

Where the Green Is: Examining the Paradox of Environmentally Conscious Consumption

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There is much debate about the value of "green consumerism." Critics claim that environmentally conscientious shopping has negligible effects, does not address wider issues relating to the creation of needs and capitalism, and has been co-opted by advertisers as a marketing technique. Proponents argue that it provides a forum where consumers can actualize their beliefs about the need for environmental awareness and protection through their purchasing choices. The focus of this paper is to outline these positions while examining the merits and shortcomings of green consumerism. Although this phenomenon does not necessarily question the "assumption of consumption," it does provide a space for environmental activism for individuals who may not wish to participate in deeper ecological activities. Green consumerism would be aided by government intervention in the form of a regulatory body that would guarantee that "green" products have met strict environmental standards.

Introduction

This is not the article I thought I would be writing. I had planned to spend these pages exploring the environmental possibilities contained within the individual consumption of goods. I thought I would begin this paper with a couple of pages about ecological theory, then move into a tight analysis about the opportunity for consumers to make their collective voices heard through "green" product purchases. 'Green consumerism' is defined as "the purchasing and non-purchasing decisions made by consumers, based at least partly on environmental or social criteria" (Peattie, 1992, p. 118). I thought I would spend the majority of the paper listing those companies with questionable environmental records, and illustrate how consumer dollars are being used to pollute rivers, create toxic waste and destroy natural spaces. I pictured making statements like 'did you realize that Company A directly contributes to the destruction of virgin rain forests?' or that 'Company B throws out more waste than New York City?' Finally, to offer my readers hope, I would name companies that not only possessed unblemished environmental histories, but that also offered environmentally-friendly products at reasonable prices. I would provide a condensed version of the paper to all my colleagues and friends, who could coast into their

summers confident that their meagre budgets were being used to encourage corporate environmental responsibility.

Writing this paper has gone a little differently than I imagined. From the onset, it was difficult to clearly identify environmental protectors and polluters in the business world. One company, for example, would have an excellent environmental record, but be guilty of human rights offences because of dismal labour standards. Another corporation would have a deplorable environmental history, but would have recently improved their waste management processes due to pressure from consumers and environmental groups. Still others would (unbelievably) show up on both the "most-green" and the "most-toxic" list, such as the popular President's Choice products sold at Canadian grocery stores. It was also extremely difficult to find solid information about corporate environmental practice, except for highly publicized "environmentally-friendly" activities that companies would profile on their websites (such as supporting community 'clean-up' efforts while failing to disclose internal waste records). Due to these factors, and others, I began to think that it would be irresponsible and impossible, to clearly state which companies to support and which to boycott. I started to think that perhaps a paper could be found within these conflicting notions about the need for, and value of, green consumption.

Some environmentalists claim that producers will eventually shift to better resource and waste management because of customer demand and resource scarcity (Hawken, Lovins & Lovins, 1999; Cox, 2004). Others maintain that this will never occur until environmental laws and penalties are implemented and enforced by national governments (Gale, 2002; Hyde, 2005). Still others said that green products were of no consequence and that, instead, the entire system of capitalism should be overthrown in order to stem the damage already created by the corporate world (Maniates, 2002; Princen, Maniates & Conca, 2002). It soon became obvious that the merits of 'green consumerism' are highly contested and required further discussion and analysis.

Process, Products and Patriotism: The History of Consumption

Waste generated as a result of human consumption is currently at its highest point ever and, in 2000, surpassed the earth's natural capacity to absorb it by 15% (Cox, 2004). But this was not always the case. Increased consumption and our propensity for throw-away items began with the industrial revolution. Mass goods were produced cheaply and, as urbanization intensified, cramped living quarters did not allow the space to save items for their reuse (Hyde, 2005). It also became less time consuming to purchase new goods rather than create them by hand. Heather Rogers

offers a concrete example of how fast these changes altered the lives of nineteenth century North Americans: "The 1841 version of Catherine Beecher's 'Treatise on Domestic Economy' explains how to make candles and soap; her 1869 edition of the same book tells you to just buy those things instead of making them yourself" (Hyde, 2005).

