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Title: A Reimagining: Prefiguring Systems of Alternative Consumption

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Abstract

This ethnographic research reveals how an ecovillage prefigures consumption via a repertoire of alternative consumption and production systems designed to challenge neoliberal notions of choice, value and ownership; explores how community members participate in broader changemaking and how the community engages the broader institutional framework to further environmental education.

Introduction

Consumer collectivities, pro-social consumption and ideology have featured in recent consumer research calls for papers (Adaval & Wyer, 2020; Arnould et al., 2019; Huber, 2019). Ecovillages have developed in response to environmental and social degradation and represent an alternative to the official future of globalisation and technological advancement. Their objective is the prefiguration of a future-oriented, global, ecocentric society which challenges the current dominant economic imaginary (Buckles, 2018). As sites of social experimentation and new cultural forms ecovillages are “a fascinating place for consumer researchers to ponder the transition of consumer culture and contemporary society into a more eco-friendly and sustainable form” (Kozinets & Belz, 2011, p. 67). Within CCT, collectivities represent an opportunity to understand the ideologies underpinning collective modes of consumption (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011, p. 383). Here, we focus on the ecovillage as an ideological collectivity, an intentional community explicitly designed to critique hegemonic relations via the reimagination and articulation of alternative socio-economic structures (Cooper et al., 2019).

Consumer movements endeavour “to transform various elements of the social order surrounding consumption and marketing (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004, p. 691). Prefigurative political strategies, employed by intentional communities, involve the construction of alternative or utopian, post-capitalist socio-economic relations “either in parallel with or in the course of, adversarial social movement protest” (Yates, 2015, p. 236). Thus, society is reimagined and remade in the interstitial spaces of capitalism (Wright, 2013). Emancipatory, utopian thought emphasises the “crucial critical function” of utopia, “its transformative, anticipatory nature” evident in the “articulation of alternatives that challenge the status quo” (Maclaran & Brown, 2001, p. 369, 2005). This research explores how pro-social consumers reimagine consumption/production, how they then engage with broader market logics and institutional bodies to further their ideological position. It contributes to transformative consumer research (Ozanne et al., 2015), Consumer Movements (Gollnhofer et al., 2019; Weijo et al., 2018) and adversarial or pro-social consumers (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Sen et al., 2001; White et al., 2020).

Methodology

Cloughjordan ecovillage (CJEV), located in Ireland, was established in 2007 and is cooperatively owned. Designed as a 'model of sustainable living', CJEV features permaculture landscape design, low energy homes, a renewable energy centre, civic spaces, woodland gardens, a community farm, an eco-enterprise centre and an educational centre. At present, it comprises 53 sustainable homes and has planning permission for a further 132 units.

An ethnographic approach enabled access to the members' everyday life. Participant observation consisted of five-week-long periods living in the village. Sixteen in-depth, unstructured interviews were conducted with fourteen members of the ecovillage (Arsel, 2017). The data set consisted of 234 single-spaced pages of interview data supplemented by 126 pages of field notes, institutional documents and media coverage. Fieldwork resulted in rich narrative data from the interviews and auto-ethnographic field notes. All of the data were interrogated in line with critical and sociological thought (Denzin, 2003). A holistic approach was taken in the analysis of the data, paying close attention to both the individual interviews and to recurrent themes, features and ideas which arose across the interviews. Consideration was given to both linguistic choice and content.

Findings

The first theme reveals CJEV's repertoire of alternative consumption and production systems which challenge neoliberal notions of choice, value and ownership; the second offers insight into how members of the community engage in broader change-making, and the third explores CJEV institutional engagement to further environmental education and develop local infrastructures.

A repertoire of Alternative Systems: The "Car clubs, buyers' clubs, bread clubs, egg clubs, milk clubs, CSA [community supported agriculture] farms, allotments, research gardens, orchards with Irish apples" (Enda) are at the heart of this experiment. CJEV has constructed an infrastructure to facilitate and demonstrate alternative means of production, distribution and consumption (Table 1). For example, Marcus describes how the CSA has prompted members to "treat consumption very differently"; to rethink ownership in the context of consumption; "It's not 'my' food; it's our food that I am taking some of" (Marcus); to defetishise choice, as it is limited by place and seasonality (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007) and to redefine notions of "value" as membership is more costly and time-consuming than modern models of de-territorialised food distribution (Reich et al., 2018). Here, the establishment of the CSA represents the consumption element of this prefigurement, a single element embedded in a larger social (re)imaginary.

Changemaking Initiatives: Members of CJEV strive to impact the broader community, encouraging the village pub to stock local beers, the store to offer vegan products and instituting a farmer's market (Table 1). A notable approach to local change-making is the launch of several festivals celebrating culture, sustainability and food (Cultivate, 2019). Both Locals and visitors partake in the festivities, which, promote the community's ideals and support CJEV's other. Both the transformative power of collective creativity and the capacity of green events to promote sustainability is recognised (Mair & Laing, 2013; Weijo et al., 2018). This kind of activity is essential if ecovillages are to "scale up" and move beyond the activist core (Boyer, 2015).

