stores, thereby enhancing social capital. In summary, whether negative or positive, ethical purchasing behaviour demands a level of participation in society that increases social capital and is important for social cohesion.

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CONSUMERS AS CITIZENS: SYNERGIES AND TENSIONS FOR WELL-BEING AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Frank Trentmann, Professor of History, Birkbeck College, University of London (United Kingdom)⁴⁷

What is the impact of consumer culture on well-being and civic culture? The debate about this question tends to dead-end in two rival, polar-opposite points of view. One position focuses on the pathologies of affluence. In this view, the rise of a seductive world of goods and of a consumerist lifestyle in the last few decades has had damaging psychological, civic, and environmental costs. Wealth and well-being became divorced, a disjuncture that has been traced in a variety of indicators, from those on happiness to those on the rise in recorded mental illness and divorce. An excess of choice, we are told, has made us sick and depressed. Consumerist habits and aspirations, from television watching to a drive for conspicuous consumption and ever bigger houses and cars, are blamed for eroding the family, associational life, and political participation (Layard, 2005, Offer, 2006, Schor, 1998, Schwartz, 2005).

The second position proceeds from a different starting point, especially manifest in recent reforms of public services in the United Kingdom. Here, choice is a source of empowerment and democratic renewal. In this view, the welfare state has been overtaken by a more affluent consumer society which has made people more individualist, knowledgeable, and demanding. Democracies need to adjust. Instead of treating them as passive clients, public services should treat citizens as active, informed customers (Blair, 2002, Clarke et al., 2007, Bevir and Trentmann, 2007a).

The Council of Europe's perspective on well-being and civic engagement offers a welcome opportunity to complicate this dichotomy (Council of Europe,

2008). Both positions tend to operate with far too unitary, simplified views of consumption and citizenship. Citizens do not always act for the public good, and high political participation or voter turn-out is not in and of itself a sign of democratic health (in Weimar Germany it was not). Likewise, people consume for a whole variety of reasons, some self-centred or to assert status, some other-regarding, altruistic or part of sociability (gifts, buying organic food, recreation).

Critics and advocates of 'consumerism' both share debatable core assumptions. They may disagree in their evaluation, but both tend to view the 'consumer' as a utility-maximising and self-regarding individual as opposed to an other-regarding 'citizen'. Until recently, theorists of citizenship have had little to say about consumption, and vice versa. This essentialist view of the consumer is also often tied to a broader view of contemporary history. 'Consumer society' is heralded or condemned as a new historical era and paradigm break, a new all-embracing social system that, after rising up in the United States in the mid-20th century, swept across Europe and other parts of the world. Both of these assumptions are debatable and offer poor guidance for reform today (cf. Miller, 1995, Brewer and Trentmann, 2006).

This chapter offers some fresh perspectives for a more constructive and historically nuanced approach to the role of consumers as citizens. Neither consumers nor consumer culture are an invention of the last half-century. They have come in various guises with shifting consequences for civic culture and political engagement. Attention to this longer history helps to highlight the ongoing variety and complexity with which 'ordinary people' combine the desire, purchase and use of goods and services with their lives as citizens and their ideas about well-being and justice. Far from being separate universes,

46. The author was director of the £5 million Cultures of Consumption research programme (2002-2007) co-sponsored by the Economic and Social Research Council and by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. For more information, research, and papers, see www.consume.bbk.ac.uk

consumption and citizenship have overlapped in the modern period. This chapter discusses the interaction between the two, highlighting synergies as well as tensions. It places current movements for ethical consumption in a longer perspective, offers a broader view of choice and consumer identity, and evaluates the potential appeal to caring consumers in strategies for improving well-being and engagement.

Consumption as a site of civic activism

Fears that material goods and pleasures undermine community and civic-mindedness are as old as theories of citizenship themselves, and can be traced back across the modern period to ancient Greece. (Horowitz, 1985, Davidson, 1999). Critics of consumerism often invoke a golden age of civil society and political engagement, contrasting it with a recent decline in associational life and a spread in political apathy. History does little to support the idea that once people start consuming more they cease to be interested in civic affairs. Interestingly, it was the 18th century that saw a parallel mushrooming of consumption and civil society. New goods and tastes – tea, sugar, cotton and porcelain – were important ingredients in an expanding sphere of sociability, clubs and associations. In many parts of Europe and North America, the rise in material standards of living and the spread of commercial culture in the late 19th and early 20th centuries – the department store, early cinema, tourism, and branded goods – was the very period when political participation and movements for social and democratic rights mushroomed.

In the course of the 19th century, consumption emerged more directly as a terrain of social mobilisation and civic activism. In the 1980s-90s it became fashionable to look to ‘fair trade’ and campaigns against sweat shops as a new, more consumer-oriented paradigm of politics. Rather than a new departure, these boycotts and buycotts are chapters in a longer history, especially pronounced in Britain and the United States, but with a transnational network of buyers’ leagues also covering France, Austria-Hungary and Germany.

Three episodes especially illustrate the different modes by which consumption fostered civic engagement. The first was the mass boycott of slave-grown sugar by shoppers on both sides of the Atlantic in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. These boycotts were especially important for women, giving them a public voice while still formally outside the political nation. A second form was battles over water and gas at the level of local politics, notably in Britain. In the 1860s-80s, these produced the first consumer leagues. These leagues were pioneered by propertied, middle-class men who asserted their rights as consumers against commercial monopolies which, they insisted, were providing poor service at high prices. A third form was the million-strong mass movement for free trade on the eve of the First World War supported by a phalanx of radicals, liberals, feminists and organised consumers. For them, an open door – without any trade barriers and subsidies – stood for cheapness, civil society, and peace (Trentmann, 2008, Sussman, 2000, Trentmann and Taylor, 2006).⁴⁷

Consumption, these three examples suggest, is flexible and modular, offering different social and ideological possibilities for civic engagement. In the anti-slavery boycotts, women did not adopt the formal voice of citizen but exploited the gendered ideal of women as bearers of a higher morality to exert ethical pressure, above the material pressures of the market.

In the conflicts over urban water supply, propertied men, by contrast, exploited their status as tax-paying citizens to press for greater accountability in the provision of services – some wanted a public takeover, others even talked of a ‘water parliament’. Here the new voice of consumer rights expanded the scope of politics beyond voting and formal participation: the material world of everyday life became politicised and questions of basic needs introduced early ideas of social citizenship.

A generation later in Britain, by the 1890s, the language of the consumer had expanded well beyond propertied tax-payers, to women and the public in general. The popular momentum for free trade at the

47. For consumer activism in the United States, see Cohen (2003).



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time cemented the new status of consumers as a public interest. Free trade gave consumers cheap goods. But the interest in cheapness was also tied to ideals of civil society and democracy. Female consumers in the co-operative movement now gave the power of the purse a much more direct political thrust. They might not have the vote, but by preventing special interests from putting tariffs on food, free trade recognised their interests as vital parts of the nation. Moreover, they argued, their wise and responsible exercise of choice in the marketplace demonstrated their capability to exercise choice at the ballot box too.

What these cases illustrate is the diverse, evolving use of consumption in civic movements. To avoid misun-

derstanding, the point is not to replace the moralistic critique of 'consumerism' with an idealised picture of the unilinear rise and triumph of the consumer as a hero of civic empowerment. Consumer behaviour can be selfish at times. Consumer movements, like other movements, have ideological blind spots. They carry power, and exclude as well as include. For example, many critics of the slave trade had no problem with imperial conquest as such. Many British free traders, likewise, were firm believers in an imperial mission, blind to the realities of exploitation and suffering in the colonies. Consumer activists who championed the municipalisation of services, by contrast, were naïve in believing that a public take-over would ensure more responsible, economic consumption habits. Material

well-being – such as cheap and easy access to water – can have damaging results for the environment.

Rather, the point here is to emphasise that a narrow focus on the consumer as a self-regarding, materialistic individual ignores the broader moral and political universe in which consumers have become active. Conversely, we must not idealise the virtues of political action which are often not public-spirited.⁴⁸ Clearly, consumer engagement is not limited to individual choice – the Victorian water consumer leagues wanted public control, not choice and competition. Yet where choice is mobilised, as in the free trade campaign to defend access to cheap foreign goods, it is not only in the sense of individual desire. It can be part of a larger vision of social and international justice. Progressive liberals believed that free trade would create ‘citizen-consumers’, giving them an active stake in civil society and teaching them to develop ‘higher’, socially more responsible tastes that would express greater care about the well-being of producers.

Choice and caring

‘Choice’ has become a central bone of contention in the current battle over extending consumerism to public services. This debate is mainly conducted in terms of support or opposition to an economic model of choice as an instrument of maximising utility, popularly associated with neo-classical economics. Critics see it as a dangerous transfer of values and practices from the supermarket to hospitals, schools, and public libraries. Supporters champion it as a way to empower users of public services as co-partners, giving them an opportunity to pick providers and influence treatments.

For a consideration of well-being and participation, it is helpful to retrieve a broader conception of choice. Some of the criticisms of choice are problematic. Of course, it is possible to point to the dozens of kinds of milk available today in a supermarket as an example of an impenetrable jungle of choice. Most consumers will easily point to one kind of service or another to

show the ‘ridiculous’ proliferation of choice, such as the many competing telephone inquiry services once competition is opened up.

The problem with this critique is that it is partial and cannot be generalised. What seems an excess of choice and waste of time and effort to some people for some goods and services appears vital to others. We would, for example, not draw the conclusion that the proliferation of choice of, say, books or music on any given topic or genre has diminished well-being. We may find it challenging, even at times frustrating, to steer our way through the escalating number of publications, but our well-being, knowledge, social life, and sense of self would not be enhanced if we just had two or three books or music recordings to choose from.

The idea of choice, therefore, should be carefully disentangled from the narrow utilitarian version that has received so much attention in recent years. One alternative tradition is that of John Dewey, one of the most influential American thinkers, reformers, and educators in the inter-war years, especially in the United States. For Dewey, all life was about choosing. Choice helped individuals to develop “the habits and impulses ... to make us sensitive, generous, imaginative, impartial in perceiving the tendency of our inchoate ... activities”. Individuals, in this view, are not just calculating machines that measure short-term pleasures and pains. Rather they learn to use their memory and experience to cultivate long-term habits that make sense of their lives, connect past and present, and raise their consciousness. In short, choice makes people more human by making them constantly aware of the meanings of their actions (Dewey, 1922, p. 207).

This may sound abstract and philosophical. In fact, it was a popular idea in the Home Economics Movement, through which hundreds of thousands of American women and men learned how to enhance their daily lives as consumers – what today would be included under ‘well-being’. In addition to questions of price and quality, home economics taught people about a range of cultural as well as financial subjects, from healthcare and banking to art. People were considered more than ‘buyers’. They were ‘consumers’,

48. A point well made by M. Schudson (2007).

who (in addition to making purchasing decisions) evaluated different choices according to motives, values, and ends. The aim was to train consumers to make choices that were not only about instant gratification or a good price but which would develop their own personality and faculties and foster social affections and relationships. Choice, in this view, was a channel between individual and social well-being.

Choice can connect personal and social motives. One manifestation is the use of consumption as an expression of caring for others. The consumer co-operative movement was a large-scale phenomenon across the globe until the middle of the 20th century, and continues to be so in some countries. In recent years, caring has stretched from concern for producers to care for the land and animals. Consumers have flocked to a wide variety of so-called 'alternative' food and consumption networks, stretching from local farmers' markets to organic allotment groups, all the way to Internet schemes for adopting sheep in the Abruzzi mountains. Interestingly, one appeal behind farm shops and organic food box schemes is that shoppers feel it increases their choice, providing them with previously unknown vegetables like kallaloo (Kneafsey et al., 2007).

Knowledge and interest in organic food is not the preserve of the educated middle class. People think about the health of their family, the environment, and distant farmers as well as price. For many disadvantaged consumers it is not values or attitudes but lack of income and absence of a diverse retail landscape that prevents them from expressing their caring motives.

Public connections

It is unhelpful to see political consumerism (consumer boycotts; anti-sweatshop campaigns; fair trade) and more conventional forms of political behaviour (voting; political engagement at the local or national level) as a zero-sum game – one drawing energy away from the other. Historically, they have tended to be symbiotic rather than competitive or mutually exclusive. The white label campaigns of consumer and buyer leagues a century ago, which used consumer power to enforce better working con-

ditions, for example, provided a political space for reform-minded middle-class women. Similarly, the New Deal in the United States and grass-root consumer mobilisation reinforced each other. Of course, political consumerism is not inherently virtuous, nor does it all times feed into civic engagement – the middle-class consumer leagues had a paternalistic strain that saw workers purely as producers (not equally consumers); the testing agencies that have sprung up in post-war Europe have focused on safe, efficient consumer durables rather than formal political engagement. Still, there is no reason to presume that political consumerism and political activity more generally have ceased to be symbiotic in many instances in contemporary Europe.

Recent research on one thousand young people in Stockholm, Brussels and Montreal who used boycotts, buycotts and other forms of political consumerism, shows that most of them also had an above average degree of community engagement, act as volunteers, and had a high degree of trust in their fellow citizens. They are not alienated from public life in general but from formal political institutions in particular. They might be sceptical citizens, but they are neither apathetic nor passive (Micheletti et al., 2003, see also Barnett et al., 2005).

More generally, the degree of disengagement from the public world must not be exaggerated. A focus on formal associations distracts from the many more informal and mediated modes of engagement. Television, more than any other feature of consumer culture, has been blamed for a retreat from an active public sphere into a private world of passive, material comforts. In fact, we know surprisingly little about how people consume media and what consequences this has for their engagement with public affairs. One large British study, conducted in 2004-05, found that most people felt connected to the public world; 70% felt they had a duty to keep up with public affairs, and many had a habit of watching the news regularly. Nor were they indifferent. Most people felt strongly about issues. The problem was lack of trust in formal political institutions: two-thirds were interested in politics, but over half felt they had no say in what their government did. In short, the problem is

not political interest but a sense of powerlessness and a lack of trust in politicians (Couldry et al., 2007).

One aim of the Council of Europe's programme on well-being is to create a virtuous circle between well-being, engagement, and participation. An older communitarian, often moralistic tradition tends to imagine a linear flow of cause and effect: materialism and commercial culture saps engagement which then results in diminished participation in public life. The above discussion suggests a different view. The spread of material goods and lifestyles may have transformed the issues and forms of engagement but they have not extinguished them. As far as regular political participation is concerned the problem lies between existing levels of engagement and an area of formal politics that is seen as distant, exclusive, and untrustworthy.

To what degree has the 'consumerist' reform strategy of injecting 'choice' into public services helped to overcome this legitimacy deficit? Has the appeal to 'consumers' or 'customers' of public services like medical care, social housing or care for the elderly given people a greater sense of belonging and empowerment? Interestingly, recent research from the United Kingdom shows the considerable gulf between government rhetoric of choice, on the one hand, and identities and practices on the ground, on the other. The 'consumer' remains an ambivalent, shifting identity. The vast majority of people (local users of services as well as providers) disliked the language of the consumer in public services – some felt it was importing a radically different world of the supermarket into the life of the community. People did want better services, but this included a concern for the needs of others, not just their own. Voice matters as much as choice. Many local authorities lacked the different kinds of channels to be heard that citizens were looking for. The clash of languages between 'consumer' and 'community' suggests that for well-being and engagement to be joined in a virtuous transfer with participation, governments need to do much more to listen to people on the ground and to take their local knowledge, identities, and ways of managing everyday life seriously (Clarke et al., 2007, Birchall et Simmons, 2004, Bevir et Trentmann, 2007a).

Conclusions

In the last two decades, consumption and choice have become significant sites of political projects for enhancing well-being, people power, and social and international ethics. These have ranged from consumerist reforms of public services to movements for fair trade and responsible consumption. Public debate would do well to recognise that this appeal to the consumer is not an entirely new phenomenon. The turn to the consumer as a political actor is not the invention of contemporary consumer culture, nor the result of some 'advanced liberal governmentality'. It has a longer history in social movements and battles for citizenship. These past projects reveal the potential of consumption as a terrain of engagement, and of goods, tastes, and lifestyles to articulate questions about public inclusion and accountability as well as about social ethics and responsibility towards others.

They also show the danger of seeing the consumer as an all-embracing identity or exclusive form of political practice. It would be unwise to simply reject consumers and choice as instruments of individualist materialism. But equally it would be foolish to idealise them and turn them into a new political toolkit fit for all occasions. In their everyday lives, past and present, people try to enhance their well-being through a variety of channels and forms of engagement. Choice and consumer empowerment is felt to be appropriate and desirable in some contexts, not in others. To advance engagement with citizens, any strategy for well-being should recognise the potential as well as the limits of choice.

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FIGHTING FOR HUMAN RIGHTS: CONSUMPTION BEHAVIOUR AS POLITICAL PRAXIS

Massimo Lori, IREF, Istituto di Ricerche Educative e Formative (Institute of Educational and Training Research), Rome (Italy)

In the debate on the forms of social participation in western societies, many contributions emphasise a transformation of political involvement both from an ontological point of view and in relation to the repertoire of action. In short, the main changes of collective action can be traced back to two emerging phenomena: (the) global activism networks and lifestyle politics.

Contextualising new forms of political action

In their seminal work Keck and Sikkink emphasised the importance of the arrival of several non-state actors in international politics at the end of the 20th century (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). These collective actors interact with one another, with nation-states and with international organisations. To be more precise, the two political scientists define as transnational advocacy networks: "... those actors working internationally on issues, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services" (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, p. 2). Although environment and development issues are important fields of mobilisation for these networks, the core mission concerns claims of human rights. The main conditions underlying the emergence of a transnational network can be synthesised into three points: the existence of conferences or international relations, which can be the base for the establishment of arenas for the formation and strengthening of networks; the belief, widespread among activists and political entrepreneurs, that a strategy based on networking can be effective for the success of a campaign; and finally, the closure of the local political system towards groups putting forward the solution of a problem.

From an empirical point of view, recent years have seen the advance of a global protest, an explosion of

internationally active social movements; going from organisations linked to Islamic fundamentalism to those against neoliberalist globalisation. However, these processes should not be viewed too optimistically. We must abandon the idea that the proliferation of NGOs and transnational networks is the expression of a 'world polity', or a bottom-up form of globalisation whose foundations differ entirely from those of the multinational corporations and most powerful states. To do this one must refer back to the very useful concept of complex internationalism that is "an interactive network of state, non-state and international actors who gravitate around both national and international institutions" (Tarrow, 2003).

Within and around national and international institutions, a critical cosmopolitan mass has developed, made up of activists who use local resources, experiences and opportunities to put forward the rights of people who they claim to represent.

Transnational social movements develop against the background of an emerging network society, a post-modern society remodelled by the new technological paradigm (Castells, 1996). The first aspect characterising the network society is the fact that information becomes its raw material par excellence, as the management and social processes are dependent on information flows and on symbolic thinking. Moreover, the metaphor of the network fits very well the description of the new social order, because information is an integral part of human activities and the technological revolution enables the formation of networks for all types of processes, organisations and for any system or set of interactions.

With the rise of the 'affluent society', further to the changes in the private sphere, a high potential for symbolic conflicts develops. As Giddens says, we are witnessing the transition from "emancipatory poli-

tics” to “life politics” (Giddens, 1991). If emancipatory politics is a politics of societal transformation turning around social inequality and oppression, life politics is concerned with how we should live: “while emancipatory politics is a politics of life chances, life politics is a politics of lifestyle” (Giddens, 1991, p. 214). In post-industrial societies, rationalisation processes (defined by Weber as *Entzauberung der Welt*) have undermined the foundations of every religious or symbolic meta-narration (non-social). Indeed, the ability of society to act on itself has expanded to such an extent that even nature becomes a social outcome, with the possibility to modify even the biological constitution of the human species (Melucci, 2000). Thus, we are witnessing a shift in where the formation of individual identity takes place, from traditional social contexts (family, religion, community, etc.) to different areas. New forms of power spread along this direction. We go from the management of things to the government of men, and new forms of social control for the prediction and modification of opinions, attitudes and behaviours are spreading. In other words, the power tends to intervene directly on the system of values and on culture (Touraine, 1992). As widely discussed in the literature on social movements, the conflicts in western societies are cultural conflicts linked to the process of defining collective and individual identities, and, in general, to the cultural trend of society (Melucci, 1991).

Thus, contemporary social movements tend to politicise the sphere of everyday life (Beck, 1997); they are concerned about issues such as gender relations, the responsibility towards the environment, the conceptions of body, health and definition of needs, issues which in the past related to the private sphere, because they were governed solely by non-political institutions (family, ‘natural’ order, religion, traditional morality, etc.). These issues are closely related to the need for self-fulfilment and individual authenticity.

In the sphere of consumption, ‘problematization’ of social identities has led to conflicts for the affirmation of the legitimacy of new cultural models, expression of the individual and collective search of the meaning and significance to be attributed to their

consumption behaviour (Lori & Volpi, 2007). From a certain point of view, the consumer society is a paradox. It is defined primarily as a society where the satisfaction of everyday needs is met in a capitalist way by purchasing goods on the market, and where consumption is a sphere of action in itself with rituals and specific times and places devoted to it (Sassatelli, 2004). While on the one hand this society is characterised by the commercialisation of goods and services, on the other hand, it is based on the ability of consumers to customise the goods, which get an individual meaning and can support social interactions. By this process of personalisation of goods, various different meanings are attached to objects. In this sense Baudrillard has prophesied a society where objects lose every link to their utilisation value and tend to take the most diverse meanings and so refer circularly only to themselves (Baudrillard, 1968). Therefore, consumption is a creative action, and the citizen-consumer invents his/her everyday life through different forms of ‘poaching’ (De Certeau, 1990). Consumers cleverly attribute to products meaning and utilisation values of use, other than those imposed by the dominant economic order. In my opinion, this is the main reason why we can speak today of consumption as a political action.

Mapping the responsible consumption movement

The politicisation of the sphere of consumption occurred primarily through information campaigns, collective actions and social movements which, starting from the analysis of the social function of consumption, have raised criticism of the dominant socio-economic order. In particular, the critique of consumer society focused on the issues of global justice, international solidarity and respect for human rights (Micheletti, 2007). The experiences, groups and movements active on this front are very wide and varied, and perhaps it would be useful to introduce an analytic classification to put some order inside this universe. Organisations and movements, which fight for human rights and consider consumption behaviour as a political tool, can be classified into two categories. The first one, that attains organisational

dimensions, distinguishes networks and organisations active on a national scale from those working at an international level. The second category refers to the strategy adopted by collective actors. Two distinct modalities (not exclusive as this distinction is mainly heuristic) can be outlined: institutional change and social change. In the first case, social organisations and movements implement actions of political pressure to bring about a change of direction by institutions (primarily governments and multinationals), that are directly or indirectly responsible for the violation of human rights.

Social change, instead, relates to a more micro level, since the ideal of a greater global justice is pursued through changing people’s lifestyle and consumption pattern. For example, these kinds of organisations, coherently with their values horizon, promote the purchasing of goods produced by socially responsible companies, or alternative forms of trade and relations between consumers and producers. Therefore, considering these two categories jointly (the organisational dimension and the strategy adopted), social movements fighting for the respect of human rights starting from consumption can be classified into four typologies (Figure1). An empirical example for each of the action models outlined is presented below.

A – Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC)

This campaign is a classic example of a transnational advocacy network. The network is made up of collective players of various nature (NGOs, trade unions, third sector organisations, churches, solidarity groups) active in 11 European countries, which have joined in order “to improve working conditions and to empower workers in the global garment industry, in order to end the oppression, exploitation and abuse of workers in this industry, most of whom are

women” (CCC, 2007). The CCC adopts the main strategies characterising the transnational advocacy networks. Indeed, CCC’s main activity is information politics, which means that it “moves politically usable information quickly and credibly to where it will have the most impact” (Keck & Sikkink, 1999, p. 95). Indeed, the network is an alternative source of information that generates social issues (defining goals, motivations, targets and forms of mobilisation). Through ICTs and in particular the Internet, the CCC is a kind of collector of information to and from developing countries. It provides information not available elsewhere, understandable and useful to activists and to a public opinion that is geographically or socially distant from the mobilisation in which they are invited to take part. In this sense, through watchdog institutes and research groups, the CCC collects information on human rights violations by firms. Moreover, acting as a resonance box, it directly gathers claims by those workers who take the risk to denounce to public opinion and the media their experiences of suffered exploitation. The CCC invites people to participate at two different levels: as citizens, by asking them to sign protest e-mails to be sent to the targets of the campaigns, and as consumers, by inviting them not to buy products from socially irresponsible companies.