Except for times of war, consumption has been a staple in North American consciousness. Governments and corporations have continuously portrayed consumption as a panacea to whatever troubles were brewing, both domestically and internationally. In post-war periods, and in times of insecurity (such as the months following September 11th in the U.S.), shopping and fervent consumption was promoted as a forum through which citizens could express their nationalism. As Daniel Yankelovich states, "To work hard and consume well was a patriotic duty" (1981, p. 47). These same bodies often reframed consumption as necessary for economic prosperity and domestic stability (Darnovsky, 1996; Durning, 1992; Schor, 1995). For the most part, public opinion reflected these pervasive normative notions: "[M]ost Americans regard [a reduction in consumption] as a threat to their quality of life. More importantly, they are persuaded that the future of their jobs depends on the continuation of current patterns" (Darnovsky, 1996, p. 362). This ideology is exploited by industrialists and economists who state that continuous consumption is necessary, and unquestionable. As capitalism is based on "unfettered access to natural resources" (Rogers as interviewed in Hyde, 2005, para. 18), that "recognizes no limits" (Cox, 2004, para. 13), the planet began to suffer.

Regardless of this reality, there is no indication that "economic growth [will be] . . . constrained by the limits of the planet" (Korten, 1996, p. 21). While some citizens call on politicians to enact tougher laws and penalties for corporate negligence, national governments are increasingly constrained by international trade agreements. Many agreements call for sanctions if environmental legislation proposed by any country is thought to represent a barrier to trade (Shrybman, 1999). It is due to this fact, coupled with corporate North America's lack of ability to see beyond the bottom line, that green consumerism has the potential to exert significant pressure on the market and its products. This opinion would be greatly challenged throughout the writing of this paper.

All By Myself: The Individualization of Environmental Responsibility

One of the problems with green consumption, according to its detractors, is that it supports the corporate ideal that places environmental responsibility on the shoulders of individuals. Many assert that this narrow focus masks larger structures that continue to ensure that wealthy corporations routinely

benefit from pollution and the mass extraction of resources. There are facts to support this claim. The instantly recognizable anti-litter slogan and campaign entitled 'Keep America Beautiful' was orchestrated in 1953 by glass, aluminium, paper and steel container manufacturers (Stauber & Rampton, 1995; Berlet & Burke, 1992). These included Pepsi, Coca-Cola, Seagram's, Dupont, Dow, and Procter and Gamble (Darnovsky, 1996; Hyde, 2005). The KAB campaign was created as an alternative to 'bottle bill' legislation that sought to have producers charge a deposit for bottles and cans, repaid to the customer upon their return (Stauber & Rampton, 1995; Berlet & Burke, 1992). In setting up the KAB campaign, these companies effectively moved the environmental onus from those creating the bottles, to those who threw them on the side of the highway. This significant shift has helped to create a culture that looks to individuals to repair the damage caused, in large part, by producers. The role KAB played in creating this context cannot be overstated.

Not even Dr. Seuss is beyond reproach with regards to the "individualization of responsibility" (Maniates, 2002, p. 45). His beloved environmental tale entitled *The Lorax* has been criticized for contributing to the persistent, and corporately supported, notion that individual actions are the most important way to repair ecological damage. In the story, a business owner (called the Once-ler) repents for his greedy and destructive past, and encourages his young friend to plant a tree to symbolize a future commitment to the environment. Michael Maniates claims that the story unintentionally "echoes and amplifies an increasingly dominant, largely American response to the contemporary environmental crisis. This response half-consciously understands environmental degradation to be the result of individual shortcomings (the Once-ler's greed, for example), best countered by action that is staunchly individual" (2002, p. 45). Although it is doubtful that Mr. Maniates holds Dr. Seuss directly responsible for such a pervasive worldview, his point is well illustrated and well taken.

Maniates later states that green consumption threatens 'real' environmental activism, and detracts from larger corporate structures that continue to go unchallenged:

This collective obsessing over an array of "green consumption" choices . . . is noisy and vigorous, and thus comes to resemble the foundations of meaningful social action. But it is not, not in any real and lasting way that might alter institutional arrangements and make possible radically new ways of living that seem required. (2002, p. 52)

Finally, he states that people must reclaim their citizenship by placing civic

involvement before consumption: "Confronting the consumption problem demands, after all, the sort of institutional thinking that the individualization of responsibility patently undermines. It calls too for individuals to understand themselves as citizens in a participatory democracy first, working together to change broader policy and larger social institutions, and as consumers second" (Maniates, 2002, p. 47). These are convincing and purposeful arguments that challenged my premise: save the world through shopping?

