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SPECIAL ISSUE: SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

Sustainable Consumption – Three Paradoxes

Sustainable consumption is a field characterized by paradox, as illustrated by the papers in this special issue. Interrogation of three paradoxes – the primacy of the individual consumer, the futile search for definitions, and the retreat from power – may open new paths for bringing order to the field, while underscoring the importance of power to the field.

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Sustainable Consumption – Three Paradoxes

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Abstract

Sustainable consumption is a field in transition, with limited agreement around organizing questions, key definitions, overarching frameworks and fundamental disciplinary traditions. The resulting dissonance complicates the collaboration and cumulative generation of knowledge typical of effective research communities. This dissonance emerges from the papers in this special issue of *GAIA*, which together illustrate three paradoxes that characterize the field: the primacy of the individual consumer, the counterproductive search for definitions, and limited theorizing about social change and a consequent retreat from power. Concerted struggle with these paradoxes can illuminate new approaches to defining and advancing the field, including those outlined in this essay.

Keywords

definitions, individual consumer, paradox, power, social change, sustainable consumption

As an idea, a cluster of individual behaviors, and a set of policy practices, the notion of sustainable consumption remains profoundly unsettled. The term is used in divergent ways by different actors to describe or prescribe everything from individual acts of conscientious consumption to consumption-shifting policy measures to cultural pathways to “degrowth” and the evolution of shared consumer practice (e.g., Assadourian 2010, Cohen et al. 2013, Lebel et al. 2010, Shove 2012). Seemingly anything that involves both “sustainability” (itself a contested concept) and “consumption” counts as sustainable consumption.

While this conceptual diversity may be distressing to some, others celebrate it as a sign of success. After all, determined inquiry into the drivers and consequences of consumption is a recent feature of research into environmental futures; sustainable consumption remains a distinctly young area of inquiry. Until the early 2000s, focus on population growth and technological change drove the conversation about global environmental change (Princen et al. 2002). Questions about consumption, tainted as they are by the spectre of limits and sacrifice, were relegated to the margins of the debate. For the past 15 years, however, scholarly and policy interest in consumption has grown, making the field one of the most vibrant among the many strands of sustainability science.

This collision between conceptual disorder and growing interest creates special problems for the sustainable consumption research community. Without a shared understanding of the boundaries, traditions, and organizing questions of the field, researchers can easily talk past one another or unnecessarily recapitulate established insight. Creating a broadly accepted body of cumulative knowledge upon which researchers can build becomes difficult to achieve. The challenge now is to organize our shared inquiry around notions of sustainable consumption in ways that sharpen the analytic power of the field without unduly narrowing the questions it asks or the scholarly traditions upon which it draws.

The work presented in this special issue of *GAIA* thus arrives at an important moment. The German Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) is to be commended for supporting ten project groups under the focal topic *From Knowledge to Action – New Paths*

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towards *Sustainable Consumption*,¹ focusing on promoting sustainable consumption. The synthesis project team, whose work is reflected in this special issue, also deserves praise. Taken separately, each paper in this issue usefully introduces the reader to a distinctive and important body of literature. Read as a single body of work, the essays raise questions that deserve the attention of the research community.

As an outsider to the work that informs this special issue, I cannot comment in detail on the deliberations and conclusions of the ten project groups, or on the nuances of the synthesis project and the conceptual frameworks summarized by *Defila, Di Giulio, and Kaufmann-Hayoz* in their introductory essay. The research is rich, exciting, complex, and filled with possibility, but for the purposes of this essay it defies simple summary or extended evaluation. I therefore seek to shun the role of an evaluator and instead explore three paradoxes that emerge when considering the contributions to this special issue.

