Addressing Sustainability and Consumption

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This article examines issues of sustainability in relation to consumption. The authors first discuss the notion of sustainable consumption and the link between individual consumer behavior and the macroconcerns of understanding and influencing aggregate consumption levels. The authors then reflect on the differing perspectives on whether consumption patterns are in need of adjustment. In the main part of the article, the authors then explore the issue of sustainable consumption through the lens of two broadly differing conceptualizations of consumption itself, discussing four main questions for each of these conceptualizations: (1) How is this view of consumption linked to prevalent current understandings of sustainable consumption? (2) How would sustainability be achieved following this perspective on consumption? (3) To whom would this view of sustainable consumption appeal or not appeal? and (4) What would the roles and responsibilities of different social actors be in achieving sustainability following this view of consumption?

Keywords: *unsustainability; consumption; marketing; roles and responsibilities*

Environmentalists have long been concerned about the individual and aggregate increases in human consumption that have typically accompanied economic development. At an international policy level, the environmental implications of contemporary consumption were highlighted in the Brundtland Report, and the 1992 Earth Summit specifically called for "national policies and strategies to encourage changes in consumption patterns" in Agenda 21. The notion of *sustainability* and the concept of *sustainable consumption* have recently emerged as key elements in the academic and policy debates that consider the environmental impacts of consumption. This has given rise to various academic research articles explicitly framed around sustainable consumption, both in the marketing and consumer behavior literature (van Dam and Apeldoorn 1996; Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero 1997; Heiskanen and Pantzar 1997; Dolan 2002) as well as in environmental sciences, sociology, policy studies, and elsewhere (see Burgess et al. [2003] for a review). Moreover, publications and programs from organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD; 1998, 2002), the Royal Society and the U.S. National Academy of Sciences (www.royalsoc.ac.uk/st_pol12.html), and the United Kingdom government (Department for Environment, Transport, and Regions 1997) have all explicitly addressed the issue of sustainable consumption practices and patterns.

Although this to some extent signals that academics and policy makers, who in the past appear to have been reluctant to acknowledge the role of consumption patterns in driving environmental problems, have slowly begun to address its significance (Cohen 2001), authors such as Dolan (2002) in the pages of this journal have also been critical of the underlying premises of the concept of *sustainable consumption*. In this context, a reexamination of existing conceptualizations of sustainable consumption, and why some conceptualizations appear to have taken predominance over others, seems useful. In this article, we therefore continue in the critical vein of Dolan (2002) but go beyond his important work in critiquing sustainable consumption to arrive at some preliminary propositions that seek to explain *why* the debates and literature linking the environment with consumption have developed in the way that they have. This is important because it helps us to understand better the trajectory of the literature pertaining to sustainability and consumption and offers the opportunity to identify likely dead-ends, plausible points of departure, and promising directions for further development.

In this article, we first discuss the notion of sustainable consumption and the link between individual consumer

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behavior and the macroconcerns of understanding and influencing aggregate consumption levels. We then reflect on the differing perspectives on whether consumption patterns are in need of adjustment. In the second part of the article, we explore the issue of sustainable consumption through the lens of two broadly differing conceptualizations of consumption itself, an information-processing, choice-oriented view on one hand and a more sociological/cultural view of consumption on the other. In discussing each of these broad perspectives on (sustainable) consumption, we look at four questions: (1) How is this view of consumption linked to prevalent current understandings of sustainable consumption? (2) How would sustainability be achieved following this perspective on consumption? (3) To whom would this view of sustainable consumption appeal or not appeal? and (4) What would be the roles and responsibilities of different social actors in achieving sustainability following this view of consumption? The purpose of this is to provide the reader with a comprehensive review of the different perspectives in the literature, as well as to identify some of the key underlying drivers and assumptions of these views. In this way, researchers interested in sustainability and consumption will be more able to locate their own work within the literature and assess the prevailing opportunities and constraints involved.

CONCEPTUALIZING SUSTAINABILITY IN THE CONTEXT OF CONSUMPTION

In this first substantive section of the article, we discuss, first, the notion of *sustainable consumption*, second, the link between individual consumer behavior and the macroconcerns of understanding and influencing aggregate consumption levels, and third, the differing perspectives on whether consumption patterns are in need of adjustment. Three overarching questions are posed: (1) What is meant by *sustainability?* (2) What is the relationship between consumption and sustainability? and (3) Who—if anybody—needs to change consumption patterns to achieve greater sustainability?

Sustainability (and related terms such as *sustainable development*) is an extraordinarily contested concept that is subject to multiple interpretations and meanings (see Dobson 1996). Part of the current debate about the desirability and possibility of sustainability therefore stems from conflicting definitions of the term (Gladwin, Kennelly, and Krause 1995). In brief, sustainability can be defined rather narrowly, mostly in terms of environmental stasis and system maintenance, as in ensuring that our actions do not impact on the Earth or the biosphere in such a way that its long-term viability is threatened. More broadly, sustainability can also be seen in terms of balancing economic, ecological, and social goals and consequences (see Elkington 1998). Most current definitions of sustainability tend to rely on the widely cited definition of sustainable development from the Brundtland commission (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987). This stresses the necessity of meeting the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs—a goal that is captivating on an emotional level but leaves open a number of questions, including how needs are defined, whose needs take precedence in cases of conflict, and whether any genuine sacrifices in terms of lifestyle are required of the most well-off part of the Earth's population.

Given this diversity in definitional stances, it would appear that the question of the relationship between consumption and sustainability could be approached from two different angles. One is what could be termed an *objectivist approach*, which tries to determine objectively maximum sustainable consumption levels and actions that need to be taken to stay within these levels. Such maximum consumption levels have not been calculated with anything approaching certainty, either on an aggregate or on an individual basis. However, some work has been carried out on the carrying capacity of the Earth, suggesting that the ecological footprint (measured by the amount of land used to sustain the consumption of an individual) of an average person worldwide is 2.28 hectares, with the average U.S. American needing 9.7 hectares, the average UK citizen 5.35 hectares, and the average person in Mozambique 0.47 hectares (World Wildlife Fund for Nature 2002) and that we would need several planets Earth if the entire world population were to achieve the consumption levels of the average European, let alone North American citizen. This would be particularly critical if world population trends followed the high fertility scenario suggested by the United Nation's (UN) report on "World Population in 2300" (UN 2004). This perspective has therefore led to a widely voiced suspicion that current aggregate consumption levels are either already unsustainable or fast approaching that state (Heiskanen and Pantzar 1997; OECD 2002).

The precautionary principle (i.e., an assumption that in lieu of scientific certainty, one should prove the harmlessness of one's actions before proceeding) would suggest that this requires, at the very least, a stabilization of aggregate consumption at the current level, if not an actual reduction. Two obvious contributors to such high overall consumption levels can then be identified. One is to be found in an expanding world population and the other in unprecedented and rising levels of material consumption by the better off part of the world population. In these simplified terms, the solution would then lie in a stabilization or reduction of the world population on one hand and/or a stabilization or reduction of the amount of natural resources consumed by individuals on the other. Both of these seem highly important and extensive issues. Doing both justice would go beyond the scope of a single article. Therefore, this article focuses on the latter.

