

27 Sustainable Consumption, Consumer Culture and the Politics of a Megatrend

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Introduction

Three things must be clarified before we can proceed with the examination. These are the terms sustainability, politics and megatrend. Unfortunately, all three are ambiguous and few disciplines have arrived at a consistent definition for any of them. While we will not resolve the ambiguity to everyone's satisfaction, we will attempt to achieve an extensional bargain (Rappaport, 1953) through which we develop an understanding of how we are using the terms. First, sustainable development became a construct in 1987 through the Brundtland Report (Brundtland, 1987) and has remained ambiguous ever since. This is where we begin our examination of sustainable consumption. Megatrend, as a phenomenon, has been defined in a multitude of ways over the past thirty-five years. In this chapter, we adopt the criteria set forth by Mittelstaedt et al. (2014) for categorising megatrends, but will use a broader interpretation of what constitutes megatrends. Finally, our use of the term political will be broader than the more common use of the term relating to legal structures, laws or agencies, and include the underlying institutions that frame the more micro aspects of politics. This approach is necessary because of the scale of sustainability and megatrends in both time and space.

Using this broad, institutional-based approach, the authors consider the swing in popularity of sustainability and the various solutions provided to the extent that there is discussion of sustainability as megatrend. We ask what changes have occurred in the past and how they affect the politics surrounding sustainable consumption that might enable humanity to feel confident and competent to now offer up solutions to the challenge of sustainability. But before this can be accomplished, it is critical to have a better understanding of the institutional underpinnings of the politics and economics of sustainability: how we got where we are now and what the prospects for the future are. There is no apparent consensus on whether sustainability is a megatrend or even what that means. Mittelstaedt et al. (2014) argue from the perspective of paradigms that sustainability is the new megatrend, while Scott, Martin and Schouten (2014), arguing from the perspective of growing materialism, are not as convinced. This is an anomalous result if one considers that materialism is contained within the Western paradigm (Kilbourne, Dorsch et al., 2009). Varey (2012) offers a third, and more prescient point in terms of the relationship between sustainability and megatrends. He argues that sustainability is larger than a megatrend in its impact and evolution.

To better understand the varying conclusions about sustainability and its prospects, we develop an historical perspective of the changing patterns of economic and political structures (these are considered inseparable) and the evolution of the underlying institutional structures that are firmly in place. This constitutes the Dominant Social Paradigm (DSP) of Western societies (Kilbourne, McDonagh and Prothero, 1997) that includes the political, economic and technological perspectives that constitute its worldview. It is against this backdrop that sustainability as a megatrend will be examined.

The approach to be taken here falls in the general area of the New Political Economy (NPE) that treats economic institutions as the relevant phenomena to be explained by political economy. NPE is said to examine economic doctrines to better understand their political content. It examines economic ideas and behaviour as beliefs and actions that must themselves be explained and that are not taken-for-granted behaviours that are self-evidently rational and, as a result, do not need further analysis (Bauman, 1998). This we hold to be the essence of being immersed in a prevailing structure, or in the DSP of society. In Western industrial societies it is the institutions of the DSP, whatever those may be, that initiate, direct and reward economic beliefs and behaviours. These come to be so prevalent that they become so self-evidently true to the extent that behaving in any other way becomes irrational. Or as Marcuse (1963) states it, beliefs become 'irrational in their rationality'. Our approach in constructing this framework is a synthesis of Kilbourne, McDonagh and Prothero's (1997) use of the DSP and the NPE emphasising the theory of Antonio Gramsci (1971). Thus, the focus will be on the sustainability of consumption as it is currently practised relating to both its quality and quantity, and, in doing this, we will attend both to the genesis of what may be called cultures of consumption (Featherstone, 2007) and the role that consumption can play in ameliorating its own condition through market actions such as, for example, the political consumer (Connolly and Prothero, 2008; Trentmann, 2007).

Here we examine sustainability to determine its position within the prevailing historical context that might be called late modern capitalism. We provide a brief historical assessment of the development of the relevant institutions, and then we provide some likely scenarios that might develop in the future depending on whether sustainability is a new megatrend, or if its internal logic is insufficient to change the direction of globalisation, consumption and the future. What this suggests is that, if current modes of consumption are not globally sustainable, as has been frequently pointed out in recent years (O'Connor, 1994), then there is an inevitable conflict between the culture of consumption and nature, or a conflict between sustainably minded consumers who want to consume less and producers who must produce more.