Paradoxes, as observed by policy scientist Deborah Stone (2011), are a misunderstood fact of political life. They do not arise from moments of irrationality or suggest conceptual shortcomings that must be corrected or tolerated. Instead, paradoxes are places and moments where “the rationality project”, which assumes that most social problems can be scientifically understood and effectively managed, is shown to be insufficient. Paradoxes create moments of uncomfortable dissonance and provide the opportunity and impetus to reconsider old assumptions and test new concepts. Much has been written about the contradictions within the field of sustainable consumption (e.g., Zaccā 2007). I strive below to move beyond a recitation of contradictions and instead wrestle with three conundrums that flow from the preceding papers and extend to the field as a whole. I will sometimes use the pronoun “we”; when I do, I refer to scholars and activists whose concern for the resilience of critical environmental systems leads them to interrogate

patterns and practices of consumption. Perhaps this illumination of paradox will advance, in small ways, the central aim of this research project, which is – as *Defila, Di Giulio, and Kaufmann-Hayoz* remind us – to conceptualize the field “in such a way that researchers from different disciplines (and practitioners from different fields) can link with it” (p. 152).

The Individual Consumer Paradox

We know that consumption patterns reflect much more than the rational calculations of the mythical individual consumer. Yet the prevalent unit of analysis continues to be this very same individual consumer.

In the early pages of their opening essay, *Defila, Di Giulio, and Kaufmann-Hayoz's* raise an especially thorny question: how does one best understand individual consumption? They compress a great deal of information into a few paragraphs to press the claim that individual consumption cannot be divorced from complex forces operating at a variety of levels. “Individual consumer acts,” they say, “are embedded in social, cultural and material contexts” (p. 152). We cannot, in other words, fully understand existing patterns of consumption unless we see individuals as more than consumers, and view individual consumption choices as more than narrow transactions meant to satisfy objective material needs.

For those seeking to promote sustainable development, the message from *Defila, Di Giulio, and Kaufmann-Hayoz's* paper is clear: individuals are but part of a process that creates and maintains prevailing patterns of unsustainable consumption and, as such, “the individual” may not be the best or primary unit of analysis. Other elements of the larger social-technical-cultural-institutional system that prestructure or normalize prevailing consumption patterns may be more deserving of attention. In ways similar to the work of systems analysts like the late Donella Meadows (2008), *Defila, Di Giulio, and Kaufmann-Hayoz's* summary seems to argue that researchers must strive to understand the larger system of consumption before reaching conclusions about what questions to ask, where to intervene, and how the individual consumer fits into the consumption system. Consumption is more complicated than first meets the eye; reflexively focusing on the individual consumer may prove unproductive.

As reasonable as this advice sounds, it is poorly heeded by most of the papers in this issue, which work largely within the bounds of “individuals”, “consumers”, and “consumer needs”:

- *Kastner and Matthies* investigate the interplay of individual consumer intent and environmental impact as drivers of individual consumer behavior.
- *Fischer and Barth* offer a complementary analysis of core competencies of conscientious consumers.

Rico Defila, Antonietta Di Giulio, Ruth Kaufmann-Hayoz: Sustainable Consumption – an Unwieldy Object of Research ▶ p. 148

Ingo Kastner, Ellen Matthies: Motivation and Impact. Implications of a Twofold Perspective on Sustainable Consumption for Intervention Programs and Evaluation Designs ▶ p. 175

Daniel Fischer, Matthias Barth: Key Competencies for and beyond Sustainable Consumption. An Educational Contribution to the Debate ▶ p. 193

¹ The focal topic was funded from 2008 through to 2013 by the BMBF as part of its *Social-ecological Research Programme (SOEF)*. For more information see www.fona.de/en/9876.

Birgit Blättel-Mink:
*Active Consumership
as a Driver towards
Sustainability?*
▶ p. 158

Antonietta Di Giulio,
Doris Fuchs: *Sustainable
Consumption Corridors:
Concept, Objections,
and Responses*
▶ p. 184

Melanie Jaeger-Erben,
Ursula Offenberger:
*A Practice Theory
Approach to Sustainable
Consumption*
▶ p. 166

- **Blättel-Mink** challenges the accepted definition of “consumers” by exploring the varied roles of consumption in everyday life, but here too the individual-as-consumer perspective trumps.
- **Di Giulio and Fuchs’** exploration of consumption corridors is at times guided – and perhaps a bit constrained – by a conceptual tilt toward individual consumer preferences and needs when defining their corridors.
- Only **Jaeger-Erben and Offenberger’s** essay on everyday life and social practice explicitly blurs prevailing notions of individual and consumer and, in this way, stands apart from the others.