In further reading, I was soon heartened to find researchers who made claims that people participate in the civic and market arena in different ways. Who is to say that my decision not to buy paper products harvested from virgin forests (and, perhaps, sending a letter to the company articulating this choice) is less significant than someone who publicly protests the way in which the federal government supports this same company? Some might argue that the second choice is more valuable as it may heighten other people's awareness of the company's practices. But, in exercising my choice, I am speaking to the corporation through the representation of money, which many claim is the only dialect that companies understand. Even if I am not willing to appear on the national news for an environmental cause, I can still create social change.

Can product choice be reframed as another arena for participatory democracy? Jeremy Rifkin (1990) states that consumption is a perfect venue for individuals to begin to exert corporate power: "By extending the concept of participatory democracy [to consumption] . . . we assure our responsibilities as active participants in the decisions that affect the future course of our society, civilization, and ultimately, the planet" (p. xv).

Elkington, Hailes & Makower (1990) illustrate how the conventions of capitalism can work to the consumer's advantage:

You may be surprised at how easy it is to make your voice heard in the marketplace. The marketplace is not a democracy; you don't need majority opinion to make change. Indeed, it takes only a fairly small portion of shoppers – as few as one person in ten – changing buying habits for companies to stand up and take notice. (p. 9-10)

Fred Gale (2002) notes that, "cautious consumers can affect dramatic change through their purchasing power" (p. 299), and Brecher, Costello & Smith (2000) encourage citizens to "utilize the power that lies hidden in the withdrawal of consent" (p. 31). Admittedly, some of the voices that champion green consumerism also peddle books about the various ways that

consumers can heal the earth; but does this mean that their contributions should be discounted? If I try to create an environmental business, does the fact that I am seeking to make a living negate my environmental concerns and suggestions? This leads to another main criticism of green consumerism: that it only serves to solidify capitalism, thus perpetuating continuous ecological depletion, and reinforcing market inequities.

Stay the Course? Capitalism and Green Consumption

In *The Business of Consumption*, Laura Westra (1998) sums up the green consumerism critique quite accurately when she writes: "It is not about *how* to conduct business but about *whether* to continue to sustain an enterprise that is based on increased consumption" (p. ix). Some environmentalists see green consumerism as reinforcing capitalism, as it offers products and processes which may mitigate some ecological effects, but which do not question the 'assumption of consumption'. As Princen, Maniates and Conca (2002) state:

Consumption becomes sacrosanct. If water supplies are tight, one must produce more water, not consume less. If toxics accumulate, one must produce with fewer by-products – or, even better, produce a cleanup technology – rather than forego the production itself. Goods are good and more goods are better. Wastes may be bad – but when they are, more productive efficiencies, including eco-efficiencies and recycling, are the answer. Production reigns supreme because consumption is beyond scrutiny. (p. 5)

These critics also point to the ways in which a green sensibility has been co-opted by advertising and marketing executives; a trend that the business community admits and celebrates (Darnovsky, 1996). Michael Maniates notes that capitalism possesses the "dynamic ability" to market dissent, and then "sell it back to dissenters" (2002, p. 46 & 51). He states that this has contributed to the boon of green industry which becomes "paradoxically, a consumer-product growth industry" (Maniates, 2002, p. 47). Again, this criticism is well taken. But the fact remains; regardless of ideology or personal politics, we continue to live in a consumer society.

While Marcy Darnovsky agrees that "commodifying dissent has become standard marketing practice" (1996, p. 161), she sees some possibilities for subversion. She presents a new term for conscious shoppers when she writes "[c]ritics of consumer capitalism often argue that it substitutes consumer culture for political involvement. The activist-consumer challenges this assumption" (Darnovsky, 1996, p. 161). The activist-consumer is

“simultaneously a marketing category and a social identity” (Darnovsky, 1996, p. 160-161). They are also “a major segment of the consuming public” (Dadd & Carothers, 1990, p. 13). Although capitalism is undoubtedly the cause of many social and environmental ailments, it is still the system of choice for many North Americans. Is there potential for green action within the confines of this structure?