Megatrends

Since Naisbitt's (1982) first book on megatrends, many others have embarked on the search for megatrends. Foremost among them are the major global consulting firms including Price Waterhouse Coopers, Ernst and Young, KPMG, Frost and Sullivan, and Arthur D. Little. Other public policy organisations such as the Mowat Centre, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the

Council of State Governments have entered the field as well. However, there has not arisen as yet a formal definition of megatrends that is used by everyone. There is a consensus on the general idea of a megatrend that we will adopt for this chapter, and it is that provided by Frost and Sullivan (2017) as, ‘Megatrends are global, sustained, macroeconomic forces of development that affect business, economies, societies, cultures, and personal lives. In essence, these trends—such as urbanization, connectivity and convergence—will define our future world’.

While the definition is sufficiently broad to take in most of what are considered megatrends today, it is not sufficiently precise as not to be ambiguous. We could not, for example apply this definition to a particular trend and determine whether or not it is a ‘mega’ trend. This reduces us to making a subjective judgement and suggests that there might be different opinions on a particular trend regarding the precise meaning of macro, sustained or global. But this is an inherent difficulty of all definitions: they are ambiguous at the margins, and this is acknowledged by the authors. The ambiguity is reflected in the identification of megatrends by the organisations that study them on a regular basis (those mentioned above). We now provide a synthesis of megatrends that have been developed by the above organisations. We also categorise the trends in a general classification scheme presented in [Table 27.1](#).

Table 27.1 Classification of megatrends

<i>Demographic</i>	<i>Economic</i>	<i>Political</i>	<i>Technological</i>	<i>Ecological</i>	<i>Globalisation</i>
Urbanisation	Poverty	Participation	Information	Climate	Power Centre
Aging	Power Shift	Inequality	Health	Resources	Markets
Middle Class	Integration	Interventions	Energy	Eco-Energy	Brain Drain
Gender	New Models	Nationalism	Biotechnology	Conflict	World Trade
Population	Prosumption		Privacy		

Each of the megatrends in [Table 27.1](#) was mentioned by one or more of the organisations studying them. While the list is not exhaustive, it provides exemplars of what the organisations consider global megatrends. It can also be seen that some megatrends can fall in different categories, and some may question whether a particular trend is a megatrend.

Of particular note in [Table 27.1](#) is that while resource shortages and climate change are mentioned, sustainability is not. Why this is the case is uncertain, but we can speculate on the possibilities. The first is simply that the term sustainability is not yet sufficiently widespread to be in the vocabulary of those doing the judging. Sustainability is, as will be shown in the next section, still not clearly understood. It also has meanings beyond those concerned with nature; being a sustainable entity for example could refer to an organisation's green credentials or its economic viability. Within marketing, sustainability was frequently used interchangeably with environmentalism, although in recent years there has been a focus on sustainable marketing. All of the megatrends mentioned by the organisations above are mentioned in the context of business opportunities rather than problems. As we will argue later, sustainability is probably

not an opportunity for achieving long-term competitive advantage but is, instead, an imperative that will impose itself on all business activity in the not too distant future. This is where the ambiguity of time enters the megatrend discussion.

There is no definite time frame included in any of the megatrend studies. They simply refer to 'long run' changes in strategies and objectives. From the megatrends in [Table 27.1](#), it can be inferred that some will last longer than others, and that during the period, product offerings and consumer demands will change. What is important in this is the nature of the changes wrought by the megatrend, and the changes will certainly vary according to context. Most will involve changing cost structures for firms and prices for consumers. In addition, methods of distribution and marketing communications will likely change to reorient consumption practices. While the Internet of Things has only recently been discussed in any depth, Rifkin's (2015) book is about an emerging megatrend that might have tremendous consequences for the business model. The title, *The Zero Marginal Cost Society*, is self-explanatory. When the marginal cost of production approaches zero, the ramifications for marketing and consumption will be large indeed. But these are strategic changes within the normal course of business activities. The major question with which we are concerned is the ramifications for sustainable consumption. If the price of consumer goods reflects the marginal cost, then prices will necessarily decline and consumption of those goods will increase, further exacerbating the problem of sustainable consumption unless the ecological cost of goods diminishes commensurably. This question can be inferred from Varey's (2013) term, mega-megatrend. Is sustainability a megatrend requiring adaptation (McDonagh and Prothero 2014a) or is it something greater that will require a fundamental shift in the institutional structure of the consumer society? To address this question, we must first establish an extensional bargain on what constitutes sustainability.

Sustainability

Because sustainability has been a substantive issue in consumer research for almost thirty years now, it would seem that its meaning would have been established with some consistency by this time. Such is not the case however, and it appears that the term has become more confused than at its original conception in 'Our Common Future' (Brundtland, 1987) (also known as the Brundtland Report). The most often quoted definition of sustainable development is 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (p. 43). While it has been acknowledged over the years that this definition is somewhat ambiguous and, therefore, can't be used as a tool or measure, its implications can be used as a conceptual guideline. O'Connor (1994), for example, suggests a triple meaning from the definition of 'sustain' itself. He argues that it implies a system that stays on course, provides the necessities of life for people around the globe, and endures over time in the face of challenges.