Figures on comparative ecological footprints suggest that different responsibilities with respect to limiting or reducing

material consumption would apply to different sections of the world population (Durning 1992; Hart 1997). At one level, it is possible to look at the average ecological footprint of people in a country and this will tell us something about appropriate national policy measures with regard to consumption. Following the above figures, it would seem appropriate that countries such as the United States and the UK, to name but two, should look at policy measures that reduce the average material consumption levels of their citizens, although this would not be appropriate for government policy in countries with a much lower aggregate consumption level.

At a different level, it has to be recognized that individual consumption levels within countries can also vary significantly. In many so-called developing countries, the elite enjoy material consumption every bit as high and sophisticated as members of the elite in so-called developed or industrialized countries, whereas in the latter there are often parts of the population that have access to significantly lower levels of consumption than the average. It would therefore seem obvious that those who are enjoying high consumption levels (compared to a worldwide average), regardless of the country in which they may live, have a more significant role to play in terms of limiting individual consumption levels as part of an aggregate effort to limit worldwide material consumption than those with less-than-average consumption levels. In this article, we are concentrating on the consumption patterns of the first group of individuals, a type of consumption that we shall call *affluent consumption* in the remainder of the article. The consumption levels of the second group, and particularly of the least well off part of the world population, although part of the same overall question, is a very different problem and needs to be discussed elsewhere (see, e.g., Peet and Watts 1996).

While the argument outlined in the preceding paragraphs is popular with many in the environmental movement, the need for reduced consumption levels is not universally accepted. In trying to explain the contested nature of the notion of reduced or environmentally responsible consumption, it is fruitful to apply a different angle in the form of an *interpretive approach* to the question of sustainable consumption. Here, the question is not so much as to what levels of consumption would be objectively sustainable but from what point of view would environmentally responsible consumption be considered necessary or unnecessary (Hannigan 1992). Environmental activists and proponents who subscribe to the logic, outlined above, that aggregate consumption levels are currently unsustainable or will be so in the near future or that this should at least be assumed from a precautionary principle, will argue that environmentally responsible and reduced consumption is necessary, at least for affluent consumers (e.g., Fisk 1973). Producers of ecologically responsible products and services and governments committed to meeting international environmental treaties may also argue for environmentally responsible consumption (e.g., OECD 2002; Schmidheiny 1992).

On the other hand, restrained consumption may not be considered necessary (or a matter of concern) from a number of different viewpoints, such as academics in other fields of interests or activists promoting different concerns, who may be indifferent or even hostile to the environmental agenda. Governments that consider other commitments and interests as more important than an environmental agenda or meeting international environmental treaties may also show no interest in curbing consumption. For example, U.S. President George W. Bush stated when the U.S. administration withdrew from the Kyoto protocol that "we will be working with our allies to reduce greenhouse gases, but I will not accept a plan that will harm our economy and hurt American workers" (cited in Burgess et al. 2003)—a clear reference to the perceived economic impacts of explicit attempts to limit consumption of certain resources.

Third, there are viewpoints that promote an agenda of increased material consumption. Fisk, in an address to the Macromarketing Conference in 2001 (reprinted in this journal; Fisk 2001), argued that marketing is a multiplier in accelerating development, thus raising the quality of life for people, particularly in developing economies. Governments in both developing and highly industrialized nations may promote increased consumption, where the former may be seeking economic conditions and material living standards comparable to those of affluent countries for all their citizens (and not just an elite) and the latter may be more concerned with economic growth than with reducing material consumption. Others interested in increasing material consumption will include national and multinational companies seeking to increase market share and market size, the suppliers and distributors of nonrenewable resources, and consumers with materialist values who take prestige and construct their sense of self from consuming resource-intensive goods (see the third section below for a detailed discussion of this).

Further questions arise if one takes the view that current affluent consumption levels are too high to be sustainable, at least if a much larger proportion of the world population were to enjoy similar consumption levels. While this may be unrealistic or improbable for the very poor, recent economic growth in countries such as China has raised the prospect of very significantly increased material consumption levels by a large number of people. Thus, assuming a need to reduce the consumption levels of a significant number of people, the problem arises of how to link the microbehavior of individuals to the macroprocess of working toward sustainable consumption. In this respect, there would be an obvious role for governments, educational institutions, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and perhaps also economic institutions, such as firms and trade associations. Yet actual changes in affluent consumption patterns, which we have argued is a

necessary component of a long-term process toward sustainable consumption, would need to take place at individual and household levels. Any attempts by the above-mentioned institutions to influence consumption patterns in the direction of limiting material use need to be based on a realistic and comprehensive conceptualization of consumption, one that takes into account the complexities of consumption as a social and cultural activity. Cohen (2001) has argued that most governments of affluent countries have so far been very reluctant to curb the material consumption of their citizens, but even where they have made some limited attempts in this direction, this has usually been based on a highly simplistic and incomplete stimulus-response conceptualization of consumption. In the remainder of this article, we shall first examine how environmentally oriented consumption, which may be considered a precursor to sustainable consumption,[1] has been conceptualized in the literature to date, showing a dominant conception in terms of the consumer as rational chooser. We then discuss the implications of cultural and symbolic conceptions of consumption in terms of the process of establishing a more progressive relationship between sustainability and consumption.

CONSUMPTION AS CHOICE AND INFORMATION PROCESSING

In this and the following section of the article, we look at sustainable consumption from two broadly differing perspectives of consumption itself, exploring how these views of consumption are linked to prevalent current understandings of sustainable consumption, how sustainability would be achieved following these perspectives, to whom these views of sustainable consumption would appeal or would not appeal, and what the roles and responsibilities of different social actors in achieving sustainability would be, following these views of consumption. The main arguments put forward in these two sections are summarized in Table 1. In this section, we look at sustainable consumption from a choice and information-processing perspective.

Relating the Choice/Information-Processing Model to Sustainability

There is a strong link between the information-processing and choice perspective and prevalent understandings of sustainable consumption. Much of the existing literature linking consumption with environmental problems has been based on traditional psychological and marketing conceptualizations of consumption as individual choice. This view of consumption is trying to uncover the individual psychological processes leading to particular consumption choices. Information-processing models of such cognitive processes form the basis of much of the theory behind this conceptualization (Ajzen and Fishbein 1974, 1977, 1980; Bettman 1979). This type of work, which in keeping with the terminology typically used by the researchers and commentators associated with it we shall term *green* consumption, has primarily focused on the environmental concerns of consumers and their propensity to choose less environmentally harmful products and consumption patterns if given sufficient choice and information.