In the book *Natural Capitalism*, Paul Hawken and Amory and Hunter Lovins (1999) write about the futility of attempting to retreat from capitalism, and the hidden environmental power it may actually possess. They write:

A common response to the misuse, abuse, or misdirection of market forces is to call for a retreat from capitalism and a return to heavy-handed regulation. But in addressing these problems, natural capitalism . . . suggest[s] that we should vigorously employ markets for their proper purpose as a tool for solving the problems we face. (p. 260)

‘Natural capitalism’ is defined as “a set of trends and economic reforms that reward energy and material efficiency,” and as a “coherent theory of how to exploit market systems . . . to generally support the goals of environmentalism” (Labour-Talk-Law Online Encyclopedia, March 2005). Green consumerism falls within this definition. As *Natural Capitalism* reminds us, the goal and ‘true purpose’ of the market in a capitalist system is to “allocate scarce resources efficiently over the short term” (Hawken, Lovins & Lovins, 1999, p. 261). This will become a more valuable trait as resource extraction leads to scarcity, and the need for new alternatives. Hawken, Lovins and Lovins echo others when they suggest that “[c]ompanies that ignore the message of natural capitalism do so at their peril” (1999, p. xiii). This is due not only to depleting natural resource pools, but also because of a more conscientious consuming public.

As corporations are beginning to understand the power wielded by the green consumer, they have attempted to ‘green up’ the presentation of their products and services. This has led many environmental groups to investigate the claims of companies, often with disappointing results.

Green on the Outside: The Practice of Corporate Greenwashing

Greenpeace coined the term ‘greenwashing’ in 1991 to “describe corporate deceptions, exaggerations, and cosmetic changes undertaken purely as public relations ploys” (Darnovsky, 1996, p. 223). These “cleverly disguised attempts” (Freeman, Pierce & Dodd, 1998, p. 345) often extol a virtuous environmental record, or donate money to green organizations to draw

attention away from questionable ecological activities. Another type of greenwashing occurs when companies advertise their 'environmental-friendly' products or processes, while failing to share that these standards are the minimum required by law (Hyde, 2005). The 'Keep America Beautiful' campaign discussed earlier is generally thought to be one of the first examples of corporate greenwashing (Hyde, 2005). As a result, many environmentalists believe that any attempt to place the blame for environmental destruction on individuals feeds into this phenomenon (Darnovsky, 1996).

Having considered the possibility that many companies I support may have inflated, if not invented, environmental practices, I am still wary of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Maybe hope resides in individual action. Statistics Canada states that, in 2003, nine of ten Canadians polled listed the environment as one of their top concerns (Boyd, 2004, p. 1). The law of averages states that there must have been some business owners among those polled. As much as corporations may have profit as their guiding principle, many individuals have their children's health as their main priority. It is reasonable to assume that some of that concern translates into corporate environmental responsibility. As Marcy Darnovsky notes "Four kinds of problems beset green marketing: criticism from environmentalists, consumer scepticism, an uncertain and chaotic regulatory situation, and the difficulties inherent in evaluating what makes a product, package or process 'greener'" (1996, p. 250). Which leads to the question – what role does government play in maintaining the environmental standards of corporations?

Minding the Store: Government and Green Consumerism

It would seem reasonable for the argument to be made that government regulation needs to be a part of the green consumerism movement. How else can we (the consumer) believe some of the claims that advertisers make about the biodegradability of their dish soap, or the organic origins of their cotton? But it is important to remember, as Heather Rogers notes, that "[t]he state helped create the disposable society we have today" (Hyde, 2005, para. 20). By consistently intervening to subsidize polluting activities, and by helping to keep the cost of natural resources artificially low, governments have often served to impede environmental activities, rather than enhance them (Hyde, 2005; Hawken, Lovins & Lovins, 1999). In fact, some environmental writers and thinkers are extremely critical of the ways in which a 'sustainable sensibility' has been co-opted by mainstream political parties and 'liberal' environmentalism. The latter has been dismissed as being "so compatible with contemporary material and cultural currents that it implicitly supports the very things it should be criticizing" (Wapner, 1996,

p. 21). Princen, Maniates & Conca agree with this assertion, when they write, “[t]he environmental movement is very middle class . . . and its organizations do not challenge middle class values” (2002, p. 8). These statements articulate a concern that any adoption of ‘radical’ principles by mainstream organizations, and governments, only serves to dilute the message and intent they were originally imbued with.