The divergence between the theoretical claims of the opening essay in this special issue and the work presented in the subsequent papers is usefully striking. It highlights the tension between the complexity of consumption studies on the one hand and the attractiveness of the simple frame of the individual consumer on the other (e.g., Sanne 2002). A paradox, in these papers and the field as whole, thus arises. We understand the individual as consumer to be an incomplete and mythical notion that can hide more than it reveals, yet this construct continues to dominate the field.

There are at least four overlapping explanations for this paradox. One is unavoidably semantic. The term “sustainable consumption” immediately suggests that current patterns of consumption are the problem while new patterns of consumption – “sustainable consumption” – are the solution. The individual consumer is the most visible and easily studied participant in these patterns of consumption, and thus can become the natural focus of study and persuasion. This tendency to assume that “consumption = individual” is reinforced by a second element rooted in the structure of knowledge generation: economics, psychology, and business studies are major players in the field, and the individual is the primary unit of analysis for each (e.g., Mont and Plepys 2008).

A third possibility flows from the promotion agenda that holds increasing sway over the field (as in “How do we – e.g., policy and academic elites – promote sustainable development behaviors?”), and which shapes the work in this special issue. Everything else being equal, a promotion agenda – or what Elizabeth Shove (2010) terms the “ABC” approach – inevitably steers the analyst’s gaze toward what Webb (2012, p. 109) identifies as “behavioral adjustments to individual self-interest”, where self-interest is typically defined in economic and consumeristic ways. The result, as Shove (2009) notes, is the inevitable definition of “citizens as consumers and governments as ‘enablers’ whose role is to induce people to make pro-environmental decisions for themselves”.

A fourth explanation, linked closely to this promotion agenda, revolves around the notion of consumer sovereignty, which views individual consumer choice as the principal source of production, pricing, and regulatory decisions by business and governments (Princen 2010a). This thinking holds that if individual consumers change their behavior – if they vote in the marketplace with their

Dollar or Pound or Euro – producers will produce less and produce differently, and government policy will change accordingly. Consumers are in the driver’s seat, and if the bus they are driving is heading toward a cliff, consumers must be educated or persuaded to steer the system in another direction. From this perspective the first task becomes figuring out what it is that consumers lack – information, perhaps, or competency or empathy – that prevents them from consuming in ways that advance the interests of their children, their grandchildren, and the planet as a whole. The second task is to draw on a heightened understanding of consumer behavior to effectively persuade or coerce consumers to make proper choices. The frame, focus, and principal actor throughout is the individual consumer.

No doubt other explanations exist for the paradox of knowing that individual consumers are not always the primary agents within prevailing patterns of consumption, yet treating them as if they were. A useful next step for mitigating this paradox might be to compile and disseminate, from the work of the focal groups, examples of existing research in sustainable consumption that operationalizes some of the insights (and implicit prescriptions) presented in figure 2 of *Defila, Di Giulio, and Kaufmann-Hayoz’s* opening essay (p. 152). What, for example, would scrutiny of individual consumption from a “cultural context” perspective look like as compared to work that emphasizes an “institutional context” or “social affiliations”? If distinctions like those in figure 2 could be shown to be analytically and methodologically useful to researchers, and attractive to funders, they could help shape the field in powerful and productive ways.

The Paradox of Definition

Sustainable consumption is an unwieldy field of research in part because it is so profoundly ill-defined. Stronger working definitions are necessary, but strong definitions can further cloud the concept and restrict disciplinary and conceptual diversity.

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The concept of sustainable consumption serves many masters. Upon reflection, this should not surprise. Recall that the concept originates from the work of the Brundtland Commission, which framed sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987, p. 43). Interestingly, the papers in this special issue embrace the Commission’s focus on needs, which became the conceptual beacon of the 1992 *Earth Summit* not for its analytic clarity or decisive articulation of key concepts, but rather because of its lack of both. The inherent ambiguity of sustainable development was purposely engineered, in part by focusing on needs, to create political space for a diverse array of actors at the *Earth Summit* and, in this way, it was remarkably successful (e.g., Chatterjee and Finger 1994).