Research in this tradition has thus sought to identify and analyze green consumption values, attitudes, and behaviors (Bohlen, Schlegelmilch, and Diamantopoulos 1993; Minton and Rose 1997; Roberts and Bacon 1997; Balderjahn 1988), as well as explore ways to segment and target such consumers (Kinnear, Taylor, and Ahmed 1974; Roberts 1996; Ozanne and Smith 1998). This has also been the starting point for much other research published within the (closely associated) green marketing literature, such as examinations of the new product development processes for goods and services targeted at environmentally concerned consumers (Dermody and Hanmer-Lloyd 1995; Polonsky and Ottman 1998), analyses of green communications aimed at informing and encouraging green consumption (Banerjee, Gulas, and Iyer 1995; Lord and Putrevu 1998; Polonsky et al. 1998), and explorations of how to improve the eco-efficiency of products, distributions systems, and reclamation and recycling systems integral to the wider purchase and disposal cycle of green consumption (Schmidheiny 1992; Schrum, Lowrey, and McCarty 1994; Meijkamp 1998; Fuller 1999).

Achieving Sustainable Consumption

Following this perspective, more sustainable consumption patterns will be achieved through consumer demand for more environmentally benign goods and services, a fact that provides an incentive for marketers to offer such products. In common with the majority of general marketing texts, consumers in this literature are generally conceived of as choosers (Gabriel and Lang 1995), motivated by their individual and cultural beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes and thought to make product and other consumption choices accordingly. Specifically, green consumers are thought to be motivated by strong environmental values and attitudes, therefore seeking environmental product information, rationally weighing the utility provided by a particular product against the environmental cost attached and making a purchasing decision based on these environmental criteria in conjunction with more conventional considerations of price, quality, and convenience. This is well demonstrated by the chapter on green consumers in Ottman (1993), where environmentally conscious consumers make "decisions [that are] are shaped by deep rooted values," "have access to more information than any other generation in history and . . . know how to use it," "consider themselves logical and rational and are attracted to high quality and substance" (Ottman 1993 20), "make a detailed shopping list," "check ingredients" on labels, and "look for useful information" in advertising (p. 29).

TABLE 1
VIEWS OF CONSUMPTION AND RELATIONSHIP WITH SUSTAINABILITY

					Supporters and Critics	
View of Consumption	*Underlying Assumption*	*Relation to Sustainability in Literature*	*How to Achieve Sustainable Consumption*	*Roles and Responsibilities of Different Social Actors*	*Groups to which it Appeals*	*Groups to which it does not Appeal*
Rational choice and information processing	Consumers as rational, utility-maximizing decision makers; focus on individual consumers; consumption and its antecedents can be rationally determined	Strong—main basis for "green" consumption literature	Environmental concern leads to inclusion of environmental criteria in individual consumer decision making; pervasive environmental concern and aggregate behavior of many green consumers leads to more sustainable consumption (and production) patterns overall	Individuals: key locus of action for more sustainable consumption; Marketers: respond to consumer demand for greener products and services; Public policy: education of consumers, removal of barriers to individual green behavior; Social groups and entities: limited role	Green marketers; policy makers seeking stimulus-response model of greening; environmentalists with natural science background; academics trying to establish green marketing in mainstream marketing literature	Radical, "deep green" environmentalists; academics interested in sociological/ anthropological perspective
Sociological/ anthropological view of consumption	Consumption embedded in social and cultural practices; focus on the role of consumption in people's lives as individuals and groups	Weak—often seen as in opposition to, or neutral toward, concept of *sustainability*; sees sustainable consumption as a problematic concept with inherent tensions	All consumption has important social roles and purposes; sustainable consumption needs to take into account cultural and social aspects of consumption	Existing social actors are resistant to change—wider social, economic, and political transitions are necessary to address sustainability; Individuals: less emphasis on their actions; Public policy: could limit promotion of symbolic function of new consumer goods; could promote more sustainable ways of fulfilling social and cultural needs; limits imposed by other development goals; Marketers: may be unwilling to promote new ways of fulfilling social and cultural needs because of reduced growth potential; Civil society/media: promotion of civil discourse about redirection of social and cultural functions of consumption	Potential appeal to environmentalists and critical scholars of consumption seeking a richer conceptualization of sustainable consumption	Environmentalist with normative concerns and working within positivist framework; consumption scholars concerned with positive cultural aspects of consumption and who are unhappy with the normative approach to consumption

Hedonistic consumption	Consumption brings pleasure, often through act of shopping itself, through use or consumption, or through possession	Often seen in direct opposition to more frugal lifestyles advocated by environmentalists	Pleasure may stem from environmentally benign goods and from alternative shopping environments, as well as "exploration" of search for such goods
Construction of self-identity through consumption	Consumption as means to construct psychological and social identity	Literature tends to be neutral on links to sustainability	Active construction of sustainable self-identities and lifestyles
Consumption as communication	Consumption as a code for communication of status, taste, self-identity, and social relationships	Literature tends to be neutral on links to sustainability	Shared experiences of sustainable lifestyles in families, groups, and communities; group identities and pressures promote more sustainable consumption patterns

Along a similar line of thought, a number of other authors (e.g., Peattie 1995; Fuller 1999) have modeled green consumption in terms of the buyer-decision process. This suggests that the consumer moves through a number of discrete cognitive and behavioral stages such as problem recognition, information searches, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and postpurchase behavior. The widely held assumption here is that individual attitudes, need recognition, information search, and so forth, will lead to behavioral intentions and, ultimately, to behavior (see Bohlen, Schlegelmilch, and Diamantopoulos 1993; Schlegelmilch, Bohlen, and Diamantopoulos 1996; Minton and Rose 1997; Roberts and Bacon 1997). This view is derived directly from Ajzen and Fishbein's (1974, 1977, 1980) information-processing model of consumer choice. Following this conceptualization of consumption, barriers to more sustainable consumption can be found in various impediments to the above process. For example, consumers might have insufficient levels of environmental awareness and concern (Kindra 1994; Schrum, Lowrey, and McCarty 1994), be limited in environmental knowledge and cognitive capacity (Anderson and Claxton 1982), accord insufficient salience and importance to environmental criteria over other product performance benefits (Anderson and Claxton 1982; Peattie 1999), be skeptical toward environmental-marketing claims (Schrum, McCarty, and Lowrey 1995; National Consumer Council 1996; Mohr, Eroglu, and Ellen 1998), and/or feel ineffective, even powerless, in contributing to environmental solutions through any single act of purchase (Kinnear, Taylor, and Ahmed 1974; Peattie 1999).

Roles and Responsibilities

The key role in achieving sustainable consumption, under this view, would seem to lie with individual consumers. Their values and attitudes, translated into behaviors such as demand for sustainable goods and services produced, distributed, and disposed of by sustainable processes, would drive corresponding behaviors by marketers, who would either respond to this demand by delivering more sustainable products and processes or, eventually, be driven out of business. A role for public policy would lie in educating consumers about environmental issues and in the removal of the above mentioned barriers to individual green behavior. However, as we shall see below, such an individualized view of green consumption and responsibilities may be quite problematic from a more social and systemic perspective.