Despite this belief about the inability of governments to address ecological issues, these same voices chide the average citizen for their lack of political advocacy. Maniates (2002) states “When confronted with environmental ills – ills many confess to caring deeply about – Americans seem capable of understanding themselves almost solely as consumers who must buy “environmentally sound” products (and then recycle them), rather than as citizens who might come together and develop political clout sufficient to alter institutional arrangements that drive a pervasive consumerism” (p. 51). This is a troubling and contradictory statement given the previous arguments. If environmental academics have no faith in government and the environmental movement, than why should John and Jane Q. Public? Shouldn’t any environmental effort, which may lead to increased ecological awareness, be celebrated?

Thankfully, other writers posit their calls for action in more positive terms, citing corporate culture as the issue needing address: “We can’t just leave this up to industry, and we can’t just leave this up to the market – we need to intervene because there’s a fundamental lack of democracy in the use of our resources” (Rogers as interviewed in Hyde, 2005, para. 26). One of the most meaningful ways for the public to converse with industry is by altering their shopping patterns. This is an easier practice for the wealthier segments of society to undertake, for obvious reasons (access to transportation, ability to purchase more expensive products, time to comparison-shop, etc.). The goal of this exercise is emphasized when communities from all socio-economic strata decide to elect government officials who cite the environment as a central issue, and whose plans include concrete processes to encourage and enforce ecological compliance among industry. This requires *more* government intervention, guided by public concerns.

One way for this to happen is for governments to gradually increase the prices of natural resources, until they begin to reflect their full cost. ‘Full cost’ means a price that not only illustrates the cost of extraction and the scarcity of the resource, but also accounts for disposal and biological breakdown of the product (Hawken, Lovins and Lovins, 1999). Although this causes short-term financial strain for consumers (i.e. gas prices in North America which, although climbing, are still artificially low compared to other parts of the world), it does encourage conservation and responsible

production. Paul Hawken states that 'full cost' economics has other benefits as well, such as lessening the divide between rich and poor, but requires that governments, and citizens, make decisions that are difficult and unpopular: "Unless we take business out of politics, prices will never reflect cost or value. Unless it is in our best interest to live well within our means, income polarization will broaden" (Hawken as interviewed in Cox, 2004, Economy Class section, para. 3). This is also a challenge for green businesses whose products are usually priced higher than market value. Although this may give rise to arguments that only the rich can afford to live sustainably (and use the remainder of naturally-occurring resources), the hope is that full cost pricing will necessitate cheaper, more ecologically-sound alternatives and, again, encourage conservation.¹

North American governments can also look to other countries that have implemented successful environmental programs. In Germany, the state decreed that 72% of the bottles that a company produces be refillable (Hyde, 2005). In Denmark, 98% of the bottles are refillable, and 98% of the surveyed public stated that they consistently return the bottles for a deposit (Hyde, 2005). By mandating company practices, these countries' governments have significantly altered the environmental activities of the general public.

Another possibility is government certified 'eco-labelling' for products that are proven to exert less of a strain on the natural environment. Again, the argument can be made that this does not address larger issues of North American consumption and can thus only result in "small incremental changes in product and production environmental standards" (West, 1995, p. 20). However, it is undeniable that eco-labelling may serve to "make the same choice available to the interested-but-not-fully-committed consumer who wants to "do the right thing" but not at great personal inconvenience" (Gale, 2002, p. 298). Fred Gale (2002) states, "This larger segment of consumers constitutes the mass of shallow ecological purchasers that might yet be encouraged to achieve deeper ecological objectives" (p. 298). When this 'larger segment of consumers' decides to make 'small incremental' modifications to their shopping patterns, large changes can result. Government has a significant role to play in setting the environmental standards to which any product bearing an eco-label must adhere.

