

Situated Consumption: A Basis for Policy Development

by Victor Margolin

In a recent paper on sustainable consumption Eva Heiskanen and Mika Pantzar introduced consumer behavior to the discussion of global sustainability.¹ In fact, they argued that consumers bear the main responsibility for environmental degradation in a market economy. While there is also a need to take into account the behavior of businesses, given the severe damages that companies cause by not taking appropriate environmental precautions, Heiskanen and Pantzar are accurate in recognizing that consumers bear a heavy responsibility for wasteful energy consumption, excessive accumulation of possessions, and indifferent attitudes toward product disposal.

They state that we still lack a clear definition of sustainable consumption and argue that consumer research has not yet focused on the most important issues. I agree with these points as well as with their observation that green consumerism is too limited a concept. As they make clear, some larger theoretical framework is needed in order to better define the relations between consumers, users, and the environment.

What makes any attempt to characterize this relationship particularly difficult is that consumers and sustainability have not yet been considered within a macro-framework that combines data on global capital flows, available resources, the production of goods, and the inequitable conditions of consumption around the world. There is a need for some form of global systems approach that can bring consumer behavior on the micro level into relation with macro conditions that directly or indirectly affect it. By creating a global context within which to study local consumer behavior, it should be possible to more accurately describe the environmental implications of that behavior. The models generated by the Club of Rome have demonstrated the possibility of synthesizing and analyzing large amounts of data but these models have focused more on the use of resources at a very general level and have not addressed the ways that the real behavior of consumers in all its diversity affects this process.

Environmental economists have long argued that we do not have the proper calculus to account for the real costs of consumption. Many of these costs, they claim, remain hidden and must be paid by governments in the form of environmental clean-up campaigns, recycling programs and the like. Ways of restructuring this calculus have been proposed but are generally considered to be so politically undesirable that they are not translated into new regulations and taxes. Hence, the real costs and consequences of the high consumption in developed countries

¹ Eva Heiskanen and Mika Pantzar, "Toward Sustainable Consumption: Two New Perspectives," *Journal of Consumer Policy* 20 (1997): 409-442.

and their consequences for developing countries remain largely invisible. This makes it all the easier for multinational corporations to expand the global market that began with North America, Europe, and Japan and now includes new developing nations such as Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Korea, China, and others. It would appear to the multinationals that the high level of consumption presently enjoyed by the developed nations can be spread throughout the world without consequences.

The inability of social and economic analysts to clarify this situation is also a factor in the way many studies of consumption are organized. As Heiskanen and Pantzar, citing Jamieson and others, point out:

In a highly industrialized society, knowledge and responsibility are so diffused among economic actors that no one really feels responsible.²

Consumers benefit from this confusion by not being held responsible for the consequences of their consumption patterns. Researchers continue to talk about the role of consumption in defining the self without sufficiently accounting for the social and environmental context in which the self exists. Much of the current thinking about consumption has been influenced by research methods from anthropology, a discipline in which scholars have a long tradition of reflecting on the symbolic meaning of goods within a local exchange process rather than considering the production of meaning in relation to macroeconomics, resource consumption, and related factors. In the move from the study of non-industrial cultures to industrializing and industrial ones, scholars have not sufficiently addressed the significantly higher levels of consumption within industrial cultures, nor have they taken into account the real costs of producing goods. McCracken, for example, has drawn on the research done by anthropologists in non-industrial cultures in order to study the symbolic value of goods in industrialized societies. In *Culture and Consumption* he writes:

Consumer goods have a significance that goes beyond their utilitarian character and commercial value. This significance consists largely in their ability to carry and communicate cultural meaning.³

In the development of Western consumption studies, the emphasis on what McCracken calls “person-object” relations brought a new and valuable perspective to the question of how humans engage with material culture. It added a personal and psychological dimension to the earlier mechanistic studies of many economists, the limited interpretation of consumption as a

² Ibid, 409.