While the conceptualization of consumption as information-processing and choice has been challenged and supplemented by other, socially and culturally based views, as we shall discuss in the next section of this article, it remains prevalent in the literature concerned with environmental issues. The question thus arises as to whom this view of green consumption might appeal and why.

Supporters and Critics

A number of groups of people may find it appropriate, useful, or convenient to see environmentally oriented consumption mostly in a choice and information-processing mode. These may include academics trying to establish green marketing and green consumption within the mainstream marketing and consumer behavior literatures. Much of mainstream marketing and consumer behavior research is steeped in the quantitative research tradition with its emphasis on measurability and reliability, and this is probably another reason that it has favored the information-processing, choice-focused approach to consumer behavior, which lends itself relatively easily to such research methods.[2] Adopting similar concepts and methods for green marketing and consumer research may therefore be helpful in publishing such work.

Adopting a traditional information-processing and choice-oriented conceptualization of green consumption may also appeal to those interested in pursuing ostensibly sustainable marketing practices within the existing economic system, including those who believe in incremental greening, marketers of green products, and environmental policy makers looking for a relatively simple stimulus-response model by which to steer consumer behavior. The relative straightforwardness of this approach, and the quantitative research findings it tends to provide, may be seen as more useful for such practical concerns than the frequently less clear-cut and less easily actionable results typically offered by other, more interpretive research traditions. This may explain why a choice and information-processing view of green consumption is common in the literature addressed to practitioners.

It may also be the case that under the assumption of consumption as a goal-oriented, rational, information-processing activity, marketing as marketers like to see it (i.e., as the generally benign activity of satisfying customer needs and demands) can go on as usual, albeit with the difference that these needs and demands now include environmental criteria. This considerably reduces the critical challenge that thinking about sustainability can, in principle, pose for established market systems. If so-called green consumers choose products and services based on a rational evaluation of their environmental impact, then the market system can be expected to provide such products and services and a transformation toward greater sustainability can be expected to happen through market forces. The way toward greater sustainability therefore would depend on a sufficiently large number of consumers employing a proenvironmental choice criterion so that predominantly environmentally benign products are offered in the market. This then becomes an educational issue for public policy makers and green marketers alike, but it is no fundamental challenge to market-based economic and political systems (i.e., the systems predominantly found in the most powerful nations of the world).

Third, a rationalist, information-processing perspective on consumption may also appeal to many environmentalists, who often come from a natural science background and are used to rationalist and positivist frames of inquiry and tend to favor a similar approach to social science problems (Cohen and Murphy 2001).

Others, on the other hand, may criticize this approach to understanding green consumption as inappropriate or deficient. They are likely to include scholars of consumption who work within the sociological or anthropological research tradition. These would favor a different conceptualization of consumption as less rational, less oriented toward individual needs and expectations, and more as a social and cultural activity (Dolan 2002). However, sociological and anthropological consumption researchers are also often not very sympathetic to environmentalist concerns with consumption, either because they consider such normative concerns as inappropriate to their scholarly approach or because they do not wish to curb consumption, which they consider to be a positive social and cultural activity (Borgmann 2000). This is discussed in more detail in the next section.

Others that might disagree with the above, prevalent conceptualization of green consumption are those looking for a much more radical, fundamental change to the current economic system than is envisaged by the majority of those concerned with green marketing and incremental greening. This group might dislike the rationalist-, choice-, and information-oriented model of green consumption in a somewhat more indirect way, precisely because it lends itself to the notions of incrementalism, which they consider to be mistaken and insufficient. The incremental approach to the greening of marketing practices that tends to follow from the above considerations has thus been heavily criticized as not really constituting genuinely sustainable marketing. It has been labeled a "band-aid" (Smith 1998) and "green wash" and is seen by some authors as falling far short of what one would consider as a genuine consideration of sustainability in marketing and consumption, which would place less emphasis on individual changes in behavior and more on significant, systemic changes to the dominant social paradigm (Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero 1997).

SOCIOLOGICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF CONSUMPTION

In the previous section, we have shown that considerations of sustainability in consumption are strongly influenced by a rationalist, information-processing conceptualization of consumption and discussed reasons why this might be the case. In this section, we are looking at some socially/culturally inspired conceptualizations of consumption and how they may relate to questions of sustainability. Again, we will explore how such a view of consumption is related to existing notions of sustainable consumption, to whom such a view of sustainable consumption might or might not appeal and why, how sustainability might be achieved, and where roles and responsibilities for sustainability would lie following this perspective. First, however, we provide a very brief summary of some of the most important strands in this sociological and anthropological work on consumption. Some of the more recent literature in this area has been reviewed by Holbrook in a three-part review article in recent issues of this journal (Holbrook 2000, 2001a, and 2001b).

Sociologists and anthropologists have studied consumption not so much from an information- or choice-oriented or psychological perspective but from a social and cultural one. Their emphasis is less on how people perceive, evaluate, and select different consumption options and more on the function that consumption has in their lives, both individually and as members of social groups. The sociological and anthropological literature on consumption encapsulates an impressive heterogeneity of theoretical positions, informed by perspectives as diverse as postmodernism (Firat and Ventakesh 1995), poststructuralism (Thompson and Hirschman 1995; Holt 1997), feminism (Hirschman 1993; Stern 1993), Marxism (Hirschman 1993), and social constructionism (Elliot and Wattanasuwan 1998) among others. Common to them is a view of consumption as less rational, less choice and goal oriented, and less oriented toward objective product utility than the traditional account. Beyond this, the emphasis taken by different works differs widely. The more widely spread and well-developed emphases include hedonistic consumption, consumption as a means to construct self-identity, and consumption as a means to construct and express social relationships and communicate social and cultural meaning.

Consumption as Hedonism

The view of consumption as hedonistic self-indulgence, an activity that brings pleasure to the individual, is common in both the popular press and the academic literature. Baudrillard (1997) claims that in contemporary society, consumers do not merely have a right but almost a duty to seek pleasure. Pleasure in consumption may derive from the act of shopping itself; from the use—the actual consumption—of the goods and services bought; or from the possession of goods, which may afford their possessors the opportunity to display style and taste (Bourdieu 1984) or to dream and fantasize about pleasurable, albeit often quite unrealistic, scenarios involving these objects (Campbell 1987). Many of the benefits of hedonistic consumption for the individual seem to lie in the act of purchase and the possession of objects rather than, or in addition to, their use or actual consumption. This is particularly obvious in the case of shopping as mood repair—or "retail therapy" as it is often referred to only semijokingly (Woodruffe 1997)—or in the more extreme case of "compulsive" or "addictive" shopping (Elliot 1994; Faber and Christensen 1996). The notion of hedonistic consumption thus leads us to a possible disjunction of shopping and

consumption where people may want to buy things but not actually consume them in the sense of using them (up). This has some potentially rather problematic implications from the point of sustainability, problems that are discussed in the final section of the article.