What worked for the framers of the *Earth Summit* back in 1992 is not nearly as useful to today’s sustainable consumption community. Ambiguity over what “sustainable” consumption finally means prevails in the research arena and the policy realm, complicating action in both. The logical response is to develop more robust definitions, both formal and applied, of sustainable consumption, and on this front there have been many attempts (e.g., the multiple perspectives in Jackson 2006 and Seyfang 2006). Some definitions emphasize the nature of production (renewable energy, e.g., or organic foods) while others focus on the primary locus of consumption (e.g., Schor 2010, Seyfang 2006). Some analysts classify sustainable consumption as any moment of material provisioning that restores natural capital and the resilience of ecosystem processes (e.g., Hawken 2013), as contrasted against those who emphasize the impact of consumption practices on social capital and citizen competency (e.g., Leonard 2010, Princen 2010 a,b, Stolle and Micheletti 2013). And others wonder about the whole notion of sustainable consumption, arguing that few if any consumption choices are sustainable in the absence of fundamental change in industrial society (e.g., Assadourian 2013 b, Speth 2008).

Defila, Di Giulio, and Kaufmann-Hayoz join the fray with a two-part definition that is distinctive for its novelty. The first part focuses on consumer action and intent: sustainable consumption constitutes those consumer choices that are both intentional and effective – that is, consumers intend through their consumption behavior to make a difference, and the choices do in fact have some positive impact on environmental and/or social conditions. A second element establishes a connection to their broader concern about inequity: bona fide acts of sustainable consumption, in addition to being intentional and effective, must also enhance collective capacity to meet objective needs fundamental to “the good life”. As an organizing concept and a set of discrete behaviors, “sustainable consumption” becomes a vehicle for individual participation in the fundamental reorientation of contemporary society toward ensuring an acceptable and environmentally sustainable level of consumption for all.

All definitions of sustainable consumption are implicit proclamations of research agendas, and this one is no different. The primary research tasks summarized by **Defila, Di Giulio, and Kaufmann-Hayoz** include better assessment of 1. the overall environmental and social impact of individual consumption choices, 2. the effect of these choices on established and emerging patterns of consumption occurring across multiple and intersecting chains of production and consumption, 3. consumer intent, and 4. the norms and institutions necessary to facilitate equal access to “the good life” across time and space. One could challenge or embrace this (or any) definition based on the feasibility of these tasks, an assessment of relevant research capacities, or underlying conceptual weaknesses or strengths. Some, for instance, may embrace the request, implicit in the opening essay of this special issue, that researchers link the operationalization of needs (and the consumption choices they inform) to assessments of “the good life”. Others may balk at the centrality of consumer intent: since consumers do not typically consume in intentionally unsustainable ways, why must intentionality count, especially in those circumstances where sustainable choices would be prefigured or “choice edited” (e.g., Maniates 2010) without the full knowledge of consumers? But all this is to be expected. Operational definitions – definitions with teeth in other words – elevate some research questions over others, while inviting some disciplines to the table and holding others at bay.

Herein lies the paradox. Any new definition of sustainable consumption that fails to impose itself on the field simply joins ranks of existing definitions and further muddies the waters. And if a new definition becomes dominant and thus privileges certain concepts, methodologies and questions over others, it walls off the field from potentially useful scholarship. We need better and stronger definitions as part of the sustainable consumption enterprise, yet we do not want the exclusionary effects such definitions will create. The hunt for “better” definitions cannot resolve this tension, yet we nevertheless continue to search as if this dilemma did not exist.

