

Chapter 2

The Emergent Environmental Policy Discourse on Sustainable Consumption

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1. Introduction

While consumption has been a long-neglected topic in dominant environmental discourse there are indications that it is now moving closer to the centre of contemporary policy-making. With the rise of sustainable development within mainstream circles as the organising framework for conceptualising the “environmental problematique” processes of material acquisition, particularly in the world’s most affluent nations, have begun to attract increasing scrutiny. During most of the modern environmental era (i.e., from circa 1970) the political power of (post-)industrial nations was sufficient to maintain a narrow problem definition of the factors responsible for environmental deterioration on the global level. This prevalent framing attributed increasingly more pervasive ecological deterioration not to consumption, but rather to rampant population growth. Accordingly, legions of development specialists were dispatched to the world’s developing countries to advise them that they should first and foremost curb their demographic expansion. Once the birth rate was under control these nations could begin to implement policies to encourage export production that would enable them to overcome the debilitating effects of chronic poverty and declining environmental quality. By defining global environmental problems in terms of population growth wealthy nations managed for several decades to successfully sidestep their own complicity.

Despite the long-standing reticence of the developed nations to accept responsibility for the environmental harm caused by high levels of material consumption, the issue continued to crop up from time to time in international forums. However, the North’s ability to maintain its commanding agenda-setting influence, combined with the political ineffectualness and fragmentation of the South, worked to preserve the hegemony of the dominant discourse. The ability of the affluent nations to ascribe their own particularistic delineation around the sources of large-scale environmental change began to come under heavy challenge during the diplomatic preparations leading up to the 1992 Earth Summit. Though economically advanced nations sought to preserve the prevailing problem definition, pressure from newly empowered developing countries, and allied non-governmental organisations (NGOs), proved too powerful. In the post-Summit period consumption gained new stature, especially in European nations, as an organizing theme with which to

interpret the widening gap in global economic inequality and the environmental impact of consumerist lifestyles.

Changes in the content of the international environmental policy agenda contributed to this transformed problem definition. During the 1970s and 1980s, the affluent nations, by virtually any measure, made considerable progress toward bringing under control their most offensive forms of pollution. The outbreak of fire on Cleveland's Cuyahoga River, the industrial disaster at Seveso, and the methyl-mercury poisoning of the Japanese population of Minamata captured public attention and led to the implementation of sweeping legislation and the creation of new administrative agencies. Soot-filled air and chemical-saturated waters gave way in the face of a host of managerial interventions. At the same time, the classic environmental dilemmas of the developing countries — desertification, food security, and uncontrolled urban sprawl — were pushed out of prominence by a new class of global environmental problems. Novel issues such as global warming, acid rain, ozone depletion, and declining biodiversity, because they transcended national boundaries and raised seemingly irreconcilable scientific uncertainties, reconfigured environmental politics.

We examine in this chapter some of the critical changes that have taken place in dominant environmental discourse over the past three decades and suggest that consumption is now emerging as a central conceptual frame for policymaking. This survey begins its review with the 1972 publication *The Limits to Growth*, a report that was, along with a small handful of other seminal accounts, largely responsible for launching the modern environmental movement. Despite its crude treatment of consumption and a variety of problematic assumptions, this document did much to place the environment on the international policy agenda. We then advance fifteen years and publication of the Brundtland Report. This landmark endeavour introduced formally the concept of “sustainable development” and signalled the onset of a new era in environmental politics. The chapter then describes how this new framing became manifest in more concrete policy terms in both the European Commission's Fifth Environmental Action Plan and the Agenda 21 Report negotiated at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. To bring this review up to date, and to divine likely future directions for the emergent policy discourse on more sustainable forms of consumption, I discuss two more recent documents: (1) a joint statement by the Royal Society of London and the United States National Academy of Sciences and (2) a consultation paper issued by the UK Department of Transport, Environment, and the Regions. The chapter then proceeds to delineate the role that the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development has been playing to shape the inchoate understanding of the relationship between consumption and the environment.

2. *The Limits to Growth*

Prepared by a distinguished group of MIT researchers as a report to the Club of Rome, *The Limits to Growth* remains more than two decades after its original publication one of the most significant pieces of contemporary environmental scholarship (Meadows *et al.*, 1972). Though most of the authors' famous cybernetic forecasts have proved wide of the mark, their ambitious analysis continues to cast a portentous shadow over environmental

thinking. Unfortunately, many of the ensuing debates sparked by the report between cornucopian and apocalyptic conjectures typically generate more heat than light. These still-simmering controversies tend to tell us a great deal about the political and cultural commitments of the protagonists, but frightfully little about the state of the natural environment (see, for example, Myers and Simon 1994). Rather than rehash these tired arguments the following discussion attempts to characterise the way in which *Limits* conceptualises consumption with respect to the environment and to point to how this particular framing has influenced more recent efforts.