Consumption as Identity Construction

Another important strand in the sociological/cultural literature on consumption concerns the way in which consumption can become a means to help construct (and communicate) a person's psychological and social identity. Self-identity in modernity is seen as less fixed and given than in premodern society and hence becomes a reflexively organized endeavor and a task of negotiating lifestyle choices between different options (Giddens 1991), a task in which consumption can play a major role. While special and cherished objects have always formed part of humans' identity (Belk 1988), it is the particular characteristic of consumer societies that any kind of object may be imbued with meaning and used for the construction of identity and self-image (Featherstone 1991; Baudrillard 1997). Consumers do not establish profound relationships with such mundane products but use them in highly visible ways, conscious of the inferences that others will draw from them (Gabriel and Lang 1995). Whether the proliferation of consumer goods means that identities are no longer scarce and can be discarded and replaced at will, as Bauman (1988) seems to argue, or that such overabundance just makes the quest for unique and authentic identities more difficult, as Gabriel and Lang (1995) would have it, remains open to debate.

Consumption as Communication

Connected to the notion of constructing identities through consumption is the communicative and social function of consumption. A large proportion of consumption activities take place in social units, most frequently the family, but also within circles of friends, work groups, and other social settings. Shopping and consumption are therefore frequently done in the presence of others, or with them in mind. Shopping in this sense can be seen as a labor of love (Miller 1998). Consumption thus becomes a code or a language through which status and taste (Veblen [1899] 1925; Bourdieu 1984), self-identities, and social relationships in general are expressed (Douglas and Isherwood 1978). When looking at consumption from this perspective, it is not the use or exchange value of commodities that becomes the focus of consumers' attention but their sign value, which, according to Baudrillard (1997), is now the chief value that most consumer goods have.

It should perhaps be noted that the social and cultural aspects of consumption are not new phenomena but have probably always existed. Dixon (2001), in the pages of this journal, provides an account of conspicuous consumption gleaned from the diary of Samuel Pepys, in seventeenth-century England, which is no less complex or ostentatious than anything observable in our own times. As Holbrook (2000) notes, what has changed is the understanding that marketing academia has of consumption, which has only taken on board these cultural and social aspects rather more recently.

The preceding three paragraphs constitute only a very brief introduction into this rich literature, intended to set the scene for the subsequent discussion of the relevance of these conceptualizations of consumption to the consideration of sustainability. For a more detailed overview see, for instance, Gabriel and Lang (1995). Let us now turn to the four questions posed at the beginning of this section.

Relating Alternative Views of Consumption to Sustainability

The social and cultural notions of consumption outlined above have so far not been linked very strongly to discussions of sustainability. This seems, at first, a bit surprising, given that they have generated such a rich and varied literature in general. Some authors have looked at the phenomenon of consumer society and consumer culture from a more systemic perspective and have shown a number of important and generally problematic implications that this has for the project of sustainability in consumption and marketing. Notable in this respect are Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero (1997) and Kilbourne's (1998) work on the dominant social paradigm, Prothero and Fitchett's (2000) attempt to integrate environmental issues into green commodity discourse, and Dolan's (2002) critique of the very concept of sustainable consumption. However, in general, relatively little work seems to have been done that takes the above conceptualizations as a starting point for theoretical or empirical investigations into sustainability and consumption.

Supporters and Critics

The question then arises as to why this should be so. There are two groups of scholars to whom one might assume that such a view on consumption might appeal, but neither appears to have taken much of an interest in a social and cultural conceptualization of sustainable consumption, yet. One group consists of environmentalist scholars and the other of sociologists and anthropologists working on consumption.

As Cohen and Murphy (2001) suggest, environmentalists may not have taken the above conceptualizations of consumption as a starting point for their work for two potential reasons. First, they often work within a largely positivist/objectivist frame of inquiry, often influenced by a natural science or technical background, with an emphasis on quantitative data and, hence, little emphasis on the qualitative methods that these social and cultural conceptualizations of consumption generally entail. Second, the generally interpretive approach to meaning making of these social and cultural

approaches to consumption is not necessarily easy to reconcile with the normative and practical goals of the environmental movement, which typically include a reduction in consumption levels.

On the other hand, scholars working within the sociological and anthropological consumption research tradition, working in an interpretive frame of inquiry, may be unconcerned with—or perhaps even hostile to—sustainability issues. First, they may consider such concerns to be unduly driven by a realist perspective on environmental "problems" that conflicts with interpretive goals of "interpretation" and "meaning." As such, the emphasis of sociologists is more on how environmental problems are constructed, legitimated, and interpreted than on solving them (see, e.g., Hannigan 1992). Second, they may see consumption as a positive social and cultural force and disagree with notions of curbing it (see, e.g., Borgmann 2000). It is for these reasons that Cohen and Murphy (2001) argue that bringing environmentalist and cultural/social researchers together in this kind of work is fraught with difficulty and that governments and other policy makers may prefer simple models of consumption that allow the illusion of straightforward, stimulus-response type solutions.

Achieving Sustainable Consumption

At the same time, studying the problematic nature of sustainability from a social and cultural theoretical perspective on consumption may offer significant insights that may supplement and expand those offered by the traditional perspective, both in terms of showing problematic issues and barriers to the project of greening consumption and in terms of enriching our understanding of what sustainable consumption is and/or might be (Dolan 2002) and where roles and responsibilities for achieving this might lie.

In some respects, the above social and cultural conceptualizations of consumption make the notions of both green and sustainable consumption more problematic. One such respect is the way in which shopping and possession become partly divorced from actual consumption and the idea of objectively defined, utilitarian needs (Dolan 2002). All of the conceptualizations of consumption outlined in this section imply that sometimes, or perhaps even rather frequently, consumers purchase things that they may have little intention of consuming in the traditional sense or may not need from a utilitarian perspective. If shopping per se becomes important and meaningful, the continued possession of a good may not be sufficient to give pleasure or allow self-expression, and the act of shopping would have to be repeated regardless of whether one already possesses previously purchased goods that may still be perfectly serviceable from a functional perspective. Insofar as it fulfills no objectively defined need, pleasure derived from the act of buying itself, the desire to continue the construction of self-identity through consumption and to communicate with each other through the purchase, display, and overconsumption of certain goods, may all be seen as wasteful from a typical environmentalist perspective. In fact, it is this "wasteful" consumption of material goods for purposes other than to satisfy strictly utilitarian needs that seems to lie at the heart of much environmental (and cultural) criticism of consumer culture (Dolan 2002).

These critics tend not to acknowledge or value the positive social and cultural aspects of consumption, which are emphasized by many sociologically and culturally inspired scholars of consumption (e.g., Firat and Venkatesh 1995). The latter see consumption as an intrinsically positive force, precisely because it affords humans pleasure and allows them to construct and express self-identities and social relationships (Borgmann 2000). From this vantage point, environmentalist critiques of consumption and aims to curb it become problematic in themselves since such a curb, if successful, would be liable to take away a commonly employed means of achieving happiness and quality of life. The importance of consumption in facilitating social and cultural expression also means that simply condemning it from an environmental perspective is unlikely to meet with approval from a large proportion of consumers and is thus probably not conducive to the promotion of greener, more sustainable consumption patterns.