It can be inferred from this description of sustainability generally, that it would impose significant restraints (challenges) on firms, consumers and governments. But the magnitude of

these restraints can only be discussed if we clarify the different degrees of sustainability being referred to. Unfortunately, within the past twenty years or so, the term sustainable has remained opaque. To help alleviate this ambiguity, we propose a continuum of sustainability rather than different terms. We see sustainability activities as a continuum flowing between strong and weak sustainability. Buying greener products for environmental reasons would be weak sustainability while incorporating eco-rationality into one's daily behaviour would be stronger sustainability. Deep ecology as proposed by Naess (1973) would be strong sustainability. Such an environmental continuum was originally proposed by Kilbourne (1995).

Making the production and/or distribution process more eco-efficient is characteristic of weak sustainability because it implies doing what we have always done, but doing it better and more eco-efficiently. It means reducing the throughput in the system while maintaining or increasing the output (getting more for less). But it does not require fundamental changes in consumption practices. The question then becomes, if we use this approach exclusively, will it eventually achieve strong sustainability? The answer is a resounding 'probably not'. But if such activities as voluntary simplicity (Rudmin and Kilbourne, 1995), adopting the anti-consumption perspective (Black and Cherrier, 2010), or political consumption (Connolly and Prothero, 2008) spread significantly, then the probability is greater because it adds the consumption perspective to the problem. Sustainability generally and sustainable consumption specifically are multidimensional problems and will require multidimensional solutions.

There is no shortage of uncertainty in the eventual outcome, however, because it relates to a complex interaction of production and consumption. We are referring here to the underlying assumptions under which the complete consumption process is carried out from beginning to end as an integrated system. Production and consumption in this view are an inseparable duality that underlies cultures of consumption. While a thorough discussion of each assumption is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is important that significant ones be addressed.

The first, and probably most controversial, is the limits to growth thesis. This dimension of the economic process, including production and consumption, was addressed most formally in Meadows and Randers (1972), in which they concluded that there were definite limits to consumption and that Western industrial societies were rapidly approaching them. This was supported by Daly (1991), who postulated the impossibility theorem stating that infinite growth in a finite system is *prima facie* impossible. While there was, and still is, contentious debate (Cole, Freeman and Jahoda, 1973; Simon, 1981) on the limits to growth thesis, its basic premise is still worthy of consideration. In support of the limits to growth thesis, more recent and independent research on the ecological footprint (Wackernagle and Rees, 1998) indicates that many nations in the industrial West are already exceeding their bio-capacity limits. That is, resources (sources) are being used at a rate that exceeds their regenerative capacity and waste deposits (sinks) are exceeding the earth's assimilative capacity. This suggests that the current approach to marketing, economics, etc. will not be sustainable in the long term unless some currently unknown and unpredictable change in the basic structure of our world occurs. Conversely, Porritt (1988) suggests that the situation in which we find ourselves has resulted

from our unwillingness to address the underlying causes of environmental destruction, choosing to focus instead on symptoms such as pollution and ozone depletion. These symptoms manifest themselves as a consequence of over-consumption of the wrong types of products that tax both resource availability and the assimilation capacity of the planet. This assessment, which is not universally accepted yet, does have significant implications for the culture of consumption because it ties it directly to the sustainability of current consumption patterns.

Smith (1998) argues that the current situation is related to the underlying rationality of Western industrial societies, particularly the USA, that have been captured by a productivist discourse. This discourse operates as a suture through which the flaws of its role in the sustainability discourse are hidden. The flaws are also hidden by the counter-entropic logic of perpetual economic growth through which inequality in the distribution of goods and ecological 'bads' is perpetuated in a process of economic reductionism that transforms political choice (who we want to be) into economic preferences (what we want to have). In this process, the productivist narrative is conflated with matching consumer and environmental narratives to create the meta-narrative of capitalism. The fundamental problem in this hegemonic process (Gramsci, 1971) is that strong sustainability is incompatible with the prevailing meta-narrative that demands unlimited economic growth in a finite system. The end result of the hegemonic process is that a new myth about sustainability in the culture of consumption is created that factualises fictions (growth in consumption is the ultimate good) and fictionalises facts (current consumption practices are unsustainable). As both Marcuse (1963) and Gramsci (1971) argue, facts contrary to the major societal narrative are absorbed into the narrative rendering them impotent by transforming critique into naive acquiescence.

