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EDITORIAL

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The next generation of research on sustainable consumption

In 2006, the Department of Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) in the UK published a commissioned report on how to induce citizens to reduce their electricity consumption (Darby, 2006). The goal of the document was to advance policies aimed at changing people's behavior by providing incentives and instantaneous feedback on domestic electricity use. Several implicit assumptions underlined DEFRA's initiative. First, that reducing demand is just as important as pursuing energy efficiency and renewable sources. Second, that energy consumption (or any other mode of consumption for that matter) in people's personal lives is a matter of rational individual choices. Third, that information and incentives are the key factors in changing these choices. And fourth, that public policy to reduce consumption should focus on behavior modification.

What a difference a few years make! Of these four implicit assumptions, only the first one—about the need to reduce consumer demand—still holds. It is now becoming widely accepted that consumption is not a rational individual act that can be altered through "behavior modification." Rather, it is a collective social process taking place in the context of a particular economic system: *a consumer society*.

To understand the complex phenomenon of mass consumption it is necessary to consider it through multiple lenses. Let me offer four such lenses. Through one of them, consumption is very much part of people's search for meaning and well-being. We acquire and use goods to satisfy curiosity, express individuality, gain approval from peers and parents, and compete for a mate. We use them to demonstrate love, generosity, and gratitude. Material consumption is an important factor in our effort to match the lifestyles of a social group to which we belong or aspire, and to seek standing in our community. In short, material consumption helps us satisfy the very human yearnings for well-being, respect, and security. But in a consumer society, aggressive advertising and marketing exploit these natural instincts and longings, which are perpetually magnified and ultimately distorted into endlessly unsatisfiable desires for more.

From the second perspective, consumption is an invisible part of everyday lives. We "consume" energy and materials unconsciously when we go through daily routines and rituals of ordinary lives. These *social practices* are at work when we attend to personal hygiene, seek comfortable and healthy homes, partake in celebrations and festivals, pursue personal mobility and access to life amenities, and take care of our families and friends. These are scripts of behaviors written by society at large, and we rarely question them. Many such social practices involve interactions with technology in a circular, mutually reinforcing way. For example, attending to cleanliness confronts us with myriad choices of bathrooms, home design, washing machines and driers, cleaning agents, and other technologies. These, in turn, affect how much energy, water, and other natural resources are consumed during the course of *practicing* personal hygiene. Designers and promoters of these technologies therefore play a central role in the evolution of our ideas of what behaviors are appropriate and socially acceptable and what constitutes basic needs. And once a social practice is adopted, it creates expectations that these technologies are commonly available and, in fact, necessary for well-being. Well-known examples are the emergence of the social practices of daily showering, a personal bathroom for each family member, and dressing for a constant year-round indoor temperature. And in a consumer society, this mutually reinforcing relationship between technology and social practices tends toward more technological complexity, more amenities, and more material goods: hence, more consumption.

Through yet a third lens, consumption is intricately linked to dominant socio-technical systems, such as, for example, an automobile, or the generation and distribution of electricity. The stability and resistance to change of such configurations is a well-known phenomenon. And in a consumer society, resistance to change of a socio-technical system often comes hand in hand with resistance to change in consumption patterns. This is because consumption is often at the core of a system's stability. For example, drastic reduction in our dependence on the automobile as the primary means for achieving personal mobility would adversely affect not only the manufac-

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turing sector, repair and parking services, and the fuel industry, but also such deeply established institutions including insurance, driving schools, automobile clubs, and many others.

Finally, using the economic lens, we see that mass consumption has been the engine of the tremendous rise in wealth since World War II. During the postwar years, the prospect of mass consumption has carried the promise of intergenerational upward social mobility, greater equality, and stronger democracy. Consumerist culture is a construct that emerged through concerted strategic efforts of the free market and the government, the latter through development of suburban infrastructure, mortgage-interest deductions, interstate highways, and other major initiatives.