On the other hand, putting a cultural/social lens on consumption also opens up different, more diverse, and potentially richer ways of thinking about sustainability—albeit more challenging ones. For example, in terms of consumption as pleasure seeking, it would seem that environmentally oriented consumption need not be envisaged as necessarily joyless or self-denying. Pleasure may be gained from aspects other than merely the somewhat austere satisfaction of having done one's bit to "save the planet." Consumers may, for instance, derive pleasure from the look, feel, and taste of more environmentally benign product alternatives, such as organically produced garments using natural fibers and dyes or organically produced, traditional varieties of fruit and vegetables, to give just two examples. Such goods can also confer socially desirable sign value onto consumers, such as being seen as "a good mother" by buying "natural," organic foods and other goods for one's children (Burgess et al. 2003) in addition to addressing health concerns that an increasing number of consumers have about conventionally produced food stuffs. As Prothero and Fitchett (2000) argue, ecological (and health) goals can be aligned with a "green commodity discourse" that presents such goals as "positive" and "glamorous."

The shopping experience offered by some more environmentally benign retail environments, such as farmers markets, shops dedicated to eco-friendly, locally produced, or fair-trade goods, and high street shops and local markets as opposed to out-of-town retail parks and shopping malls, can also bring pleasure and sign value to consumers who shop there. Additionally, the element of "exploration" involved in

the search for more environmentally benign consumption alternatives, such as organic and/or fair-trade goods, second-hand goods, more authentic and unbranded goods and shopping experiences, or ways of achieving goals with less use of materials, can be intrinsically rewarding and pleasurable to consumers.

Equally, the notion of identity construction through consumption has insights to offer for an understanding of sustainability. People may want to construct an environmentally responsible lifestyle and the identity of the kind of person who values the environment sufficiently to take it into account when engaging in consumption activities. Both the consumption of environmentally responsible product alternatives and nonconsumption for environmental reasons could fit the idea of a green identity constructed through consumer decisions and practices. For instance, while much existing research on voluntary simplicity (Leonard-Barton 1981; Shama and Wisenblit 1984; Rudmin and Kilbourne 1996; Iwata 1997) would seem to fall into the rational choice tradition of consumer research, the notion of consumers actively constructing green identities and lifestyles through their consumption patterns offers the possibility of a more dynamic understanding of the relationship between sustainability and consumption. For example, Zavestoski's (2002) study of voluntary simplifiers shifts the emphasis to questions of personal authenticity and even Marxian notions of alienation rather than just simply those of rational choice.

Obviously there are profound tensions here, particularly when such decisions may result in such individuals fearing negative social labels such as *gullible*, *weird*, or *idealistic*, as one recent study revealed (Bedford, cited in Burgess et al. 2003) or when consumers worry about "guilt trips" and becoming "neurotic" in trying to maintain a "simpler" lifestyle (Shaw and Newholm 2002). Nonetheless, extending this a little, we can also see how identities may be constructed through specifically *anti*consumption attitudes, values, and behaviors. This goes further than passive nonpurchase to include acts of active rebellion against or subversion of existing consumption practices. Behaviors such as unorthodox (mis)use of products, consumer boycotts, and local exchange trading systems (LETS) schemes can be seen as attempts to construct an identity through consumer activism and rebellion, which may help to sustain more positive self-images. Indeed, through antiglobalization and anticapitalism demonstrations and institutional challenges to modern affluent consumption (e.g., Adbusters Media Foundation, Reclaim the Streets, etc.), activism through withholding consumption (as in consumer boycotts) has been supplemented with activism against consumption itself. Of course, there are contradictions and tensions here, too, with protesters using (and being used by) the processes and discourses that they critique (Rumbo 2002), but the coping strategies, and the consequences for individuals trying to maintain such a stance, clearly represent an important area for further research.

Our understanding of sustainability may also be enriched by placing more emphasis on its social and communicative dimensions and going beyond existing social-psychological notions of influences on individual attitudes and choices, which have received some attention in the green consumer literature (e.g., Ottman 1993). The above arguments regarding downshifted and anticonsumption lifestyles may be extended to include a strong social element. For many people, these are not just individual lifestyle choices but shared experiences within families, friendships, and communities. Evidence suggests that those seeking to negotiate the difficult terrain of reducing or shifting consumption toward more responsible patterns are less likely to suffer social stigma when acting within a community of likewise individuals (Bedford, cited in Burgess et al. 2003). Furthermore, the idea of sharing products and services (Meijkamp 1998; Schrader 1999) explicitly tries to build a notion of more sustainable consumption practices on social behaviors where the act of sharing the use of a car or a washing machine with a group of people can act as a valuable bond in increasingly individualized modern societies.

In these contexts, Bauman's (1992) concept of *neotribes* is interesting, as communities constructed around shared environmental values and actions, such as road protests, are one of the most frequently described types of such neotribes. The shared experiences and social bonds of such protests and similar activities would seem to be at least as important to the people engaging in them as the actual environmental protest. The same might be said for consumers' development of community identification around "alternative," less environmentally harmful forms of consumption, such as LETS, yard sales, or antique and flea markets. In this sense, rather than removing the means to construct and sustain social relationships, consumption activities of a potentially more sustainable nature may in fact add to them by shifting them into new forms of behavior and new spaces of consumption. In a somewhat less directly consumption-related but nonetheless relevant area, civil protests around World Trade Organization and G8 meetings showed highly sophisticated coordination between social movements, NGOs, and individuals.

Roles and Responsibilities

This brings us to the question of where roles and responsibilities for a change toward more sustainable consumption patterns might lie. While individual behaviors would still seem to play a role, given that it is individuals, or at least households, who do much of the actual purchasing and consuming of goods and services, it also needs to be recognized that they have to act within what the systems in which they exist offer them as options (Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero 1997). If consumption is seen as embedded in our very society and culture, we may thus place less emphasis on individual behaviors and more on systemic approaches, and the recognition of the roles of a much wider set of social

actors comes to the forefront. Kilbourne (1998) and Capra (2003), among others, point to the need for a wide ranging change in social values to move toward a more sustainable economic system, including consumption patterns. Under a cultural and social view of consumption, public policy might have a role in limiting the promotion of the sign value of goods and instead promote other, more environmentally benign ways of fulfilling social and cultural needs. From a systemic perspective, there is also an obvious role for public policy in setting economic frameworks that are less geared toward short-term maximization of growth and profits and more toward long-term sustainability of the economic system.[3] Marketers might think of ways of satisfying social and cultural needs that are not as dependent on material consumption. Finally, there is a big role for civil society, NGOs, and the media in the promotion of a civil discourse about redirecting the social and cultural functions of consumption toward less environmentally wasteful forms of consumption and nonconsumption. The roles that different social actors might play in achieving sustainable consumption and the likelihood of their doing so, as well as possible barriers to change, are discussed more fully in the conclusion to this article.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have discussed different conceptualizations of consumption and their implications for notions of sustainability. In particular, we have contrasted the prevailing view of consumption as rational information processing and choice, which has dominated most conceptualizations of green consumption and green marketing, with social and cultural views of consumption, which are prevalent in sociology and anthropology but have so far made little impact on sustainability thinking. Here, we contend that looking at consumption through a social and cultural lens has a number of interesting and potentially important implications for theory and policy practice in the area of sustainability.

