

Book Review: Green Consumption: The Global Rise of Eco-Chic edited by Bart Barendregt and Rivke Jaffe

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*Green lifestyles and ethical consumption have become increasingly popular strategies in moving towards environmentally-friendly societies and combating global poverty. This book aims to scrutinize the emergent phenomenon of 'eco-chic': a combination of lifestyle politics, environmentalism, spirituality, beauty and health. Case studies cover Basque sheep cheese production and Ghanaian Afro-chic hairstyles to Asian tropical spa culture and Dutch fair-trade jewellery initiatives. For those interested in sustainable consumption, this book is an interesting look at the intersection of ethics, fashion, and power from a largely anthropological perspective, writes **Kira Matus**.*

Green Consumption: The Global Rise of Eco-Chic. Bart Barendregt and Rivke Jaffe (eds.). Bloomsbury Academic. February 2014.

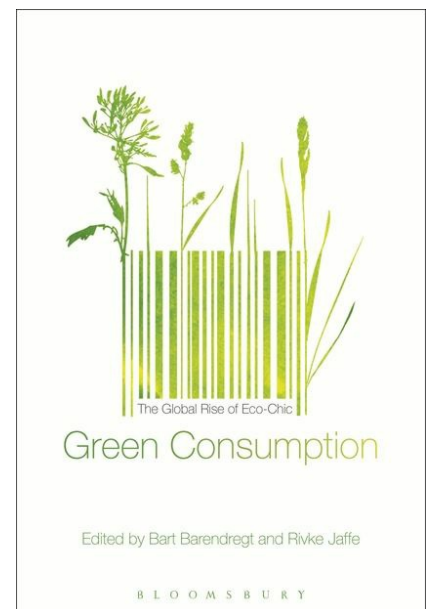
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The role of the individual as a consumer is becoming an increasingly prominent aspect of discussions around sustainable development. The concept of 'green consumption' dates back to the 1970s, but the precipitous rise of corporations touting green agendas and products, along with increasing prominence placed on systems of certification and eco-labelling, have signalled a growing reliance on individual choices to enact environmental policy. In a world where market-based policies are ever more the norm, the day to day consumption of individuals thus becomes an inherently political act.

Green Consumption: The Global Rise of Eco-Chic is a volume that delves into what co-editors Bart Barendregt and Rivke Jaffe call 'eco-chic': '...a combination of lifestyle politics, environmentalism, spiritualism, beauty and health, combined with a call to return to simple living' (p.1). The authors rightly note that this blurs the lines between ethical consumption, elite consumption and sustainable consumption. The challenge of disentangling these ill-defined and overlapping motivations for consumption is tackled by dividing the book into three parts, each with multiple case studies. The first, which is concerned with 'From Production to Consumption' investigates the way that concepts of eco-chic travel from the global North to South, and the divergent interests that emerge from the interactions of large, often global actors with local level efforts to improve sustainability. The second section, 'Spatialities and Temporalities' contains three cases that probe the ways in which eco-chic privileges narratives of the 'local' and nostalgic references to a slower, simpler past, through the marketing of 'authentic' and place-based goods (champagne or beauty products from the Red Sea fall into this category, as do any goods which have a value or appeal contingent on their place of origin). The final section, 'Bodies and Beauty' examines the concept of eco-chic from the perspective of the developing world, with cases that highlight how global aesthetics are reflected back through traditional and local practices to form new and emerging eco-chic fashions.

This treatment of the concept of 'eco-chic' has a great deal of potential, especially in its attempts to examine questions of consumption from a variety of different spatial perspectives. While there are several cases that focus on Europe and North America, there is a great deal of effort spent teasing out what eco-chic means in parts of the world where significant parts of the population are struggling with under-consumption, not over-consumption. That being said, nearly every narrative in this volume has at its core issues of inequality; be it the power inequalities between large global brands like Coca Cola and its local NGO partners, the inequality between wealthy Dutch consumers and the individuals using traditional, non-toxic methods to pan for gold to sell into their jewelry, or the inequality between those in Jamaica or south-east Asia who can afford to pay for luxury beauty treatments, and those who are



still struggling to meet more basic needs. In all of the cases, eco-chic, as described in the volume, is a privileged, elite activity. And across the cases presented in the book, a picture emerges of a movement whose very attempts to reduce inequality through ethical consumption is one that is only made possible, and may in fact reinforce, the very inequality that consumers are attempting to overcome.