The report views environmental deterioration largely in terms of the impact that an increasing global population has on the availability of natural resources. In particular, *Limits* sees exponential demographic growth, most prominently in the developing countries, as placing inexorable pressure on the world's productive capacity to generate food and provision other basic needs. The authors' computerised-systems model also predicts that the pervasive spread of modern lifestyles will hasten depletion of non-renewable commodities (e.g., coal, copper, petroleum). The report does not make any attempt to problematise consumption as a social activity and treats material acquisition as a simple function of increasing population and industrialisation.

Interestingly, *Limits* makes no attempt to get to grips with the way in which individuals and households develop their materialistic aspirations and it does not discuss the role of central features of modernity such as television, fashion, and advertising in shaping desires. Consumers, to the extent that they appear explicitly in the report's analysis, are depicted as a generic, homogenous mass. For example, the authors discuss the depletion of bauxite entirely in terms of production and do not link the ultimate use of the commodity to the manufacture of aluminium, airplanes, and demand for air travel.

Limits observes that "as a population becomes more wealthy, it tends to consume more resources per person per year" (Meadows *et al.*, 1972:113). There is however a brake on this "run-away train". At a certain point, nations reach a "saturation level of material possessions" at which additional increments of income are spent primarily on services that are less resource consuming (118). Globally, the only mechanism available to temper the extraction rate for natural resources is the inevitable increase in prices that will become manifest as shortages become pronounced.

While the forbidding future portrayed by *Limits* enhanced public awareness of certain environmental problems, its understanding of consumption is truncated and fails to comprehend how contemporary provisioning practices contribute to ecological stress. The authors' depiction of material acquisition is one of pushing, to the point of exhaustion, an ever-increasing volume of natural resources through a pipe. More importantly, the policy recommendations that fall from the report are not especially constructive and are likely to offer inspiration to only the most indefatigable environmentalists.

3. Our Common Future

Fifteen years later, after the achievement of considerable, though uneven, progress in advanced nations addressing the effects of localised sources of air and water pollution, the World Commission on Environment and Development issued in 1987 *Our Common*

Future detailing the extensive amount of work that still remained to be done on the international level (WCED 1987). This important document, better known as the Brundtland Report, asserted that developing countries were beset by serious environmental problems and these dilemmas were largely attributable to the effects of poverty, population growth, and unequal terms of trade. The Commission also claimed that the global environment was now threatened by a new range of global ecological concerns which, because of their tendency to transcend national frontiers, were likely to pose grave challenges to existing regulatory institutions. While *Our Common Future* describes these conditions in considerable detail, the document is most notable today for placing the concept "sustainable development" on the international policy agenda. Our purpose here is not to interrogate the efficacy of sustainable development; nonetheless, this concept does provide a useful framework with which to examine how the Brundtland Report conceptualises consumption.

As is well known, the Brundtland Report defined sustainable development as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED 1987:43). Though this definition has become increasingly elastic and devoid of substantive meaning, the Commission originally conceived of sustainable development as resting on two elemental principles: limitations and "needs."¹

First, the notion of constraints on human development is obviously carried over from *Limits* and earlier thinking in the natural sciences (most specifically ecology). Such neo-Malthusianism contends that increasing population and growing per capita demand for natural resources will strip available supplies and lead to famine, scarcity and wrenching conflict. *Our Common Future* addresses this problem specifically for developing countries and describes the intense pressure on these societies to follow in the footsteps of the advanced nations. Ill-equipped technologically and institutionally, they engage in activities that cause serious and pervasive environmental damage. However, at the core of these destructive processes are the consumption patterns of the world's wealthiest members. The lifestyles common in affluent Northern nations (as well as among Southern elites) encourage disenfranchised agriculturists and industrial labourers to engage in economic activities that are ecologically harmful. The Brundtland Report thus marks an important turning point in the mainstream policy discourse and we begin to see, albeit in primitive form, formal recognition of the unequal contribution of affluent lifestyle-types to environmental problems (see Weale 1992). The authors are quite clear on this point and the Commission advises that we evaluate the "[s]hort-sighted way in which we have often pursued prosperity ... [s]ustainable global development requires that those who are more affluent adopt lifestyles within the planet's ecological means" (WCED 1987:8-9).