When this hegemonic process is successful, the narrative of capitalism is reinforced and reproduced in its original form with only minor changes. While the narrative is challenged somewhat by the sustainability discourse, its logic is also reinforced. This is, for example, the case for sustainable consumption generally. Sustainable consumption as a term was first introduced at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and was an important element of the Agenda 21 programme. It was discussed by the United Nations Environment Programme in 1999 and included such factors as consuming less, consuming differently, consuming more efficiently, and quality of life.

There are disagreements within the various definitions of the term, particularly in relation to consuming less (Jackson, 2014). Meanwhile, recognising the importance of the full life-cycle of a product, the United Nations Environment Programme (2009), building on the earlier work of the Oslo Symposium held in 1994, defines sustainable consumption and production (SC&P) as follows:

the use of services and related products, which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as the emissions of waste and pollutants over the life-cycle of the service or product so as not to jeopardize the needs of further generations. (UNEP, 2009, p. 8)

Switching the emphasis from consumption to production allows a shift of focus from consumption to 'resource productivity issues' (Jackson, 2014), and, while it is clear that to achieve sustainability requires both consumption and production changes, it is important that the emphasis on production should not be at the expense of questioning the role of consumption. As Jackson (2014, p. 282) reminds us: 'Questioning consumption and consumer behaviour quickly becomes reflexive, demanding often uncomfortable attention to both personal and social change. To make matters worse, arguments to reduce consumption appear to undermine legitimate efforts by poorer countries to improve their quality of life'. While there appears to be no clear acceptance of a definition, and indeed some arguments amongst academics and policy makers surrounding the term, particularly in relation to the thorny issue of questioning consumer ideology and consuming less, there is acceptance that both consumption and production must play a part in engendering changes to consumption practices. There have been many global initiatives to achieve such changes, and some of these can be summarised by focusing on the initiatives developed following Rio+20, the most recent United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development.

Sustainable Consumption and Production Initiatives

Rio+20, built on the success of the 2003 Marrakech process, identified various SC&P needs and priorities that led to numerous initiatives. The UNEP then produced a report (UNEP, 2012) focusing on global and regional SC&P activities and providing 56 case studies from across the globe that address SC&P priorities. Examples are taken from government, business and civil society. At the government level, for instance, is the example of The Montreal Protocol, a global initiative which focuses on substances that deplete the ozone layer. By 2009, over 98% of the chemicals being controlled were totally eliminated. At the business level, various initiatives are considered, ranging from those undertaken by individual companies like Unilever's successful Sustainable Sourcing Initiative, to examples of businesses coming together, both within and across industry sectors to tackle SC&P issues. For example, the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) produces reports in which businesses document their sustainability performance following the guidelines laid down by the GRI. At the civil society level, organisations, including NGOs, community and indigenous groups, have also played a significant role in affecting change at the SC&P level. Two examples include the FLO, a fair trade labelling scheme now available for 15 product groups, and the success of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) in certifying sustainable forest products. While there is criticism of all three bodies, there is also a general acceptance that since the first UN Rio Conference in 1992 much has been accomplished in relation to SC&P and this has been as a result of a global recognition of the need to tackle the depletion of the earth's resources and the role consumption plays therein.

While it is clear that many initiatives have been proposed with success on the production side, much remains to be done regarding the future of the productivist discourse as it relates directly to consumption. Unfortunately, the essence of the relationship between production and consumption will be deferred until a later time as space does not permit a thorough

examination. For more recent assessments of production approaches, many can be found in studies of the ecological footprint, such as those by Waggoner and Ausubel (2002) and York, Rosa and Dietz (2003). Instead, we focus the remainder of the chapter on the consumer aspects of the sustainability problem.

The ideology of consumption is maintained within the DSP, in that, while it may advocate weak sustainability, the necessity for continuous growth in production and consumption is maintained intact if not increased through a sustainability backlash effect, suggesting that if people consume better, they can then consume more. Because the current phase of the DSP is so well engrained and its separate narratives so well integrated, especially in the USA, it is opaque to both critics and adherents. Its logic is self-evident, requiring no justification (Kilbourne, McDonagh and Prothero, 1997), and that logic repairs the fracture created by the contradiction between sustainable consumption and expansionary economics. The political nature of sustainability is subverted as it is incorporated into the dominant discourse of economics and markets, as will be discussed later in the chapter.