In addition to information politics, another type of action characterising the strategy of CCC is the leverage politics, namely “the ability to call upon powerful actors to affect a situation where weaker members of a network are unlikely to have influence” (Keck & Sikkink, 1999, p. 95). The CCC, besides mobilising public opinion through the media, to support groups of politically weaker workers in their country, it also implements a strategy of persuasion and political pressure so that the most powerful insti-

Figure 1 – Typology of the responsible consumption movement

	INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE		SOCIAL CHANGE	
TRANSNATIONAL	A	INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN	C	ALTERNATIVE INTERNATIONAL TRADE
DOMESTIC	B	CONTENTION AGAINST LOCAL ACTORS	D	SEARCH FOR A NEW STYLE OF CONSUMPTION

tutional players are involved (primarily governments and international institutions). Currently, the CCC is operating on European governments and trade unions to take action against the arrest of some of its activists in India. Finally, a further strategy used by the CCC is accountability politics. The network devotes a lot of energy in an attempt to induce governments and multinational companies to change their behaviour appealing to codes of conduct formulated by worldwide recognised institutions, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations and OECD.

B – Protesting against public actors: “Sponsor Etici” Campaign

Actors of responsible consumption share the idea that not only citizens and private enterprises should be ethical consumers, but also public institutions. In the late 1990s, a campaign named “Sponsor Etici” was launched in Italy, aimed at encouraging public administrations to adopt the principles of responsible consumption and to draw up legislation to this end. One of the main results of this campaign was the approval of a provision issued by the Municipality of Rome. This provision constrains administrations to follow the guidelines of the United Nation resolution on corporate social responsibility⁴⁹ in sponsorship procedures and in sponsors’ choices, as far as cultural, social and leisure events are concerned. In more detail, the new regulation may refuse any sponsorship offer regarding municipal initiatives proposed by enterprises which do not respect equal opportunity rights (especially for women, native populations and ethnic minorities), people’s right to well-being and security as well as workers’ rights; furthermore, it may also refuse entities who are involved in some way in the production, marketing, financing and intermediation of arms. In order to verify these requirements, the municipal regulation has created an ethical committee composed of five CSR experts, nominated to express their opinion on the acceptability of the different sponsorships. According

to the organisers’ assertions, the outcomes of the Sponsor Etici Campaign are only partially positive, as the Municipality of Rome has not duly applied the regulation. They complain about the high number of communal initiatives (more than 400) that have been sponsored by socially irresponsible enterprises. They also lament the fact that the ethical committee has been consulted only in a few cases and that it did not always use objective criteria when evaluating the sponsorships.

In any case, the results of the campaign are certainly positive. After the experience of Rome other public administrations have adopted regulations on ethical sponsorship. In this sense a certain political impetus may be seized as far as the movement for responsible consumption is concerned. Therefore, in the future this movement may carry on more efficacious pressure campaigns towards public institutions, first of all using the tool of accountability politics.

C – Trade not aid

Fair trade is the main transnational advocacy network of responsible consumption that, creating an alternative way to conventional international trade, aims at fighting poverty and promoting social justice worldwide. The internationally recognised definition of fair trade was created by FINE:⁵⁰

“Fair Trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, which seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalised producers and workers – especially in the South. Fair Trade organisations (backed by consumers) are engaged actively in supporting producers, awareness raising and in campaigning for changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade.”

There is ample literature on this topic; therefore, only the most important characteristics will now

49. “Norms on the Responsibilities of Transnational Corporations and Other Business Enterprises with Regard to Human Rights”, approved 13 August 2003, by UN Sub-commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights Resolution 2003/16, UN Doc. E/CN.4/Sub.2/2003/L.11 at 52 (2003).

50. FINE is an informal association of the four main fair trade networks (Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International, International Fair Trade Association, Network of European Worldshops and European Fair Trade Association).

be brought to mind. The ‘master frame’ (Snow et al., 1986) inspiring fair trade can be brought back partially to several movements focused on the critique of neoliberal globalisation. This master frame is based on the idea of a rising ‘world system’ where the lack of rules and of a world politics, leave a free hand to the interests of multinationals and of the strongest economic actors. In particular, the fair trade movement is very sensitive to issues related to the North-South divide, to the gap between rich and poor countries, to the fact that one-fifth of the global population, through a system of unfair international trade, takes advantage of the wealth of the remaining four-fifths.

The Alternative Trading Organisations (ATOs) operate using different modalities. Nevertheless, the principal schemes adopted by the ATOs foresee the following ‘key practices’:

- a minimum price, which covers production costs as defined by the producer;
- a price-premium, to increase financial income of small producers;
- pre-financing, to allow smallholders to buy raw materials;
- training and technical support, to improve market power of the producers;
- long-term contract arrangements between producers and importers.

The main actors animating the fair trade movement are five: producers, importers, labelling organisations, world shops and consumers of fair trade products. The variety of objectives and actors of fair trade can be conceptualised in two main different visions of the movement (Schmelzer, 2006). The first one is more pragmatic and reformist, interpreting fair trade as a way to improve the life conditions of small disadvantaged producers living in the southern hemisphere. On the contrary, the second vision is more radical, considering fair trade as a fighting tool against neoliberalism, able to transform the economy in a more anti-capitalistic sense.

The fair trade history is long, as it started after the Second World War. Inspired by Christian values, the first ATOs started an alternative international

commerce, importing hand-crafted products from southern countries (Redfern & Snedker, 2002). Now fair trade offers principally food products and, entering mainstream distribution channels, it is increasingly gaining credit as a ‘labelling model’.

Unquestionably, fair trade is a successful story. In 2006, the biggest organisation of Fairtrade Labelling (FLO) had certified products from more than 1.4 million farmers and workers, in 57 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. During the same year, consumers worldwide bought €1.6 billion worth of fair trade certified products, 42% more than the year before (FLO, 2007).

D – Towards a new consumption pedagogy: the GAS and Bilanci di Giustizia experiences

It is not easy to apply the principles of responsible consumption in everyday life. The consumer has, most of the time, a weak position towards producers; therefore, because of a lack of information, it is not easy for him or her to adopt a consumption style that is contemporaneously able to give individual well-being, to be sustainable from an ecological point of view and to be supportive of less advantaged people. In the late 1990s, some associations called “Gruppi di Acquisto Solidali” (GAS) and “Bilanci di Giustizia” (BdG)⁵¹ were set up in Italy, with the aim of facing this challenge. These groups criticise economic rationality and seek for a meaning behind the commercialisation of social relationships provoked by the market (the so-called colonisation of the life-world theorised by Habermas). The main idea is that it is possible to strengthen social ties, to produce goods and relationships, as well as to create long-distance (towards the southern hemisphere) and, above all, close (within the local community) solidarity networks, through collective consumption actions.

Briefly, the consumption model proposed by GAS is characterised by purchasing non-damaging products (from an environmental point of view) and by

51. They could respectively be translated into “Solidaristic Purchasing Group” and “Household Budget of Fairness”. In this regard see the studies carried out by two research teams, the first with a sociological approach (Fair Trade Research Group – University of Colorado) and the other from an economic point of view (International Workshop on the Economics of Fair Trade – Durham University Business School).

choosing local producers who run small enterprises and respect workers' rights (Saroldi, 2001). The way GAS functions is very simple: families communicate weekly to the group the list of products they intend to buy. After that, the goods requested from the producer are divided among the various families. They all meet periodically in order to select producers and products, as well as to exchange opinions on consumption behaviours and to socialise.

Although the Bilanci di Giustizia group often communicates with GAS, whose main motivations they share, they operate in a different way, putting the accent on sobriety. The main principle of BdG's philosophy is 'shifted' consumption (Valer, 2000). The 'shifted' consumption choices are made by the families according to how they intend to modify their consumption style, following moral, environmental and sobriety criteria. In order to document and concretely verify the changes in their lifestyle, the families fill in three forms (monthly, seasonal and annual) to confirm the decrease or increase in expenditure on the goods selected to change their behaviour.

According to the last report (for the year 2006), the campaign's results have been positive: these families have 'shifted' in a more fair and ecological sense over 25% of their total consumption. Although GAS and BdG may be considered as laboratories of experimentation for alternative consumption styles, they are still niche experiences, involving only a few thousand people.

Impact and limits of the responsible consumption movement

Evaluating the effectiveness of social movements and of responsible consumption campaigns in promoting human rights is a rather difficult task. On the one hand, although they use common catchwords and are inspired by the same ideal of global justice, in practice collective actors of responsible consumption have different strategies and cultural orientations. On the other hand, the results of case studies and surveys provide partial, not very systematic and not always consistent outcomes. We can

consider as an example the fair trade movement that has been widely studied. Many researchers conclude that fair trade has a positive impact on the income and living conditions of producers and their families (Murray et al., 2003; Becchetti & Costantino, 2006; Osterhaus, 2006). The picture becomes more complex when considering just the economic benefits. The effectiveness of fair trade seems to depend heavily on the social context in which producers are embedded. Some studies have found that fair trade producers have a greater income because importers give them a price that is roughly twice the street price for conventional commodities (Perezgrovas & Cervantes, 2002). However, other studies have shown cases where salaries for fair trade producers, although above the national minimum wage, are not significantly higher compared to the day rates of casual labour in those areas (Blowfield & Gallet, 2001) or stand on a subsistence wage (Lyon, 2006).

The lack of systematic research and methodological difficulties impose caution in assessing the effectiveness of the responsible consumption movement. Otherwise, too optimistic positions would threaten to transform the practices of this movement into "rationalized myths" (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). A practice becomes a "rationalized myth" when it is regarded as a necessary mean for assuring a desired outcome. At the same time, these practices are also 'myths' in the sense that arguments for their effectiveness rest less on empirical confirmation. When not considering the practice of responsible consumption as rationalised myths, the possibility to correct or to identify the most efficient and effective ways to achieve the same objectives remains open. For these reasons, it is best to dwell on the effects of the responsible consumption movement which are more general and are less subject to debate.

In western societies, the responsible consumption movement has had a major impact on culture, since it produced a shift of consumption from the private to the public sphere. The sphere of consumption is no longer the exclusive realm of individual freedom and inclinations, since all consumer behaviour may be subject to public scrutiny. This is because responsible consumption revealed the apparent naturalness of the

'world of goods'. In reviewing the value and production chains of commodities, the responsible consumption movement identified centres of power governing the process of globalisation and social issues related to it. Every consumer has to make an ethical choice to avoid supporting a socially unfair system.

To address public issues such as human rights and environmental protection, consumption becomes an issue to be addressed within the political debate and agenda, a ground on which contrasting views of the world clash and where social forces compete with each other on the cultural trend and direction that society should take.

As with other social movements, the responsible consumption actors have great innovative potential. As opposed to traditional cultural forms, the responsible consumption movement created alternative strategies of action (Swidler, 1986), such as meaning systems, behaviour patterns and lifestyles opposed to the dominant culture (Melucci, 1991). Responsible consumption made it possible to consider social and environmental values in consumer behaviour. If consumption is an activity through which individuals build their own identity, then responsible consumption provides symbolic and cognitive resources so that people can adopt a 'market behaviour' defined by ethical and social reasons. The spread of these strategies of action coincided with the growth of ethical or green consumerism.

Finally, a further step taking shape is the establishment of consumption action as a reflective practice, which involves a careful evaluation of the effects of the action. The consumption behaviour is comparable to a cognitive process by which society thinks and acts by itself.

The responsible consumption movement, besides having identified different ways of consumption, helps also in defining alternative business practices. The concept of CSR (corporate social responsibility) comes right from the idea of responsible consumption, in an attempt to redefine the social role of the enterprise, certainly not limited to the maximisation of profits for shareholders. Indeed, the interest of companies in CSR principles can be interpreted

as a defensive response by the world of production, caused by the activism of responsible consumption actors (Harrison, 2003). Moreover, since in brand economy the logo is the main competitive asset of enterprises, they are particularly vulnerable when they become the target of a protest campaign. However, if it is undeniable that the responsible consumption movement is playing an important political role in promoting the ideals of global justice, it is equally true that it meets limits in this direction.

A first limitation can be linked to the structural characteristics of the emerging global civil society (Chandhoke, 2002). The transnational networks that are actively fighting for human rights in the sphere of consumption, paradoxically, are less common in countries where globalisation has given rise to the greatest proportion of human rights violations (for example, by sweatshop factories). In fact, the strongest predictor of countries' participation in transnational social movements is not global economic integration but the domestic opportunities for participation. The transnational movements, therefore, would tend to reflect the strength of the local civil society. However, at the local level the power of civil society is closely linked to the power of the national economy and the state. Consequently, there is a problem of representation and governance of the global civil society, as it is structured on the great inequality of resources between North and South; in other words, it is a reflection of the economic and the state-centric international order. Therefore, transnational social movements refer to a culture and a set of specific values: the global civil society actors, and in particular the humanitarian organisations, are inspired by a highly western-centric ideology. To support this remark, two examples can be mentioned. A few American organisations opposed to corporate globalisation (such as Public Citizen, founded by the well-known Lori Wallach), by reporting on the exploitation of Chinese workers, promoted a campaign to prevent China from participating at the WTO conference in Seattle. No independent Chinese movement was invited to support the campaign, which had not even received the approval of those sectors of Chinese civil society who were committed to workers' rights.

Another example that highlights a problem of governance in transnational advocacy networks refers to fair trade. Although this movement tries to build a bridge between consumers in the North and producers in the South, they remain distinct stakeholders with different points of view. This gap is evident also on issues that should be taken for granted. So it is not surprising that producers in the South are not aware of what the essence of fair trade is from the global civil society point of view (Lyon, 2006). Producers often do not understand what the symbolic challenge of fair trade is; in fact they consider it mainly as a way of selling products at a greater price or as a humanitarian aid for international solidarity.

Beyond this limitation, which is intrinsic to the so-called global civil society, another weakness in considering a consumer's point of view is the overestimation of the consumer's political role. By distancing itself from the more traditional form of political participation, the responsible consumption movement seems to support the idea that we can make society more egalitarian, starting from the mechanisms by which the market operates (according to the well-known slogan: the consumer as voter). Thus, consumers with their own shopping list can blame socially irresponsible multinationals. However, this reasoning is based upon the optimistic view that the market can self-govern itself, with no need for intervention by the state and international institutions. Anyhow, public intervention, historically, has proved to be essential in establishing rights and duties in the economy, as shown by labour law.

From a sociological point of view, the obstacles faced by groups and associations that are based on a collective definition of consumption behaviour can be also identified. Experiences such as GAS and Bilanci di Giustizia clash with the difficulties of being based on strong and stable collective identities, that could provide members with the symbolic and emotional resources needed to support them in the adoption of a consumer counterculture style (that of responsible consumption). What's more, some social processes are antithetical to the principles of responsible consumption. If Fordism favoured functionality and efficiency of consumer goods, in times of flex-

ible accumulation, aesthetics, futility and exclusivity become the qualities of objects (Harvey, 1990). The flexible accumulation has resulted, on the one hand, in changing and unstable fashions (hence the relative contraction of the average life of products); on the other hand, it has resulted in the creation of new needs and the commercialisation of cultural forms. In addition, the internal cohesion of groups like GAS and Bilanci di Giustizia is made fragile by the processes of individualisation (Beck, 1992). In complex societies, biographies become increasingly open and the possible life courses of individuals multiply. Therefore it becomes increasingly difficult to harmonise lifestyles within a collective project. Finally, it is worth noting that the sphere of consumption is the realm of social distinction. In fact, consumption styles tend to reflect individual differences in terms of economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1979).

To answer the initial question on the impact of the players of responsible consumption in promoting human rights, Polanyi's theory of double movement can help (Polanyi, 1957). According to this theory, a historic first phase characterised by the expansion of the market will be followed by a second, as a reaction to the previous one, which would bring an increase in institutional regulation of the market. After the advent of neoliberalism, the responsible consumption movement represents the start of a new phase, aimed at re-embedding the market in social relations. The overall outcome of this phase cannot be foreseen at the present moment. Up to what point society will be able to regulate and control market forces, will depend on the forces that actors of responsible consumption will be able to put into action and on the ideologies that will prevail within this movement.

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COMBATING EXCESSIVE FRAGMENTATION BY COLLECTIVE ORGANISATION OF CHOICES

René Kalfa, Network for the promotion of the Sustainable Consumption in European Regions (NEPIM)

Consumers play a predominant role in overall strategies aimed at transition to more sustainable consumption. In these models they are primarily exercising their individual freedom. The only real power they have is that of sanctioning, and their only weapon is the boycott. In fact, their freedom is confined to choosing one product rather than another.

Although consumer power cannot be denied, it is insufficient to bring about the requisite enduring changes. The traditional economic model based on producer-consumer equality does not operate properly in reality. Under this model, consumers know their own needs and how to meet them. At the heart of this hypothetical freedom on the consumer's part lies information as a tool that enables him or her to make decisions with full knowledge of the facts. However, consumers' decisions really stem from a dynamic and complex process in which information, although playing an important role, is only one of the factors involved (Reisch & Røpke, 2004).

Assuming that information is the main factor in the consumer's decision making, as in the hypothesis of the traditional economic model, s/he should have all the necessary information for taking decisions with full knowledge of the facts. However, consumers face a colossal information deficit. There are almost 250 000 products and services and very little information on them. Furthermore, the main source of information is the producer or service provider. There is no clear, objective information on products, apart from the obviously limited data supplied by labels. If we add the pressure of advertising and the consumer society in general, the 'informed consumer' concept loses its meaning and 'consumer power' is more honoured in the breach (Eicke, 1991).

Unlike consumer action, citizen action is an exercise in collective freedom.

Some of the more committed citizen/consumers have decided to go further than mere sanction-based action. They see sustainable consumption as a credible alternative to industrial modes of production. It is a case, in their view, of leaving behind a meaningless, dehumanised system which completely negates human dignity. Their project requires commitment to a new type of society based on new values. Their approach to sustainable consumption could be seen as an attempt, against the background of a crisis of meaning, to reinstate values within an economic system which has completely broken away from the human dimension. They see the question of meaning as necessitating collective action.

In order to conduct the requisite action, these particularly informed consumers have created new approaches and revived older models, imbuing them with new substance. Rather than attempting to locate the information required for a reasoned choice among a huge supply of products, they reverse the situation by defining their own needs as consumers. In this framework, co-operatives are emerging as being particularly well placed to carry out certain initiatives, particularly thanks to their democratic mode of supervision and the human development goals they pursue.

Consumer co-operatives – a renewed concept

The consumer co-operative movement is undergoing renewal after a period of crisis.

Consumer co-operatives originated in Rochdale, a small textile town in England. In 1844, 28 workers and craftsmen decided to set up a co-operative to tackle the problem of low product quality and secure reasonable food prices (Siegrist, Kaelble & Kocka, 1997). So began the co-operative known

as the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers.⁵² Although historically speaking this was not the first ever attempted co-operative, previous efforts having failed because of the difficulty of securing the capital to start up the enterprise, Rochdale was the first to succeed in creating an independently managed company. The model developed by the Equitable Pioneers was based on a number of standards that had been devised a few years previously by the Welshman Robert Owen (1777-1858), a utopian socialist. Its principles are used as a reference in this field to this day. They were adopted with a few amendments by the International Co-operative Alliance, which is currently based in Geneva.⁵³

The basic principles governing co-operatives are as follows: co-operative membership is voluntary and open to all; co-operatives are democratically supervised by their members. Each member has one vote, rather than one vote per share as is the case in holding companies; members provide an economic contribution in the form of a 'co-operative share'; profits are channelled primarily into developing the co-operative and creating financial reserves. The interest (on working capital) paid to members is limited so as not to hamper the desired aims of the co-operative. It can also be used to finance secondary activities that correspond to the human development aims set out in the co-operative's statutes. The co-operative must be autonomous and independent from any religious dominations or political and financial groups; the co-operative also provides for training, educating and informing its members. The sixth principle concerns inter-co-operative co-operation. Co-operation is encouraged with other co-operatives.

Lastly, co-operatives undertake to work towards the sustainable development of their communities by means of policies devised by their members.

Rochdale quickly became a model for all similar co-operative societies wishing to set up in the United Kingdom, and subsequently throughout the world. This universal model is applicable in many fields of economic activity. What started off as a small shop

soon spawned a network of distributors, producers, credit companies and many other economic activities, helping to restore the dignity of thousands of individuals. Ten years later, the United Kingdom already had almost 1 000 consumer co-operatives.

For over a century the consumer co-operative movement continued to expand, but in the mid-1960s, under the pressure of the hypermarkets and discount stores, the co-operative movement underwent a serious general structural crisis which bankrupted a large number of co-operatives or transformed them into holding companies (Brazda & Schediwy, 1989).

In recent years the consumer co-operatives have been making a comeback in response to new consumer concerns about sustainable consumption. One of their recent innovations has been the organic supermarket.

The main goal of consumer co-operatives today is to meet their members' needs in terms of high-quality products based on sustainable production models. As in the past, profit is not the ultimate aim but rather a necessary means of developing the enterprise in order to pursue the objectives set by the co-operative members. They adopt a comprehensive approach to the production and distribution process, taking account in particular of consumers' health and environment and respecting members' concerns. They also consider the social responsibility of enterprises as a primary aspect to be integrated in their activities. A consumer co-operative is an autonomous association of consumers joining together on a voluntary basis. Their aim is to work together to meet their economic, social and cultural needs while respecting specific values, by means of a democratically supervised shared-capital enterprise. Consumer co-operatives, like all other co-operatives (banking, farming, insurance, etc.), adhere to the Co-operative Principles set out by the International Co-operative Alliance, which are recognised by the United Nations. Members' needs are met via a distribution network of local shops and sometimes supermarkets. This gives them a vital role to play in developing the local and regional socio-economic fabric.

52. See <http://archive.co-op.ac.uk/pioneers.htm>.

53. See "Alliance coopérative internationale" at www.ica.coop/fr.

As in the past, consumer co-operatives are based on the values of mutual assistance, responsibility, equality, fairness and solidarity, and are committed to sustainable development in their communities and beyond. In line with the founders' tradition, consumer co-operative members adhere to such ethical values as honesty, openness, social responsibility and altruism.

One of the reasons for the return of co-operatives is indubitably the consumer's loss of bearings in the face of deregulation and a form of liberalisation which has now escaped market control, making the consumer feel defenceless. The new types of co-operative are in a position to respond to the increasingly complex situation, particularly in the energy field. The inadequate preparation for liberalisation of the energy sector means that consumers now face a huge, disparate range of energy sources. This is unprecedented, because consumers were always used to having a single source of supply from a historical operator monopolising distribution.

This complex, confusing mode of supply, with its differing price structures and its products that are difficult to compare (more or less environment-friendly, conventional or nuclear electricity sources), contracts of varying duration and with difficult-to-compare contents and problems with changing distributors, bars the consumer from playing any active role on the market. In order to remedy this situation, such new initiatives have emerged as Greenpeace Energy in Germany and Power4you in Belgium, which are two examples of new consumer co-operatives.

Greenpeace Energy not only supplies its members with 'green electricity' but also builds new electric power stations utilising solar, hydraulic, wind, geothermal and biomass energies.⁵⁴ The capital provided by its members makes it independent of the world of finance, so that it can invest solely in renewable energies without having to worry about making quick money. The basic principle behind the setting up of this co-operative was the desire to reconcile economy and ecology. The co-operative dimension has been the icing on the cake, enabling the enter-

prise to introduce the social dimension of sustainable development. The enterprise's customers are also its owners. Another argument in favour of this model is the greater price stability it induces, giving it a head start over the other suppliers emerging after the liberalisation of the electricity market. When the enterprise began operations on 1 January 2001 it already had 2 500, and by June 2007 it had a total membership of 60 000.