Second, *Our Common Future* makes a provisional effort to distinguish between needs and desires. The document recognises that

¹Sustainable development is an ecological concept with origins that can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century. "Sustainability" was inherent in German foresters' original formulations of "sustainable yield" used to estimate rates for harvesting trees. We must therefore be sceptical of the application of this term to a wide range of contexts to which environmentalists and others may seek to apply it. For a more complete discussion refer to Worster 1985.

[p]erceived needs are socially and culturally determined, and sustainable development requires the promotion of values that encourage consumption standards that are within the bounds of the ecologically possible and to which we can all reasonably aspire ... Major changes in policies will be needed to cope with the industrial world's current high levels of consumption ... It is part of our moral obligation to other living beings and future generations (WCED 1987:44, 57).

Despite its attempt to grapple substantively with consumption in more nuanced social-scientific terms, we should be careful about reading this statement as a call to downscale material consumption in the advanced nations and to create ecological space to accommodate the aspirations of the developing world. Rather, the Commission places massive emphasis upon the use of technology and improved social organisation "to make way for a new era of economic growth ... The shift to sustainable development must be powered by a continuing flow of wealth from industry" (WCED 1987). The report's enthusiasm for economic expansion as the engine with which to drive global environmental improvement implies that any concerted effort to modify provisioning patterns in affluent nations would impair progress toward this objective. Paradoxically to some minds, *Our Common Future* argues unequivocally that greater consumption (and increasing national products) is a *sine qua non* for sustainable development. As a result, the Commission agilely avoids having to confront squarely the initial questions that it raises regarding the ethical propriety of contemporary lifestyles in the advanced nations.

4. European Commission *Fifth Environmental Action Programme*

In 1992 the European Commission (EC) published its Fifth Environmental Action Programme (FEAP) to articulate and systematise its priorities in this domain (European Commission 1992). The document sequentially addresses particular policy areas (e.g., solid waste, coastal zone management) and strives, within the constraints of this format, to devote considerable attention to material consumption. As such, the report provides some insight into the ways in which policymakers at the European level were beginning to conceptualise the relationship between consumption and the environment during the early 1990s. While the EC has limited unilateral power to implement policy initiatives, its directives guide individual member-states in formulating their own strategies to maintain compliance.

FEAP is clear at the outset that although it is going to engage with the "wasteful consumption of resources," the EC is not prepared to do so in a way that will court economic crisis. Rather, the Programme contends that improved environmental performance needs to be achieved within the "context of sustained economic growth." After conveying this caveat, the report claims to be "new and radical in its emphasis on the need for changes in current patterns of consumption and behaviour." Such action requires "a sharing of responsibility at all levels of society, including governments, regional and local authorities, non-governmental organisations, financial institutions, production and retail enterprises and individual citizens." While FEAP never discloses the concrete activities

that will be required by each of these actors to encourage more environmentally-aware consumption, its general understanding sees the situation in terms of two failings: insufficient information and inadequate costing.

First, the Programme states "policies should be developed in a way which will help consumers to make informed choices on the basis of safety, quality, durability, and general environmental implications." FEAP allocates to the "retail sector" especially significant responsibilities and encourages enterprises to develop eco-labelling programmes that will enable consumers to make decisions that take the environment into consideration. On this general point, the Programme elaborates

The individual, as a consumer, can make fully informed and rational choices only if the product information with which he/she is provided covers all relevant aspects such as performance, reliability, energy efficiency, durability, running cost, etc. and if this information is given in a neutral form, supported by effective and dependable guarantees.

Second, FAEP contends that prevailing forms of consumption are problematic because products are not priced at their "full cost to society ... including their environmental costs." In other words, correcting environmental harm requires accounting more comprehensively for the deleterious effects of production on ecosystems and human health. Present pricing conventions enable producers (and indirectly consumers through artificially-low prices) to shift a portion of their costs onto the wider society. The EC report suggests improvement in this regard is a function of "getting the prices right," a process that entails the implementation of a variety of fiscal instruments (e.g., ecological taxation, pollution charges) to encourage firms to internalise the full costs of their activities. The additional increment in price will then be passed along to consumers in accordance with the demand elasticity of particular products.

Specifically in terms of conceptualising consumption FEAP is most noteworthy for its recognition that the amelioration of environmental problems is not exclusively limited to the production sphere and for moving the issue of material provisioning closer to the centre of discussion (for a discussion specifically of the European Union see Chapter 3).