The second factor that the dominant discourse on sustainability relates to is the time frame, which is admittedly imprecise. But this is not too difficult to deal with if we avoid the standard treatment in neoclassical economics that uses discounting methods to value the future. The rationale here is that the farther into the future we try to imagine, the more likely we are to be wrong, so there are time frames beyond which it is not fruitful to venture. We cannot know what future consumers will value, what technological changes will have occurred, or what the state of the environment will actually be. This is the domain for predicting megatrends and their consequences. But, while it is certainly true that we cannot predict these characteristics with great accuracy, that should not disqualify the endeavour altogether. One of the favoured pastimes within econometrics is making those types of predictions. While Galbraith may have disparaged the discipline in his characteristically witty style with his quip that economic forecasting makes astrology respectable, we must continue to improve our skills. And while it is true that long-term forecasting of social trends is difficult, we can do some 'what-if' assessments that help us frame the possible scenarios.

One approach that has been used in the past, albeit not in studies of consumer culture, is the Ehrlich equation, $I = PAT$ (Ehrlich and Holdren, 1971). The equation, which is really an identity, cannot be used for predicting, but it can be used to gain insight into how a system operates. The actual identity says that environmental impact, I ; is a function of the product of population, P ; affluence, A ; and technology, T . Affluence is defined as per capita consumption ($GDP/Population$) and technology is defined as the environmental impact per unit of GDP ($Impact/GDP$). Speth (2008) provides an example of how the equation can be used to enhance one's perspective about change over time. He shows that if the current population growth rate remains at about 3% and the current growth rate in affluence remains at about 3%, how must technological impact change over the next 50 years to maintain the current ecological impact of consumption behaviour? When the problem is solved it shows that for constant impact, the T factor must be reduced by approximately 95%. This becomes reduced to a probability estimate

of the likelihood that this dramatic improvement in technology will occur.

This approach to studying sustainability has been improved in the last decade by converting it to an actual predictive equation referred to as STIPAT (York, Rosa and Dietz, 2003). In this formulation, many different factors (for examples see Wei, 2011) such as production of CO₂ or consumer spending, can be included to determine their contribution to the ecological footprint generally. This allows for an assessment of the impact of consumer culture and its ecological impact on sustainability.

In this brief examination of sustainability, the intent was to provide a characterisation of sustainability. It is considered here as a continuum from weak sustainability (making limited sustainability choices – e.g. buying recycled toilet paper) to strong sustainability (incorporating eco-rationality into both consumption and production decisions). We argue that sustainability embedded in the productivist logic rooted in neoclassical economics is an incomplete and flawed construct as it is the product of economic reductionism in which the essential political content has been removed. The missing political content is at two levels: (1) the political consumer embedded in consumer culture; and (2) production embedded in the DSP of Western industrial societies. Our task is now to reintroduce the political in the form of the New Political Economy. From this we will then frame sustainability in a more appropriate and comprehensive way than it is currently considered.

Political/Economy Approach (from the New Political Economy)

Traditionally, within marketing generally and consumption specifically, consumer choices have been taken as an economic phenomenon. It has been viewed through the lens of neoclassical economic theory (NCE), and reduced to an act of choice guided by a singular, all-inclusive consumer (economic) preference function (see Schwarzkopf in this volume). Fundamental to this is that consumers do not make interpersonal comparisons of their respective preferences and that preferences are exogenous and do not change as a result of the market activity in which the consumer is embedded. In short, economic preference functions answer the question, ‘What do I want to have?’ The difficulty in this is that it is becoming more frequently argued that this is not the end of the question. NCE argues that it is because market actors are perfectly rational and capable of reducing all their disparate roles into the one all-encompassing economic preference function. As a result the confluence of all types of preferences other than economic is realised. The question to which we turn is whether this represents actual reality or is simply a necessary condition for simplicity in the theory underlying it.

Depoliticisation

Kassiola (1990) argues that this position reflects a depoliticisation of society in which all values (including consumption choices) can be reduced to a set of economic choices. As a

product of economic imperialism, this effectively removes political choices regarding many aspects of the life one chooses to live. This condition has been examined for several decades going back at least to Hirschman (1970) who argued that such depoliticisation reflects a transition from voice (expressing one's views through discourse) to exit (expressing one's view by exiting the situation). The latter is the market (economic) approach in which consumers express their views through (non)purchase behaviour: If I like your offering I will purchase it, and if not, I will not. The former is concerned with the reasons behind one's choices which are reflected through unadulterated discourse (political).

The primary difficulty with the economic approach is that it is likely that individual tastes and preferences are conditioned by cultural institutions such as advertising to the extent that they do not truly intercede between the consumer and his/her preferences. Samuelson (1947) describes Western man as a 'hodgepodge of beliefs stemming from diverse and inconsistent sources' (p. 226). Deferring to the market as the sole arbiter of all values then becomes highly problematic. This has not gone unnoticed throughout modern history.