Power4you does not produce energy: it is in fact a kind of 'energy wholesaler' geared to supplying green electricity and gas to all citizens under optimum conditions.⁵⁵ These conditions optimise prices, guaranteeing a high level of consumer protection and environmental quality for energy. The founders of this co-operative, mostly consumers' organisations, leading trade unions, mutual insurance companies and family associations, consider that access to energy is a right on the same basis as access to water, health and education. According to this human dignity principle, everyone must have uninterrupted and fair access, in reasonable quantities and at affordable prices, to the energies required for such vital needs as heating, lighting, etc. Having realised the confusion created by the liberalisation of the Belgian electricity and gas market, they endeavoured to assist consumers, offering to negotiate the best conditions available on the market on their behalf.

Unlike Greenpeace Energy, the Power4you co-operative does not sell or produce energy. In fact it has entered into negotiations with all the Belgian energy-producing corporations based on a specific schedule of conditions setting out a number of binding conditions on the prospective supplier. These conditions are as follows: electricity production must be based on renewable energies; the enterprise must obtain the Belgian social label indicating that it complies with International Labour Organization (ILO) standards, with the same obligation applying to raw material suppliers; the enterprise must provide fixed-rate contracts for electricity in order to prevent the regular increases that have been inflicted on consumers since the abolition of price controls;

54. See www.greenpeace-energy.de/.

55. See <http://power4you.be/>.

it must undertake to comply with a code of good conduct; and in the event of a dispute between the enterprise and the consumer, the former must accept the binding opinion of a disputes board organised by the consumers' associations. Another major aim of the co-operative must be to secure lower prices than those applied on the market for comparable products. Lastly, the enterprise must undertake to fulfil all the transfer formalities so that all citizens can easily change suppliers if they so wish.

We should also note that the guarantee on advantageous energy supplies for the consumer means that the enterprises must remain competitive. If, from one day to the next, the co-operative finds another supplier providing the same ecological and social guarantees, it is free to change partners.

Alongside co-operatives with their clear legal structures, other more flexible initiatives have developed, providing more and more havens for this new human-scale economy.

Community-supported agriculture

In order to cope with the pressure exerted by super- and hypermarkets, which demand ever lower prices from producers and thus drive many small farms out of the market, committed consumer-citizens and farmers have been joining up to resist the dehumanisation of farming operations by setting up solidarity communities. These include the "Groupements d'Achats Solidaires" (GAS) in Italy and Belgium,⁵⁶ "Associations pour le Maintien de l'Agriculture Paysanne" (AMAP) in France,⁵⁷ "Agriculture Soutenue par la Communauté" (ASC) in Quebec,⁵⁸ "Recip-roco" in Portugal and Community-Supported Agriculture in the English-speaking countries.⁵⁹

The starting point for this movement was a Japanese initiative known as "Teikei".⁶⁰

Teikei is a system which was developed in the mid-1960s based on partnership between consumers and farmers. Teikeis set up partnerships between small farms and local consumers. It is a local system of direct sales which generally involves organic production. They are non-profit-making and endeavour to set up partnerships between consumers and small farms. Although Teikeis originated from the desire of a group of Japanese consumers to secure proper supplies of dairy products, the environmental aspects and the demand for organic products emerged in the 1970s.

The Japanese Association for Organic Farming, which was set up in 1971 and is seen as a pioneering Teikei, defines the movement as a drive to create an alternative distribution system independent of the traditional market. Teikeis are based on a direct distribution system which brings producers and consumers very close together through direct dialogue, which harmonises the interests of both parties. Alongside the practical and purely economic side of things, the philosophical dimension of Teikei urges producers and consumers to co-operate in improving their quality of life as producers and consumers on the basis of their interaction.

Consumer/farmer solidarity movements are helping preserve human-scale agriculture by guaranteeing income for farmers. The consumer obtains fresh, seasonal and often organic food items produced from local varieties. These foodstuffs are produced in the local region, which avoids having to transport them long distances. Prices are fair to both parties. In practice, the partnership, which is based on the solidarity economy, is built up by the consumer and the farmer without intermediaries. The consumer undertakes in advance to purchase part of the farmer's production at a set price. The consumer shares with the farmer the risks inherent in farming, such as climatic vagaries. The consumer can also monitor and influence the farmer's cropping methods, perhaps asking him/her to gravitate towards an environment-friendlier type of agriculture.

This system frees the farmer from the straitjacket of the market economy and from the pressure of the price wars waged by super- and hypermarkets, which

56. See www.haricots.org/gas.

57. See <http://alliancepec.free.fr/Webamap/>.

58. See www.equiterre.org/agriculture/paniersBios/index.php.

59. See www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/csa/csa.shtml.

60. See www.joaa.net/english/teikei.htm.

have been partly responsible for the disappearance of small and medium-sized farms. The system also endeavours to improve food safety, thus responding to the recent food scandals which have highlighted the limits of industrial farming, obsessed with short-term profits and maximised yield. It also helps promote biodiversity and employment in a sector particularly hard hit by a Common Agricultural Policy that is better tailored to bigger farms. The system restores dialogue between consumers and producers, thus bringing humans back into the heart of this economic activity.

The Slow Food movement⁶¹

In 1989, the Slow Food movement was launched in Italy in response to the ‘fast food’ and ‘fast life’ phenomena. Slow Food, an NGO which currently totals over 80 000 members worldwide, endeavours to prevent the disappearance of local culinary tra-

ditions and dwindling consumer interest in food quality. The movement holds that the origin of our food, its taste and our ways of choosing it affect the whole world in which we live.

The Slow Food movement considers that every consumer has a fundamental right to enjoy culinary delights and is consequently responsible for protecting the heritage and tradition in terms of the food on which gastronomic pleasure is based. Slow Food draws on the concept of eco-gastronomy, which emphasises the essential link between culinary preparations and the biosphere. Under this concept, food must be good, healthy and also fair. Advocates of the movement hold that not only must food be tasty, have a positive effect on the consumer’s health and be produced in an environment- and animal-friendly manner, but also food producers must receive a fair price for their work. Consumers adhering to these principles are not considered as persons who ‘consume’ in the traditional passive meaning of the word but as co-producers, because by securing information on the methods used for producing the food, actively

61. See www.slowfood.com/.

Other examples of collective initiatives...

- Networking initiatives:
 - The agency “Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms” helps volunteers find farms to work on without pay all over the world; the values which it upholds are based on sharing and solidarity but also support to biological agriculture and the environment generally: www.wwoofinternational.org/home/
 - IRIS is Europe’s Inter-network of ethical, solidarity-based initiatives: www.iris-network.eu/
 - Fairs are also a means of connecting ethical and environmental initiatives. For example, the ecobio fair at Colmar in Alsace (France) brings together over four hundred exhibitors: www.foireecobioalsace.fr/
- Area-based initiatives:
 - The Vauban district of Freiburg (Germany) is another example of sustainable town planning notably conducive to car-sharing, development of co-operatives, and ecological housing: www.hqe-amenagement.org/Une-petite-visite-du-quartier-Vauban-de-Fribourg-_a31.html (explanatory PDF file available for consultation on this page), and www.vauban.de/ (Vauban district’s official site).
 - There are also numerous initiatives by self-managed communities based on the members’ responsibility, solidarity, biological agriculture and sustainable development: www.soleil-levant.org/presse/article.php?id_article=209: the site presents, for example, the scheme to found an eco-hamlet in the Ardèche region of France under the aegis of the association “Habitat, terre et partage”.

supporting the producers and demanding tasty local products, they become active players in the production system.

The movement stands against the degrading effects of the fast food industry and its standardisation of taste. It tries to promote food based on local products and defends indigenous culinary traditions. It encourages food biodiversity by means of taste education programmes aimed at both children and adults. It is endeavouring to create public awareness of culinary traditions and the cultures surrounding them. It helps small food-processing businesses producing quality foodstuffs, and is fostering sustainable tourism and solidarity initiatives in the food-producing field. The approach also draws on a philosophy of hedonism.

All these novel schemes will combine to produce a new approach to consumption, which is a matter for

the responsible citizen, that is to say sustainable and socially responsible, guaranteeing access to global resources for all the world's inhabitants for both today and tomorrow.

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Part IV

Contributing to general well-being through prior links with producers



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FROM SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE CONSUMERS TO CO-PRODUCERS

Marco Servettini

Lilliput Network, “Lisola che c’è”, Como Economic Solidarity District (Italy)

Practices connected with socially responsible consumerism and economic solidarity in general are disseminated by the development of social networks that spark off dynamic processes involving direct contact between the various players, thus giving new meaning to the concept of the local level.

A socially responsible consumer goes beyond support, essentially, for social and cultural concepts in order to become increasingly involved in the production chain, explicitly seeking to break out of the role of ‘consumer’ as passive user and move towards the role of ‘co-producer’ – someone who initiates projects on the basis of actual needs and implements them jointly with producers. Resting on a direct relationship with a local area that provides familiarity with its players, features and needs, a new type of ‘production chain business’ is emerging based on participation and shared responsibility of all concerned.

Inasmuch as socially responsible consumer practices are a source of well-being and give value and meaning to individual lives, local promotion is now the watchword, not as a matter of calculation or strategy but rather of recommendations and unsolicited support: it is ‘word of mouth’ that enables these networks to grow and involve more people.

The basic approach is therefore to develop socially responsible consumer networks, which can be done through systematisation of significant existing schemes and training of network co-ordinators able to involve the locality, create a grapevine and support the growth of co-producers thanks to the participative design of new chains of production.

In conclusion, the emphasis is placed on a number of critical points, which at the same time offer potential: making socially responsible consumer practices available to everyone; remaining open to new influences and alliances; involving the workplace to test out coherent forms of ‘socially responsible work’;

encouraging public involvement in order to genuinely apply the subsidiarity principle and consequently to acknowledge the collective capacity for independent organisation.

Socially responsible consumption and economic solidarity: the context

The emergence of consumer-based political responsibility has led to a rapid change in forms of social organisation over the past few years, offering new opportunities for rethinking the economy and society on inclusive, solidarity-based lines. In describing some of the fundamental features of this change, we shall take certain basic tenets for granted: there are a huge number of factors, ranging from a global awareness to specific health or quality needs, that encourage consumers to become social agents of change – in other words, consumer activists; socially responsible consumerism is part of a broader debate about a social and solidarity-based economy.

A principal feature of this context is the fact that the consumer activist not only boosts the market, and institutions, by endeavouring to alter their non-participative practices but also gives specific form and content to various sectors of the solidarity-based economy itself by reviving and promoting more structured activity such as fair trade, ethical finance, social co-operation or organic farming. Consumer activists, in short, are a novel cross-cutting force that encourages horizontality and innovation both within their home context – the social and solidarity-based economy – and outside.

Consequently, in terms of creating an alternative economy and a new model of inclusive society, active consumerism seems to hold out particular promise precisely because of its influence on the consumer world and a civic proactiveness that extends the field

of action beyond individual well-being to social and collective well-being.

This seems to confirm that in practice socially responsible consumers, perhaps on account of greater awareness (and consequent ability to engage with ethical, social, aesthetic, environmental and economic issues), are particularly active in running social networks and rebuilding sectors of the solidarity-based economy as part of a general systematisation opening the way to various possible forms of 'alternative economy'.

It is in this context that a number of networks have sprung up in Italy:

- Chief among them is the Lilliput Network (Rete Lilliput),⁶² which was founded in 1999 to link together the many social agents working for a 'just economy' in Italy. Countrywide, in the space of just a few years, it has helped bring together a thousand or so groups in 70 local co-ordination systems known as 'nodes'.
- Among Lilliput members, solidarity-based buying groups (Gruppi di acquisto solidale, GASs)⁶³ have played a decisive role; these are groups of socially responsible consumers who have joined together to facilitate buying and lend more political weight to their choices.
- Further networks have sprung from this proliferation, one of the largest being the Italian economic solidarity network (Rete di economia solidale italiana),⁶⁴ which has encouraged the various key players in economic solidarity districts (Distretti di economia solidale, DESs) to unite locally and horizontally to establish new economic channels able to take stronger and wider action on the basis of each area's specific features.

Active participation in these solidarity-based buying groups and economic solidarity districts therefore constitutes the background to and starting point for the thinking in this paper, which studies in greater detail the processes arising out of direct contact

between the various players – processes that give new meaning to the concept of the local level by making these players part of new entities made up of co-producers.

The co-producer: a consumer in the production chain

The world of socially responsible consumerism, and economic solidarity generally, exhibits a distinct dynamism, which means that it is constantly changing and is marked by myriad schemes across the globe. Even if these are often small-scale specialised experiments, they are highly innovative, exert a considerable social and cultural influence and also suggest new methods of managing economic relations.

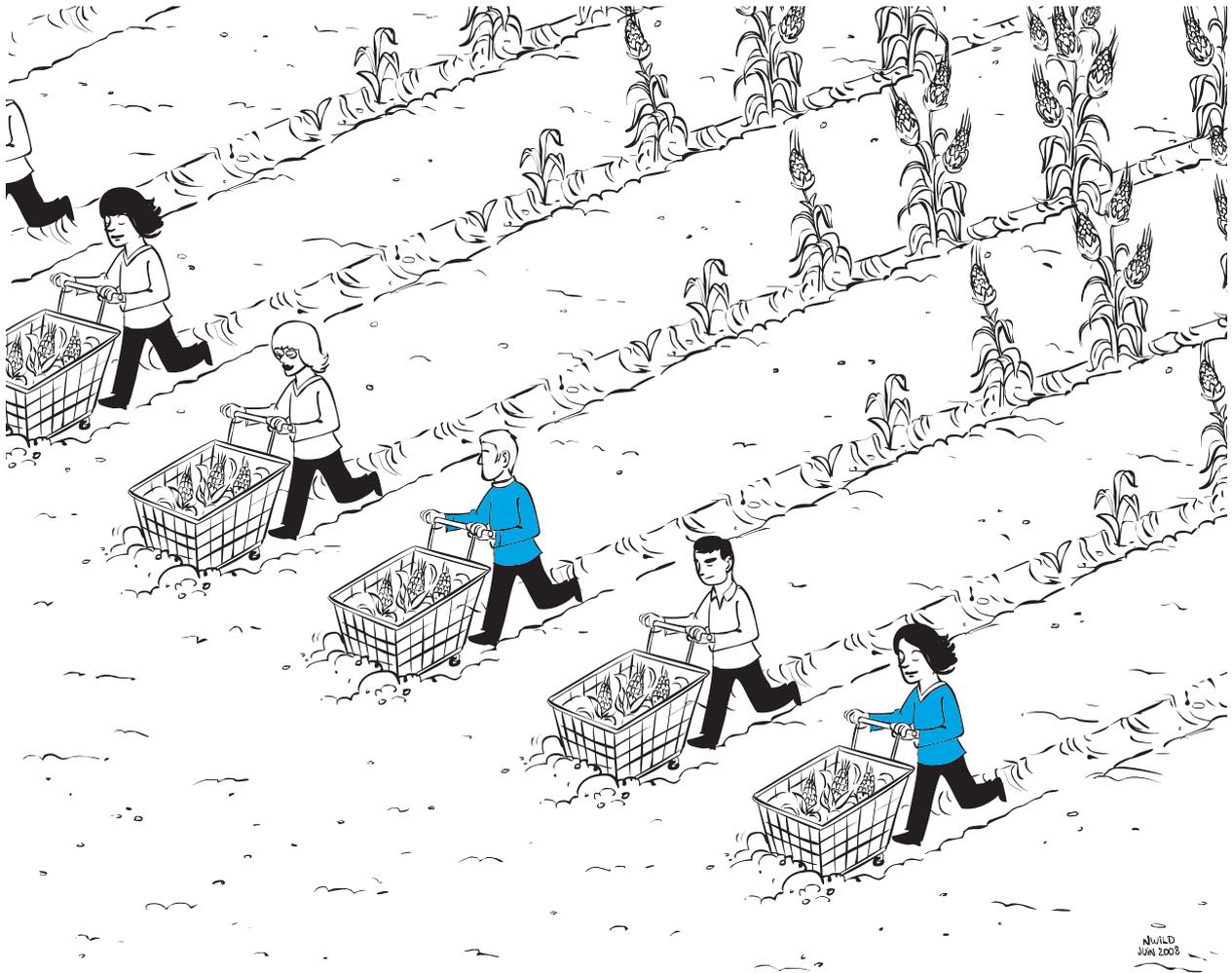
An important first step in developing socially responsible consumption is to go beyond discriminating individual consumerism to practise collective consumerism, first and foremost in groups and associations. Networking these initial forms of collective action makes it possible to disseminate practices widely and set in motion a process of collective learning that will guide development and help extend the network to other players, thus laying the foundations for a solidarity-based economy built on the interdependence of different sectors and settings (as in the case of economic solidarity districts).

Some 400 solidarity-based buying groups have been recorded in Italy, but the number of active groups is undoubtedly higher: because they are informal, there is no easy way of counting them. In addition, many other purchasing pools (for organic products, for example) have been established at various times in various circumstances. Such groups have a strong tendency to form small local networks for overcoming shared problems, increasing their purchasing power and exchanging knowledge and practice. In such processes, direct contact between consumer and producer (who nevertheless keep their separate roles) has, because of its importance, an initial popularising effect. This is how the term 'co-producers' starts to be used – in various contexts and

62. Lilliput Network: www.retelilliput.org.

63. Network of Italian solidarity-based buying groups (GASs): www.retegas.org.

64. Italian economic solidarity network: www.retecosol.org.



with various meanings. In fact, by its very nature socially responsible consumerism is both active and pro-active and therefore productive of new practices: although it contains elements of criticism, it never just makes demands but tries to put forward solutions and implement them itself.

Before studying interaction within the production chain, it is worth asking what socially responsible consumerism actually 'produces'. It has a string of consequences, making the co-producer a consumer who produces the following:

- culture and knowledge: being able to read labels, knowing about production chains and seasonal patterns, interpreting advertising messages, etc., all add up to a significant stock of cultural assets;
- social instinct: establishing contacts, networks and communities creates a social fabric and fosters mutuality, inclusion and therefore security;
- education: training in new lifestyles based on moderation, simplicity and thrifty use of resources makes for more rational, more provident consumption and spending;
- compliance with the law: concern for transparency and democratic control of economic processes, and direct support to local or regional employment, help to combat illegal work and organised crime; in Palermo, for example, this is one of the express aims of the End Extortion campaign ("Addio Pizzo"),⁶⁵ which uses socially responsible consumerism to select producers and retailers who are not at the mercy of the Mafia;
- participation: linking one's everyday actions to a particular view of society and the common good is a new form of activism, reflected in participation and active citizenship;

65. End Extortion (Addio Pizzo) campaign: www.addiopizzo.org.

- local development: supporting quality (that is, organic, eco-friendly, fair, solidarity-based, etc.) local production helps to promote solidarity-based development models in which output, work, rights and quality of life are reconciled;
- skills: reacquiring manual skills and the ability to produce independently increases self-sufficiency and independence in terms of consumer practices; for example, cultivating their own vegetable gardens, making their own bread and repairing their own electrical appliances are very common among solidarity-based buying groups and number among the activities promoted by the Justice Tallies campaign (Bilanci di Giustizia),⁶⁶ which involves approximately a thousand families in Italy who monitor their own consumption with a view to changing the economy through their everyday actions; community vegetable gardens, in which work, skills and time replace money for exchange of goods, are also becoming common.
- determining the types of product that are genuinely needed and identifying their providers, local if possible;
- obtaining information in order to make a knowledgeable choice of product and assess its production process;
- providing the producer with information about the quality and characteristics of the desired product;
- taking factors into account that have an impact on price-setting and production processes.

At the same time as individual needs are being redefined, the market is being pressed to meet often implicit needs, for it generally offers standardised products that take little account of the criteria which socially responsible consumption applies. It is not always possible to find small local producers able to provide appropriate solutions. Besides, in a market in the broad sense, the 'producer' has only indirect information about cultural trends among consumers, who, according to the statistics, today attach greater importance to the environment and individual rights. This pressure on the market encourages practical corrective action, but this is too often confined to greenwashing, which forces consumers to call on extra knowledge in trying to decide whether there is any substance to it. This type of remote pressure – typical where big business is concerned – makes relations more complex and abstract, and certainly less satisfactory.

The list could easily be added to, but these examples suffice to show how socially responsible consumerism in fact creates social inclusion. For instance, household indebtedness, due to growing reliance on consumer credit and a fall in purchasing power, is a worrying phenomenon that is on the increase. To this may be added a drop in saving capacity, producing an overall situation compounded by inability to manage a budget or determine priorities. In this context, collective consumerism, by teaching people to make better use of money and establishing social networks, in fact promotes social security.

In contrast, when direct contact with a producer is possible, as is usually the case at local level, the ensuing process is more concrete and allows the dialogue needed to define the chain's features. For example, in processes like those found in solidarity-based buying groups, experience shows that it is not always easy to determine a fair price because of the complexity of the production chain and the production factors involved, whereas direct contact and the trust that it brings with it enables these problems to be overcome and a price to be set that is satisfactory to all parties. The fact that thinking about fair prices encourages people to learn about and extend their knowledge of production processes is also a useful factor, and the resulting debate is therefore undoubtedly constructive.

In addition, the social and cultural value of socially responsible consumerism should be highlighted, especially given the symbolic importance attached to consumerism in our society. However, socially responsible consumerism is also beginning to act on specifically economic mechanisms because of the need to develop concrete and coherent answers to a growing proportion of individual needs. Action regarding the production chain means, at the outset:

66. Justice Tallies (Bilanci di Giustizia) campaign: www.bilancidigiustizia.it.

Discussion of the production chain has led to the spread of ‘short chain’ practices over the past few years. In Italy these practices are also taking hold at the behest of public authorities and as a result of legislative action, both of which recognise that they have a decisive role to play in supporting local economies, especially in sectors such as agriculture. In parallel with (formal and informal) purchasing pools working with local producers, pilot direct selling schemes and farmers’ markets are being developed in towns and villages. There are also some cases of particular interest, stemming from local economic-solidarity networks, where consumers involved in co-ordinating new projects play an important role. These networks’ direct contact with the local area is one of their basic features and provides familiarity with players, needs and peculiarities.

The project “Tra passata e futuro” (Between tomatoe sauce and future), started in the Trentino region in 2005 by the Trentino Arcobaleno economic solidarity network,⁶⁷ is a prime example. This networked pool buying initiative was based on a simple observation: every year many families in the Trentino would make their own passata (crushed strained tomatoes) but would almost always buy ingredients produced outside the region to do so – despite the fact that the Trentino produces excellent organic tomatoes for passata. The main factors were knowledge of the area and of the needs of socially responsible consumers. The first steps in launching the project were then:

- to identify producers willing to produce organic tomatoes under an agreement whereby the quantity of produce to be purchased in summer would be estimated in winter, thus making it possible to plan production;
- participation of interested consumers willing to pre-order the quantity of tomatoes that they were going to use and thereby ‘forced’ to think about their future needs in advance.

Orders were then collected from customers at a pre-determined price and with an advance payment of 20%. Thus the producers were sure of selling their

products in March, while the customers were able to reserve their tomatoes at an agreed price unaffected by market influences and fluctuations. The tomatoes were subject to strict organic certification by an outside body. They were therefore healthier and more eco-friendly; nor did they generate any waste because their packaging was reusable.

In 2006 four farms and a range of solidarity-based buying groups took part in the project, representing a total of 349 people who bought 22 tonnes of tomatoes. As the project has developed, an attempt has been made not only to retain its spirit but also to improve its organisation and make it financially sustainable by, amongst other things, budgeting for a small profit to pay one person. There has thus been a transition from management based on voluntary participation to a set-up which guarantees the durability of the whole production chain, which has since been extended to take in other products offered by the area.