A responsive and proactive government must work in collaboration with an empowered citizenry to ensure that an environmental ethic begins to infiltrate and alter the market. And although the mainstream environmental movement may be flawed, Darnovsky notes that its central values offer an alternative worldview that has implications for issues other than ecology: "[T]he environmental movement seems to me our best hope for popularizing

global political awareness and a willingness to rethink not just consumer culture, but all the fundamental arrangements of the political and economic order" (1996, p. 374). This consciousness that encourages individual 'rethinking' also contains possibilities for larger, cohesive actions.

Not Shopping Together: Collective Action and Social Change

When discussing issues pertaining to environmental choices, it is helpful to view consumption as more than "an individual's choice among goods. [It is also] a stream of choices and decisions winding its way through the various stages of extraction, manufacture, and final use, embedded at every step in social relations of power and authority" (Princen, Maniates & Conca, 2002, p. 12). Shopping for products can be a "significant part of an individual's attempt to find meaning, status, and identity" (Princen, Maniates & Conca, 2002, p. 14). If this act is politicized, and understood to have corporate, social and environmental consequences, these individual choices can create a space for contemplation, deliberation and caution. As Brecher, Costello & Smith note, this can then become an arena where people discuss their everyday decisions, and begin to come together:

This process may start with some people internally questioning or rejecting some aspects of the status quo [such as mass consumption at Christmas, or buying products from environmentally irresponsible companies]. It becomes a social process as people discover that others are . . . asking the same questions, and being tempted to make the same rejections . . . Seeing other people share similar experiences, perceptions and feelings opens up a new set of possibilities. Perhaps collectively we can act in ways that have impacts isolated individuals could never dream of having alone. And if we feel this way, perhaps others do, too. (2000, p. 20)

As Kalle Lasn, one of the founders of *Adbusters* states "Individual change *and* collective action geared to enforcing corporate responsibility is the *only* way that we will together achieve our goals" (Maniates, 2002, p. 215). The goal of environmental awareness, conservation and protection is within reach, and green consumption is a venue where individual responsibility can meet communal activism.

Everyday Activism: Green Consumerism as Environmental Awareness

Brecher, Costello, and Smith (2000) state that civic engagement is powerful,

but is manufactured to seem elusive: "The latent power of the people is forgotten, both because those in power have every reason to suppress its knowledge and because it seems to conflict with everyday experiences in normal times" (p. 23). An encouraging component of green consumerism is that it is mired in the everyday. In his book *Reveille for Radicals* (1969), Saul Alinsky writes, "Most people are eagerly groping for . . . some way in which they can bridge the gap between their morals and their practices" (p. 94). Green consumerism offers this possibility because, regardless of shopping habits, everyone must buy food. And, as Professor Jules Pretty of Essex University notes, "The most political act we do on a daily basis is to eat" (Connor, 2005, para. 10). Because "global food production and trade . . . consumes more fossil fuel than any other industrial sector" (Shrybman, 1999, p. 12), this section of the market offers a variety of ways for 'cautious consumers' to greatly lessen their ecological impact. By choosing to buy local produce, shoppers are significantly reducing the 'food miles' between the farm and their plates, resulting in less fossil fuel use, fresher produce and more money for their neighbourhood businesses. This small change can be a catalyst for becoming more ecologically-minded while shopping.

Following the Green: Industry Trends

Perhaps one of the most promising aspects of green consumerism is that improvement is imminent. Hawken, Lovins and Lovins (1999) write of the next "industrial revolution", where, aided by 'full cost' economics and government regulated taxation on waste output, producers begin to look for the most efficient and sustainable way to conduct business. They state that the waste and noise associated with current manufacturing practices "represent money being thrown away. They will disappear as surely as did the manure from the nineteenth-century streets of London and New York. Inevitably, industry will redesign everything it makes and does, in order to participate in the coming productivity revolution" (Hawken, Lovins & Lovins, 1999, p. 13). And, many environmentalists assert, these producers need look no further than the insect in front of them to discover unparalleled proficiency, productivity and design. When comparing man-made Kevlar (a strong fiber) to the silk spun by a spider, a clear winner emerges:

The spider manages to make equally strong and much tougher fiber at body temperature, without high pressures, heat or corrosive acids . . . If we could learn to do what the spider does, we could take a soluble raw material that is infinitely renewable and make a superstrong water-insoluble fiber with negligible energy inputs and no toxic outputs. (Benyus, 1997, p. 135)

As science writer Janine Benyus notes, “We don’t need to invent a sustainable world – that’s been done already” (1998, keynote address). If scientists and producers could work together to create sustainable processes that mimic those found in nature, the possibilities are limitless. With such forward thinking, and such fine examples, green consumption has the opportunity to make zero waste the goal, and then the standard, for the production of all goods.

