

Review: Confronting Consumption

By Thomas Princen, Michael Maniates, and Ken Conca (Eds.)

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Thomas Princen, Michael Maniates, and Ken Conca (Eds.). *Confronting Consumption*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002. 392 pp. ISBN 0-262-66128-4 (paper). US\$26.95

If this book does not make you squirm, you are not paying attention. The authors have done a masterful job of bringing consumption into focus in the context of environmental issues. Consumption has become the "black box" of the environmental movement or as the authors put it, the AIDS of environmentalism. Consumption compromises our ability to recognize and respond to core threats to the environment because it does not allow us to engage an "ethos of frugality." Everyone wants more stuff even if it hurts the environment, others, and ultimately, themselves.

The essential failing of our current economic system is an unwillingness to entertain the terms "too much" when it comes to consumption or production; self-restraint could be considered the oxymoron of Western environmentalism. Production reigns supreme in our land because consumption is beyond scrutiny. Refusing to apply a band-aid to the wound of consumption, the authors demonstrate great courage as they confront many underlying assumptions about consumption and consumers.

In short, the authors remind consumers to think of production as consumption along a chain of material provisioning and resource use. They claim that consumer sovereignty is a myth and consumption is deeply rooted in politics and corporate marketing. Therefore, the struggle to build new institutional mechanisms that more fully communicate the actual costs of consumerism, commoditization, and over consumption is an intense reality. This struggle will not be won through individual efforts carried out randomly but by collective action brought about through institutional and political reforms.

It has long been fashionable to create lists of individual actions to "save the earth." However, the authors here point out the shortcomings of such lists in that they lack institutional and political muscle. Some of the activities are even based upon the cultural mandate to produce and consume at ever-higher rates. The Environmental Defense Fund's list looks like this: 1) visit/support national parks, 2) recycle, 3) conserve energy, 4) properly inflate your tires, 5) plant trees, 6) organize a local program to recycle

Christmas trees, 7) find alternatives to chemical pesticides for your lawn, 8) purchase tuna brands labeled "dolphin safe," 9) organize a community group to clean up a local stream, highway, park, beach, etc., 10) join the Environmental Defense Fund.

Unfortunately many of the national parks are deteriorating from overuse. Recycling, as the authors point out, may prove ineffective if the concept of recycling is not built into every phase of a product's life. Conserving any resource, energy included, sounds good but can lead to higher levels of production, which can actually lead to higher levels of energy consumption. For example, fuel-efficient cars may foster a false sense of savings where people actually drive more, "since they are driving more efficiently." The net result is no savings in fuel consumption at all. Similar concerns can be raised over any simplified, individualized effort to "save the earth."

Contrast the list above with one published by the editors of Audubon magazine. 1) avoid shopping, 2) park the car, 3) live in a nice place so you can walk to the store, 4) get rid of your lawn, 5) do less laundry, 6) block junk mail, 7) turn off the TV, 8) communicate by email, 9) don't use a cell phone, 10) drink water rather than store bought beverages, 11) visit the public library, and 12) limit the size of your family. These lists raise many questions about transforming this individualistic approach to a broader, institutional, and politically active force. In fact, such lists may actually trap us into a consumer think and sink mindset, where we think we can solve world environmental problems individually through more consumer activity.

Individualization is both a symptom and a source of waning capacity for citizens to participate meaningfully in the process of social change. If consumption is to be confronted, the forces that systematically individualize responsibility for environmental degradation must be challenged. For example, the "appropriate technology movement of the 70s failed because radical do-it-your-selfers did not network and spread the good news of their discoveries as many assumed they would. Appropriate technologists were lovely visionaries but naive about the political and institutional forces confronting them."

Issues of consumption revolve around power, privilege, prosperity, and larger possibilities. As such, the authors suggest an alternative to the IPAT formula, which seeks to model environmental impact (IPAT: $\text{Impact} = \text{Population} \times \text{Affluence} \times \text{Technology}$). The authors propose IWAC as a more meaningful model: $\text{Impact} = \text{quality of Work} \times \text{meaningful consumption Alternatives} \times \text{political Creativity}$. Much more dynamic than IPAT, the IWAC formula reveals a better understanding of the intricacies of human behavior. The authors explain the relevance of meaningful work to environmental

quality in clear and comprehensive terms. Meaningful consumption alternatives reveal what may not be immediately apparent to everyone, and political creativity is crucial if social change is to be realized.

Industrial versus organic agriculture also receives close scrutiny here. The difference is seen as one of investment strategy, long-term or short-term. Agriculture is characterized as being in a bind, where productivity has been artificially supported like a building established on a foundation of sand. Dependence on the current production levels of industrial agriculture makes a shift to lower productivity methods less likely. Artificially high production levels continue to be propped up so marginal land is brought into production. This calls for the most intensive methods to achieve an acceptable level of production. This is a no-win situation for organic agriculture. Any choice for agricultural methods other than the industrial one is actually a false choice.

While far superior to such recent works as *Transforming the Dream: Ecologism and the Shaping of an Alternative American Vision* by Charles S. Bednar, the text is not without its shortcomings. The underlying tone, that all consumption is negative and results in some form of degradation, is biased and simplistic. Other simplistic statements include the assertion that producers must simply exercise restraint and resistance when demand is overwhelming. Too often the authors paint a picture of all or nothing. For example, forests will only be "eliminated" by consumptive pressure rather than "modified." The real world is not so black and white.

The authors focus on North America, though the consumption craze is certainly not limited to the North. This bias is reflected in negative language sprinkled throughout the text and is an unfortunate weakness. For example, they state that the first third of the 20th century was a formative era for American imports and the consumption of tropical agricultural products led to the entire replacement of tropical forests. Later they say that the Amazon was not even penetrated until 1960. This frame of mind continues with the assertion that America took Brazil's coffee crop. Corrupt governments and poor land management practices in the tropics have undoubtedly contributed to the ecological damage occurring there, but here it is given only slight attention. The authors claim that consumption is not an isolated end-line phenomenon, yet their remarks reveal a mindset where consumption only occurs at the end of the line in America. However, the frequency and derogatory nature of these remarks is not significant enough to disqualify this work as offering a major contribution to international dialogue on this issue.

I highly recommend this book for academic and public libraries, environmentalists, and those in political and institutional leadership roles.

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