5. Agenda 21

Preliminary negotiations leading up to the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Río were the backdrop for contentious debate regarding the relative contribution of contemporary consumption practices to global environmental problems. Developing countries and non-governmental organisations struggled to shift responsibility onto the resource-intensive lifestyles of the world's wealthiest nations, while the rich countries themselves worked to maintain the narrow, but increasingly implausible, framing that attributed international ecological degradation to rampant population growth. Though Northern delegations (principally the United States) fought mightily to keep disputes contained within their conventional boundaries, this ultimately proved too difficult a battle. Agenda 21, the summit's final report, observes that

[t]he major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production, particularly in industrialised countries, which is a matter of grave concern, aggravating poverty and imbalances (UNCED 1992, §4.3).

This statement heralded a new age in international environmental politics. To probe exactly how Agenda 21 views the ecological implications of material acquisition in the advanced nations it is instructive to focus attention specifically on Chapter 4 of the report entitled “Changing Consumption Patterns”.

Cast in deliberate and measured diplomatic language, Agenda 21 conveys an acute awareness that consumption practices in the advanced nations are in need of substantial modification if we are to achieve marked environmental improvement. While Northern consumption is clearly problematic, the report tries to balance this indictment by observing that the real danger lies in the efforts of developing countries to emulate the damaging and wasteful lifestyles of the affluent nations.

Agenda 21 is sparse on specific recommendations on how to encourage less environmentally-destructive consumption, focusing only in general terms on the importance of enhancing the quality of product information available to consumers and the use of economic instruments to improve price signals.² With respect to consumer information the report contends that

[g]overnments, in cooperation with industry and other relevant groups, should encourage expansion of environmental labelling and other environmentally related product information programmes designed to assist consumers to make informed choices (UNCED 1992, §4.21).

Agenda 21 recognises however that providing consumers with more comprehensive information is not in itself likely to have an appreciable effect. Such initiatives should also entail programmes to elevate the public’s environmental consciousness and to educate consumers about the consequences of their product choices. Such a three-pronged approach can “encourage demand for environmentally sound products and use of products” (UNCED 1992, §4.22).

The careful reader invariably comes away with the impression that Agenda 21 is moving in this consumption-oriented direction with great trepidation due to the political and economic conflicts engendered by such a critique. The report also conveys a palpable awareness of the complexity of consumption as an intellectual issue.

[G]rowing recognition of the importance of addressing consumption has also not yet been matched by an understanding of its implications ... [we need to] develop a better understanding of the role of consumption and

²Interestingly, the Conference Secretariat was of the opinion that — despite the poor knowledge base on which to base policy decisions — significant progress toward more sustainable consumption could be achieved without allocating significant resources to the endeavour (UNCED 1992 §4.14).

how to bring about more sustainable consumption patterns (UNCED 1992, §4.6 and 4.7).

Despite acknowledging the existence of critical knowledge gaps, consumption is still viewed as an economic activity that can be adjusted through the application of top-down modifications in market mechanisms. It is largely our understanding of how consumers respond to different informational campaigns and price adjustments that requires improvement. Noteworthy is the observation that Agenda 21 displays no awareness that consumption practices are shaped by social and cultural influences as much as they are by economic signals.

6. Joint Statement by The Royal Society and the National Academy of Sciences

Let us now turn our attention to the highly unusual June 1997 joint statement by the Councils of the Royal Society of London and the United States National Academy of Sciences entitled *Towards Sustainable Consumption*.³ Although an announcement from two distinguished academic institutions obviously does not carry the same significance as official statements by international policymaking bodies, it is instructive to draw attention to this document because it points to directions in which this emergent discourse is likely to move during the next few years.

The Royal Society-National Academy of Sciences communication conveys the interest of the scientific community in bringing its skills to bear “to expedite the transition to a sustainable, desirable life for the world’s people in the coming century” (RS-NAS 1997). The essential thrust of this statement is on the explicit ways in which scientific and technological knowledge can be employed to improve current understanding of the impacts of human behaviour on ecological systems. Nonetheless, this resolution is notable for its recognition that “consumption patterns of the richer countries may have to change; and for global patterns of consumption to be sustainable, they must change.” Furthermore, this statement suggests “societies need to examine their values and consider how goals can be met with the least damaging consumption” (RS-NAS 1997).