³ Grant McCracken, “Meaning Manufacture and Movement in the World of Goods,” in McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 71.

striving for status, and the deterministic arguments of those who examine consumption within a Marxist framework. But the result of focusing on the personal relation to products while not sufficiently factoring in the social consequences of that relation has tended to obscure the problems of consumption and sustainability that are now being brought back into the study of consumer behavior.⁴

We currently have a thriving culture of consumer research and an equally active one dedicated to research on the environment.⁵ The question before us is how to bring these two cultures together in order to create conditions for research that can move beyond the separate communities of investigation on the one hand and polemical tracts on the other. Consumer researchers tend to conduct ethnographic research without locating the informant in a situation that takes ecological conditions into account while environmental researchers tend to offer simplistic and unrealistic solutions to the ecological problems created by intensive consumption.

To overcome this separation, I propose the concept of “situated consumption.” I mean by this phrase that the individual is always located in a situation that establishes particular conditions for her or his behavior. Individuals act in these situations to either change them or contribute to their perpetuation. Exactly what these situations are is of course grounds for social debate. There is now growing evidence that we are situated within a global ecological crisis even though some choose to ignore this evidence. Without bringing this debate to the level of polemics it is nonetheless possible to relate data on patterns of resource use and other relevant information to current methods of formulating consumption situations so as to offer a broader picture of what is implied in the act of individual consumption.

While current studies of consumption continue to make valuable contributions to our understanding of consumer behavior, it is essential to create a new research model in order to gain a greater understanding of how consumer behavior contributes to the current ecological conditions of the planet. Ecologists have made cogent arguments for the need to change consumer behavior in industrialized countries but, in the absence of a solid research program on sustainable consumption, they have had little more to suggest than the selective adoption of green products or a broad but vaguely stated reduction in the purchase of goods.

In fields such as social work or political science which have active research cultures, many studies are done that relate individual behavior to policy questions. Such studies, which

⁴ The books by Vance Packard in the 1950s such as *The Hidden Persuaders* and *The Waste Makers* were among the first to criticize the excessive resource consumption of the American public but they were polemical tracts, whose arguments were not accepted into the discourse of academic social science despite the author’s perceptive attention to the negative consequences of excessive consumption.

⁵ A leading publication in this field is the *Journal of Consumer Research*. See also John F. Sherry Jr., “Postmodern Alternatives: The Interpretive Turn in Consumer Research,” in Thomas S. Robertson

provide strong empirical bases for discussions of social policy, can also serve as useful models for future research on consumer activity within a framework of environmental policy analysis. We need to use the data generated by those who have studied “person-object” relations in order to generate more sophisticated hypotheses about how consumers might respond to new environmental policies. We also need to address the question raised by Heiskanen and Pantzer of how to state persuasively the responsibilities of consumers in a sustainable society.

However, there are differences that we must recognize between policy studies in social work or political science and those that affect the market where consumption occurs. The market allows a great deal of freedom that is highly resistant to regulation of any kind. It is therefore more difficult to quantify positive or negative social outcomes in market situations than it is to justify the enactment of social policies by measuring the consequences of insufficient social services, for example, or the effects of poor housing on individuals.

Studies of sustainable consumption will have to address the necessary interplay between the widespread freedom that consumers currently enjoy in national, regional, and global markets and the more restricted freedom they would experience in markets of the future that are regulated in response to the ecological needs of the planet. As one way of looking at how consumers might respond to the way goods are produced, distributed, and used in order to create a practice of sustainable consumption, researchers will need to differentiate a variety of roles for the consumer. It is important to envision these roles quite specifically and conduct research studies that explore them rather than simply call for broad changes in consumer behavior as many environmentalists now do.

An important consequence of bringing together current theories of consumer research with data that can be used to construct a macro ecological situation in which personal consumption occurs is that we can begin to talk more specifically about the environmental consequences of consumer behavior. Using the concept of “situated consumption” we can explore the policy implications of current consumption practices and thus move towards strategies for change that are more realistic than the reductive proposals we now have.

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and Harold H. Kassarian, *Handbook of Consumer Behavior* (Englewood, Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1991), 548-591.