Institutional Engagement: CJEV strives to work with local and EU bodies to both develop the broader community (Table 1) and to become a "centre for environmental education" (Thomas), CJEV, has been developed as a model. Modelling is CJEV's primary objective.

Conclusion

Findings demonstrate how the ecovillage members engage in prefigurative politics as a way to not only challenge and confront damaging consumption but to engage in transformative practice. Prefigured spaces articulate a reimagined socio-economic landscape, enlarge society's capacity for change and offer marketing scholars an opportunity to embrace new, critical and collective approaches to socio-politico-economic issues.

References

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Appendix 1: CJEV's Repertoire of Alternative Systems, Change-making Initiatives and Institutional Engagement

Theme	Description	Quote
<p>Theme One: <i>The Car Sharing</i></p> <p>Part of the repertoire which challenges ownership (the car is owned by the club) and choice (members do not choose the car nor when they can use it)</p>	<p>The EcoNeighbourhood is situated in a small village, several of the members have no car, while many of the members share a car between one family. There is some public transport however in order to address the transport shortage the members have developed a car sharing club. It has limited membership and works from a shared timetable. The Car club allows members to avoid individual car ownership.</p>	<p>You pay per trip, maybe, so for example if I needed the car go to Birr every Tuesday I could just schedule that in but then I could also schedule in 'oh my friends are going to be in Thurles on Saturday, so I am going to take the car' so is the car is free on Saturday? And you look at the schedule. SO I think certain things are set in stone and that works and then other things are like 'oh this is going on' is the car free? (Jessica)</p>
<p>Theme One: <i>The District Heating System (DHS)</i></p> <p>Part of the repertoire which challenges ownership (the DHS is owned by the cooperative that is CJEV)</p>	<p>The eco-neighbourhood boasts the largest DHS in Ireland. It is fuelled by woodchip and is therefore totally sustainable. The system is connected to every house in the neighbourhood. Thus CJEV's home are not heated using fossil fuels. The woodchip is sourced locally.</p>	<p>And making those options so a place where we can build a house which is much more energy efficient, in a place that is using a DHS so that we can live a comfortable life without using vast amount of fossil fuels (Marcus)</p>
<p>Theme One: <i>Clothes Swap Night</i></p> <p>Part of the repertoire which challenges ownership (clothing is shared with other members) and choice (choice is limited by the selection brought to the meeting)</p>	<p>Clothing is a divisive subject, problematic in that its' manufacture often has serious environmental and/or ethical implications, and yet it is a necessity. Members of the CJEV address this need through a series of swap nights, where members bring their unwanted clothing and swap it with other members. Activities such as this help to reduce consumption and promote strong community networks.</p>	<p>Yeah there's no issues there, it's funny because it's done anonymously, to a point it is done anonymously but we actually, and it's at the discretion of the person to say 'oh you ended up with my top, oh it's really nice on you'. Half the time you don't really know whose stuff you are wearing and if you do it's a bit of a laugh, you know, because I think people who come along and engage in a swap night are very open anyway and don't have so much issues (June)</p>
<p>Theme One: <i>The Community Farm</i></p> <p>Part of the repertoire which challenges ownership (the food and the farm are owned collectively), choice (choice is limited by seasonality) and value (members may not find value in the produce)</p>	<p>Cloughjordan Community Supported Agriculture is a scheme which is designed to reach beyond the EN. Members of the wider community are welcome to join, a subscription fee of €16 a week is required however one can take as much as one needs. The food is distributed from a location on the main street using an honesty system (there is no body 'guarding' the food). Biodynamic farming methods are employed. CSA's strengthen local economies, help to territorialise food sources increasing resilience and promote strong community networks.</p>	<p>The farm is community supported agriculture concept or project owned by the members and the members aren't just... it is not an eco-Village Project... It is a project for members from anywhere in the community. The principles behind it... I don't need to go into all of that... the box scheme and all the rest... I am a member of the farm and I support it because I support the principle of it. I think it is good to support the idea of local food security. The idea of having my own fresh produce and the rest of it. I don't consider it to be particularly good value but that is not the way I look at it. And I don't take my fair share all the time but I do support the whole principle of the thing. (David)</p>