To assist this process of adjustment the scientists claim that we need to develop “a better understanding of human consumption and related behaviours and technologies.” They write that

[s]cientists can help to understand the causes and dynamics of consumptive behaviour. They can also develop indicators that track environmental impacts and link them to consumption activities, build understanding of how environmental and social systems respond to stress, and analyse the effectiveness of different strategies for making and implementing policy choices in the presence of uncertainty (RS-NAS 1997).

³In a related vein, see Stern *et al.*, 1997 and Heap and Kent 2000.

The two scientific societies are taking the lead on behalf of the InterAcademy Panel on International Issues, an informal organisation of the world's national scientific associations that is planning to take up the issue of consumption in earnest in the future.

To appreciate the full significance of this statement it is useful to examine it in the longer historical context that we have thus far been developing in this chapter. The document represents an important shift not only because august scientific bodies are now suggesting that modern societies need to take a reflexive look at their values and how they achieve their aspirations. This resolution is also significant because it represents a change of worldview for the scientific community. Official science, as embodied in professional associations and other expert bodies, has argued for the past 25 years, that global environmental problems stem largely from high rates of population growth. This assessment has led policymakers to place chief responsibility for these dilemmas on the doorstep of developing countries and to impose upon them the burden for adjustment. To defuse this "demographic time-bomb" industrialised countries have promoted a diverse package of interventions predicated upon technology (e.g., contraception) and social programmes. This particular characterisation has been a powerful force in enabling the affluent nations to divert attention from the environmental destructiveness of their own lifestyles.

Despite some decline in the authority of science among members of the lay public, the state continues to derive tremendous legitimacy from this body of knowledge; at the same time, science gains authority from this relationship because of the authority the state confers upon it. If the view depicted in *Towards Sustainable Consumption* is maintained it will become increasingly difficult for the world's most highly developed countries to avoid painful decisions requiring curbs on material consumption.

7. UK Consultation Paper: *Sustainable Development — Opportunities for Change*

To gauge more recent developments taking place at the confluence between consumption and the environment it is instructive to look at the UK government's February 1998 consultation paper entitled *Sustainable Development: Opportunities for Change*. This document enables us to gain some insight into how sustainable consumption has taken root within the political context of a particular country. Most of the note perpetuates what has become conventional thinking in environmental-policy circles around sustainable development. It views progress to promote more sustainable consumption as a challenge for producers in that they should aim to design more energy- and resource-efficient technologies.

This consultation paper however devotes a considerable amount of attention to the role of consumers. The document contains passages stating that

[t]o promote ... more sustainable production and consumption we need to stimulate and support those influences which encourage producers to provide better goods and services while using resources more efficiently ... Consumers can have a huge impact on sustainable development through their influence as purchasers (DETR 1998).

This statement indicates that the policy discourse that has been promoted in European councils has begun to filter down to the national level. However, as was the case in the EC Programme, the role of consumers is seen as being largely instrumental and one that places pressure on producers to modify their recalcitrant ways.

We can derive from this consultation paper two valuable insights into how the policy discourse around consumption and the environment is likely to develop in the future.

First, the paper provides the first time in our survey that we come across the term “sustainable production and consumption.”⁴ “Sustainable production” has become familiar enough and is embedded in recent interest in industrial ecology and various environmental-improvement strategies targeted toward business managers (see, for example, Schmidheiny 1992; Welford and Gouldson 1993). Such an emphasis is not surprising given the dominant view that environmental problems arise principally from the production sphere. Moreover, changes in process technologies, product standards, and managerial regimes are relatively uncontroversial politically, especially when they can be expressed in terms of ‘win-win’ scenarios.

The much less familiar idea of “sustainable consumption” is more innovative and deserves further elaboration. Sustainable consumption, as it has been used in the academic literature in recent years, encourages consumers to conceive of products not as material objects, but as providers of services. In other words, people should no longer envision an automobile as a tangible item with intrinsic personal value, but rather as an artefact designed to provide mobility (Jackson 1996; Weizsäcker *et al.*, 1997). Under such circumstances, to continue the example, a driver would pick up a car at a nearby parking facility and drop it off at the end of the journey — much like municipal bicycles are presently managed in some northern European cities. The driver would obtain another vehicle the next time (perhaps even later the same day) she needed to make a trip by automobile. The use of this terminology hints that policymakers in the UK are beginning to move away from purely productionist moorings and to develop a more sophisticated conceptual model of the connections between material consumption and the environment.