On one hand, we have shown that an understanding of consumption in such social and cultural terms can be quite problematic for those seeking to make affluent consumption more sustainable. The rise of the sign value of consumer goods may thus be partly behind the extraordinary increase in material consumption levels by affluent consumers worldwide. Environmentalist critics of consumer society have picked up on this and demonstrated its troublesome implications for sustainability (Kilbourne 1998; Smith 1998). The connection between the symbolic value of consumption and a tendency to overconsume from an environmental point of view also helps to explain why environmentalists may be quite uncomfortable with the notion of consumer society and of consumption as a cultural and social activity. Yet even if the implications are problematic and troublesome, ignoring or denying the social and cultural value of consumption in affluent consumer society is not likely to lead to successful campaigns or policies aimed at reducing consumption, be they earnest but austere exhortations to reduce individual consumption levels or public policy aimed at regulating consumption through price mechanisms (e.g., an eco-tax on goods deemed to be particularly harmful or wasteful). From this perspective the prospects of making consumption more sustainable (i.e., in effect reducing material consumption) in affluent consumer society look bleak, precisely because consumption seems to have such important social and cultural functions.

On the other hand, the previous section of this article has also shown how understanding consumption as a social and cultural activity may hold out some hope for making consumption more environmentally responsible. Social and cultural needs can be fulfilled by other means than consumption. This is true for the large numbers of nonaffluent consumers worldwide today (unless we are to assume that these people, deprived of the means of affluent consumption, therefore also must lead culturally and socially deficient lives), and one suspects that a large proportion of the sociocultural needs of many affluent consumers are also met by predominantly nonconsumption means. Constructing and communicating self-identities and social relationships are clearly core cultural activities, and seeking pleasure would also seem to be a key human function and hence not really amenable to change, but the fulfillment of these needs through the means of mass consumption is probably a secondary cultural trait and hence open to easier and more rapid change. It could be argued then that consumer goods in this sense are perhaps no more than a prop for the expression of social and cultural meaning, a prop that humanity has often been able to do without (or at least in much smaller quantities) and that today's affluent consumer might conceivably learn to do without again.

As we have shown in the preceding sections, there are also types of consumption that may fulfill the same symbolic functions as present-day affluent consumption but with much less material input in terms of sourcing, producing, transporting, and disposing of goods. These include shopping for secondhand goods, shopping in organic and fair-trade shops, or shopping at farmers' markets, as well as various exchange and hire systems. As such, these embryonic models of nonmaterialist consumption may hold out some hope for a remodeling of contemporary consumer society on less environmentally costly lines.[4] It must, however, be recognized that only a minority of consumers currently choose these ways of socioculturally significant but ecologically less wasteful forms of consumption, and current trends do not suggest that this is likely to change in the near future. Appadurai (1986, 1996) argues that consumption systems are strongly characterized by habit and that anarchic consumption patterns are difficult to achieve. This makes it difficult for consumers to break away from the dominant social paradigm of consumer society, and consumer action in itself is therefore unlikely to affect the major shifts in affluent

consumption behavior that a move toward more sustainable consumption would seem to require.

As already briefly discussed in the preceding section of this article, we also have to consider other social actors that have a role to play in this context, among which industry and government figure prominently. Industry plays an important part in promoting affluent consumption, particularly through its marketing efforts. There has been a marked shift in advertising from informative advertising styles, focusing on the functional benefits of products, to an image-based and dreamlike style of advertising, which focuses on the symbolic benefits of buying, owning, and using products (Brown 1995)—that is, on the sociocultural functions of consumption discussed in this article. The extent to which image-based advertising is welcomed by consumers and used by marketers appears to be somewhat culturally dependent, but some of the most affluent consumer societies also see the highest incidence of dream- and image-based advertising, for instance, in Japan (Usunier 2000). Ewen (1976, 1988) argues that advertising contributes materially to an obsession with style, which has the ability to promote social control and a dominant way of seeing the world. In this way, advertising is encouraging people to participate in cycles of disposal that represent, on an ecological level, some of the most fundamental crises of contemporary life.

In the 1970s, Schumacher (1974) and Daly (1977) already pointed out that sustainability required a repositioning of the economy toward small-scale production and the steady state (i.e., no overall growth of material consumption). However, there are few signs that these views are taken on board on a significant scale by industry (or government). It is not necessarily in the economic interest of producers of consumer goods (at least not in the short term) for consumers to fulfill most of their social and cultural needs through means other than consumption or even through the alternative, less environmentally harmful ways of consumption discussed above. It has already been discussed in the first section of this article that producers of consumer goods will in all likelihood have an interest in increased overall consumption rather than a reduction thereof. Marketers of consumer goods thus actively encourage the fulfillment of sociocultural needs through consumption of new goods. How this could be changed is not at all easy to see, given the growth and profit motive inherent in the market system and, one suspects, a near saturation of many affluent consumer markets as far as material utility needs are concerned. The marketing of goods via their symbolic function thus seems necessary to achieve further growth and likely to increase rather than decrease.

In this context it is also worthwhile to note that green marketing efforts by companies invariably involve the marketing of some more environmentally benign product alternative (i.e., the encouragement of consumers to buy more new goods). This kind of green marketing is highly compatible with the growth motive of the companies involved. On the other hand, the alternative forms of consumption outlined above seem to hold less overall promise for growth, at least as far as large, multinational producers of consumer goods are concerned, and are therefore less likely to be marketed in similarly forceful ways. An exception seems to be organic food, where significant consumer concern, at least among the middle classes, has created a relatively large market niche that is now sufficiently interesting that the large supermarket chains in the United Kingdom and elsewhere have devoted a fair amount of shelf space to it (Mintel 2003). This would suggest that industry will promote environmentally responsible consumption where there is an attractive market niche and where this involves opportunities for growth. But industry is highly unlikely to promote forms of environmentally responsible consumption that involve less consumption and the fulfillment of sociocultural needs through other means and thus to promote generally more sustainable consumption, which—as discussed at the beginning of this article—must surely mean less overall consumption by affluent consumers.