It may be time for an alternative approach. One way forward could be to draw on the focal group work summarized by **Defila,**

“Contemporary consumerism embodies a concept of ideology and a political and economic collusion strategy; these values were somehow made very legitimate and logical, like how consumerism has been used as the driving force behind social development and stability. A big part of our consumer demand is a result of social needs; (...).”
Artist’s Statement,
Hong Hao, 2014

Di Giulio, and Kaufmann-Hayoz to develop a “lens” on sustainable consumption (Princen 2010b) through which to view the causes and consequences of the rapid unravelling of the natural world. Under this formulation, sustainable consumption becomes less about defining a specific set of activities or outcomes and more about a particular understanding of the world. This lens would be characterized by the questions it poses (e. g., “What are the impacts of this pattern of consumption?”, “What is the history and drivers of this pattern?”, “Who are the winners and losers in this

The Paradox of Power

Questions about power and social change lie at the heart of the sustainable consumption project. Yet the scholarly community best poised to address these questions – scholars and activists who focus on sustainable consumption – remains reluctant to fully engage them.



Bottom No. 4, 2009 © Hong Hao/Prix Pictet Ltd.

pattern?”, “What norms support this pattern?”, and “Where are the pressure points for change in this pattern if one wants to make it more rather than less sustainable?”), and by those combinations of disciplinary fields best able to address these questions (much along the lines of Seyfang 2009, p. 4). Sustainable consumption is thus defined by what it offers – a set of questions, approaches, and goals that direct and connect relevant research – rather than by what it is. The contributors to the project that informs this special edition are uniquely positioned to develop and refine such a lens, which could drastically reduce the research unwieldiness of the field.

Unavoidable questions of power and social change permeate the sustainable consumption project. What configurations of power and influence produce and maintain existing patterns of consumption? Which actors are able and willing to reshape the underlying structures of material provisioning? Who is capable of shifting the terrain of consumption, and who is culpable for creating and reinforcing existing patterns of unsustainable consumption? What pro-

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cesses of social change must be analyzed and reinforced, and how can research be framed and disseminated to challenge the powerful while empowering the agents of sustainable consumption?

chology, consumer behavior, and marketing – embrace the individual as the starting unit of analysis. Mainstream environmentalism, moreover, has its own tendencies in this direction, with its focus on individual behavior as a primary source of environmental degradation, and individual action – through small acts

The world has become a less equal, less ecologically diverse, warmer, and far less stable place despite the herculean efforts of many in the sustainable consumption community.

It is difficult for this writer to imagine a more pressing set of questions for the sustainable consumption project. Happily, for the past several years a broad range of scholars and activists have struggled with these questions, including political economists (e. g., Dauvergne 2008), historians (e. g., Cohen 2008), anthropologists (e. g., Wilk 2009), policy scientists (e. g., Clapp and Swanston 2009), and activists (the best example being Leonard 2010). This inquiry is producing an increasingly clear picture of how systems of power function to produce and reproduce norms and practices of unsustainable consumption, and how these systems might be altered or disrupted. With few exceptions, however, this work occurs outside of the self-identified sustainable consumption community; those asking the difficult questions about power and privilege are motivated more by particular policy issues or theoretical questions (e. g., “What are the politics of plastic bags?”, or “How do we explain the rise of consumerism?”) than by concerns with sustainable consumption per se. Here, then, lies yet another paradox: those who should be among the most determined to raise difficult questions about consumption, power, and social change – scholars working explicitly on sustainable consumption – generally appear to be the most reluctant to do so.

In ways that reflect the opening paradox of this essay, one likely source of this aversion to power is methodological. Many of the contributing fields in the sustainable consumption discourse – economics, psy-

like recycling or “green consumption” – as a principal engine of the transition to sustainability (e. g., Devinney et al. 2010). It is no wonder that the field of sustainable consumption at times seems trapped in an analytic framework that focuses too much on individuals who consume unsustainably, and experts (governmental, corporate, or academic) who aim to change this behavior.

One consequence of this framework is that power becomes conceptualized by the field in two mutually dependent and eventually narrow ways: as the manifestation of consumer sovereignty (where consumer choice dictates consumption patterns), and as the expression of expert influence (where experts and the organizations they advise look to influence these “sovereign” actors in multiple ways). This in turn privileges two theories of social change common to the sustainable consumption literature. One is a simplified version of diffusion theory, in which the right combination of novel ideas and new consumption practices will spread spontaneously among consumers, sometimes with nurturing by enlightened policy makers. Another is a variant of rational choice theory, where the preferences and behaviors of rational and predictable consumers are steered in new directions by equally rational and predictable policy instruments. Both theories have their place, but both skirt any real confrontation with power.