Second, this consultation paper contains the suggestion that ever-increasing volumes of consumption may not be consistent with conventional notions of the good life. The report remarks “[a] higher quality of life may be achieved with fewer but higher quality, more long lasting or satisfying products” (DETR 1998). Unfortunately, the document does not explain how this objective can be harmonised with an overarching posture of promoting the “maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth” (DETR 1998). Presumably, in the absence of substantial restructuring, reductions of total material throughput would have to impact negatively on the prospects for continual economic expansion.⁵

⁴My investigations trace the origins of this term to a January 1994 workshop in Stockholm organised by the Nordic Council of Ministers. See Nordic Council of Ministers, 1995 and Norwegian Ministry of Environment, 1994.

⁵Presumably, a country could only reduce its material through-put without cutting into economic growth by stemming its purchase of imported goods and services, while strictly maintaining its purchases of locally-produced goods. Such an approach suggests that consumers would be able to distinguish carefully between indigenous and foreign items and only curtail their consumption of the latter. Moreover, the document provides no suggestion that sustainable consumption would require more fundamental changes in contemporary processes of material acquisition, say, by reducing the overall volume of goods and services purchased.

8. The Role of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

Although it does not have power to actually implement policy, the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) serves important facilitating and co-ordinating functions for the world's wealthiest nations.⁶ In the wake of the UNCED Summit, the OECD established a working group on sustainable consumption and production. Much of the organisation's work to date on this broad topic has concentrated on the production side of the equation. However, the OECD has begun more recently to inquire into the "factors that determine consumption patterns and levels, including welfare and lifestyle considerations" (see, in particular, OECD 1997a, 1998a, 1998b, 1999). In an effort to establish the rationale for addressing consumption explicitly a recent OECD report notes

[Our] Work Programme focuses on *consumption issues and demand-side management*, seeking to identify measures to address the wider economic system and the problems caused by millions of individual consumer decisions ... [I]t reflects a shift away from a purely supply-side perspective, the traditional focus of environmental policy. It permits a more comprehensive view of the economy as a "system" causing environmental stress and provides the means to take a systems view of both the micro-economic influences on firms and households, as well as the macro-economic influences on the economy (*italics in original*) (OECD 1997:8).

As part of this programme of work the OECD is seeking to develop its

[u]nderstanding of both the driving forces behind specific consumption patterns, and the implications of using different policy instruments to try to change them ... [s]tudies by the OECD and other institutions agree that, in many areas, innovative approaches to modifying consumer behaviour — particularly those which involve community and private sector stakeholders — can have positive environment, social and economic impacts (OECD 1997).

Personal transport is a specific area of consumption that has drawn the attention of the OECD. The organisation's work is generating insights that move the policy discourse beyond customary perspectives of consumer information and fiscal instruments. A recent summary report notes that "[e]vidence from the social sciences (e.g., anthropology, geography, psychology, sociology, etc.) indicates that many of the approaches typically used in transport policy development and evaluation are inadequate to deal with the complexity of

⁶The OECD includes a number of countries not typically considered to be part of the world's economic elite, namely Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, Mexico, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and the Republic of Korea.

the problem". Accordingly, the OECD has begun to draw more extensively on such expertise. This new orientation has led to recommendations that favour "mobility" (rather than transport) and that recognise the value of experimental initiatives involving, for example, car-sharing.

However, the organisation is quite clear about the overarching framework within which this initiative will be pursued. Though the OECD observes that member-countries currently have "unsustainable consumption patterns," it does not intend to promote "*de facto* an agenda for reducing consumption in general." The working group is not blind to the complexity of this particular problem definition and they set themselves an ambitious agenda that emphasises

the need for better knowledge of present consumption patterns; the challenges remaining to define a framework and set of goals for government to address consumption patterns as a coherent issue; the opportunities to influence lifestyles and consumption through practical, value-neutral measures; the importance of influencing the broader network of actors and institutions which shape individual consumption patterns; government measures to empower the individual consumer to make positive changes; and the need for the underlying macro-economic framework to encourage rather than obstruct progress towards more sustainable consumption and production patterns (OECD 1997).

9. Discussion and Conclusions

This survey of environmental-policy documents suggests that the discourse on consumption has gone through a sharp transformation during the past three decades, with the most dramatic changes coming about since the 1992 UNCED Summit. A recent OECD report acknowledges this conversion.

[T]here have been important shifts in thinking in both OECD and non-member countries, which have reduced geopolitical tension that has emanated from the *consumption versus population* debates of the preceding two decades. In the OECD, a growing number of countries have [sic] acknowledged that rethinking ways in which environmental resources are utilised to meet human needs is both a moral obligation and in their enlightened self-interest (*italics in original*) (OECD 1997:41).