The “Ear of Grain & Bread Bin” project (Spiga & Madia) is a second very significant example. Promoted by the Brianza economic solidarity district (DES Brianza)⁶⁸ to the north of Milan, it is intended to test out a short production chain that is local, solidarity-based and transparent. The project is based on the work of a number of solidarity-based buying groups in the Emilia-Romagna region, which, through their support for struggling local farmers and bakers, have succeeded in establishing a totally closed production chain for bread and thus made an entire valley of the Apennines self-sufficient whilst saving jobs. The basic idea was to reconstruct a bread production chain starting with the growing of organic wheat, through to milling and baking, all within a radius of a few miles. The venture simultaneously met the interests and aspirations of various players:

- a landowning family that was refusing to turn its farmland into building land and was keen to turn it over to organic farming;

67. Trentino Arcobaleno economic solidarity network (Trento economic solidarity district): www.trentinoarcobaleno.it.

68. Brianza economic solidarity network: www.retecosol.org (click on “Documenti”, then “Distretti”, then “Brianza”).

- a farmers' co-operative that had been in organic farming for several years and was offering work to the disadvantaged;
- families in the local network of solidarity-based buying groups who were looking for a source of bread and flour;
- a family-run mill and baker's shop that were willing to co-operate.

A project was therefore set up, with a finance plan and an 'economic solidarity and co-operation agreement', whereby consumers, producers, distributors and landowners mutually undertook to rely on each other to introduce short production chains and low-impact crops and produce, expand employment for the disadvantaged and partly share the business risks (advance on purchase) as well as the profits (solidarity fund).

During the wheat-sowing period in 2006, families from 15 partner solidarity-buying groups placed their orders and paid an advance, thus supporting production. In summer 2007, 240 quintals of grain were harvested, and 140 member families are now receiving their co-produced bread every week at a great deal less than market cost. With regard to future development on the consumer front, an explicit attempt is therefore being made to break out of the role of 'consumer' as passive user to move towards the role of 'co-producer' who instigates projects on the basis of actual needs and implements them jointly with the producer.

To extrapolate the salient features of these schemes, what we have here is a new type of 'production chain business' with the two noteworthy features of participative design and joint responsibility.

Participative design means:

- always starting from clearly defined 'demand' from socially responsible consumers;
- ensuring transparency of objectives, which must go beyond the producers' need to sell more and the consumers' need to make savings;
- acknowledging equally all the players (co-producers) involved in operating the system.

Joint responsibility means:

- finding methods of sharing business risk and investment;
- trying to strike a balance between the services provided and mutual voluntary work;
- paying attention to both producers' problems and consumers' demands.

Within the co-production process, an attempt is therefore made to redefine jointly the rules governing operation and interplay of the various roles involved in production itself. As far as consumers in the narrow sense are concerned, well-defined demand and, more concretely, advance ordering – as a form of collectively organised choice arising out of discussion and education relating to responsible consumption – play an important role. However, schemes of this kind have a number of crucial aspects that need close attention:

- transport and distribution of goods require a degree of organisation;
- planning has to be refined in the light of experience and requires flexibility;
- producers' requirements and ability to meet planning constraints must be carefully monitored;
- fickleness of consumer demand, including demand for a given product, needs countering by consumer re-education and re-examination of the spurious 'freedom of choice' offered by the supermarket model;
- risk sharing, in particular payment ahead of production, needs developing and consumers need to be made more aware of their responsibilities.

In every case the main task is to build contact networks through which projects can operate, relying on mutual trust rather than economic guarantees. It should be stressed that this type of project cannot be exported as a package. The project approach must be extrapolated and mapped onto the features of the relevant area and consumer network. There are, in addition, various cases where this approach has been tested in more complex sectors (clothing, energy, telephony) where large volumes are required as well as greater investment in terms of knowledge and contacts in order to develop meaningful solutions.

In the field of information technology, for example, freeware is an important model demonstrating how co-operation and sharing can be more effective than, and preferable to, rivalry and outright competition.

The democratisation of economic processes is therefore one of the main outcomes at which the co-producer is aiming. In the current system, decision-making power over these processes is concentrated among players in the financial and supermarket sectors, who alone determine production, prices, modes of transport and distribution of wealth. We need only reflect that the profit margin which in our examples is no more than 10% is usually ten times higher in the supermarket sector, with the end customer paying all the costs of the system and leaving the producer with only a tiny fraction of the end profit. Co-producing with businesses in a production chain under the arrangements that we have just described means reclaiming the power to decide or, at the very least, influence what is to be produced, at what cost, by what means, according to what criteria and for whose benefit.

In short, we seem to be seeing a new stage in the progress of socially responsible consumer behaviour, one in which the consumer becomes a co-producer and brings his or her personal activism to bear on the heart of the economic system in order to rethink it more democratically. The aim is to go beyond sectoral roles and the spreading and mixing of functions in order to move towards multidisciplinary profiles: co-producers able to do several jobs at once. This should be achievable without any sacrifice of the earlier work of putting pressure on the market and developing networks of socially responsible consumers, and must bear in mind that the primary aim of these forms of parallel economy consists in demonstrating that a new pattern of consumption and production is possible, worthwhile and desirable.

The “local” as a means of communication

While the local level is a key element in moving socially responsible consumerism towards further

forms of co-production where opportunities for interaction extend throughout the production chain, it has also provided the momentum for the extensive spread of socially responsible consumer networks across the country.

Direct experience, together with a certain amount of research on the subject, has confirmed this and underlined the ways in which socially responsible consumer practices are spreading and have gained a foothold in everyone’s daily life, even to the point of becoming a way of life. The content of the message – responsible consumerism – can be conveyed only by direct contact and not by mass advertising, which is already sending out a nondescript volume of sometimes even conflicting messages. Today, communication has become too complex, as the mass media – sometimes called the ‘mass entertainment’ media – create so much background noise that it is too time-consuming to make out each individual message from the multitude of solicitations. This accustoms people to being bombarded with images and content, behind which lies an entire industry that invests enormous resources in trying to make messages stand out. Furthermore, we should realise that mass advertising – whose aim is to colonise the collective imagination through the virtual world of the ‘global supermarket’ – is intimately associated with the model of the individualistic society, which is based on commerce that uses mass advertising and that, too often, is used as a tool to regenerate this model (the means implies the end, so to speak).

Yet everyone knows that real life is different and that our experience of everyday life covers a multitude of occurrences depending on other factors – relationships, solidarity, pleasure and co-operation – to do with satisfaction of normal needs, whether essential or non-essential. In the real world, practices associated with social relations do not grow out of marketing or communication techniques but develop in individual and independent forms from the bottom up, according to culture and context, producing considerable social biodiversity, which evolves through a layering of experience and language, not gaining ground systematically but instead spreading in haphazard fashion.

Experiments in socially responsible consumerism also start from below, primarily from the need to reclaim freedom of choice and share it with others. They originate in real life, where, regardless of the dominant imagery, relationships still constitute the true wealth. Inasmuch as such practices are a source of well-being and give value and meaning to individual lives, it may then be possible to initiate a process of local promotion, not as a result of calculation or strategy but rather in the form of recommendations and unsolicited support for a shared asset that is increasingly coming to reassert itself. It must be stressed that analysis of such experiments shows that socially responsible consumerism offers considerable opportunities for those engaging in it:

- renewed ability to make contact;
- a new type of civic activism;
- broadening of individual horizons;
- ability to act with forethought;
- a chance to adopt a consistent approach to day-to-day living.

Such opportunities are potentially fulfilling. They encourage socially responsible consumers to become active and, above all, to spread the approach.

Local promotion is therefore a tool arising out of minimally funded grassroots experiments and from the particular context of the action by social stakeholders, who thus – often unconsciously – acquire abilities, creativity and skills that deserve to be exploited and developed, including through training. Mass advertising and the market recognised the value of this approach well before we did, and we are today seeing an increasingly marked tendency to customise advertising as much as possible by means of artificial proximity, even extending to talk of local marketing. Location is also an important factor in promotion. The local area is regarded as the message mediator and a presence in the local area is therefore required – a characteristic of schemes which originate and spread from below and are then adjusted to the particular situations to which they are being reapplied. Standardisation, brought about by the globalisation of multinationals and businesses in general, has created a remoteness from the local level which

is very difficult to offset and which requires enormous investment in advertising rather than actual production. We are thus seeing, from direct experience, the growing spread of social networks acting as transmitters of messages, and these networks, in the course of their development, gain self-knowledge and insight into the role that they can play in a collective learning process.

This promotion takes place at the human pace of real life, where, instead of broadcasting technology, it is direct contact, a glance and a handshake, dialogue, trust and shared experience that count – in short, everything that takes shape through ‘word of mouth’. These ‘promotion tools’ obviously cannot convey messages as instantaneously as an e-mail or a television broadcast, but they have the ability to go much deeper and spread messages to places where they can develop into new independent daily practices.

Thus local promotion, as a matter of natural inclination rather than deliberate choice, becomes the main conduit for disseminating experience drawn from everyone’s daily life in the same way as socially responsible consumerism. It is precisely through such local grounding that this experience can be pooled: its initial dissemination is through networks (family, friends, associations, the community). Today, strengthening the awareness that everyone is a social player who can be a vehicle for this type of promotion is a fundamental step towards sounder, more structured solidarity-based forms of social networks able to act as collective entities. Raising this awareness may lead socially responsible consumers to send out their messages through the social networks that criss-cross local areas. For this, the best way is involvement in actual projects, where, once again, direct experience and the meeting of actual needs make it easier to set up shared ventures. Co-production projects are a concrete example of this: by constantly gaining ground they produce a wave of awareness within the networks which adopt them.

Communication technologies such as the Internet may also prove useful: they can be used to support the birth of social networks and substantially improve networking skills, although their strength is nevertheless dependent on establishing non-virtual

contact and putting a face to an e-mail address. Such technology should therefore be regarded as a medium or channel for gaining access to real networks. Basically, the networks themselves may be said to be their own best communication tools for spreading the message about responsible consumerism, and their talent for local promotion is undoubtedly their most powerful and innovative tool. When networks become aware and are galvanised into action, uncontrollable but extremely effective processes of dissemination may be triggered.

By way of example, mention may be made of the “Peace from every Balcony” campaign (*Pace da tutti i balconi*)⁶⁹ launched in 2002, for which the Lilliput Network urged all Italians to hang a rainbow peace flag from their balconies. In the space of a few months this became so popular that the number of flags displayed reached two million, and thousands of people became ‘transmitters’ of the message in their local networks. This example, at national level, shows a fairly speedy and consistent message in relation to a specific action, but the potential of such messages always lies in their ability to foster an awareness, which then makes people reflect.

An example at the sub-national level is the Como economic solidarity district, where the “This Island” network (*Lisola che c’è*)⁷⁰ annually holds a fair by means of the social capital the network is able to mobilise. Organised with minimum financial investment and reliance on word of mouth, the event is attended by over 10 000 people and introduces them to the 150 or so economic solidarity and socially responsible consumer schemes that exist in the area. Here too we can speak of co-production centred on organising contacts for an event that has a social, cultural but also economic value. Over the past few years, the use of economic solidarity fairs as a promotion tool has become widespread in Italy: there are now dozens of events, sometimes national but more often local, which are often a way of activating the grapevine and raising consumer awareness. The large attendance such events attract makes them a

good way of generating support for local networks, giving them room for manoeuvre and so galvanising them to set up joint projects. As regards raising consumer awareness, the range of programmes aimed at promoting a change of lifestyle among city-dwellers, often with substantial co-operation from the public authorities, is continuing to grow: the first and most important of these programmes is called “Would You Change?” (*Cambieresti?*).⁷¹ Started in 2005 in the city of Venice, for several months there were some 1 250 families participating. In Brazil’s social and solidarity-based economy – which is more developed than most – such programmes have tried to consolidate successful experiments through learning by doing, by institutionalising policies and by training managers. This made it necessary to move away from single projects towards organised ones and therefore focus efforts on the networks in order to reach more people.

The setting-up, maintenance and development of socially responsible consumer networks are thus further strategic aspects on which the spread of these schemes will depend, bearing in mind, however, that the effects will be felt not immediately, like a tidal wave, but rather after successive changes, in long waves. Experience of local economic solidarity networks has also shown that the participative approach and co-ordination of network processes are not sustainable if reliance is placed entirely on spontaneity. There have to be appropriate tools, resources and training. To attract a large number of socially responsible consumers who will provide support to new producers and new co-production chains, it is necessary to organise economic solidarity networks that facilitate contact, communication and project development.

The training of network coordinators, able, at different levels, to galvanise local areas and help develop an ethos of socially responsible consumption, may therefore be the first investment. Direct experience in this field has been gained through the EQUAL “New Lifestyles” (*Nuovi Stili di Vita*) project⁷²

69. Peace flag campaign: www.bandieredipace.org.

70. *Lisola che c’è*, Como economic solidarity district: www.lisolachece.org.

71. *Would You Change?* project (*Cambieresti?*): www.cambieresti.net.

72. EQUAL *New Lifestyles* (*Nuovi Stili di Vita*) project: <http://nsv.bi.clafucina.it>.

centred on training network co-ordinators who then test their skills by co-ordinating local areas and maintaining local economic solidarity networks in various provinces of Lombardy.

Crucial points and development potential

We have concentrated on certain characteristics of socially responsible consumerism while at the same time trying to derive some guidance from them for future work. Here it is necessary to consider some crucial points for ensuring that processes are genuinely inclusive, both horizontally and at different levels, in particular so that the most vulnerable cease to be purely passive beneficiaries or victims of marginalisation. And these crucial points also of course have a bearing on potential in terms of practices for finding answers to establishing a more inclusive and solidarity-based system.

At the global level, the situations and factors behind tendencies of this kind have reached a crux that calls for action on our part: the shortage of material goods in the South is a very different incentive factor from the excess found in the West. A significant level of awareness is needed to motivate socially responsible western consumers, and research has shown that the latter are usually people who carry economic and cultural weight and therefore have a greater degree of choice. We know, in addition, that poverty and lack of choice are closely associated and that information for accessing goods and services that are essential in a particular context plays an important part in social exclusion. One of the main objectives of socially responsible consumption must therefore be to create democratic conditions for accessing its quality-based practices and therefore, first and foremost, making them more available: it is not enough to leave the way open; the way must also be signposted as far as possible, especially for people with less information.

Another crucial factor is the danger of socially responsible consumers losing their political instincts: whether in individual or collective practice, there is a

risk of becoming closed to outside influence, ceasing to broaden one's horizons and ceasing to feel part of any wider process, and while this is undoubtedly conducive to private well-being it means that energies and potential are wasted. It is essential to remain very open to other networks and practices, both near and far, because dissemination and growth can occur only through the establishment of new links, further proliferation and new alliances.

A further important stage will be to tackle the workplace as well and test new approaches that introduce a greater degree of participation and joint responsibility. In precisely the same way as consumption, work is all-pervasive and we badly need to devise coherent forms of what might be termed 'socially responsible work'.

As for the public policies that could be introduced, what is necessary, more than direct action, is an acknowledgement of the value of the kind of approach we have been discussing, acknowledgement in the form of legislation and instruments creating a basic framework that promotes, protects and supports the approach. The object is not to relegate government action to the background but genuinely to apply the subsidiarity principle, acknowledge the community's capacity for independent organisation and recognise the part this can play. The practices, for their part, must as far as possible be self-sufficient, internally generated, genuine – that is, meeting actual needs – and able to show involvement and reciprocity. Social currencies, or complementary currencies, are an example of instruments designed for this purpose: they can be spent locally on goods and services produced in the area and can maximise the potential of socially responsible consumerism by promoting local development and becoming tools to include the most vulnerable – for example, by forming part of income support and also by putting a value on contributions of time. During this stage, which is also critical for public funds, institutions might use practices such as mutual support and non-monetary exchange as part of social welfare at local level.

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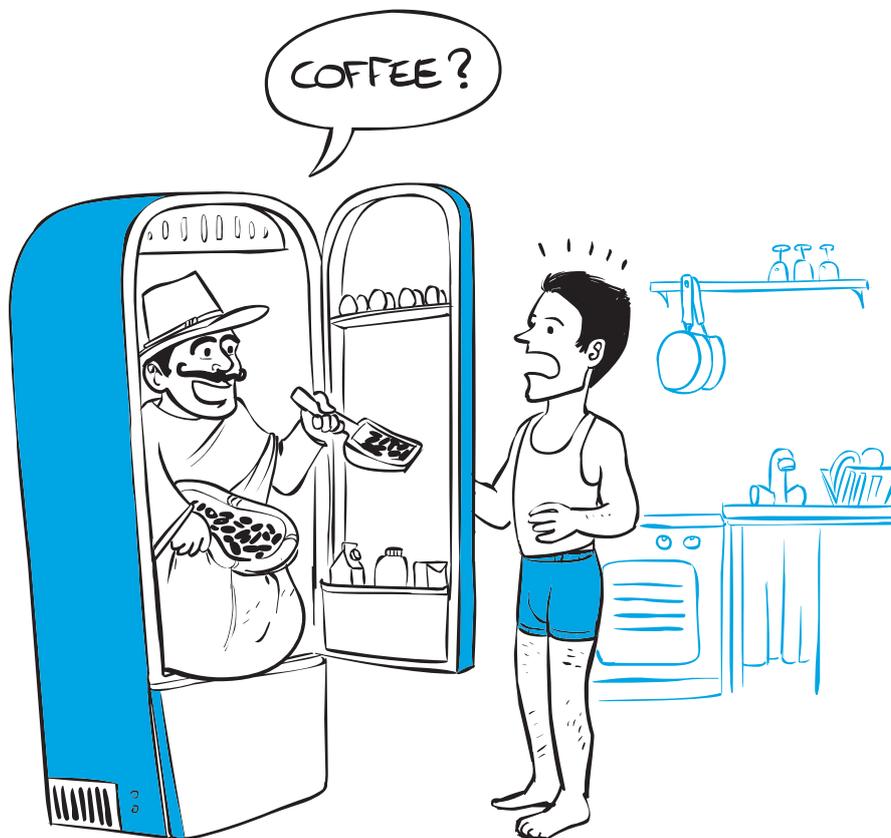
FAIR TRADE: LONG-DISTANCE AND SHORT SUPPLY CHAINS. WHEN BUYING GOODS MEANS SHOWING SOLIDARITY WITH PRODUCERS

Christophe Mالدردر, Solidar'Monde (France)

One of the features of trade in its 'pure' form is that it removes social links and dehumanises the process. In our contemporary western societies, consumers have ended up buying anonymous products from anonymous producers. While the deterioration of consumer/producer relations started with mass production at the time of the Industrial Revolution, it accelerated considerably with globalisation at the end of the 20th century, when the anonymity of the market, the geographical fragmentation of industries, the mobility of production areas and the volatility of relations between producers and suppliers were all accentuated at the same time, and this in a context of continuously changing products and production

techniques. The link between producers and consumers has completely disintegrated, the consumer very often only relating to a product because of the brand.

Today, states are trying to impose the formulation of strict rules on the quality (food ingredients, for example) and origins of goods (traceability). However, we are more interested in those new phenomena and initiatives which are on the increase and which aim to recreate the lost link between producers and consumers. Where food is concerned, the concept of 'local specialities' is being revived. Thanks not only to indications of geographical origin, but also the promotion by mass marketing brands of the authen-



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ticity of local produce, the consumer can now identify with a place and thus with its traditions, heritage and farmers.

Allowing consumers to see beyond the product to its producer, particularly when they are more vulnerable...

While this relationship aspect is again becoming central to the new patterns of consumption, certain initiatives are imparting a specific character to these in the name of solidarity. We will look at two of these here, in order to illustrate how this relationship ethic works: firstly fair trade, and secondly solidarity-based short supply chains. We will describe in turn the cases of the French fair trade network, “Artisans du Monde”, and the local solidarity-based partnerships between consumers and producers, mainly peasants (AMAPs, *Associations pour le Maintien d'une Agriculture Paysanne*, in France) or CSA (Community Supported Agriculture in English-speaking countries), in order to show how the products passing along these supply chains symbolise solidarity with the ‘producers’ and equity in trade, and how the producers thus assume a distinct face. But we will also see how geographical, social and cultural distance – lesser or greater according to the supply chain – influences the emergence of this face.

Fair trade recreates a long-distance bond with producers of the South

Fair trade has played a pioneering role for the last thirty years or so, giving a face to products from the South sold in specialised shops (world shops) such as those of Artisans du Monde. In the 1970s and 1980s activists tried to mobilise people against the unfair balance of North-South relations by putting on the market products of marginal craft workers living in shanty towns, or impoverished rural landless labourers. The producers of the South were presented mainly as victims, left behind by develop-

ment, exploited by the multinationals of the North or oppressed by dictators. Or they embodied political regimes with which it was necessary to show solidarity: buying ‘coffee from Nicaragua’ for example, was then a way of expressing support for the Sandinista Revolution (Lemay, 2007).

Over the years, the producers of the South supplying the shops of Artisans du Monde have changed, and some supply chains have grown: some more specialised producers have been brought into the chains, making it possible to offer better quality products; food products, some of which are now more processed (like chocolate), have been diversified, originating from agricultural co-operatives all over the world. The ‘faces’ of the producers are nevertheless still displayed in shops, and the story of their products is told: posters show photos of the producers accompanied by slogans, small cards are placed on the shelves or are handed to buyers, detailed leaflets about producers are made available, encompassing personal accounts, life stories, the socio-economic conditions of production, characteristics of organisations, the structure of costs, etc. The volunteer sales assistants promote the products in other respects, by providing the visitor with information about the producers and talking in more general terms about the benefits of fair trade.

The craft or food item becomes a method of mediation between the buyer and a distant producer, as well as an embodiment of a fair relationship. It carries a message which presents the producer and his or her living and production conditions, or which explains the distortions of international trade. In buying the product, the consumer becomes aware of the practical repercussions of the purchase: he or she is supporting a given co-operative of small-scale producers, providing vulnerable people with income, or helping to defend the rights of one group or another. The buyer is therefore going to consume a product and, at the same time, help a particular cause, an identifiable human group which can be geographically located, and which in a way becomes close to him. It is rather as if he or she were acting as the sponsor of a child in a country of the South, providing support for the schooling of a specific child in a specific

village on the other side of the world, a child with a face (Ballet & Carimentrand, 2005).

Within this arrangement, the members of *Artisans du Monde* play the role of interpreter, of spokespersons for objects which obviously cannot speak for themselves.⁷³ They are therefore sellers trying to stimulate a relationship, instigate a purchase, but they are also teachers on a mission to provide 'development education' to a wider audience than just shoppers, including such groups as school pupils.

These relationships which become looser and less focused due to their indirect communication via documents from commercial 'intermediaries' (an umbrella organisation, a purchasing group), are periodically 'revitalised' through direct contact: the volunteers visit the producers 'over there', or the latter visit in person while in France for the annual presentations of collections or themed weeks (Fair Trade, International Solidarity, Sustainable Development, etc.).

Weekly boxes of produce: an expression of new links between city-dwellers and farmers

Local solidarity-based partnerships between consumers and producers play a part in a more recent phenomenon than fair trade, a process whereby cities and their surrounding countryside are brought closer together. They consist in a partnership between a group of urban consumers and a local farmer, united by specific commitments to one another centred on periodical delivery of a box of fresh produce (fruit and vegetables). The consumers commit themselves for a whole season, paying for the crop in advance at a price considered to be remunerative for the farmer. The latter, in turn, undertakes to provide members with a regular supply of the broadest range of produce possible, in boxes that they can collect from either the farm or another predetermined place (see article by Daniel Vuillon).

Geographical closeness and lack of intermediaries make possible a far more direct link between buyers and producers than fair trade, because it involves a personal partnership. Yet the informative and educational dimension similarly plays a key role in the partnership. The process of production (and of distribution) is made transparent. The producer must provide information about his or her farm and methods of production and give an account of any difficulties. 'Farm visits' are organised, sometimes taking the form of veritable educational workshops. The consumers learn about the constraints of production and the seasonality of products, which results in the content of the boxes becoming more meaningful (as well as offering quality).

Through this link with the producer, consumers offer an alternative outlet to the farmers who are inexorably disappearing from outlying suburban areas, but at the same time, they are fighting for a much bigger cause. Producers participating in such partnerships have, in effect, distanced themselves from 'productivist' agriculture, and their practices are inspired by organic farming methods. To be a member of such a partnership also means being involved in activist networks which clearly distinguish themselves from the intensive farming model and the commercial supply chains linked to mass marketing, and which work to preserve small-scale agriculture.