This brings us to the role of government. There are ways in which governments may be able to encourage the reduction of affluent consumption. These include curbing the promotion of the symbolic function of consumption, most notably by regulating advertising. Examples of this would be bans or restrictions on advertising to children in Greece, Sweden, and Norway (Crane and Matten 2004) or the limitation of TV advertising to certain, limited times of the day on state television in Germany (now, of course, rendered less effective by the spread of commercial cable and satellite TV channels). National and local governments could also play a role in creating brand-free zones (e.g., in schools or other public institutions, thus curbing the increasing trends toward the penetration of branding into all aspects of daily life; Klein 2000). Governments could also promote other, more environmentally benign ways of fulfilling sociocultural functions, either through nonconsumption or less environmentally wasteful consumption alternatives. This might well be more effective than environmental education efforts directed at consumers.

Yet it has to be recognized that many governments, particularly those espousing a free-market orientation, have shown themselves to be quite reluctant to take any policy measures aimed at curbing consumption and thus industrial activity (Cohen 2001), as already discussed above. Explanations for this are not too hard to come by. We could follow the reasoning of Karl Marx that political superstructures are always determined by the economic substructure and that governments are therefore generally the willing assistants of the economically powerful forces in society. Another explanation (not incompatible with the first) is that many governments quite genuinely believe in the importance of economic growth, and experience shows that those governments that are held responsible for a downturn in economic activity often find reelection difficult.

Where, then, could the impetus for redirecting the sociocultural functions of affluent consumption toward more sustainable nonconsumption and alternative forms of consumption come from? Kilbourne's (1998) notion of the dominant social paradigm in affluent consumer societies, which promotes consumption as a socially and culturally meaningful activity, suggests that a rethinking at all levels of society is necessary. As our discussion above has attempted to show, it is, however, not quite clear which social actors might become the driving force for this rethinking. As Slater (1996) discusses, consumer culture is strongly bound up with the very essence of modernity. A change toward more sustainable consumption, depending on a change of values and behavior by a majority of individual consumers, thus raises quite fundamental problems and tensions in contemporary society that make such prospects unlikely. A more Marxist, class-based view of the problem would lay the blame for the current state of affairs more squarely at the door of industry and governments serving the interests of industry (Foster 2002) and seems to suggest that some kind of revolutionary change of the economic system could bring about greater ecological sustainability.

However, as discussed above, it does not currently seem that either a change of consumption behavior by a majority of affluent consumers or a radical change of economic system (such as wrestling control from industry and resulting in a more ecologically sound alternative system) are imminent. Some possible policy options emerge from our discussion, in terms of regulating marketing efforts more systematically with a view toward reducing consumption or greater promotion of alternative consumption and nonconsumption means of satisfying social and cultural needs, but the political will to take such measures in any but the most marginal forms is equally doubtful at present. There would also be a role for business to construct some form of green commodity that can be made to appeal to these symbolic consumer needs (Fitchett and Prothero 2000), but this is likely to happen only to the extent that it involves growth opportunities for firms.

A perhaps more promising avenue for change may be seen in the area of civil society. Recent years have seen significant protest action against the social and ecological costs of free-market global capitalism. While these protests have arisen from a high diversity of sources and types of reasoning, there are two remarkable facts about them. One is the sheer number of people taking part, most of them probably not members of the "radical fringe," suggesting a genuine concern among large numbers of people. The other is the coordination between different NGOs and more informal groupings in making these mass demonstrations happen. If this is indeed a sign for widespread uneasiness with the socially and ecologically destructive aspects of modern, affluent economic development, this may well be the seed for more significant change to the dominant social paradigm, including its attendant overconsumption (Klein 2000; Capra 2003). Open dialogue among the actors of civil society, such as developed in Habermas's (1981) thoughts on the ideal speech act, may be able to move thinking in this direction and perhaps even start shifting the dominant paradigm in the long term. It has to be recognized, however, that the ideal speech act is to many a highly idealistic and aspirational account of social communication. Perhaps the notion that civil society could somehow "decide" to change the dominant paradigm toward more sustainable consumption, in the face of strong and real short-term economic interests in keeping consumption levels high, is equally idealistic. Alternatively, a Foucaultian perspective might suggest that we are currently faced with an episteme where the value of material possession and economic growth is taken for granted. This would also suggest that this episteme may be superseded by a different one in time, although Foucault would be skeptical about the possibility of inducing and directing this change, as well as the idea that a different, future episteme would constitute some form of progress.

In conclusion, we may say that any conceptualizations of more sustainable consumption need to address the important social and cultural functions that affluent consumption currently fulfills. Ignoring these would seem to condemn such aspirations to failure from the start. We have also shown that these sociocultural needs can potentially be fulfilled by nonconsumption and/or less environmentally wasteful consumption alternatives but that it is difficult to identify any social actors that currently have both the interest and the ability to effect a large-scale shift toward such alternatives. Punctuated equilibrium theory (Gersick 1991; Tushman and Romanelli 1985) suggests that radical change, in which basic premises of previous behaviors are questioned, generally happens only if the people involved perceive a significant crisis. The above-mentioned civil protests against global capitalism perhaps suggest such a sense of crisis among a larger number of people than before. However, this would perhaps have to spread much wider still, particularly to decision makers in politics and industry, as well as to the broad mass of affluent consumers, for a sea change toward more sustainable consumptions patterns to occur. Academics, pressure groups, and the media, among others, all have a potential role to play in creating this sense of crisis. We believe that recognition of the sustainability implications of consumption and a full and open debate about the important social and cultural roles of consumption in people's lives and how this might be achieved more sustainably is important and urgent. We also hope that this article might contribute to raising the salience of this issue, provoke thoughts, and thus contribute to such a debate. We would also hope that this debate happens on a larger scale than so far, including more key decision makers in government and industry, and that some changes to our consumption patterns could be achieved before environmental change

threatens the lifestyle (and lives?) of a large part of the world population in much more drastic way than hitherto. Whether this is a realistic scenario or an utopian ideal will remain to be seen.

NOTES

1. The terms *green consumption*, *environmentally responsible consumption*, and *sustainable consumption* are often used relatively loosely and even interchangeably in the literature. Sustainable consumption, strictly speaking, is probably rare for affluent consumers, perhaps practiced only by a small number of highly committed environmentalists. Environmentally responsible consumption, often also called *green consumption*, by contrast, can be any consumption activities undertaken with the specific aim to reduce negative impacts on the environment. These can include activities related to purchasing, use and disposal of goods, as well as nonpurchase decisions (Peattie 1995). Such environmentally responsible consumption may not amount to wholly sustainable consumption but may be a step in that direction.

2. It would be interesting to discuss in more detail why the mainstream marketing literature remains so wedded to the choice-oriented, information-processing notion of consumer behavior, but a detailed discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of the present article.

3. Clearly, the role of public policy and economic framework conditions for sustainable development is a big topic, one that cannot be properly discussed within the scope of this article.

4. By understanding the social and cultural foundation of much of today's affluent consumption, and by separating this function from the material props in which it tends to rest in contemporary consumer society, we may also be able to think of alternative models of development that might address the aspirations of those in the world population (approaching 80 percent) that are not currently categorized as affluent consumers and that do not rely on the same levels of material consumption. However, a discussion of this problem is clearly beyond the scope of the present article.

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