In the philosophy of Rousseau (1975) we find a similar distinction that he refers to as the will of all versus the general will. This suggests that there are two types of will residing in the same person, and they reflect different beliefs and preferences. Specifically, the will of all is the sum of individual wills, which includes their individual self-interest in personal choices. The general will is that part of the will of all with self-interest removed. This reveals what the individual would choose as the best for everyone collectively. The first reflects what each individual wants for themselves, and the second reflects their choice for the common good. More recently, this distinction has emerged in O'Neill (1993) who expresses it as want regarding principles versus ideal regarding principles, where the former express that which I want to have and the latter expresses who I want to be. The first is economic and the second political. This same distinction is brought to the fore by Sagoff (2007), who argues that the two types of preference function are generally in conflict with each other, particularly in public finance. Thus, he argues that there are clear distinctions between consumer and citizen where the choices of the former are reflected in the economic preference function, and the choices of the latter are reflected in the political preference function. He further argues:

Analysts who attempt to shuffle citizen judgements and personal preferences into the same ordering commit a logical mistake. They confuse *judgment* with *preference*, that is to say, beliefs about what we should do with expressions of what I want or prefer (p. 55, italics in the original).

Finally, as clear and distinct an expression as we have found for the difference between consumer and citizen is that provided by Musgrave (1959). He also sets the stage for the approach we will be adopting for the remainder of the chapter. Speaking of the roles of citizen and consumer, he states: 'In the latter situation the voter acts as a private individual determined by self-interest and deals with his personal wants; in the former, he acts as a political being guided by his image of a good society' (pp. 87–88). In this passage, Musgrave ascribes the roles of citizen and consumer to the same person, who reflects one set of values as citizen and

a different set as consumer. However, he describes the consumer as a voter, but one who votes in a different way than as a citizen. As a consumer, the individual expresses his/her beliefs with money in the market rather than in political discourse. But Musgrave also suggests that, in some sense, the consumer is voting using exit rather than voice as a strategy. As indicated earlier, the concept of the consumer/voter re-emerged in the marketing literature through Dickinson and Hollander (1991) and has been reiterated by Trentmann (2007). We propose to combine both strategies by reuniting the political and the economic through the mechanism of the New Political Economy proposed earlier.

New Political Economy

Galbraith (1997) argues that within the more affluent countries of the world, consumer goods are produced in such abundance that large sums of money must be allocated to the cultural apparatus to cultivate the wants that the system provides. But he further argues that the preoccupation with consumer satisfaction will someday lead to undesirable consequences that will become more critical in the future. But there is a powerful political agenda carried out through market activities that is managed by those who are engaged in the productive process. The problem we deal with in this chapter is that, while we now begin to see the consequences as they are manifested through the natural environment, we also assent to the system because there are no plausible alternatives to be found within the DSP. Galbraith further argues that dissenting political organisations no longer offer the dissent they did in the past. This suggests the prevalence of the NCE philosophy in advanced market societies, that is, cultures of consumption.

Our use of the New Political Economy (NPE) in assessing the political aspects of sustainable consumption is predicated on Galbraith's conclusion about the tacit assent to the NCE framework in high consumption cultures. To better understand this condition, it is necessary to examine some of the institutions that underlie the NCE system and its encroachment on and absorption of the political element of the original classical economic model, or what Kassiola (1990) referred to as depoliticisation. Maier (1987) describes the distinctive element of NPE as disclosing the sociological and political premises contained in NCE and takes them, not as an established framework, but as 'beliefs that must themselves be explained'. This exposes the normative assumptions that underlie the NCE framework, not as self-evident conditions, but as conditions that themselves require political debate. Besley (2004) states that, '... the new political economy is re-engaging with the art of political economy as envisaged by the classical economists' (p. 5). It further considers seriously the Aristotelian position that one may set aside their individual interest in favour of the common good. This is echoed by Rousseau (1975) who states, 'There is often a great difference between the will of all and the general will. The latter looks only to the common interest, while the former looks to private interest and is only the sum of individual wills' (p. 27). This becomes reduced to the conclusion of Hirschman (1977) that, from Adam Smith on, the self-interested, individual will has been separated from the political, general will. One of the goals of the NPE is to reunite the two to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the political element in economic theory.

Myrdal (1954) criticises the confluence of politics and economics in liberalism as well when he observes:

Presumably 'economic interest' means the desire for higher incomes and lower prices and, in addition, perhaps stability of earnings and employment, reasonable time for leisure and an environment conducive to its satisfactory use, good working conditions, etc. But even with these qualifications, political aspirations cannot be identified with those interests. People are also interested in social objectives. They believe in ideals to which they want their society to conform. (p. 199)

All of the foregoing suggests that economics alone cannot provide an adequate description of human behaviour generally or consumption behaviour specifically. As the emerging field of Socio-Economics suggests, economics is embedded in the larger social and political field and, while it provides essential information in consumer choices, it must be united with other fields to achieve more complete understanding of the multi-faceted cultures of consumption. Simply stated, there are economic preferences (what we want to have) and there are political preferences (who we want to be). These represent different but interactive modes of choice and the most prescient recognition of this is provided by Fromm (1976) whose book, *To Have or To Be?* is aptly titled. This is the essence of consumer culture theory. The question to which we now turn relates to the particular model of NPE that lends itself best to an analysis of sustainability within cultures of consumption.