The main difference between this producer-consumer link and that which prevails within long-distance fair trade lies in the fact that the terms of this relationship are not limited to a purchase which seals a link, a commitment. The purchase is part of a broader link. While with the local partnerships the consumer loses the 'freedom' to choose between different products, he or she is, however, involved in the implementation of a system of production and trade with the producer (Dubuisson-Quellier & Lamine, 2004). The choice of production, the all-inclusive price (which is fixed in advance), distribution regulations, etc., stem from decisions made jointly. The consumer must accept the ups and downs of production: if there is a poor harvest (due to disease or weather conditions), scheme members cannot expect to be reimbursed, but in the event of a good harvest, their boxes will

73. Giraud N. (2003).

contain more. The box therefore symbolises a fair relationship based on collective confidence, as distinct from a purely commercial link.

What faces are shown?

Fair trade and short supply chains, represented here by Artisans du Monde and AMAPs, are based, as we have seen, on a web of rewoven links between producers and consumers, which take the form of partnerships. These links allow the channels of production and distribution to become more transparent. They shorten the distance created by the segmentation of roles and the length of these chains in the ‘conventional’ economy. They allow producers, particularly those who are more vulnerable – whether craftsmen/farmers from countries of the South or a dying breed of French farmers – to show a human face behind their products, whether these are craft products, food from tropical climes or boxes of fresh food. Yet there remains a difference in the nature of the two supply chains.

With fair trade, the distance that is both geographical and cultural leads to a production system with a very specific image. Formerly the Artisans du Monde movement portrayed the producers particularly as victims of an unjust international order and presented their efforts to extricate themselves from poverty. With time, these images diversified, and now illustrate the capacities of the producers for collective organisation, their cultural traditions and way of life, or even their regained dignity. But current changes in the representation of others, shifting from the ‘compassionate’ to the ‘just’, still blur the type of image conveyed by the movement.

The historical imagination of Artisans du Monde is in fact based on a logic of pity: it tries to provoke a reaction to “faraway suffering” (Boltanski, 2006) and finds its affiliation in previous practices of paternalistic aid and charity. This humanitarian aspect of fair trade still constitutes a largely effective selling point in order to prompt a purchase to support “small disadvantaged farmers” (Lemay, 2007). A second representation, which is just emerging, is itself inspired

by the idea of justice. It relies on the concept of a real partnership between equals, and implies a far more real and concrete participation by the volunteers of Artisans du Monde in these partnerships, through a mass of personal, institutional and professional links which have flourished with the decentralisation of co-operation programmes and the growth of mass tourism in countries of the South over the last decade. It encourages a real knowledge of other people, and means that images closer to reality must be produced, which make people aware of the range and complexity of collective changes for and by the poor people of the South.

This producer’s face is therefore becoming more like that shown by local partnerships; the vulnerable producer is not another ‘imaginary person’, but someone made more real because they are participating directly in a relationship built up jointly, within which solidarity is not just based on the idea of redistribution, but also on mutual commitment.⁷⁴

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74. Note that another way of expressing solidarity is now emerging: that of making the AMAPs accessible to people who are experiencing difficulties.

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SUPPORTING LOCAL FARMERS THROUGH CUSTOMER LOYALTY

Daniel Vuillon, Urgenci International Network

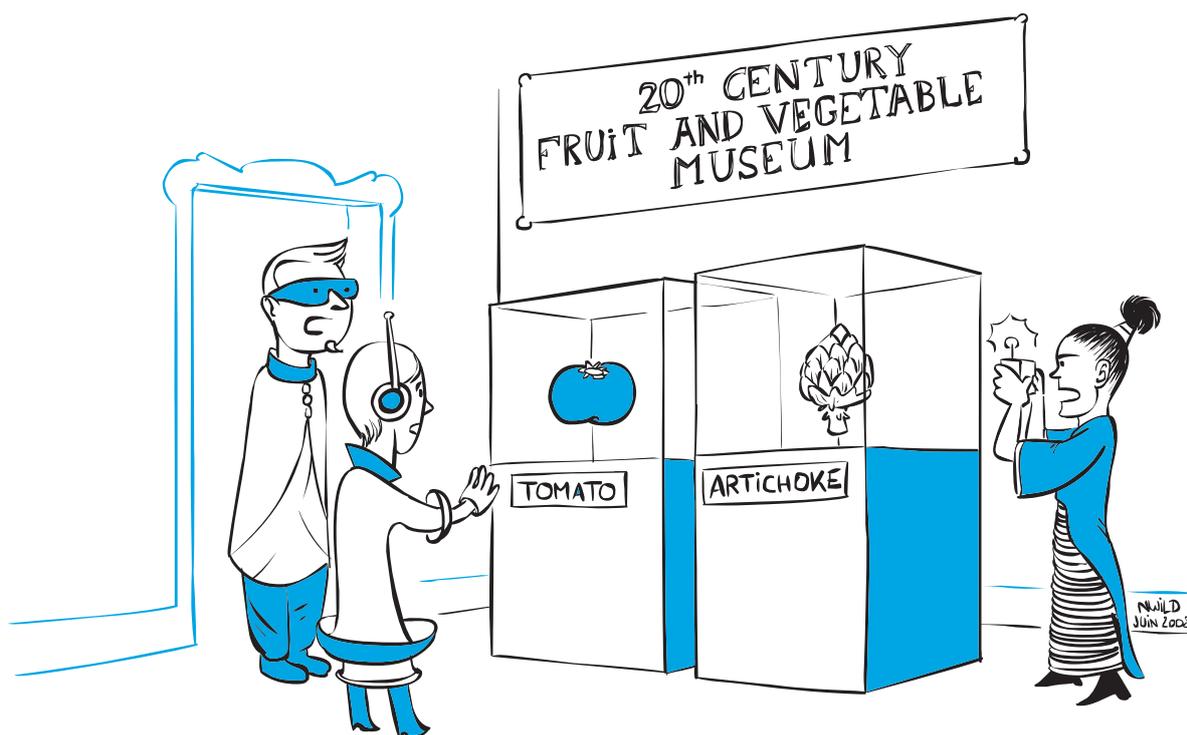
From its earliest days, small-scale farming has played the role of producing food for the people living nearby. This is still the case in a good number of countries on our planet, but the difficulties are increasing. In practice, whichever the country concerned, small-scale farmers are among the very poorest population groups. Their numbers are dwindling steadily, as is evident from the figures showing that, for the first time in human history, city-dwellers outnumbered their rural counterparts worldwide in 2007. The shift from traditional farming to agribusiness is wreaking havoc in the countryside, in developed and developing countries alike. International trade is contributing to a relocation of the food production function to the countries with the lowest production costs. This trend is aggravated by the fact that half of the people who live on this planet have just two dollars a day to live on. Producers are expected to produce ever greater quantities of increasingly attractive, cheaper and cheaper food. If someone else can do better, they must simply pack up and swell the ranks of those

who are excluded from the system, trapped in the vicious circle of exclusion and poverty.

Despite the good reputation of its farmers, the latest agricultural census shows that France had lost half of its small-scale farmers since the previous census. And the trend continues, with another 30 000 leaving every year. It is aggravated by the centralisation of commercial activities, with the market share of the mass-marketeers growing from 5% in 1980 to 90% in 2006 in sectors such as fruit and vegetables!

The situation of consumers

It is becoming ever more difficult for consumers, who are increasingly city-dwellers, to have any feeling for the origins of their food, which has often travelled 1 500 kilometres before it reaches their plate. They have moved a very long way away from any reference point in terms of the land and the seasons, spending less and less time preparing their meals.



Modern life and work and the consumer society have caused a decrease in the proportion of the household budget spent on food: now just 12%, compared to the immediate post-war figure (in France) of 50%. However, families are now beginning to worry a great deal about the lack of food safety, with cancers being caused by foodstuffs and pollution, and the problems of obesity, mad cow disease, foot-and-mouth disease, bird flu, and so on.

The history of local producer-consumer contracts

It was a lack of food safety that raised awareness among a number of Japanese mothers during the 1960s. After the presence of heavy metals in food caused numerous deaths (Minamata disease), mothers in Japanese cities no longer knew where they could buy safe food for their children. They got together to find a small farmer as close as possible to home, asking him to produce a variety of healthy and seasonal food for them to share, in return for which they would pay him in advance. Thus came into existence the first Teikei system, a name meaning 'relationship', sometimes rendered as 'food with the farmer's face on it'.

From Japan, this concept travelled to Switzerland (Les jardins de cocagne), the United States (CSA, Community-Supported Agriculture), Canada (CSA, but ASC in Quebec), France (AMAPs) and Portugal (RECIPROCO). It exists not only in Asia, but also in South America (Brazil and Argentina), and is beginning in Africa (Mali and Togo) and eastern Europe (Russia and Romania). An international network known as Urgenci links together those who are actively involved in this producer/consumer concept.

The benefits of the concept to the consumer

- Traceability of food, so that consumers know exactly where it has come from, how it got to them and who delivered it.

- Exceptional taste and nutritional value, thanks partly to the short supply chain bringing freshly-picked produce.
- A preventive health function; as Hippocrates once said: "Let food be thy medicine".
- A link with nature and the soil, excellent reference points for children in particular.
- A social bond created with the farmer, referred to in Quebec as the 'family farmer', as well as with the other families who come to collect their weekly box.
- Accurate knowledge of the weekly food spend, thanks to the subscription principle.
- The discovery of previously unknown tastes and flavours.
- The satisfaction of helping to keep a small farmer in business, maintaining his or her skills and the fertility of land close to where the consumer lives, as well as preserving biodiversity and small farmers' food-producing role for future generations.
- Solidarity with his or her farming partner when the natural vagaries of the weather adversely affect production.

The benefits of the concept to the producer

- The opportunity to escape from the vicious circle of productivism and the drive to produce ever greater quantities of increasingly attractive, cheaper and cheaper food. The producer's income no longer depends on multiplication of the output per hectare by the market-imposed price per kilo of the produce, since all the costs, including remuneration for the work done, are included in the price paid in advance.
- A guaranteed income and a certainty that the goods produced will be sold.
- The opportunity, without financial risk, to move towards production methods which respect the environment and the health of the partners involved.
- The opportunity to create stable and sustainable jobs.

- The opportunity to earn a living without public subsidies, while charging fair prices in the light of production costs.
 - The opportunity to preserve his or her main instrument, fertile land, and the biodiversity needed today, and perhaps even more so tomorrow.
 - Recognition and appreciation by society of his or her role as a food producer.
 - Personal knowledge of the customers to whom he or she supplies food brings a sense of responsibility and encourages practice of the transparency necessary to inspire trust, which must not just exist, but must also be earned.
 - The enduring nature of the concept makes it possible to make plans with confidence for long-term investments in equipment or, for example, in the planting of fruit trees or improvements to the fertility of the soil.
 - This solidarity-based economy permanently removes any risk of falling into exclusion and poverty.
- of a study of ‘cultural creatives’ showing that 37% of French people wished to subscribe to alternative concepts.
 - 20% of the population would equate to 75 000 hectares needing to be preserved in the areas around French cities, just to produce fruit and vegetables.
 - A different approach to the preservation of fertile land is also possible: it is easy to calculate the surface area theoretically needed to feed a given population, such as that of a municipality or a major built-up area, taking account of our vital need for cereals, proteins, fruit and vegetables from diverse, but good quality, sources. These notional surface areas can be compared to the actual areas revealed by the agricultural censuses organised by departmental Directorates of Agriculture. The resulting ratio can be used to give an indication of the community’s level of dependence where food security is concerned.

The benefits of the concept to society

Food, air and water are vital to the human race. It is a prime public service to ensure that every population group has these three elements available in sufficient quantities, and of good quality. Local contracts between producers and consumers at citizens’ initiative are part of the effort to achieve this. Public bodies can also play an important part in the shift to this solidarity-based economy:

- Through the maintenance of fertile land in the areas around cities. Local production, as well as bringing benefits to the environment by cutting the need for transport, with its associated pollution and other negative effects on global warming, meets a growing public demand. As long ago as 2004, the agency which observes living conditions in France, “Credoc”, announced that 20% of the population was likely to join the same kind of scheme as France’s AMAPs. These figures were confirmed with the publication in January 2007
- I have personally made this calculation in respect of my own grouping of towns, finding that, were all transport to cease tomorrow and all land to be cultivated to produce food (such land currently represents only 8% of the total surface area), it would be possible to feed only one person in two! Dependency on other areas is already a reality, which is why we have an interest in neighbouring areas also maintaining their capacity to produce excess food to feed the population of my city.
- Whatever approach is taken, the maintenance of fertile land is in the public interest, since it safeguards one of our vital functions and must be a priority of all the public bodies responsible, in an elementary application of the precautionary principle.
 - The concept has significant implications for employment: in the fruit and vegetable sector alone, we can say that one permanent job is created for every 40 subscribing families (a family = a couple with two children). These jobs are sustainable, for the families concerned will continue to need food daily, with a requirement for quality food that can but increase.

Local contracts between producers and consumers enable a vulnerable agricultural population not only to recover its social function, but also to create what are described as sustainable jobs which should attract more young people than is currently the case, bearing in mind that only 1% of agricultural trainees in France go on to work in agricultural production.

In order to encourage people to commit themselves to this alternative, the authorities could introduce tax credits for the families which subscribe. They cannot in practice recover the tax payments made to the CAP by purchasing products financed by that policy. But by paying a fair price for their food, they are not only helping to keep unsubsidised small-scale farmers in business, but also helping to create large numbers of registered and sustainable jobs. To which should be added: very positive effects concerning the ecological footprint of such food production.

In conclusion

The convergence between the responsible citizen's individual reaction to innumerable problems of society (certain solutions to which are able to be brought closer thanks to this concept) and that of the public bodies bearing spatial responsibilities, particularly for spatial planning, must make it

possible for our societies to devise new instruments which fit in with, and are appropriate to, the social and solidarity-based economy.

This economy should no longer be an 'ambulance' for the market economy, but a recognised and fully-fledged alternative which will develop further thanks to the dynamic action of those involved, whose numbers are ever increasing. Assets such as real food and sustainable jobs in all countries, North, South, East and West alike, are the only things that this citizens' movement is striving to create, in the context of responsible consumption created once citizens have become aware of their responsibilities.

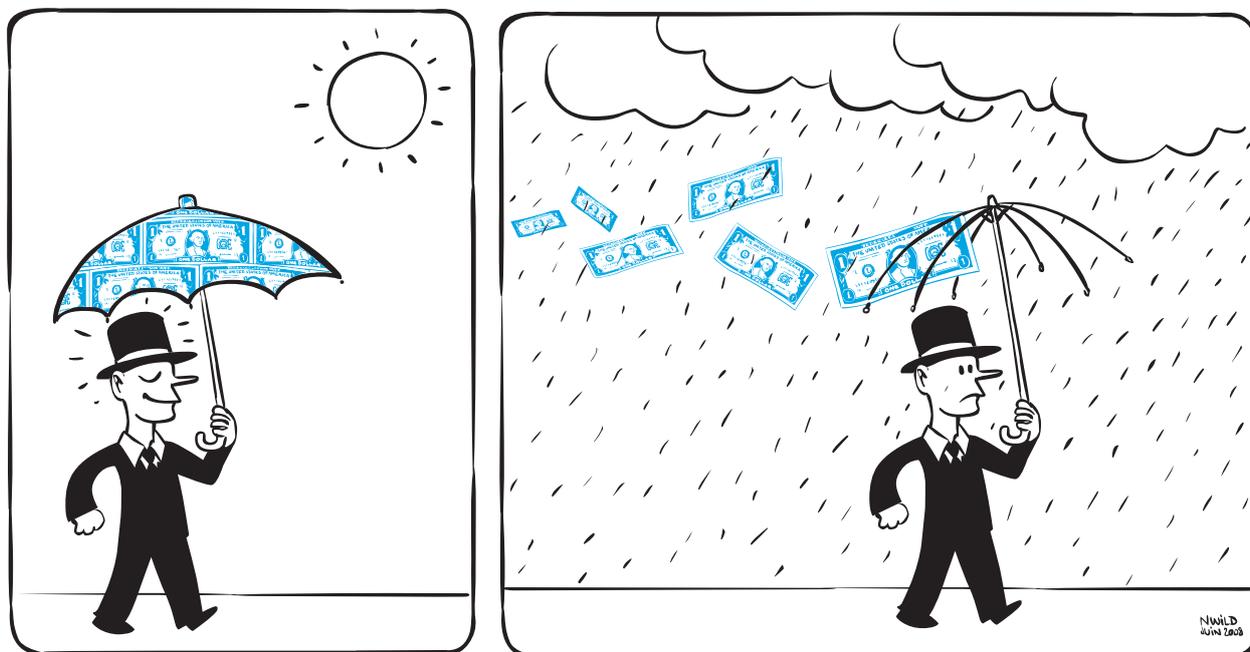
Thus a new world is possible ...

Want to know more?

- www.amap-france.org
This site provides information (in French) on the AMAP network.
- www.cuco.org.uk/
This link takes you to the UK CSA network.
- www.urgenci.net/
Urgenci is a network that works at international level to promote partnerships between consumers and producers.

USING MONEY DIFFERENTLY

Nadia Benqué, consultant, Ceefia-Paris⁷⁶ (France)



Money is familiar to us all in its everyday uses, although the general public are still very much in the dark about how it is created and how it functions.

The uses of money, and their effects

Historically, money was invented to facilitate the exchange of goods and renovate an outdated barter system. Today, we have lost sight of this exchange function to some extent, allowing the reserve and speculative function of money to take precedence. These more recent uses have changed the purpose of money, which has become an end rather than a means in a market society. These profound changes in the role of money are having a real impact on people and organisations, as we shall see.

Euro banknotes and coins are issued by the European Central Bank and account for about 10% of

the money in circulation. Most money is created through the credit arranged by commercial banks. In Europe, we renounced the right of the state to create money in 1992, since when only the banks have been able to create money. The Maastricht Treaty forbids the central banks from offering overdraft facilities or any other type of credit facility to the public treasury or to any other public body or undertaking.

Furthermore, the banks are not subject to any rules, being able to grant as many loans as they wish against compulsory reserves, and thus able to create money on which they levy interest (Viveret, 2007).

This handover from the state to the commercial banks marks a historic break that has reshaped the monetary system. The state and the banks are not required to work towards the same outcomes. While the state is responsible for the well-being of all citizens, the banks do not play that role in society and are encouraged more to focus on their private interests. Moreover, money is no longer backed by real wealth, such as gold or silver. Indeed, since the United States abandoned the convertibility of the dollar into

75. CEEFIA (European Centre for Study, Training, Innovation and Action), consultancy specialising in Corporate and Territorial Societal Responsibility.

gold in 1971, money has become virtual wealth, having no value in itself. The financial economy is no longer related to the real economy. The inherent vagaries of this system can lead to financial crises revealing these dysfunctions. Under such a system, the commercial banks can create money by providing credit according to their own criteria of solvency and demand.

In order to understand the monetary system, we shall draw on the critical analyses of a number of authors working in this field.

Derudder explains the creation of money as follows: “Banks create the principal but not the interest, and this results mathematically both in impoverishment, because it is necessary to pay back more than has been borrowed, and in the destruction of the planet”. Further, “it is the demand for credit which creates money, and not the existence of money which makes credit possible” (Derudder, 2005). These mechanisms produce impoverishment and require continued growth to be generated so that the principal and the interest can be paid back. Such unending growth is not compatible, as we now know, with the limited resources of the planet.

Viveret stresses the supremacy of the virtual economy over the real economy and the influence of speculation: “2 000 billion dollars circulate in the capital markets every day, but in real world trade, only 8 000 billion dollars a year”, with a fairly watertight boundary between the two economies (Viveret, 2005).

Margrit Kennedy explains that bank interest rates (simple and compound) make the financial system unsustainable in the long term: as soon as we buy something, we are paying a portion of interest as part of the price, and this portion depends on the investment necessary to produce the item in question (Kennedy & Kennedy, 1996).

These observations reveal the loss of the exchange function of money, and the supremacy of speculation, which benefits private financial interests rather than collective and socio-economic interests. Indeed, the monetary system results in inequality and exclu-

sion, making it difficult to trade if one does not have enough money – the cause of poverty – while if one has an excess of money, not all of that money is reinjected into the real economy and continues to fuel the financial economy.

The rules by which the monetary system works have a direct impact on human, social and occupational relationships, and when it aims at unlimited financial gain, some of its features are disastrous for the planet and for people. Far from generating well-being, the system thus creates exclusion and poverty – which in turn affect health and social cohesion.

Regaining control of money as an instrument

The intention here is not to comment further on the arcane mysteries of the financial system, but to consider how to regain greater capacity to use money, and how to use it differently and make it a tool for more responsible, socially supportive consumption.

First, money is not always the only means of exchange in economic transactions. In the market society, systems of exchange known as barter are used between enterprises, and Bernard Lietaer informs us in this connection that one-quarter of world trade takes place without any national or complementary currency. He gives us examples set in a profit-oriented context: “The French have built nuclear plants in the Middle East in return for oil, Pepsi Cola receives its earnings from Russia in vodka, which is then sold in the USA and Europe for money” (Lietaer, 2001). Other methods, more familiar to everyone, are the airline loyalty schemes: “points can be accumulated and used for services other than flights: taxis, hotels, the telephone, etc.”.

So how can control of money be regained so as to manage planetary resources better, taking greater account of people’s needs and facilitating exchange, hence access to consumption choices that do not damage natural resources. Some of these utopias have been put into effect through the complementary currency movement. This now involves between 3 000

and 4 000 institutions and between 500 000 and 1 million people in 40 countries (Blanc, 2000).

Complementary currency schemes plug the gaps in the conventional monetary system, taking account of the social and environmental aspects of trade and providing answers to problems arising locally. In their workings, complementary currency schemes give priority to the internal market in order to save, safeguard or expand the local economy, utilise the assets represented by local people, and establish rules that are validated by the community of users. The only constraint is to use imagination to innovate and improve quality of life.

Creating new realms of collaboration and integration

Bernard Lietaer explains the complementary currency system by applying the notions of Yin and Yang. Conventional money is currently saturated with Yang values: it is dominated by competition, rationalism, technology, and so on. However, the Yin and Yang system works as a coherent, complementary whole. Injecting Yin values such as mutual trust, equality, co-operation, interpersonal skills, intuition and empathy to complement Yang values will thus provide a firm basis for the principles of complementary currency schemes (Lietaer, 2001).

Complementary currency schemes provide a framework for market and non-market exchanges which may or may not be backed by official money and work towards alternative political and economic ends. First, some examples will be given below of how money can be used to stimulate a responsible local economy in the market sector.

The “Chiemgauer” was created in Bavaria by an academic economist to support the local economy and to develop greater solidarity in social relationships, in response to the finding that ‘there is no shortage of money, but the way it circulates needs to be improved’. Taking the physical form of notes and backed by the euro, it has been circulating locally for some years in the context of local commercial transactions. The Chiemgauer can be used locally to buy

milk, cheese, clothes, sports items, etc., in organic shops and craft workshops. It has no value outside the locality. It encourages short production and distribution circuits, thus avoiding the economic and environmental costs of transport.

The Chiemgauer is a melting currency (also known as a ‘consumption’ currency) which loses 2% of its value every three months if it is not used. This encourages people to use it and not accumulate it. It is a genuine instrument of local development; local businesses have seen their turnover and recruitment increase by between 10% and 30%. One of the positive effects of the Chiemgauer is that everyone works together to develop the local area through economic activity. Consumers come to play a real part in the local economic system.

France has the SOL,⁷⁶ a scheme designed to promote exchange in a high added-value social and ecological economy. “Co-operation SOL” (SOL Coopération) is fairly similar to the Chiemgauer. It is a kind of inter-enterprise loyalty card circulating in enterprises in the social economy and solidarity sector. The range of enterprises agreeing to distribute and be paid in SOLs is made up of fair trade institutions, social economy and solidarity co-operatives, and responsible enterprises. More than 60 enterprises are taking part in the experiment in five French regions,⁷⁷ providing a wide variety of responsible, fair trade and organic products and services. Co-operation SOL is also a melting currency: if a private individual chooses not to use his or her SOLs, the fall in value of 2% a quarter is recouped at collective level and managed by the SOL Association for community projects.