During the 1970s, the dominant view attributed global environmental problems to uncontrolled population growth in developing countries and extrapolated the impacts of demographic trends onto the availability of natural resources. Policymakers in the affluent nations devoted some attention to the so-called design flaws of modern industrial societies, but managed to suppress more substantive critiques of their consumption practices. Such framing had the effect of displacing responsibility for change onto the production sphere and developing countries. While this perspective did not exculpate advanced nations from

total engagement, it did provide them with the rhetorical means to avoid some very tricky political decisions. Western Europe, North America and Japan exported development aid abroad and created national regulatory regimes to control their most obnoxious forms of pollution.

Clearly a joint-statement from two esteemed scientific associations, a UK government consultation paper, and a work programme within a secondary policymaking organisation do not have the same significance as official pronouncements by individual nation-states and tangible accomplishments on the ground.⁷ Nonetheless, there can be little question that within policy circles the discourse concerning the relationship between consumption and the environment is rapidly evolving. Influential organisations are now beginning to fix responsibility for global environmental problems on the provisioning practices of affluent consumers — a population that encompasses residents of both developed and developing nations.

From the standpoint of achieving environmental improvements the current emphasis on informational campaigns and fiscal instruments is unlikely to promote unambiguous movement toward “sustainability.” The popularity of policy programmes predicated upon consumer-driven reform derives from the fact that such approaches enable the state to avoid confronting the essential contradictions between stewardship and economic growth. The consumer model most prevalent among influential policymakers is based on a dubious characterisation of human behaviour that assumes it is principally a lack of authoritative information and appropriate price signals that are preventing people from acting on what are otherwise strong personal commitments with respect to the environment. To its credit the OECD appears to realise that the modification of contemporary consumption is more complex than its constituent national governments would like to believe. The organisation confesses

Although using economic instruments to ensure that prices of goods and services consumed fully reflect their true environmental costs remains fundamental to changing consumption patterns, price is only one variable influencing those patterns, and in some cases may not be the most important (OECD 1997:50).

In part because of allegations of “state failure” in the environmental arena, governments have been under considerable pressure to delegate their policy responsibilities to other actors (e.g., industry, non-governmental organisations) (see, for example, Jänicke 1990). Environmental certification and eco-taxation schemes make it possible for the state to discharge itself from some very intractable situations and these subtle moves are becoming

⁷A large gap exists between policy documents of the sort described above and actual strategic interventions. Progress moving toward greater “sustainability” has to date been, by virtually any meaningful measure, quite limited. There are serious reasons to question whether existing institutional forms are adequate for such an arduous process of transforming the physical and mental architecture of (post)modernity. Accordingly, we must view the activities of international advisory commissions, transnational policymaking bodies, and scientific societies with care. The extent to which more sustainable lifestyles are actually achievable is still very much an open question.

increasingly common across a wide range of policy domains. In the current case, we see consumers inheriting the regulatory responsibilities that the state has cast off. It is not at all clear that the public cares enough about protecting ecological integrity, or that individuals left to their own devices will make environmentally appropriate consumption decisions. Sociologist Peter Dickens (1996) argues persuasively that the key institutional features of modern society (industrialism, capitalism and science) have undermined lay and tacit forms of knowledge, leaving people alienated and without the capacity to relate to the environment.

The inadequacies of using consumers, rather than the state, as change agents to force the production sphere to act with greater environmental responsibility are apparently becoming evident. The UK government's consultation paper observes

[Consumers] need help to make choices. Existing consumer information could be improved: voluntary "green claims" are not always trusted, while official schemes, such as the European eco-label, have sometimes been slow to have an impact. In the short term, efforts may need to focus on simpler, standardised information on key products and key issues, such as energy consumption. Labelling and information schemes also need to be supported by improved general awareness levels and consumer education (DETR 1998).

We thus see that environmental-certification schemes, even at this early stage of their implementation, may not be the panacea that the state is seeking and will require supplementation from other sources. In the meantime, governments are likely to have a more difficult time than they presently anticipate absolving themselves of these stubborn — and perhaps irreconcilable — dilemmas.