In the consumer society, in which more than 70% of gross domestic product (GDP) (in the United States) consists of private spending by households, it is truly a challenge to envision a radical reduction in consumption without triggering widespread economic disaster. The phenomenon of mass consumption is therefore more than the bedrock of the economy and culture. It also a source of stability for major societal institutions and the political process. At the same time, for most people this aggregate wealth has not translated into greater well-being or security. Indicators of happiness and societal welfare have not risen for decades. The economy has produced growing disparities in wealth and income, the work-spend treadmill with declining leisure time among those who are somewhat better off, and massive personal debt in all but the highest income categories.

Having considered consumer society from these four perspectives leads me to several observations relevant to this special issue. For one thing, it is clear that to generate knowledge and understanding about the self-sustaining power of consumerism, and about a possible transition toward a postconsumer society, requires recruiting into the conversation researchers from a wide range of disciplines and scholarly traditions. Furthermore, consumerism constitutes a complex system. For that reason, single-issue public policies aimed at reducing consumption are unlikely to be effective. For example, because of a variety of rebound effects, the mandated increases in energy efficiency of appliances, houses, and automobiles over the past three decades have not reduced the aggregate demand for energy that is required to maintain these technologies. Finally, such single-issue policies are unlikely to unequivocally produce widely shared public good. For instance, a carbon tax, even if it were politically achievable, might reduce overall consumption, but might further increase wealth inequalities by imposing a much greater financial burden on low-income than on high-income households. A mandated shortening of the work week, espoused by some analysts as a way to reduce consumption through trading discretionary income for more leisure time, would likely have similarly regressive effects.

Given these complexities, we ought to ask ourselves the following questions: In what ways is public policy as it is commonly understood—as a course of action undertaken to address (incrementally) a well-recognized specific collective problem—useful for reducing consumption? In what ways is public policy not useful? What can we learn from policy experiences across localities, countries, and continents as well as globally?

Finally, we should keep in mind that contemplating the future of consumerism, or its demise in favor of an alternative, is a subversive and deeply political act. If the phenomenon of mass consumption provides stability to the economy, major societal institutions, and the political process, then it follows that powerful and determined agents are poised to protect the status quo. Recognition of this point triggers some intriguing questions:

- What, if any, is the role of grassroots social innovations, business innovations, and socio-technical innovations in facilitating a transition toward post-consumer values and an alternative economic basis?
- Is the free market capable of producing a sustainable business model whose success does not depend on an ever-expanding consumer economy?
- What is the relationship between the two visions that are increasingly, but rather independently, taking root in the debate about the future of well-being in the United States: that of the "new economy" and that of a post-consumer society? And if the two notions are closely related, is this an opening for an insurgent social movement that could accommodate both commitments—a movement for economic security, economic democracy, pursuit of human well-being, and ecological sustainability?

This special issue provides a platform for considering these and related questions, wherein researchers engage in thinking about agents and strategies for change while drawing on a knowledge base brought here by communities of scholars, social and business innovators, and other engaged practitioners. Indeed, this is the essence of the Sustainable Consumption Research and Action Initiative (SCORAI) that serves as a sponsor of this special issue: to bring together this collection of contributions and to generate new knowledge and understanding.

Author's Note

This editorial is adapted from remarks delivered in the opening plenary presentation at the first international conference of the Sustainable Consumption Research and Action Initiative (SCORAI) held at Clark University on June 12-14, 2013.

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About the Author

Halina Szejnwald Brown is Professor of Environmental Science and Policy at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, USA. With a doctoral degree in chemistry from New York University, during the 1980s Brown served as the chief toxicologist and public health scientist at the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection. During three decades at Clark University, her research has covered an array of issues including health risk assessment and policy, corporate management of environmental and occupational health, international comparative environmental policy, and, more recently, sustainable consumption and socio-technical transitions, with special interest in energy and buildings. Brown has worked in the United States, Europe, and Asia and is a co-founder of Sustainable Consumption Research and Action Initiative (SCORAI), a North American knowledge network of professionals working to address challenges at the interface of material consumption, human fulfillment, lifestyle satisfaction, and technological change. She is a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and a Fellow of the International Society for Risk Analysis and has served on numerous committees of the National Academy of Sciences. She has published numerous academic articles and authored or co-edited *Corporate Environmentalism in a Global Economy*, *Effective Environmental Regulation,* and *Innovations in Sustainable Consumption.*