Co-operation SOL is strictly tied to the locality, and decisions about how it operates and the approval of new institutions are made collectively. It is an instrument of democratic participation for economic development that embodies the values of the social economy and solidarity. The SOL network is intended to contribute to a local economic model based on collaboration, mutuality and co-operation between enterprises, often of small size.

⁷⁶. www.sol-reseau.coop.

⁷⁷. Brittany, Ile de France, Nord Pas de Calais, Alsace and Rhône Alpes.

Co-operation SOL is a means of giving greater prominence to a more responsible kind of economy, and of restoring to consumers the power to make more ecological and social consumption choices, while directing consumption towards enterprises within the network so as to further their economic development. These initiatives reveal a wide range of possible ways of giving a new direction to consumer activities.

Making more of non-market exchanges

In the sphere of non-market exchanges, complementary currency initiatives are not backed by official money, and the unit of measurement is frequently time. These are local currency schemes to meet the particular needs of an area by providing services. They embrace aims such as strengthening social ties, recognising the skills of individuals, creating networks for the exchange of services and products and giving responsible behaviour its due, without using money.

Giving time to others is rewarded by points, which can be used by oneself or a family member, or given to an elderly person or indeed anyone else. This is what happens in time banks, Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS), and many similar local initiatives, which are a genuine instrument of social networking in the United Kingdom, generating social and human wealth. “Fair Share” is a system of exchange with a social purpose. Time is the measurement used by Fair Share. Time spent providing a service in the community is rewarded by Fair Shares that can be re-used to obtain a different service. Elderly people benefit from this system, as do prisoners who earn Fair Shares while working in a bicycle repair workshop, which they can then give to their families to exchange for useful services. For families, this can be a way of compensating for the lack of economic support from one of their members. If they have no one to give them to, they can choose to donate them to elderly people, or others.

Time and people’s skills are thus turned to account and recognised, sometimes more fully than in the

conventional system, and social ties are forged with people excluded from the socio-economic system.

Again in the sphere of non-market exchanges, the “Commitment SOL” (SOL Engagement) is a tool for enhancing the potential of value and exchange. The time spent exchanging services and behaviours showing responsibility for the natural and social environment is rewarded in the form of SOL points, which can be used for other services. It serves as a marker and an accounting tool for voluntary work that helps people to live together better.

A Commitment SOL is created simply from the exchange or application of socially responsible resources or behaviours. The ways in which SOL works are decided locally by local players organised around focal points.

Exchanges between associations can thus be structured and rewarded with SOLs, fostering co-operation and sharing of resources between associations, for example, through the organisation of a festival of local associations or other festive occasions.

Assigning value to time by means of a marker such as SOL is a way to take account of activities that help to guarantee quality of life and collective well-being, within a new economic model.

It is not a question of ‘merchandising’ voluntary work but of finding a way of recording such activity, in order to recognise the individual and collective resources that occur in a local area, and possibly of involving voluntary workers in procedures to validate experiential learning, etc.

Encouraging more responsible consumption

SOL also permits recognition of responsible behaviours such as disposing of cartridges, batteries, etc., at community sites, and the SOLs obtained may then provide access, depending on the agreements made with the local authorities, to the cultural and sports facilities of the town.

Overall, SOL is a way of setting up a network sharing the same values: a network made up of enterprises working in the solidarity-based social economy and providing goods and services with added ecological and social value. SOL is thus firmly tied to where people live, through associations that develop activities relying on mutual help and social links, through involved consumers and socially aware citizens helping to make those activities possible, and through local authorities implementing policies that contribute to high-quality sustainable human development.

Currencies of this type can compensate for the lack of official money and can thus be a means of improving quality of life, social ties and individual well-being.

In conclusion, complementary currencies are one of the tools that make it possible to create networks and areas for taking decisions collectively and regaining control of the creation of money, while giving priority to exchange, the local economy and recognition of unreckoned resources.

It is also the practical application of the somewhat provocative idea put forward by Michael Linton, the founder of LETS in the UK: “If there’s no money, manufacture it and let it circulate in the community!”

Using money to make worthwhile exchanges, and to count what is important to oneself and to the community, leads us to reflect on our choices as consumers from the standpoint of sustainable development and individual and collective well-being. Thus, complementary currencies are a tool making it possible both to step aside on another path and to include social and environmental factors in the ambit of the economy,

thereby contributing to a new and more sustainable model of economic development.

To find out more ...

- www.chiemgau.info/ (only in German)
- <http://selidaire.org/spip/> (“Local Exchange Trading Systems”) in France
- www.gmlets.u-net.com/design/home.html
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Local_Exchange_Trading_Systems
- Film DVD; *La Double face de la monnaie, de Vincent Gaillard et Jérôme Polidor, La Mare aux canards, 2006*

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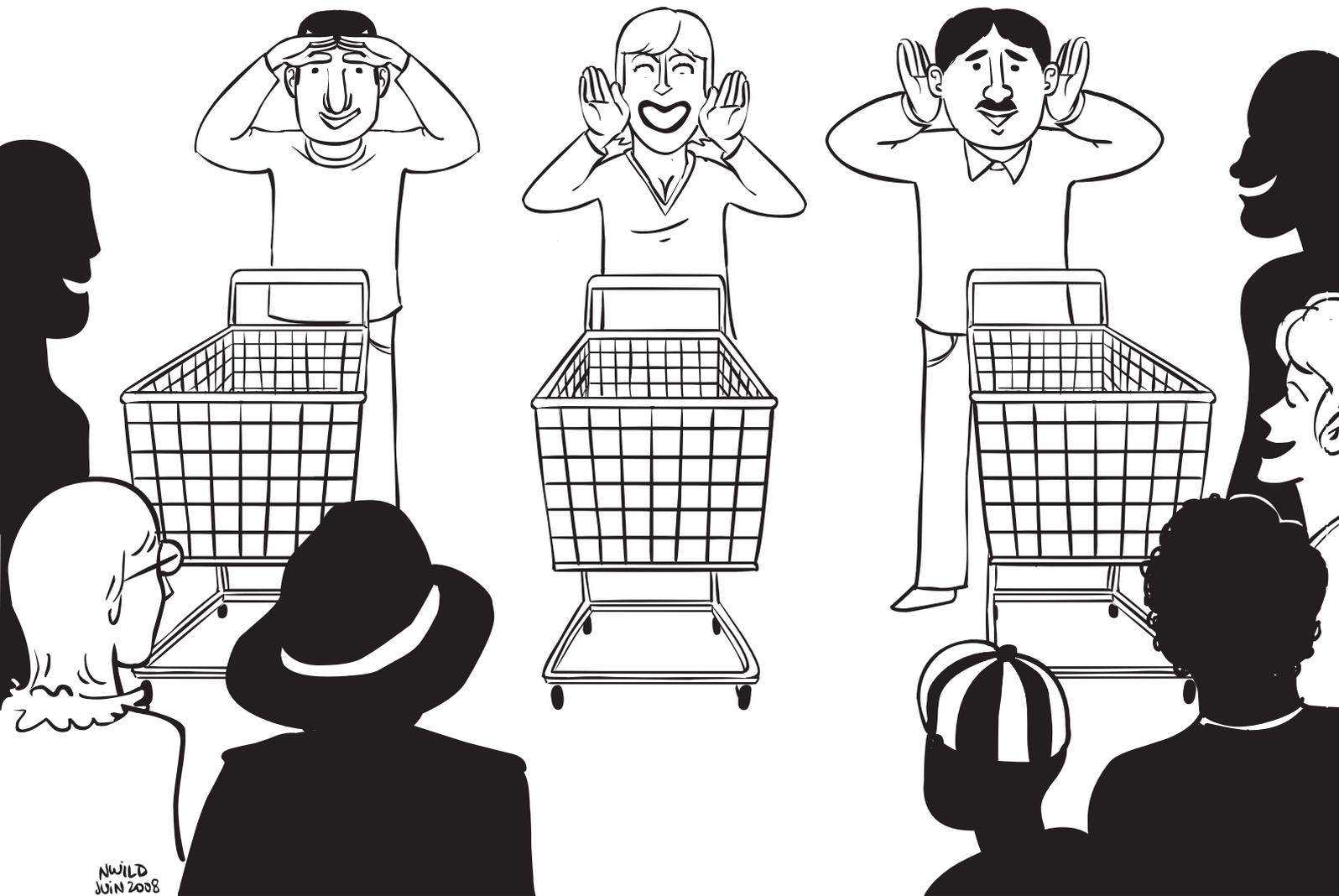
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Part V

Making consumers more aware of their responsibilities



EDUCATION FOR RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION

Jean Huet, “Artisans du Monde”, Paris (France)

Day in, day out, from sunrise to sunset, we consume services and goods, individually or collectively. And yet however commonplace this act of consumption might be, it has unavoidable consequences for our whole environment. Social inequalities at the global level are constantly increasing, in parallel to the growth in wealth. There is still stark opposition between two different blocs, though the blocs in question are now the North and the South rather than East and West. The North represents affluence and consumerism, and includes the United States, the European Union and Japan (as well as South Korea and Singapore), whereas the South houses the world’s workforce, as well as its poor cousins, including Central and South America, Africa and Asia. This unfair distribution is one of the effects of our consumption in the North. Our society urges us to consume more and more at lower and lower prices. It encourages human beings to want to have without being, while convincing them that they are because they have. It is thus gradually transforming our world in terms of economic, social and environmental issues.

Only when the last tree has been felled, the last river poisoned and the last fish caught will man know that he cannot eat money. Before he reaches this extremity as foretold in an Amerindian prophecy man can still wake up, reject this ‘inevitability’ and recover his share of responsibility. To be responsible is not to accept the blame for the world’s inequalities but to push for a different mode of consumption and a type of development that can meet the basic needs of all human beings (food, health, housing and education). To that extent, education is a response to this proposition. According to Kant, “education is ... the greatest and most difficult problem with which man can be confronted” (Kant, 2002). This question must therefore be regarded not as secondary but as society’s primordial task. Education never ends: it is in perpetual evolution. Nevertheless, education is not confined to ‘the three Rs’ reading, (w)riting and

’rithmetic. It must provide people with a capacity for using their critical faculties and becoming active members of overall society, in other words fully fledged citizens concerned, on a day-to-day basis, with the welfare of the community, while at the same time doing justice to their individual specificities.

So we should be offering a system of education for responsible consumption capable of restoring the consumer’s status not as a mere customer but above all as a free operator aware of the choices s/he is making as a consumer. Let us consider the use we can make of ‘responsible’ consumption with an eye to combating world social and economic inequalities, looking at the requisite position of younger people in this process of change through individual and collective action.

Responsible consumption: an educational tool?

When we speak of responsible consumption we are appealing to the consumer and to his or her responsibility in day-to-day consumption. However, consumption is not the sole issue at stake here: it is also a case of adopting a consistent and responsible way of life which takes account of all the facets of the surrounding human and natural environment. This is ‘consumer action’. So what does a ‘consumer-actor’ do? Here are some ideas:

- finding out: looking at the world around you to gain a better grasp of it by gradually forming your own critical opinion;
- getting involved: living in the world around you in order to help change it by joining an association, launching an innovative ethical, solidarity-based project, etc.;
- changing your mode of consumption: taking care with the products you purchase, prioritising quality over quantity and checking whether you actually need all you buy.

Consequently, the approach is initially an individual one. However, the collective aspect is vital to ensure comprehensive consideration of all the solutions available, and to provide sufficient impetus for challenging our mode of consumption. This is where education can play a major role as an instrument of reflection.

Responsible consumption is obviously diametrically opposed to irresponsible forms of consumption which negate human rights and environmental considerations. Drawing on this realisation, we can all progress in our thinking and change our way of looking at our consumption in day-to-day life. This is an essential stage in the process, urging individuals or communities to question their habits. The aim here is not to shock but to educate. The challenge may be issued in a variety of ways, using a wide range of activities such as the 'baguette game' described below.

This activity makes crystal clear the inequality of global wealth distribution between the North and the South. The game can also induce people to think about inequalities within our own countries, where the findings are the same, that is, the gulf between rich and poor is constantly widening. This situation affects the whole world, and so naturally raises questions. This highlights the link between conventional trade mechanisms and our modes of consumption: where does the wealth produced go? Who produces what under what conditions? Who consumes the commodities produced? We can once again draw on the actual experience and impressions of each participant to draw public attention to the functioning of our over-consuming society.

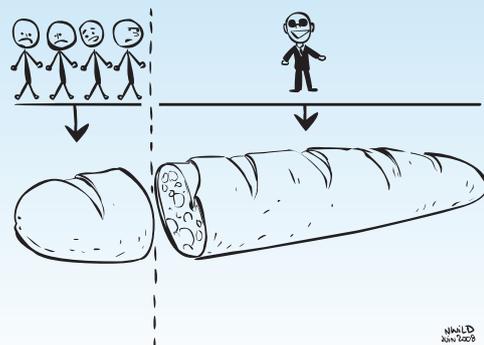
Responsible consumption is not a proposition in itself but a means of questioning our society about the consequences of its own consumption. Education should teach every individual to be fully involved in his/her own consumption decisions and choices. To that end, in the course of their development, individuals acquire an overview of the available options and a capacity for accepting or rejecting specific modes of action. There is never only one solution, but several ways ahead. The world and its inhabitants are not locked into a single mindset in facing our current problems, and we must be able to challenge our

The baguette game

Tell the participants that this baguette represents total global wealth. Invite five persons to join you, each representing 20% of the world population. Then ask how the baguette is to be divided up, starting with the 20% richest section and working down to the 20% poorest.

Splitting the baguette:

Give 4/5 of the bread, i.e. 82%, to the richest 20%. Then cut the rest of the baguette in 2 and cut one of these pieces in 8. Give one of the latter to the poorest 20%, which leaves them with 1.2% of global wealth, for 1 200 000 million human beings.



own individual and collective presuppositions. Lastly, education does not just provide solutions or expound facts: it actually creates awareness.

Promoting or educating in responsible consumption?

So we consider responsible consumption as an educational tool. We want to use the proposed change in our mode of consumption to make all consumers global actors in the community. If we are to achieve this we must consider our approach to educating people. Education is not simply a matter of transmitting ideas and having them accepted or rejected depending on individual opinions. If we wish to encourage responsible consumption we must promote an educational approach which gives people a sense of responsibility. To educate is not to format.

Our main objective is to promote the individual's critical faculties. And this means involving a person of stature, namely an educator.

Teachers must realise the potential impact of their words, particularly on young audiences. We think everyone should make an effort to alter his or her consumption and realise the consequences of the latter for the whole planet: hunting for low-cost products has the global effect of encouraging violations of labour legislation. And yet the responsibility for this does not rest with one person but with a huge group, and so we should never try to make anyone feel guilty. Educators ask questions rather than providing answers, and support debates and discussions with an eye to comprehensive awareness of the problems and of the solutions.

A number of activities can be run to ensure total public participation, one example being the 'knock-on debate'. This technique teaches participants to develop their own specific arguments and present them to the others. This means that there are no spectators, only actors. Knowledge is not merely transmitted but exchanged. Shouldering responsibility is not explained but lived. Prioritising role-playing focusing on the audience makes it easier to bring critical discussions round to issues which affect the daily lives of each and every one of us and from which it is difficult to adopt a critical distance.

So the educator shapes the discussions with a view to grasping the economic, social and environmental realities and mechanisms. This raises the question whether the educator can play a neutral, example-setting role or not. Where the concepts of objectivity and subjectivity are concerned, it should be noted that an educator in responsible consumption and sustainable development has already opted for a specific lifestyle. Neutrality is not up for discussion here. And yet an educator who teaches any subject is mainly there to provide tools, while at the same time opening up various avenues of inquiry. The possibilities for action are therefore unlimited, with all parties maintaining the ability to reappropriate the concepts in their own specific way.

Sample activity: the 'knock-on debate'



The activity leader must put a controversial question to the participants. The question can be selected to suit the audience and the context for the activity: 'Do you consider education as a form of activism?'; 'In your view, does a country's development necessitate economic or social measures?' You must select a question to which you see no easy answer, and which will prompt debate.

- For five minutes each participant thinks about the question separately and works out arguments. Each one must reply to the question with 'yes' or 'no'.
- The participants then pair off and discuss their viewpoints for five minutes (sometimes agreeing and sometimes disagreeing).
- The participants discuss in groups of 4 for five minutes.
- The participants discuss in groups of 8 for five minutes.
- The participants discuss in groups of 16 for five minutes.
- For ten minutes, there is plenary discussion and feedback on the positions of each group, with or without agreement being reached.

The educators are often taken as examples, being involved in responsible consumption themselves, and being completely aware of and consistent in their choices. It might be more useful to point out the inconsistencies in each of us and to highlight the fact that the act of purchasing is not the only way to be a global and responsible actor.

So merely promoting responsible consumption as an act is not enough to change attitudes and behaviours. Raising individual awareness of the problems prompts people to find solutions, provided that everyone acknowledges his/her share in the responsibilities.

Young people: a prime target group?

In the social imagination young people are usually considered more open to new ideas and older persons more set in their ways. However, the main criterion here is attitude rather than age. Education in responsible consumption therefore has no prime target group. The reason why we select young people as the main target for our actions is that they are more affected than older people by incitement to over-consumption.

Advertising plays a predominant role in structuring our individual desires, prompting the consumer to want more and more for less and less money. The model conveyed by advertising creates a need for possessions in order to be accepted by society, and

thwarting these consumer desires leads to frustration. This whole process distracts people, especially young people, from the important things in life.

This provides a potential forum for discussing all the issues surrounding the act of purchasing. We shall now look at the impact on workers producing or manufacturing the article, particularly in the field of textiles, shoes and sports clothing. The example set out below analyses the price of a basic sports shoe, of whatever brand.

Fashion really is a priority field for young people, as the choice of clothes signals belonging to a specific group. This being the case, does anyone ever wonder what lurks behind the price of any particular item they choose? Examining our clothes in this way highlights the social conditions surrounding their production: workers only receive a tiny proportion of the overall price, and the working conditions are often as inhuman as to resemble slavery (in terms of working hours, production quotas, effects on health, etc.). We need to know about the situation if we are to demand reliable information, exert pressure for equitable apportionment of costs, lobby our elected representatives and militate for an alternative mode of consumption. Analysis of the price of this shoe exposes the actual cost of our comfort.

What can we do to change this reality? Changing our habits is still the most obvious move for all of us, although habits become more firmly rooted as time goes on. This is why we must prioritise helping young people to understand the situation worldwide and promoting their critical faculties. Young people have more and more influence in the field of consumption, and we must help them become critical and responsible by providing them with forums for reflection and action in schools and associations, all of which has repercussions on their immediate environment.

From the educational angle, responsible consumption is thus a means rather than an end in terms of tackling the ills facing our society. We must help people to challenge their habits in order to understand them and make different choices for the future.

We buy: who pays?

Breakdown of the price of a sports shoe sold at €100:

- Production cost: €12
 - raw materials: €8
 - wages: €0.40
 - other production costs: €1.60
 - factory profit margins: €2
- Cost of brand: €33
 - model design: €11
 - advertising and sponsorship: €8.50
 - brand profit margin: €13.5
- Distribution costs: €55
 - transport and duties: €5
 - distribution and VAT: €50

The only certainty I have is doubt,⁷⁸ because without doubt and critical reflection our society would withdraw into itself and become incapable of changing or of challenging itself in order to advance.

To become a responsible consumer is to reappropriate one's environment and to secure awareness of and freedom vis-à-vis the choices one makes and the negative or positive impact they can have on the whole world. Such consumer action is geared to restoring the central position of human beings and their environment in all economic, cultural and political

exchanges. To be an actor in society is to be a citizen who participates and becomes involved. Such political involvement can be expressed by active membership of a voluntary association, for example, or by participation in the political life of a city or country.

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Further information ...

- www.in-terre-actif.com/fr/: the in-terre-actif network deals with disseminating the responsible consumption principle among young people, proposing various awareness-raising activities such as rallies for children (available in PDF format), a series of slides accessible to all and a teacher's guide (site in French language only).
- www.youthxchange.net/fr/main/home.asp: Youthxchange is an international project sponsored by UNEP and UNESCO geared to alerting young people (15-25 years) from across the world to consumption issues, particularly through education.
- idea for an activity – paper recycling: place newspaper in lukewarm water in a basin, pulp it, place a sieve into the basin, take out the sieve, place the resultant sheet on a piece of cloth, remove the sieve and leave the sheet to dry on the cloth.
- The French portal conso.net published by the National Consumption Institute comprises teaching handbooks for responsible consumption and other educational works, downloadable in PDF format, at the following address: www.conso.net/page/bases.6_education.2_textes_et_circulaires_pour_l_education_a_la_consommation/ (texts available in French only).

78. Pierre Desproges, interview.

CONSUMER INFORMATION: LABELS, ECO-LABELS AND PRODUCT COMPARISON TO TACKLE THE CURRENT INFORMATION ASYMMETRY: ADVANTAGES AND LIMITS

René Kalfa, Network for the promotion of the Sustainable Consumption in European regions (NEPIM)

Most policies to change modes of consumption are based on information campaigns. Such campaigns come up against fewer obstacles than more stringent types of action and are more likely to dovetail with the rules of the economic world.⁷⁹

High-quality information on goods and services must play a major role in orienting consumer choices and developing more sustainable modes of consumption. They must put the consumer in a position to make the 'right choice', that is, to choose cleaner technologies, optimise product utilisation, limit its consumption and have recourse to services rather than commodities. In order to achieve this, ambitious programmes have been developed on the basis of consumer information and training in an effort to change consumer behaviour. Even though consumers live in a so-called 'information society' characterised by an (over-)abundance of information, many people consider that this information is of little assistance for environment-friendly decision making.

Why this contradiction?

Most of this (over-)abundant information on products and services comes from the producers and distributors themselves. While corporate social responsibility is considered vital in pursuit of a more sustainable society, some economic activities are apparently exceptions to this rule. This is most obviously the case of advertising and marketing. 'Advertising' originally meant 'making the public aware', in contrast to information that is kept secret, but nowadays the word is exclusively applied to forms

of communication geared to directly or indirectly promoting sales of a product or service. Advertising and marketing utilise massive resources. In Belgium, for instance, a reported €12 000 million is spent annually on advertising, all types combined. By way of comparison, the social security budget totals just over €17 000 million (source: CRIOC).⁸⁰ Advertising is everywhere, accompanying us from morning to night, at home, in the workplace, in the football ground, in public areas, taking the form of messages that involve sounds, images or even smells. Some sources suggest that every day we encounter over 1 000 different advertising messages.

Overt and covert advertising

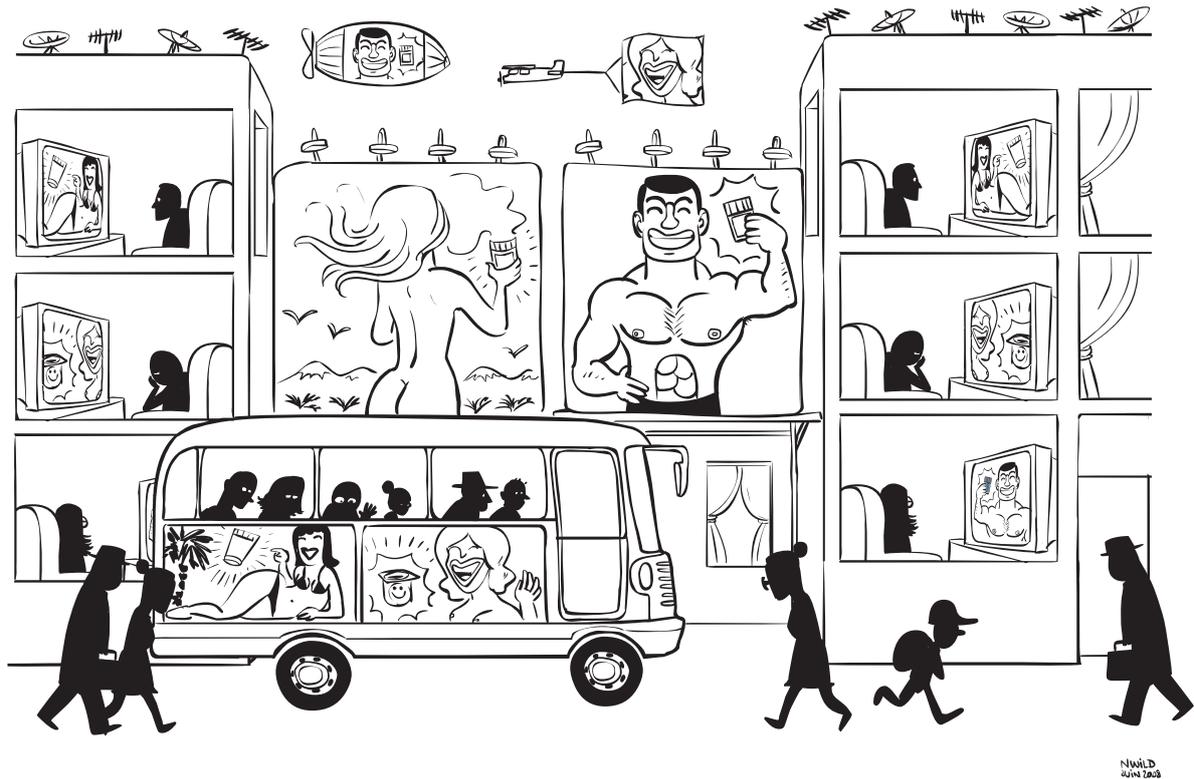
Although we can easily pinpoint the many media that carry advertising: TV, radio, newspapers, Internet, illuminated signboards, etc., advertisements may also lurk in other less obvious areas (Eicke, 1991). Advertising is to be found in a less obvious but possibly more effective form in films and TV programmes (product placement), press articles (editorial advertising), e-mails (buzz marketing), etc.