Relationship to Gramsci

Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero (1997) were the first to examine the idea of sustainable consumption, as the term is used here, within the marketing literature. They did so within the context of the DSP of Western industrial societies. One of the difficulties within this approach has been incorporating paradigm change into the model as it was originally developed by Kuhn (1970). He argued that scientific paradigms (the context of his work) do not change smoothly, but rather they transform dramatically when conditions are right for the transformation. That is, they do not change gradually by incorporating changes at the margins of the paradigm into the mainstream, or core, of the paradigm. While this may be true, or at least arguable, within scientific paradigms, it is problematic within social paradigms as described by Dunlap and Van Liere (1978), Cotgrove (1982), Milbrath (1984), and Pirages and Ehrlich (1974). Because they are much more complex than scientific paradigms, social paradigms consist of multiple institutional structures interrelated in a complex and dynamic system that is continuously in flux. Because the idea of the DSP is still in its developmental stages, its improvement as a conceptual model of social development and transition is necessary. Among the changes that would be useful is a better explanation of its dynamic character. Gramsci (1971) provides a good starting point for this explanation.

Gramscian Perspective

While the primary constructs articulated by Gramsci are very diverse, covering a wide range of political/economic activity, two are particularly relevant for this chapter. These are hegemony and passive revolution that can lead to the evolution of the static concept of the DSP, making it more consistent with social, political and economic change. The critical aspect of Gramsci's framework is that it serves to explain the absence of dramatic transitions in the socialist trajectory of Marx. In doing so, it also serves to explain how social paradigms change without the revolutionary component suggested in Kuhn's (1970) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. In this sense, Gramsci's theory argues that changes in paradigms can be evolutionary as well as revolutionary, and our focus is on this aspect of social change. This raises the fundamental question to which this chapter is directed. What are the politics of sustainable consumption and how do we get there from here?

To begin this process, we have adopted Gramsci's (1971) interpretation of hegemony. This approach is useful because, unlike the more static view of the scientific paradigm, hegemony is a dynamic process rather than an end state (Smith, 1998). As such, hegemony adds to rather than replaces the concept of the DSP. The concept of hegemony is an interpretation of political power that explains how the political, cultural and moral values of a dominant class become dominant. How is it that the belief system of the dominant class becomes self-evidently true for the rest of society without the coercion usually associated with elite control? Hegemony is a process through which consent by subaltern classes is achieved more by acquiescence than by coercion. While dominant groups in more advanced societies do have access to coercive power, its exercise is seldom necessary. This is because, when successful, hegemony results in the subordinated classes accepting the extant power relations as the natural order of things. They accept the status quo because they believe that prevalent social relations are as they should be. This is what Gramsci (1971) refers to as '... hegemony protected by the armour of coercion' (p. 263), but he also reasons that, in more advanced societies, the coercive function of the political could wither and become unnecessary in maintaining dominance. This trajectory from coercion to consent was alluded to by Thomas Paine 1776 in his assertion (2017, Introduction, p. 6), 'a long habit of not thinking a thing WRONG, gives it a superficial appearance that it is RIGHT, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defence of custom. But the tumult soon subsides'. It is interesting that the Paine statement is found in the pamphlet entitled *Common Sense* because 'common sense' is taken by Gramsci (1971) to mean '... the uncritical and largely unconscious way of perceiving and understanding the world that has become "common" in any given epoch' (p. 322).

We conclude from this that hegemony differs from mere domination in that while coercion is an alternative, the preferred approach to social control is through the assent of the subaltern classes. Next we briefly examine how, within Gramsci's perspective, assent is achieved. This is similar to asking how it is that the DSP of a society can change from within rather than through coercive political activity and become dominant. This entails an examination of the evolution and structure of macro institutions within civil (as opposed to state) society. In this

case we view 'the' DSP, not as a static arrangement of institutions but a phase through which it is passing in the process of dynamic equilibrium.