The implementation of more aggressive proposals, especially interventions that might endanger economic-growth mechanisms, are difficult to envision.⁸ In the absence of confirmation in future statements, the suggestion in the UK government's consultation paper that the road to personal satisfaction might be paved with less consumption must be viewed sceptically and as not representative of a more committed policy position.⁹ Outside

⁸This is notwithstanding the seemingly tentative steps contained in the DETR consultation paper. The experience of ex-US President Jimmy Carter is borne on the political consciousness not only in the United States but in other countries as well. In 1979, Carter gave a nationally-televised speech in which he encouraged the American public to practice restraint. He said,

In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does but by what one owns ... [O]wning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We have learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose. Quoted in Shi (1985:270–272).

⁹There would thus appear to be a growing recognition, at least in some public policy circles, of the need to shift affluent societies onto a footing in which they were no longer singularly focused on maximising consumption. This need for a notion of self-sufficiency is also a theme of growing importance in some social theoretical work with respect to the environment (see, for example, Gorz 1987), as well as among certain ecological economists (Princen 1997; Lintott 1998).

of the exigencies of war, few liberal democracies have been inclined to advance *overt* propositions to manage consumption (see Chapters 4 and 5 in this volume).

Nonetheless, we should not fail to realise that states have extensive experience in this area. National bank and treasury officials regulate consumption daily as part of the pursuit of macro-economic objectives such as managing inflation, unemployment, and foreign exchange. All modern governments have at their disposal the means both to stimulate and to suppress material acquisition, and during times of economic emergency have not been indisposed to relying on these tools. Additionally, it is useful to recall that sumptuary laws were, prior to the eighteenth century, frequently used to limit consumption — at least of certain segments of the population (see Hunt 1996). Present-day fiscal instruments, such as taxes on luxury goods, while promoted politically as a means of “penalising” wealthy individuals for certain forms of conspicuous consumption, essentially serve the same purpose. In a different vein, the state actively intervenes to regulate activities deemed to be social vices such as smoking and alcohol consumption, as well as access to other potentially harmful goods (e.g., guns, drugs). It is useful to keep these precedents in mind when the charge rings out that the liberal state has no legitimate grounds to interfere with personal consumption.

It is however unreasonable to expect the prevailing policy discourse around sustainable consumption to include in the foreseeable future unequivocal calls for restraint. If experience serves as an instructive guide, substantive interventions in the short and medium term will be thwarted by demands for further research into the environmental impacts of particular forms of consumer behaviour. Despite justifiable enthusiasm for life-cycle analysis and other modes of ecological auditing, “scientific” evaluation of the environmental impacts of individual consumption decisions is an extraordinarily complex enterprise and contemporary methodologies are insufficient for making unambiguous determinations. While the task might be relatively simple for some agricultural items originating from single, discrete locations, it becomes unwieldy for goods such as automobiles or computers that are built with components sourced from multiple sites and have intricate and rapidly shifting supply chains. Under circumstances characterised by a paucity of incontrovertible causal evidence it will prove difficult for even the most resolute policymaker to justify claims for more austere lifestyles.

At the same time, proponents of the emerging “sustainable consumption agenda” realise that social-science knowledge is important and indispensable. For instance, the OECD recognises that a major barrier to further progress in this domain stems from the fact that “it is difficult to piece together in a comprehensible framework all the influences which shape what and how societies consume” (OECD 1997:46). The extant situation provides a major opportunity for the social sciences to influence the way in which policymaking around sustainable consumption develops. Incisive understanding of the extent to which changes in prevalent patterns of material acquisition are practicable awaits the infusion of the more expansive understanding of consumption that has been developing over the past ten years within a number of individual social science disciplines (see, among others, Miller 1995; Slater 1997; Corrigan 1997). The situation is presently very fluid:

A defining framework and set of goals has not yet been defined by governments to comprehensively address consumption issues and evaluate

potential policy responses ... [Governments can] improve their dialogue with the public, by drawing on expertise from a wider range of disciplines (particularly the non-economic social sciences) (OECD 1997:47, 50).

The very challenging task at present is to devise a means to synthesise the wide array of new perspectives on consumption into a more unified and coherent paradigm. Furthermore, the social sciences' ability to contribute meaningfully to emergent modes of environmental policymaking hinges on a dialectic process that can overcome the estrangement that has existed between the two domains for much of the past two decades (Grove-White 1996; see also Bauman 1987).

On one hand, policymakers will have to realise that social-science knowledge cannot simply be distilled down to instrumental rules for scoring quick political points and maintaining social control. On the other hand, social scientists will need to lower the "guildish" barriers that have been erected to protect their specific brands of esoteric expertise. Moreover, they will have to develop ways to communicate their abstract knowledge that are both publicly accessible and sensitive to the requirements of particular locales.

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