Advertising breaks fall into two categories according to the type of medium used:

- 'above-the-line' advertising, which covers all forms of advertising disseminated by the media, Internet, the press, billboards and advertising campaigns;
- 'below-the-line' advertising, which embraces all forms of non-media advertising such as sponsorship, packaging, merchandising, direct marketing and public relations, etc.

79. "Sustainable Consumption": a summary of the research undertaken as part of the sustainable consumption piece by PADD II: "What is the role of the consumer?", Politique scientifique fédérale, 2007.

80. See Etude du CRIOC, "Publicité, Marketing et Développement Durable: Alliance possible?", 2006.



Up until now, the main concern of advertising messages and marketing techniques has been to encourage people to consume more, and often to consume products and services with huge environmental impacts, promoting environmentally damaging behaviour. The car industry is a case in point, with cars particularly well represented in advertising (it is hard to forget the image of a car driving along a riverbed or through a cornfield or hurtling along at full speed).

Attempts so far to regulate advertising with an eye to more sustainable modes of consumption have been ineffective. International inquiries are currently under way into how to involve the advertising world in promoting more sustainable modes of consumption.

Could marketing ever promote sustainable development?

Various studies have been conducted in the fair trade sector to ascertain how marketing and its corollary, advertising, could help improve the position of fair trade items on the market and boost efforts to disseminate them to a wider audience.⁸¹

Faced with the enormous changes required, all parties should be closely involved and mobilised. If consumers, enterprises and politicians are to adhere to sustainable development projects, effective communication must be developed, necessitating recourse to advertisers as information specialists. Advertising must be brought more into line with the sustainable consumption concept if we are to preserve any genuine opportunities for change.

What alternative to ubiquitous advertising do consumers have to help them effect their choices?

NGO information campaigns can obviously help inform consumers, to a greater or lesser extent. More often than not, however, the consumer faces the product or service alone, and must decide whether or not to buy it on the basis of the information provided by the product itself. This means that product labels are one of the main sources of consumer information. It is important to note here that the content of such labels is defined by the law, which might lead us to expect a clear, reliable source of information. However, the labels are not always easy to understand. First of all, the print format is the first hurdle facing the consumer, who then has to understand the product description, and this is

81. "Sustainable Consumption": see footnote 79.

where things become difficult: an impressive list of additives, often in coded form (E numbers) for food products, lists of chemicals for household and cosmetic products, technical data for electrical and electronic devices, etc.

An awareness has arisen in some quarters of the intrinsic limits of the labelling system (legally stipulated format and content, unclear content, etc.), leading them to recommend adding information to facilitate consumer choices: 'eco-labels' were born.

Eco-labels

Eco-labels provide information of an environmental, ethical and social nature. As no ordinary product label covers all sustainable development concerns, the great majority of which relate to the environment, the term 'eco-label' is commonly used.

The 'eco-labelling' principle provides consumers with a new tool for product appraisal and comparison, explaining quality attributes that they cannot assess on their own, for example, compliance with environmental or social criteria.

Unfortunately, with almost 700 eco-labels on the European market, consumers are faced with a veritable jungle of acronyms and symbols which hardly facilitates their choice.⁸² This problem is compounded by the great disparity of information types provided and the guarantees linked to each eco-label. Packages can include official labels, private and individual labels, pictograms, compulsory labelling and collective private labels.⁸³

The eco-label is not a label as defined by law. Placing an eco-label on a product is a voluntary act by the producer or distributor, who thereby undertakes to fulfil specific quality conditions of varying strictness in accordance with a specific schedule of conditions. Supervision procedures are carried out in most cases

by external bodies, but there are also non-supervised eco-labels.

The different categories of eco-label



Official eco-labels are produced under a system of recognition of the environmental quality of products managed by the public authorities. Inspections are carried out by independent external authorities.

This European symbol is an example of an official eco-label, indicating that the product fulfils specific environmental criteria, covering the whole product life cycle.

Collective private labels are created at the initiative of an industrial company, an association or a professional organisation which is independent from the manufacturer. Inspections are carried out by independent bodies, which are usually accredited by official authorities.



This eco-label means that the wood used comes from forestry operations that comply with the sustainable development concept.

Non-supervised individual private labels are designed by a manufacturer or distributor. They are generally used in one country only or even only for the products of one chainstore. For instance, some chainstores have developed their own logo, an approach which combines marketing aims and genuine concerns relating to sustainable development. The advantage of having its own range of 'green' products sets a store apart from its competitors and brings

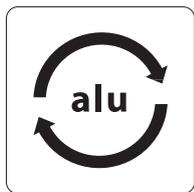
82. Figures quoted by Professor Karl Kollmann at a seminar organised by NEPIM (*Network for the promotion of the internal market in European regions through consumer topics*) on labels, Linz, 17th December 2007.

83. See brochure "Logos? Labels?, Pictogrammes? Comment s'y retrouver?", edited by le CRIOC.

in the customers concerned about environmental issues. Of course, the supply of 'green' products only accounts for a tiny proportion of the products on offer in the store.

Supervised individual private eco-labels are, just like the previous ones, created by a manufacturer or distributor, but in stark contrast to other private eco-labels they are supervised by an independent external body. Most 'organic' labels belong to this category. It should, however, be noted that there are major variations in the schedules of conditions governing the different 'organic' labels.

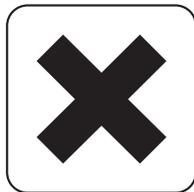
Our consideration of eco-labels would be incomplete if we did not also mention pictograms, which usually provide graphical information on the requisite processing of the product after use or the risks it may pose for consumers using the product erroneously.



Recyclable aluminium item



Recyclable packaging



Noxious, irritant substance



Corrosive substance

With such diverse contents and certification models, and sometimes completely unsupervised, eco-labels are sadly far from providing the reliable information the consumer would need. Attempts to rationalise eco-labels have largely failed. Such rationalisation is difficult because of the number of stakeholders involved, the strategies used and the label content.

And yet the inclusion of reliable information on labelling could be a very important criterion for consumers. For instance, the organic label raises problems in terms not of understanding or interest but of public trust and confidence. This also applies to many other eco-labels.

Several studies have shown that the increasing number of labels and the plethora of information of all kinds are reducing the credibility of all these resources. It would be useful to clearly regulate eco-labels, preferably at the European level and otherwise at the national level. Such regulation could be based on the European certification standards (EN 45000).⁸⁴ Such regulation should provide an added value for consumers as compared with mere compliance with the law. Certification should be mandatory, and the certifying body should be independent and accredited by the authorities. The award of an eco-label should be subject to compliance with a transparent schedule of conditions recognised by the public authorities and subject to inspection by a body officially approved by the said authorities. Lastly, eco-labels should be easily identifiable and comprehensible to consumers, providing clear, unambiguous information on the product's added value.

Given the diversity of consumer profiles, no one type of information medium (for example, an eco-label) is likely on its own to secure the support of most consumers. Developing other possible labelling types (eco-profiles, compulsory labelling, etc.) might get through to wider categories of consumers. Just as securing substantial changes in choices involves increasing and diversifying the supply of eco-products, we must also diversify the methods of providing product information in order to reach as

84. See http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/international/pdf_mra_general/certif_98_4fr.pdf.

many consumers as possible by targeting their priority concerns, while avoiding confusion.

There are a number of obstacles to the efficient provision of consumer information and following it up with effective action. The obstacles mainly concern message diversity and content and public suspicion of the information provider. Any information that is liable to inspire new types of behaviour is completely lost in the media fog.

Trust in this type of information and its source is a precondition for its use. It should be noted that the most credible information sources are local ones: friends, parents, doctors and other health professionals, municipal authorities and consumers' associations. Least credence is lent to the major production and distribution corporations and authorities, which are seen as distant from the citizen (governments and the European Union).⁸⁵

If product information is to be usable it must be down-to-earth, easy to understand and immediately visible at the sales points.

While consumers want to be able to identify the most environment-friendly goods, they would also like information on the products to avoid. It should be possible to include negative messages of the type 'consuming this product will damage the environment' on the labels of categories of products which are particularly harmful to the environment.

Nevertheless, labelling products is not enough to guarantee proper public information on environment-friendly consumer choices. People also need reliable information on possible alternatives and appropriate behaviours. Comparative testing can provide the requisite additional information.

Comparative testing

The first European magazines presenting comparative product tests came out in the 1960s. At first it was mainly a case of testing the electrical household

appliances which were beginning to invade the shops with the advent of the consumer society.

For many years testers confined themselves to highlighting products which combined high technical quality with reasonable prices. They worked exclusively from the angle of the consumer society, helping the consumer to purchase new products without worrying particularly about their environmental and social repercussions. In the last few years, however, there has been a change in the parameters used for testing products, and environmental aspects are now being increasingly taken into account. There are also more and more news articles on other aspects such as fair trade. Some magazines have even begun to specialise in the environmental aspects (for example, *Öko-Test* in Germany). Where the comparative tests are guaranteed by independent consumers' organisations, they can achieve enormous popularity.

The famous German organisation "Stiftung Warentest" states its mission as providing consumers with assistance and independent and objective information stemming from comparative tests and studies of products and services, advising them on the optimum management of their household budget and resources, and promoting a way of life respecting the rules of health and environmental protection. One-third of the German population say that they refer to Stiftung Warentest when effecting major purchases.⁸⁶

From the sustainable development angle, product testing can provide useful information on the environmental impact of the major industrial products. While testing is important, it only deals with a small section of the overall sustainable consumption phenomenon and has no effect on over-consumption of goods. On the contrary, tests are liable to whet consumer appetites by bombarding them with information on new products.

Limits of information

The impact of information on consumer behaviour implies that consumers acknowledge that there is a

85. Based on two opinion polls, one carried out by CRIOC (Research and Information Centre for Consumer Organisations) in Belgium in 2007 and the other by "Verbraucherzentrale Südtirol" in Italy in 2006.

86. See www.test.de/unternehmen/.

link between their modes of consumption and the environment, but many studies have shown that most consumers never succeed in basing their purchasing decisions on environmental criteria. Nor do they apparently manage to establish a proper order of priority in their activities. Many consumers see no connection between their consumer choices and environmental impact. They often shift the responsibility for environmental damage on to other parties.

In a survey conducted by CRIOC in Belgium on responsibilities for CO₂ production, consumers interviewed stated the following order of priority for those responsible: industry (40%), pollution (30%), cars (27%), all parties (25%), fuel (12%) and consumers (8%).⁸⁷ Consumers apparently feel that they are prisoners of the 'system' and that individual action is pointless. Awareness-raising campaigns are apparently not enough to change behaviour significantly.

An important idea which would be worth following up more intensively is education. Consumer behaviour is acquired in childhood on the basis of parental and societal models – a fact which has not escaped the attention of the advertisers who target children and young people. It is also in childhood that the values are forged for building up attitudes that will determine behaviour in general and consumer behaviours in particular. Behaviour patterns acquired during childhood usually continue into adulthood. This is why school curricula must include education in sustainable development, and especially sustainable

consumption. Analysis of the behaviour of young people also provides a fairly accurate idea of their future adult consumer behaviours.

As we have just seen, strategies for change based exclusively on information will be insufficient to initiate the requisite changes for a transition from our current consumer society to a more sustainable one. Underlying these strategies is the principle that the consumer is free to choose the lifestyle which best reflects his/her needs and desires. In fact there is a radical imbalance between the consumer and the goods' producers and distributors. The latter create products, distribute them and supply most of the relevant information. The consumer's role is confined to choosing such-and-such a product in preference to another. S/he is trapped in unsustainable consumer models and lacks any real freedom to choose.

Public authority action is vital if we are to secure real change. The authorities can influence the context within which individual choices are made. They can influence technological changes, market conditions and societal values. Information cannot be a genuine instrument of change until the imbalance between producers and consumers has been corrected.

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Need more info?

- The site "éco-sapiens" is very well-supplied with information on fair trade and responsible consumption. For example, it features an interesting list of labels and pictograms also providing links to the official sites of each: www.eco-sapiens.com/infos-les-labels.php?page=1 (site in French only).
- www.infolabel.be/project/: the database available via the foregoing link originates from a planned guide to labels for responsible consumption. The site can be browsed in French or Dutch.
- The global eco-labelling network also has its official site which may be consulted via: www.globalecolabelling.net/
- If you want to find comparative tests, make enquiries to the national consumer associations (for example, on the sites www.quechoisir.org or www.ctaconso.fr for France).
- Greenpeace has produced a "guide to products with or without GMOs" intended for consumers: <http://guideogm.greenpeace.ca/>

87. 2003 CRIOC opinion poll.

RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION: HOW TO MAKE INFORMATION ACCESSIBLE TO ALL AND MAKE PROXIMITY AN INSTRUMENT FOR CONSOLIDATING ACTION

Pauline Rivière, student at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques, Lyon (France)
Trainee at the Council of Europe in 2007

“Communicating means building bridges among different worlds, peoples, groups and individuals. Communicating also means transmitting information and therefore helping disseminate knowledge and stimulating minds.” (Dortier, 1998).

This quotation highlights the vital importance of information in changing attitudes and behaviour. Where the development and dissemination of responsible consumption behaviours are concerned, communication would appear to be the major challenge, the main means of ensuring gradual change in the perception of consumption.

Information circulation has been expanding in recent years, and has already secured encouraging results. Taking the example of the fair trade network, we can see that the information and awareness campaigns have borne fruit. Whereas in October 2000 only 9% of persons interviewed said they had heard of fair trade, by May 2006 that percentage had risen to 74%.⁸⁸ Concurrently, the 2001-2005 period saw a sharp increase in the turnover of the fair trade sector, from €18 million to €120 million. Communication and information were responsible for this boom in fair trade and changes in consumer behaviour. This example highlights the primordial and strategic importance of initiating effective information campaigns to promote sustainable and responsible behaviour patterns.

The issue at stake is therefore to guarantee the dissemination of information to all population categories, leaving no one by the wayside. This means tailoring information and the means of disseminating

it to the individual degree of awareness of sustainable behaviour. The aim of disseminating the relevant information is to initiate a collective public movement without excluding those who are already excluded from society in many aspects of their lives. We shall begin by highlighting the obstacles to the proper dissemination of information for all and then move on to examining possible instruments for effective communication, stressing the contribution of enhanced local relations to securing more effective and relevant information dissemination.

Information asymmetry

We are not all equal in terms of access to information. There are major variations even within western societies. In order to overcome these difficulties we must first of all get to grips with them and tailor our information tools to the problems. In an article titled “Information-documentation”, Jean-Paul Metzger has noted a number of obstacles to universal access to information (Metzger, 2006):

- *Difficulties with identifying relevant information sources.* There is a profusion of sources of information on responsible consumption, particularly on the Internet. The information society in which we live is an affluent society in more ways than one. One of the difficulties of this flood of sometimes partial or even contradictory information is how to sort it in terms of relevance.
- *Difficulties of physical access to information sources.* The expression ‘digital divide’ refers to the persisting inequalities in access to and use of new information and communication technology. Although this divide is gradually shrinking in

88. Source: IPSOL poll, 8 August 2006, *Notoriété assistée du commerce équitable* (spreading the fame of the fair trade system).

France, it is still fairly prevalent. For instance, while 75% of white-collar workers have home Internet connections, only 24% of blue-collar workers, 15% of pensioners and 13% of persons without qualifications have access to the Web (Alibert, Bigot & Foucaud, 2005).

- *The cost of access to information.* Information costs money. Access to information necessitates major financial investment, particularly where new technology is concerned. Accessing information also requires an investment in time and effort which cannot be expected of the whole population.
- *Interpreting and understanding information.* Every item of information has several levels of interpretation depending on the person's prior knowledge. The denser the information, the greater its exposure to different interpretations.

Therefore, any attempt to maximise information dissemination involves overcoming all these fundamental difficulties: striking a balance between excessive, disorganised information which is difficult to structure and an overly organised and rigid type of information (Morin, 2006). Information must be provided on a variety of media in order to reach as wide an audience as possible. The information disseminated in the field of responsible consumption must be simple, clear and full, although not simplistic or lax.

We must realise the need to overcome these obstacles in order to maximise the circulation of information and guarantee access to information for all. Campaigns should therefore be organised to provide information on responsible consumption, taking account of the various potential obstacles. One way of reducing the effect of the obstacles and the resultant asymmetry is to prioritise local relations as vehicles for communication and information.

How to make information accessible to all: using local relations to make information more effective

A wide variety of communication and information media are needed in order to optimise information circulation. It is best to avoid concentrating on one

single medium if we want to reach as wide an audience as possible.

Informing, communicating, alerting: there are many tools currently geared to carrying out these tasks. Some media, such as poster campaigns and TV, radio and newspaper adverts are in common currency. They all target different groups depending on the times and places people are likely to see the adverts, etc. Such media are sometimes used to promote responsible behaviour, for example, in terms of energy saving. This is the case of the ADEME in France ("Agence de l'Environnement et de la Maîtrise de l'Energie" – Agency for the environment and energy management), which in 2007 launched two major national campaigns to cut back on waste and ensure proper management of energy resources. These campaigns are very important in terms of raising public awareness of new problems, but they are not enough to bring about radical changes in people's consumer attitudes.

The transition from 'conventional' consumption to reasoned and responsible consumption cannot be directly prompted by selective advertising campaigns. Changing people's way of looking at the world is a slow process which must be constantly backed up by reliable and relevant information. This is why the traditional information tools seem powerless to produce any real change in behaviour.

One means of improving information and communication that is under consideration is to concentrate on networking the relevant actors in a given area.

It might be useful, in attempting to improve the transmission of information on responsible consumption, to create various forms of interaction among grassroots associations and the local public authorities. Combining joint energies is one of the objectives of the Council of Europe's responsible spatial planning policy. Local authorities must work alongside the citizens on adopting sustainable consumption models. Given the increasing demands being made of the citizens, they should not have to make a unilateral commitment in this field: a contract should be concluded with the authorities to cooperate in this field for the common good.

The philosopher Gabriel Tarde has highlighted the fact that individuals develop their behaviour through a process of imitating others, and during this process the action imitated becomes the standard conduct. In the field of promoting responsible, reasoned modes of consumption, the institutions can, precisely, play an incentive role. Gabriel Tarde points out that imitation is like a cycle in that it first confronts resistance before any adaptation becomes possible (Tarde, 2001). Provided that local institutions publicise their commitments, this instigating role can be a major asset in ensuring broad dissemination of information, prompting imitation of the behaviour patterns implemented.

Information and communication science researchers have specifically examined the municipal newsletters that are regularly distributed in many areas, such publications having become fairly common from the 1970s onwards (Paillart, 2006). The newsletters help construct a community of citizens, a solid group, imposing locally-based relations, albeit symbolic ones, on all individuals inhabiting a given area. The publications are geared to encouraging local collective experience. They are distributed to all without distinction and can prove useful in circulating news, creating new standards of behaviour based on reasoned and responsible consumption and limiting information imbalance, at least in terms of access to sources. This is one means of creating synergies with the local institutions, emphasising local cognitive bonds in order to secure local support.

Local and regional authorities can also usefully adopt such facilities in order to forge practical links among all the operators involved in the area and help build up the local or regional identity by involving all the relevant players and showing them that they all form an integral part of the territory. Such mutual cognitive links can make it easier for individuals to voice their commitment.

Furthermore, information and communication science researchers have also developed the *paradigme de la communication engageante* (commitment-inducing communication paradigm) (Bernard & Vincent-Joule, 2007), which posits that it is not enough to communicate to and inform the population if the

desired aim is an actual change of behaviour. In other words, it makes obsolete the notion that action derives from ideas and that it is sufficient to change ideas in order to change acts.

This paradigm addresses the matter of the meaningful preventive message which may or may not induce the message recipient to change behaviour. The optimum way to bring about change is to transform the members of the target group into active partners. If the message recipient feels genuinely and individually involved s/he will tend to concur with the arguments set out during the information campaign and give concrete expression to the commitments s/he has made in changing his/her behaviour.

Awareness and information campaigns which are conducted in one specific area and are not confined to providing information but rather endeavour to attract public support by a variety of means (for example, signing 'commitment contracts') are another means of making local relations an effective channel for information and citizen involvement. Researchers have applied this method to eco-citizen behaviours, and it is readily transposable to responsible modes of consumption.

The transition here is from individual to collective commitment, supported by external players and objects. There is a parallel transition from individual identification of the act to a shared sense of values. Researchers have shown that publicising and mediating these commitments to others, that is, ensuring mutual active commitment by all partners, is the real driving force behind changes of behaviour. They help create a *communauté de pratique* (community of common practices) (Bernard & Vincent-Joule, 2007), giving the markers of individual commitment a new dimension of collective action and shared meaning.

Markers of individual commitment really can take on a collective dimension. For instance, the campaign against AIDS was symbolised by red ribbons which people pinned to their coats. The fact of displaying this symbol in public was thus a marker for individual commitment to a collective cause. We might consider using this kind of symbol in a given area as a marker for the commitment of individuals who

have adopted responsible consumption behaviours. In addition to reminding everyone of their own commitment to others, these visible symbols can also make the individuals displaying them information-bearers, messengers, kindling the curiosity of others. It is an original way of using proximity to elicit support and commitment from local people.