<p>Theme two: <i>Local Beers</i></p> <p>Members also influence existent businesses to shift their focus towards local products.</p>	<p>Members encourage local vendors change their stock choices. As a result the local market has shifted slightly.</p>	<p>At our local pub we have not only convinced our local publican, against her best judgement, to stock local beers, she's found a brewery down in Templemore who she is stocking. Now, when you go into that pub most of the people are drinking the local beer...So, one person deciding, we begged her to bring it in [local beer]and we were drinking that. The more people drink it the more people would. Then, we got her bring in a tap of one and then we are getting these big bottles to come in. So, we'll sit around and share a couple of those bottles. So, we are behaving differently, choosing the more localised instead of...whereas before we would all have gone in and it would have been a round of Guinness. Now, it's quite rare to have round of Guinness and more often than not the Guinness drinkers would be in the minority (Marcus).</p>
<p>Theme two: <i>The Eco-Enterprise Centre</i></p> <p>CJEV has created a development space for ecocentric start-ups providing opportunities for star-ups and significantly changing the local economy</p>	<p>SPIL actively promotes the development of a local economy, one means by which they hope to achieve this is through the existence of an eco-enterprise centre. A workspace in which new businesses can develop. This is inline with their hope to establish the sort of community in which people both live and work.</p>	<p>Economics, absolutely we got a whole enterprise centre there that is trying to think of different ways to work and different ways to make and produce things, that's changing the... you know a circular economy, using the Fab lab, biomimicry, permaculture, this is a huge revolution in economical ways to do things differently (Enda)</p>
<p>Theme two: <i>The Bread Club</i></p> <p>Part of the repertoire which challenges ownership (the car is owned by the club) and choice (members do not choose the car nor when they can use it)</p>	<p>The Bread Club is an initiative run by the eco-neighbourhood baker. Members can have freshly baked bread delivered to their homes. CJEV strives to support the local economy.</p>	<p>Car clubs, buyers' clubs, bread clubs, egg clubs, milk clubs, CSA farms , allotments, research gardens , orchards with Irish apples. There are so many things here that allow us to be sustainably and yet we've got so far to go. We are only relatively a little bit more sustainable than most communities, we still have so far to go and we are not too hard lined, it's not like we are like the Amish or something (Enda)</p>

<p>Theme three: <i>Foundation for the Economics of Sustainability (FEASTA)</i></p> <p>CJEV is home to FEASTA, an organisation which works to promote sustainability, equality and well-being through education and governmental lobbying</p>	<p>FEASTA aims to identify the characteristics (economic, cultural and environmental) of a truly sustainable society, articulate how the necessary transition can be effected and promote the implementation of the measures required for this purpose (FEASTA, 2020). FEASTA lobby's the EU on a number of issues including universal basic income, shorter working hours as well as reducing carbon emissions and wealth distribution.</p>	<p>Economics, absolutely we got a whole enterprise centre there that is trying to think of different ways to work and different ways to make and produce things, that's changing the... you know a circular economy, using the Fab lab, biomimicry, permaculture, this is a huge revolution in economical ways to do things differently. FEASTA are located here and many of us are involved in it, where we have been challenging growth for 2 decades, you know growth based economic system or debt based money. So there is a lot of people challenging the social, economic systems but not everyone is. And not everyone needs to (Enda)</p>
<p>Theme three: <i>Educational Institutions</i></p> <p>CJEV works with universities (Trinity College Dublin/University of Limerick) and governmental bodies (Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland) to develop sustainable infrastructures, to disseminate this information through reports and policy documents and to educate on alternative perspectives.</p>	<p>An example of the kinds of programmes with which CJEV is involved in terms of research is "<i>The House of Tomorrow RD&D Programme</i>" which encourages the widespread adoption of more sustainable energy planning, design, specification and construction practices in both the new home building and home-improvement markets (Funding Body: SEAI). The community DHS was developed as part of a research project concerning the testing and demonstration of a house of tomorrow.</p> <p>CJEV is also heavily involved with various universities across a range of disciplines and programmes.</p>	<p>I am in charge of education here and I am now trying to develop a Cloughjordan module that is being accredited by various universities. I was talking to people in UL about it yesterday which would bring students as part of their studies to do an intensive weekend here. So that's an example of ways in which in an educational sense I think I am much more facing up to the challenge now on trying to develop perspectives on the political, social, economic challenges of climate change in a way that I failed to do when I was working full time. And I have done quite a bit of lecturing on it, both abroad and at home and I'm struggling to write a book about it (Michael)</p>
<p>Theme three: <i>Governmental Community Improvement Schemes</i></p> <p>CJEV works with EU organisations to improve the standard of living in the locality.</p>	<p>LEADER Financing: LEADER Financing works with local organisations to bring about a higher standard of living, this is a grant system. CJEV has successfully gotten grants to build a community creche, a heritage centre and the enhance the Cloughjordan village.</p>	<p>This is actually European money, which is specifically for local rural support, not every LEADER company is effective but our local one is extraordinarily effective in terms of the projects that they fund, and the way they support the projects. Okay so LEADER companies are all independent organisations what they have funded here; they have funded a community crèche. Which is a huge success because from the environmental point of view because people are no longer driving to Birr, and Roscrea and Nenagh and sometimes further afield to take their children to crèches. Which reduces carbon output, reduces time strain on the parents and makes for a stronger local community because people are meeting their neighbours and talking with their neighbours. Children are playing with their neighbours and they don't have to drive the children to birthday parties 60 miles away because there's another child from progress that is 30 miles away. It's also a community crèche which means they operate a sliding scale based on income. So, everyone has access to childcare through that facility no matter what their income is which would promote integration across social structure as well (Maura)</p>