To their credit, the contributors to this special issue of *GAIA* sometimes challenge these tendencies. In their opening essay, for example, *Defila, Di Giulio, and Kaufmann-Hayoz* identify (in the section on “How to conceive individual consumption?”) several “action theories or families of theories” (p. 153) that offer insight into important dimensions of power. Although one might hope for greater detail, their accounting is refreshing for its relative novelty. Later essays about (e. g.) the lack of critical competencies or the possibility of reshaping consumer norms (perhaps, e. g., via consumption corridors or through prosumer initiatives) continue in this vein, emphasizing the importance of sources of power hidden from easy view. Individual consumers may be the final agents of consumption but – as some of the essays in this special edition suggest – their behavior is influenced by external

actors who shape information flows, foster particular sets of norms and values, and shape options to privilege some consumption practices over others.

But who are these external actors, how and where do they operate? How could an elaborated understanding of these actors and the power they wield point to promising intervention points for change? Where do individuals have power, not as consumers, but within a more expansive understanding of the many roles they play? And how should these non-consumer sources of power best be fostered and focused in support of “strong” sustainable consumption (Lorek and Fuchs 2013)? It is both curious and revealing that the papers in this special edition acknowledge to varying degrees the importance of such questions, but ultimately retreat from any sustained engagement with power and processes of social change.

Methodological affinity for the “individual” and subsequent discomfort with power is just one source of this retreat. A growing appreciation for the complexity of consumption provides a second potential explanation. As the essays in this special issue demonstrate, individual acts of consumption and the larger patterns of which they are a part arise from layered forces interacting at multiple levels over time (think back to figure 2 in the opening essay). At some point, the weight of this complexity marginalizes questions of power and agency (Sayer 2012): it may come to seem that no single actor has the power to alter con-

is little more than a quaint concept. Agency becomes ephemeral. Social change, at least within the realm of consumption, seems unpredictable and episodic.

Finally, there is the potent mixture of realism and despair. On almost all fronts, human damage to key environmental systems has increased since the Brundtland Commission coined “sustainable development” almost three decades ago. The world has become a less equal, less ecologically diverse, warmer, and far less stable place despite the herculean efforts of many in the sustainable consumption community. It is increasingly easy to believe that we are on the cusp, as Assadourian (2013 a) suggests, of “the Great Unraveling”, in which our task is not to think about power or social change in the present, but rather to reflect on how we might “preserve enough knowledge and wisdom so that as the dust settles in a few centuries, with population stabilized at a lower number than a changed planetary system can sustain, our great-great-great-great-grandchildren do not reinvent our mistakes” (Assadourian 2013 a, p. 303). The apparent reluctance to engage questions of power and social change may increasingly flow from the sense that the best we can do as scholars is to document the slowly unfolding crash around us, with little hope that much can be done to prevent it.

The gnawing question is why the sustainable consumption community has not been more systematic and successful in theorizing about power and social change, even though it is ideally positioned to do so. We have little directed research that addresses this paradox – but perhaps some of the answers lay within the rich array of work described at the outset of this special issue. One hopes that this work can facilitate and inspire a greater degree of self-reflection about why we ask the questions that we do, and how we can more effectively ask the questions that we should. The challenge, ultimately, may not be to reduce the apparent unwieldiness of sustainable consumption as a research focus. Instead, the struggle ahead will most likely involve finding new ways of fostering sustainable consumption research that is more strategic, more reflective, and ultimately more political – in the best sense of that word.

The struggle ahead will most likely involve finding new ways of fostering sustainable consumption research that is more strategic, more reflective, and ultimately more political.

sumption practices arising from the intricate interplay of social, cultural and material forces, and that the notion of power itself, diffused across an expanding set of nearly autonomous practices and norms,

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