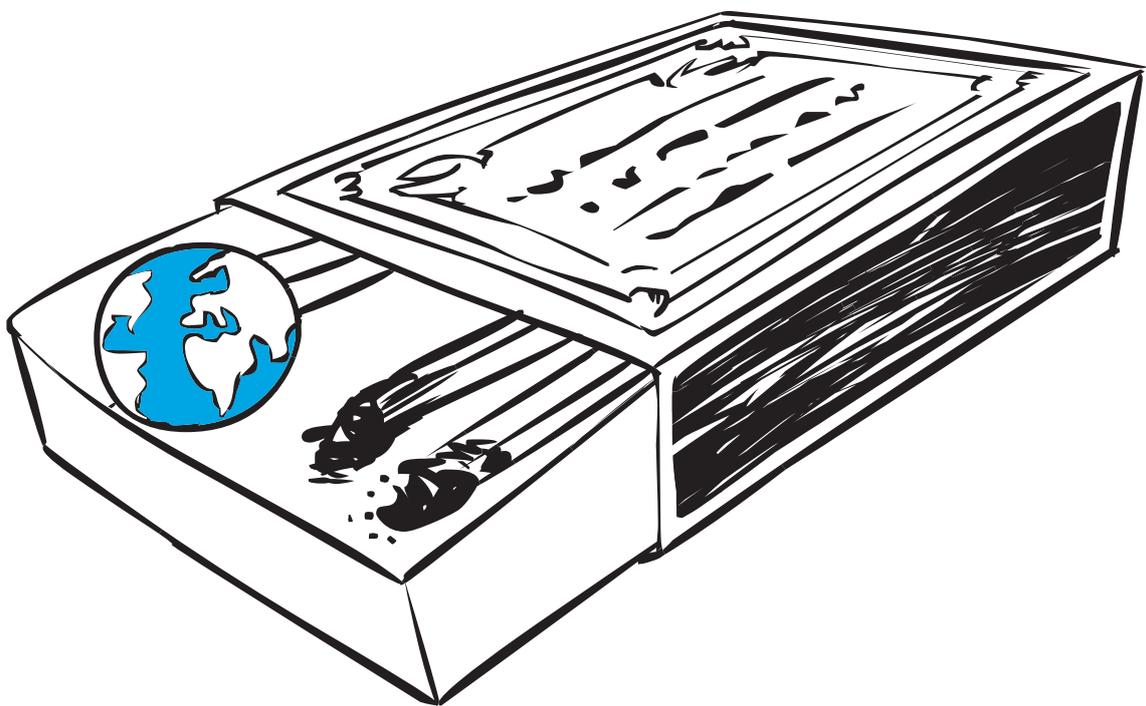
Disseminating information on responsible consumption to the whole population of a given area is no easy matter and comes up against many obstacles. However, the very realisation that these obstacles exist helps overcome them and enables us to combine the various available media in order to make information accessible to as many as possible. The use of proximity to improve information and facilitate observable behavioural changes is particularly important today, even more so than the major information and awareness campaigns on responsible consumption issues. These renewable links help the various protagonists within a given territory to enter into a mutual commitment to give concrete expression to responsible consumer attitudes and highlight our relations based on solidarity and recognition, which have had the tendency to unravel over the last few decades.

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Conclusion

From poverty to the sobriety model



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FROM POVERTY TO THE SOBRIETY MODEL

Francesco Gesualdi, Centro Nuovo Modello di Sviluppo, Pisa (Italy)

There are deep-seated injustices in the world, at every level: both between and within nations. If the world were a five-storey building housing 100 people, 20 on each floor, the top-floor tenants alone would walk off with 86% of the wealth produced; those on the floor below would have 9% and those on the next two floors 2% each; lastly, those in the basement would have to make do with approximately 1% of the wealth (UNDP, 2003).

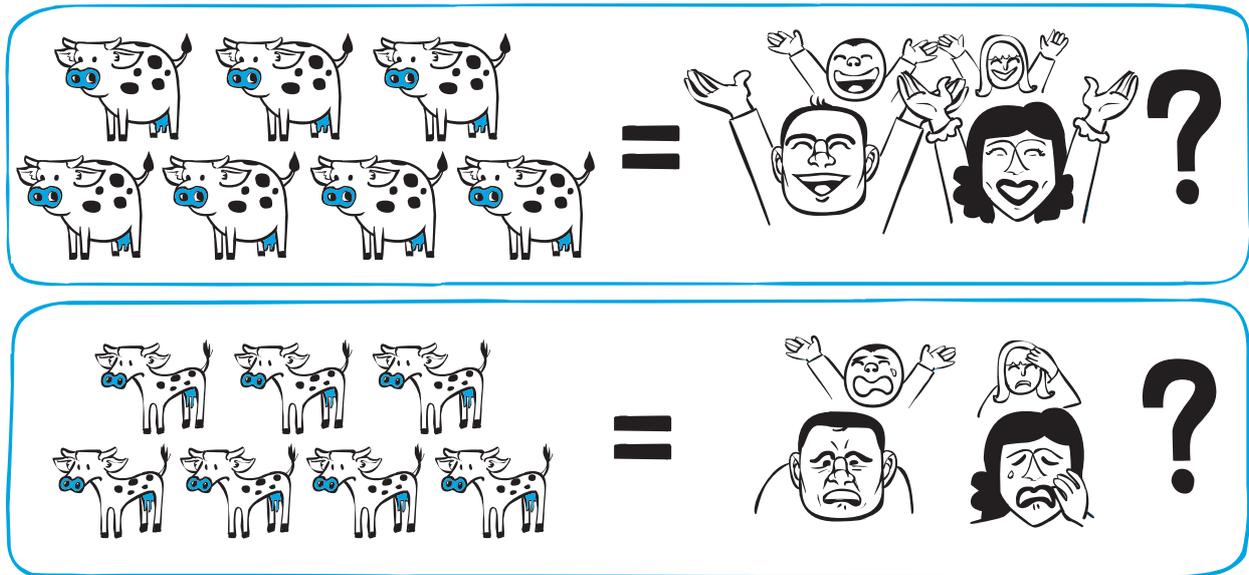
These figures are just averages, of course; a more detailed analysis would reveal an even more astonishing state of affairs. For example, the richest 1% of the world's people possess 9.3% of its wealth,

the same amount shared by the poorest 57%. The wealth enjoyed by 60 million people, on the one hand, is divided among 3.5 billion people, on the other (Milanovic, 2002).

The statistics also reveal that the income of the richest 5% is 114 times greater than that of the poorest 5%. Unfortunately, they also show that the gaps are increasing from one day to the next. This is obvious from the fact that the ratio of the income of the richest 20% to that of the poorest 20% was 11 to 1 in 1913, 30 to 1 in 1960 and as high as 86 to 1 in 1997 (UNDP, 2003).



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The situation is no better within the different countries. According to some studies, the distribution of wealth in most industrialised countries is more unfair than in Roman times. In Brazil, the richest 10% enjoy 48% of household wealth, while the poorest 50% possess just 12% of it. In the United States, the richest 5% receive 22% of available income, and the poorest 40% scarcely 12%. In Italy, the wealth enjoyed by the richest 20% is eight times that of the poorest 20%.

This enormous injustice has had appalling results: 854 million people suffer from hunger, one billion do not have access to clean drinking water, 2.5 billion do not have sanitation facilities, one billion live in shanty towns and 1.5 billion have no electricity. Across the various southern countries, nearly three billion people live on less than two dollars per day, in such poverty that they cannot even meet their basic needs (UN-Habitat 2006/7).

At the same time, poverty is making major inroads into our affluent societies, where it strikes both illegal immigrants and residents. In the European Union, 72 million people, or 16% of the population, are likely to be affected by poverty. In the United States, the figure is 36 million, that is, one inhabitant in seven.⁸⁹

89. It should be noted that in high-income countries, a person whose income is less than 50% of average consumption is considered poor.

A society that maintains this degree of injustice and reduces millions, if not billions, of people to such human wretchedness cannot claim to be civilised. We must all endeavour to ensure that no one is forced to sleep under a bridge, on a bench or in a railway station, that no one has to rummage through rubbish bins to find something to eat, that no one has to suffer the humiliation of living on charity. At the same time, we must sing the praises of poverty: not the crushing destitution of those who do not have the means of subsistence, but the voluntary simplicity of those who know how to separate the necessary from the superfluous and meet their needs while using as few resources and producing as little waste as possible.

The great religions have always encouraged us not to succumb to the lure of wealth, and urged us to strive for poverty as a prerequisite for attaining sainthood and spiritual fulfilment. In this day and age, however, sobriety is no longer merely a moral choice: on the contrary, it has become a necessary transition stage if we wish to save the planet and humanity. There are various signs that our level of production and consumption exceeds the planet's capacity. According to "Living Planet", the WWF's biennial report on the state of the world's natural resources, if we continue to consume at the same pace we will need two planets by 2050.

Our over-consumption is obvious first and foremost from the climate change caused by excessive carbon dioxide emissions. It is also apparent from the fact that numerous resources are running out, starting with water: this resource, which is the very basis of life, is becoming increasingly scarce all over the planet, from the United States to China and from South Africa to the Middle East. Some areas have already hit crisis point: in the Mediterranean area, for example, it rains less and less and the rivers are drying up. The flow of Italy's biggest river, the Po, has dropped by two-thirds over the last 25 years: right from the start of the year, a choice must now be made between irrigating crops and operating electric power stations.

Then there are fish. According to a study published in *Nature* magazine in May 2003, just 10% of the large ocean fish found in 1950 are still present today. Even a fish like cod, which used to be so common in the North Atlantic that it slowed down ships making the crossing, has had its numbers decimated.

Then there are the forests. At the start of the 20th century, the world had five billion hectares of forests. By the end of the century, it had three billion hectares, which meant there had been an outright loss of 40%. Tropical forests have been the most severely affected. According to Greenpeace, however, the situation is continuing to worsen: from 1970 to 2000, the Brazilian Amazon lost 55 million hectares, equivalent to the area of France. Now it is Russia's turn. The countdown started when Japanese multinationals gained unrestricted access: 15 000 hectares of conifers disappear from European Russia every year, threatening the last bastion of nature on our continent. Furthermore, the forests' disappearance will also stamp out the Siberian tiger, a species that is now more common in zoos than in the wild.

Then there are minerals. In some ways, the situation here is even more serious than that of plants and fish, for they have the disadvantage of being non-renewable resources. Minerals represent a vast range of materials, from iron to lime for example. They are used to make many of the objects and buildings around us. Minerals may not seem to be in any danger of running out, since they are all found

in large quantities in the earth's crust. In order to use them, however, we must first extract them, and this is not always straightforward. Some minerals are consequently starting to be regarded as scarce. Basically, a mineral's extractability depends on its location and concentration, which is why mines exist only in certain places with particularly rich, easily accessible veins. Thus, if we look more specifically at sources of minerals meeting these requirements, the quantities of some metals turn out to be genuinely limited. For example, it has been calculated that on the basis of current consumption patterns, we have enough zinc for a bare 25 years, enough silver for 17 years, enough lead for 21 years and enough copper for 28 years. Supposing, however, that consumption increases by 5%, an entirely plausible scenario given the development of countries such as China, India and Brazil, these figures drop to 16, 13, 14 and 18 years respectively (IIED-MMSD, 2002).

When considering resources, we cannot of course overlook oil, which has revolutionised our lifestyles. It has liberated us from working the fields, provided fertiliser and plastic, enabled us to stop going about on foot and, above all, supplied us with electrical power to operate our vast industrial machinery, light our houses and cities and run our household appliances. Yet this substance, which the ancients would have described as magic, has now become a scarce resource that is the cause of war and tragedy. Back in 1956, Marion King Hubbert, an American geologist and researcher for Shell, argued that the geometry of oil wells was such that large quantities of oil could initially be extracted using little energy, until production reached a maximum level known as the 'peak'. After this, it would be possible to extract less and less oil, despite using more energy. A time would eventually come when it would no longer be worth extracting oil, even though 20% to 40% of the stocks would still remain. Some experts believe the peak has already been reached; among those who disagree, the most optimistic predict that it will occur between 2012 and 2015. It will be followed by a gradual decline, with current production levels expected to halve by 2050. Natural gas will follow a similar trend, with extraction simply peaking 10 to 20 years later (Greene, Hopson & Li, 2003).

The most serious problem is that resources are disappearing when half the world's population has not yet tasted human dignity. This second tragedy compounds the first. The earth's poor must escape the destitution into which they have been thrown, and in order to do so they must consume more. They too have the right to eat, to be clothed, to have heating, to receive health care, to study and to travel more and better. They will be able to do so, however, only if the rich agree to consume less. To illustrate this argument, imagine our world as a place in which a few plump inhabitants live alongside an army of scrawny people. The latter need to eat more, but can do so only if the former agree to go on a diet, because there is a limited amount of food and it is impossible to produce more. The moral of the story is that one cannot talk about justice without taking sustainability into consideration, and that equity and sustainability can be reconciled only if the wealthy convert to sobriety, that is, a more parsimonious, cleaner and slower individual and collective lifestyle more at one with natural cycles. But how can we do this when our heads and hearts are filled with a frenzy of consumption? Who will teach us the art of sobriety in a world in which affluence has become the sole reason for living?

The only ones who can guide us are those who have not become caught up in a spiral of frenzied consumption: inhabitants of northern countries who have not succumbed to the culture of possession, and southern populations that have managed to resist the marketing onslaught and have jealously guarded their existential, social and environmental values. These oases of humanity, which are derided, excluded and regarded with suspicion, are in fact the only lifelines at a time when our cruise ships are listing and starting to leak. What if they were the famous rejected stones the Gospel says will become the cornerstones?

The first message from those who have remained detached from wealth is that we must free ourselves from want. As Gandhi wrote a century ago: "The rich have a superfluous store of things which they do not need and which are therefore neglected and wasted, while millions are starved to death. If

everyone each retained possession of only what he needed, no one would be in want Civilisation, in the real sense of the term, consists not in the multiplication, but in the deliberate and voluntary reduction of want" (Gandhi, 1986). Each time we are about to buy something, therefore, we should ask ourselves whether we really need it or whether, on the contrary, we are succumbing to the dictates of fashion, advertising or peer pressure. We should also ask ourselves whether we have done our best to repair the object we wish to replace. If we come to the conclusion that the object is genuinely necessary, then we should keep our cool. Above all, we should not race into a shop to buy a new one. We should first check with our family and friends whether they have a used one that might do.

In everyday life, sobriety involves small choices such as opting for bicycles rather than cars, public rather than private transport, vegetables rather than meat, local produce rather than products imported from all over the world, home-made rather than commercial snacks, seasonal rather than frozen produce, tap water rather than mineral water, home-made rather than ready-made dishes, drinks on tap rather than individually packaged drinks, and, lastly, a healthy diet rather than high-calorie meals. The experience of Bilanci di Giustizia, a movement involving Italian families who practise responsible consumption, shows that sobriety is possible, costs nothing, can even save us money and affords a degree of satisfaction: the satisfaction of feeling like free individuals who make their own decisions as to what to buy. Yet sobriety scares us, because we think only abundance can secure our well-being. It is in fact the poor, however, who show us that nothing could be further from the truth.

Anyone who has ever visited an African, Asian or South American shanty town comes back both overwhelmed by the poverty found there and amazed by the joie de vivre that prevails. As Dominique Laperriere writes: "One day in Calcutta, I find myself in one of the poorest, most overcrowded areas of this incredible city, in which 300 000 homeless people live in the street. The district is called *Anand Nagar* – City of Joy. It gives me the shock of my life. For

in the middle of this hell-hole, I find more heroism, more love, more sharing, more joy and, ultimately, more happiness than in many of our rich western cities. I meet people who have nothing and yet have everything. Amid such ugliness, greyness, mud and excrement, I discover more beauty and hope than in many of the paradises at home” (Lapierre, 1985).

Sister Emmanuelle of Cairo adds: “The poor I have met in Cairo have a frugal yet adequate diet, simple yet suitable clothing and shacks to live in. They are happy there because the source of their happiness is the group to which they belong. They feel secure because they are members of a living body that cannot disintegrate. It is beautiful to be together in life and in death!” (Rahnema, 2003).

To sum up, the poor show us that in order to live well and simply, it is not money that counts, but solidarity. When we have a good income, we do not feel we need others: we have money and therefore feel secure. With money in our pockets, we think we can solve all our problems on our own, from day-to-day costs to more expensive needs: housing, transport and health. For that matter, we always hope we will never be struck by illness and tragedy. Yet difficult times always come eventually, and we then realise how fragile security based on money is, for it can prove inadequate. Security based on collective solidarity is far more robust, for it has the ability to regenerate and can never be extinguished. This is why mutual assistance societies emerged at the very beginning of the European industrial revolution. These associations were founded by workers to come to their members’ aid in the event of illness, death or unemployment. This is also why *comedores populares* were set up in Peru in the 1970s. They consisted of groups of women who banded together to provide meals for their own families. The idea started in Comas, one of Lima’s poorest districts, where a group of women began to buy food collectively and cook together in order to protect themselves from dishonest shopkeepers and keep costs such as water, gas and cooking utensils as low as possible. Their success encouraged many other families to follow suit, and there are now dozens of *comedores populares* in both Lima and many other Peruvian cities.

A national network has been formed. As well as operating as a central buying service, it has facilitated information pooling between canteens and run classes on diet, hygiene, crafts, women’s rights and personal development.

Even in our rich countries in the northern hemisphere, various groups are experiencing the advantages of sharing. This is the case, for example, for Italy’s solidarity-based buying groups. Starting with a simple yet rewarding idea, families have organised themselves with a view to purchasing certain items on a joint basis, not from wholesalers but from local producers.

The first group (or GAS) was set up in Fidenza, a small north Italian city, in 1994. It was instigated by a few families critical of unbridled consumption, waste, environmental damage and the lack of respect for human beings. These families knew they did not have the power to alter the system, but were equally sure that cohesion could be a driving force for change. As far as food was concerned, the organic option naturally prevailed, the aim being to keep healthy and support environmentally friendly agriculture. They initially bought their supplies from organic shops, but prices were high and not all the families could afford it. Some of them then pointed out that there were organic producers in the local area, and that it would be cheaper to buy produce directly from them by placing bulk orders. The producers contacted were interested in the proposal, and the project developed spontaneously. Each person performed a different task, according to a rota system: tasks included collecting orders, picking up goods from producers, making one’s home temporarily available as a warehouse and collecting payment. All of this was done strictly free of charge, which is why they were known as solidarity groups.

By late 2006, there were 150 solidarity-based buying groups in Italy, known both for their innovative approach to shopping and their unusual relationships with suppliers. It is not uncommon for members of buying groups to visit producers, take an interest in their problems, discuss production techniques and compare their respective outlooks on life. In other words, they develop a friendly relationship that leads

to greater transparency, more ethical production and, in some cases, an original form of co-operation. For example, during busy periods producers may ask members of the solidarity-based buying group to help them with the simplest tasks in exchange for free or discounted produce.

Over time, it becomes apparent that sharing has the advantage of being conducive to friendship, making life more enjoyable and meeting needs at a lower cost. Moreover, as shown by the transport sector, sharing is also good for the environment. According to a Norwegian study, the environmental cost per person per kilometre, expressed in terms of CO₂ equivalent, varies considerably depending on the means of transport used. Car journeys are the most polluting, especially if one travels alone. Solitary journeys correspond to 0.291 kg per kilometre, or five times more than a kilometre travelled by coach (0.055 kg) and 10 times more than a kilometre travelled by train (0.024 kg),⁹⁰ hence the importance of public transport and car sharing arrangements. One such form of sharing is car pooling, which means that rather than travelling alone, one comes to an agreement with one's neighbours to use just one car to take children to the same school or adults to the same railway station or workplace.

The other option is shared car ownership, which involves using a jointly purchased car. This practice emerged in Switzerland in the 1990s. It was instigated by a number of young people who, rather than buying a car each, decided to buy just one car and take turns to use it. It soon became apparent that this system is good for members' wallets, since it secures them the use of a car at a low cost, and good for the environment, since it reduces the number of cars in circulation. As a result, it quickly spread throughout Europe at the instigation of associations, local bodies or private companies. Whoever initiates it, the system is always more or less the same: members make an initial contribution and a monthly payment based on the number of kilometres travelled.

90. Industrial Ecology Programme, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, *Using Life Cycle Approaches to Evaluate Sustainable Consumption Programs*, 2004. In addition to the gases emitted during journeys, the calculations include those emitted during the vehicle construction process.

Many other tools and durable goods could be shared according to this model. For example, why not set up jointly owned laundries or share a drill, coffee grinder or ski equipment, which is stored in the attic for much of the year?

If we could understand that the key is not to own objects but to be able to use them, we would all gain by it, even without much money. A change for the better could even be worked in the production sector. At present, companies derive their income from the sale of goods. To this end, they endeavour to produce goods which are not designed to be repaired, are soon damaged and quickly go out of fashion. As a result, we have a vast production sector that generates a huge amount of waste. If a market based on services rather than objects were to gain ground, companies would all follow the example of Rank Xerox. This company specialises in producing photocopiers, but sells hardly any machines any more, for it has opted to sell photocopying services instead. This means it signs a contract with clients specifying the number of photocopies to be guaranteed over a given period and the price of each photocopy. The client's office is then equipped with a photocopier; if it breaks down, a technician comes and deals with the problem free of charge. In this scenario, it is in Rank Xerox's interest to build robust machines designed to last and to be repaired. Only technically obsolete machines that cannot be repaired are discarded. Even then, they are not thrown out, but recycled. The machine's frame is salvaged and technically more advanced parts installed; the photocopier is then put back into circulation as a modern machine. In some cases, certain parts may be used in a fax or printer, which share numerous functions with photocopiers. All of this is possible because Rank Xerox operates a standardised production system: as in a building set, components may be taken apart and put back together in different ways to build a different machine. It has been calculated that 80% of the components of an old photocopier can be salvaged in order to obtain a new product. This equates to an 80% reduction in the waste produced and primary materials used for each new photocopier.

Abandoning the idea of possession could bring about far-reaching changes in production and marketing

strategies, the design of jointly-owned blocks of flats and even town planning. If we could leave behind the prison of individualism for the freedom of community, manifold new horizons would open up to us. We would discover the advantages of neighbourly solidarity, which is so important in emergencies. We would discover the benefits of small-scale exchanges of objects and even skills between neighbours. We would discover that it is possible to organise self-managed services in blocks of flats or neighbourhoods for the benefit of our children, the elderly and the sick. These services would afford considerable assistance to the many mothers, fathers and young people subject to the pressures associated with working hours, journey times and the myriad day-to-day obligations. Such initiatives, which could do a great deal to improve our quality of life, are within reach provided that we manage to bring about another revolution involving a central aspect of wealth: a review of the concept of 'capital'.

'Capital' is an adjective that means important or fundamental. Like all adjectives, it should always be attached to a noun. In fact, when we use this word we are referring to capital wealth, that is, the main form of wealth. In the existing system, money is the greatest, most important form of wealth. The words 'capital' and 'money' have consequently become interchangeable, at least in the eyes of shopkeepers. If the economy is regarded as existing to serve human beings, then what constitutes capital, the greatest form of wealth, is social cohesion. Once again, there is strength in numbers, in community and in the sharing of labour and knowledge through mutual assistance. Such an arrangement is beneficial to all and meets the needs of all, including those who have no money. That is precisely why it is the arrangement favoured by the poor and the one most consistent with sobriety.

Drawing on this idea, a group of young people from Pisa, in Italy, have set up a joint workshop where members can come and repair their bicycles, scooters or motor scooters free of charge. As in the case of the *comedores populares*, this small-scale initiative encompasses an entire political manifesto. The message is this: if we wish to develop a different kind of economy, designed to enable everyone to live in dignity while respecting the planet, it must be based on self-determination, solidarity, participation, community, free services, sustainability and sobriety, all of which are simple ideas capable of changing the world.

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APPENDIX

Free online guides to responsible consumption downloadable in PDF format

The following address takes the user to a list of publications by the Sustainable Consumption and Production Branch of UNEP, where the UNEP/UNESCO youthXchange “Training Kit on Sustainable Consumption: Towards Sustainable Lifestyles” can be downloaded in PDF format. The last page lists a large number of sources classified by theme. This facility provides an overview of the whole issue of responsible consumption and addresses many practical aspects which concern us all.

www.unep.fr/scp/publications/

Global Standard for Consumer Products (Issue 2a), a British Retail Consortium publication on the issues of responsible production and consumption, is available at the following address:

www.tsoshop.co.uk/brcbookshop/.

In the United Kingdom, the Trade Association Forum provides a practical guide entitled *Good Practice Guide – Sustainable Consumption & Production*

for UK Trade Associations, intended for trade associations wishing to become involved in responsible production and consumption:

www.taforum.org/attach.pl/2210/823/Good%20Practice%20Guide%202007%20ff.pdf

The following link takes the user to a guide entitled *I will if you will – Towards sustainable consumption*, which was produced in the wake of a Round Table on responsible consumption by the National Consumer Council in partnership with the Sustainable Development Commission.

www.sd-commission.org.uk/publications/downloads/I_Will_If_You_Will.pdf

The ADEME (*Agence de l'Environnement et de la Maîtrise de l'Energie* – the French Agency for the environment and energy management) also provides a guide to eco-consumption at this address.

www2.ademe.fr/servlet/KBaseShow?sort=1&cid=21435&m=3&catid=21436

www.oecd.org/dataoecd/1/59/40317373.pdf: a study geared to promoting responsible consumption in OECD member countries.

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