Designers prepare for Eco Fashion Week, AW 2012, in Vancouver Canada. Credit: [Jason Hargrove](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

This problem of inequality and the limitations this places on a strategy that depends on individual choices as a route to sustainability is most clearly on display in the chapter by Kate Cairns, Kim de Laat, Josée Johnston, and Shyon Baumann, 'The Caring, Committed Eco-Mom: Consumption Ideals and Lived Realities of Toronto Mothers'. Their case study of 'caring consumption' and its relationship to 'eco-consumption' beautifully illustrate the power of the ideal of the Eco-Mom, whose choices are good for her children and the planet. But as their study shows, for most women, this ideal is far from the reality of their lives. Most women find that limitations of time, money, and information severely constrain their ability to live up to the image of the eco-consumer. Even in Toronto, in one of the most well-to-do cities in one of the highest-income nations in the world, for most women, a strategy of consistent eco-consumption remains firmly out of reach. Only the elite of an already relatively elite group can afford the investment in resources which consistent eco-consumption demands.

The implications of this study are important. The first is that this chapter, beyond any other in this volume, makes clear the underlying challenge to sustainability strategies that rely on the individual consumer as political actor and market driver. The ability to reflect these preferences into behaviour is limited – even for those from relatively privileged areas. In other words, if ethical consumption is difficult for highly motivated, well intentioned mothers in Toronto, how narrow is this niche, and is it scalable in any meaningful way? As is pointed out by several authors, a movement that relies on inequality, and in some cases, may even exacerbate it, has a serious internal contradiction to overcome if it is more than a passing fashion.

The ambiguity and blurred distinctions between different kinds of consumptions that make up eco-chic is well problematized, and often insightfully addressed by the case studies in the first two sections of this book. The weakest section is the third section, on 'Bodies and Beauty.' Here, the cases are on the one hand fascinating examinations of how global aesthetics are reworked through local traditions, practices and preferences. But these three chapters, unlike the others, are less willing to confront the issues of inequality, as well as the problems of fetishization of authenticity that were gamely acknowledged, if not challenged, in the earlier chapters. This section, while raising interesting issues around concepts of beauty and the self in ways that push back against global hegemonic ideals, fail to connect this in more depth to the real implications this has for sustainable consumption decisions generally, and eco-chic more broadly. As the closing section of the volume, it also sets up a rather dangerous dichotomy in the structure, where the eco-chic sensibilities and choices of largely wealthier individuals in the global North are depicted as superficial and striving for an authenticity that has largely disappeared from their

culture, while those in the global South are fetishized as the real location of authentic culture and practice. This flirts with a kind of 'orientalism' that seems misplaced, distracting, and undermines rigorous scholarship around cultural aspects of sustainable consumption practices.

Overall, for those interested in sustainable consumption, this book is an interesting look at the intersection of ethics, fashion, and power from a largely anthropological perspective. For scholars of politics or of business who are contemplating the role that consumption has in sustainable development, it raises important points about the complexity that underlies consumption, and the role of culture and fashion, as well as competing values and priorities, that must be considered. It is also an important reminder that acts of political consumption on the part of individuals has limitations as a tool of policy. Eco-chic as a concept is well reflected by Chris Hudson in his chapter 'Green is the New Green: The Eco-Aesthetics of Singapore': "The paradox [of Singapore] is that it maintains an obvious commitment to a sustainable environment while at the same time continuing its dependency on consumption." As this work makes clear, this is the dependency that none of the eco-chic cases in this volume have had any ability to alter.

Kira Matus is an Assistant Professor of Public Policy and Management in the Department of Government at the LSE. Her research focuses on the intersection of innovation, policy, and sustainable development, with a focus on sustainable production consumption systems, certification systems, and the interface of science and policy. She is the project co-director of the 'Innovation and Access to Technologies for Sustainable Development' project at Harvard's Sustainability Science Program. She has a PhD in public policy from the Kennedy School at Harvard (where she was a doctoral fellow in the Sustainability Science Program), an MS in Technology and Policy from MIT, and a BSc in Chemistry from Brown University. [Read more reviews by Kira.](#)

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