The Social Worker Stands Back

A large reason why environmental awareness is important for the field of social work is because of the people who are first impacted by ecological deterioration: the poor, people of colour, women, people of the global south, etc.² It is interesting, then, to write an entire paper which is largely based on choices surrounding money and whether it can be spent ‘greenly’ or not. Many of the criticisms of green consumerism are valid. It is not a panacea for all environmental ills, and larger issues around the creation of needs and mass over-consumption must be addressed. But telling people to buy less is too simple an answer. As Juliet Schor writes:

In a society in which consumption is structurally positioned as the answer to so many needs, desires, and problems, and in which alternatives are structurally blocked, moral suasion is insufficient. Asking people to act ethically is important, but we must also analyze and transform the structures that make it difficult for them to do so. (1995, p. 21)

In lieu of this, it is vital to provide people with the information that they may not have the ability or inclination to access. What products and services are available locally and what are some of the best environmental practices that other individuals have been able to implement?

Talking and writing about the environment is the first step towards action, and should not be relegated to those with more expertise or experience. As Frank Cross asserts, “Just as wars are too important to leave to the military, the environment is too important to leave to the environmentalists” (1990, p. 46).

Conclusion

The debate will go on. Some environmentalists will continue to dismiss green consumption as the latest market trend, resulting in marginal environmental benefits. Others will claim that green consumption is part of the problem of

capitalism and should thus be dismissed as contributing to a system that necessitates environmental damage. But others, like me, will say that the game of sustainable living begins when more people can play. And anything that encourages greater contemplation of, and participation in, green issues is worth examining.

As Princen, Maniates and Conca state, "Ultimately, the challenge is not just to confront consumption but to transform the structures that sustain it" (2002, p. 328). But *how* do we transform the structures of consumption? We start by taking our time when we shop; looking at where things are made, where human rights are marginalized, how products are packaged, and what they contain. We think about buying less and paying more for products that we feel good about purchasing. We talk to other people about where they get their produce, how they keep their energy bills down, and why they don't have a car. We plan parties that are plastic free, and ask for less for Christmas. We become educated about current global initiatives, such as the United Nations Environment Program (<http://www.unep.org>) and the Millennium Development Goals (<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals>). We elect leaders that represent our environmental values and insist that they talk to other governments about how best to preserve and protect the planet.

When those who can afford to begin to ask for products and programs that foster environmental responsibility, the laws of the marketplace dictate that more affordable environmental goods and more widespread initiatives will follow. Small, incremental changes may be derided as inconsequential, but they are perhaps the only way that substantial social change begins. And it is we, who possess the wealth and the resources, who have the most work to do.

Endnotes

¹ The same argument is often made about how-to lists such as *12 Things You Can Do To Save the Earth* (please see Appendix); namely that they presuppose an affluent lifestyle. My response to this argument is that small environmental changes, and lists instructing how to make them, should be celebrated for what they are: a beginning for car owners and lawn tenders. If we claim the middle class are among the greatest polluters, then we should not dismiss resources that encourage 'green' activities, however small.

² Please see John Coates (2003) and Maria Mies & Vandana Shiva (1993) for a more comprehensive analysis.

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Appendix: 12 Ways to Simplify Your Life and Save the World

1. Avoid shopping
2. Leave the car parked
3. Live in a nice neighbourhood (that will allow you to walk to stores or easily access public transport)
4. Get rid of your lawn
5. Cut down on your laundry

6. Block junk mail
7. Turn off the TV
8. Communicate by email
9. Don't use a cellular phone
10. Drink water rather than store-bought beverages
11. Patronize your public library
12. Limit the size of your family

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