How this process unfolds is described by Gramsci (1971) as passive revolution. While a complete analysis of the concept of passive revolution is beyond the scope of this chapter, the basic process will be addressed as it relates to consumer culture and sustainability. Callinicos (2010) describes passive revolution as the process through which domination by a particular class is achieved or maintained gradually through compromise and concession rather than the punctuated equilibrium and destruction found in the American and French revolutions. Gramsci (2007) argues that the outcome results from a process through which:

'progress' occurs as the reaction of the dominant classes to the sporadic and incoherent rebelliousness of the popular masses – a reaction consisting of 'restorations' that agree to some part of the popular demands and are therefore 'progressive restorations' or 'revolutions-restorations', or even 'passive revolutions'. (p. 252)

This does not suggest that passive revolutions are the product of irrational demands from the subaltern classes, but they can result from contradictions in social relations and crises that occur within the DSP. These crises may first have the character of structural contradictions (described by Kuhn [1970] as anomalies) which are 'sticky' problems to which the dominant class seeks resolution from within hegemonic relations. These are referred to as restorations because, once implemented, the status quo ante is resumed. Gramsci (1971) argues, however, that anomalies of exceptional duration reveal intransigent crises, the solutions of which the dominant class will not accede to, and it is on this ground that the oppositional forces will organise to push their positions. Callinicos (2010) argues that at the conclusion of this 'passive revolution', the elements of dissent initiating the conflict are absorbed by the dominant class, but demands of the subaltern classes are at least partially fulfilled while the dominant class remains dominant. This moves the hegemonic relations to a 'new and improved' phase that is then maintained by the same processes through which it arrived. The DSP after the restoration is both different and the same. The counter-hegemonic project manages the structural contradiction of the existing paradigm but does not achieve a paradigm shift of the kind referred to by Kuhn (1970).

The Counter-Hegemonic Element in Consumer Culture

'Political consumers respond to corporate policies and products reflecting, expressing, and promoting political, social, and normative values beyond those of consumer price, taste and quality of goods', and political consumerism is defined as 'consumer choice of producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices'. (Micheletti, Follesdal and Stolle, 2004, p xiv)

These authors also remind us that political consumers have existed for many centuries and are not a recent phenomenon. The National Negro Convention, for example, called for a boycott of slave-produced products in the 1800s. For the purposes of this chapter we will focus on consumers who make political consumption choices based on their concern for the environment – sustainable consumers (in the past also called, for instance, green consumers, environmentally friendly consumers, environmentally conscious consumers, but for the purposes of this chapter we stick with a generic label of sustainable consumers, recognising that this term can have different meanings). There have been a number of reviews of the sustainability marketing literature (Kilbourne and Beckmann, 1998; Leonidou and Leonidou, 2011; McDonagh and Prothero, 2014b), and literature with specific reference to sustainable consumption is assessed here.

In terms of political sustainable consumers, the literature has focused on a wide range of issues spanning over half a century. Much of the early research provided profiles of sustainable consumers and the reasons behind their green purchasing behaviour (Balderjahn, 1988; Granzin and Olsen, 1991; Kinnear, Taylor and Ahmed, 1974). Later research though moved away from an emphasis on buying greener products to consider consuming differently (Jackson and Michaelis, 2003), and in some instances non-consumption (Dobscha and Ozanne, 2001). There has been an emphasis on both individual and collective forms of sustainable actions (Connolly and Prothero, 2008); while there is also a recognition that making sustainable choices is difficult. In Connolly and Prothero (2008) consumers emphasise ‘I know that I should and could do something, but I don't know which is the right thing to do’ (p. 133). While there have been disagreements with the political consumer literature as to whether or not political consumerism can be successful, we have witnessed similar arguments, specifically in relation to sustainable consumer practices.

What has become clear in recent years is a recognition that much of the early sustainability research which focused on small incremental changes to consumption (buying recycled toilet paper for example) will not be enough to tackle the environmental crisis, and thus, research which reflects this is warranted. To that end Kilbourne and Mittelstaedt (2012) highlighted the need for two strands of sustainable consumption research – the first would pay specific attention to the environmental impact of our consumption practices and the second would focus on the more systemic and fundamental issue of lowering total consumption – both strands tackle the institutional and market-based practices highlighted by Micheletti, Follesdal and Stolle (2004) above. This second avenue therefore poses important questions from political, economic and cultural perspectives because it questions growth – which, of course, occurs against the backdrop of buying more stuff. The ideology of consumption therefore plays an important role in understanding sustainable consumption. This is not a new finding, and something that Fisk (1973) acknowledged many years ago. In focusing on the ideology of consumption issue, McDonagh and Prothero (2014b) ask ‘how do we get everyone to consume less?’

Consumer Culture and Sustainability: Megatrend or Passive

Revolution

While we posit that sustainability is yet to be widely confirmed as the megatrend, or as Varey (2013) suggests, a mega megatrend, it does appear logical to assume that, for humanity's survival, it is the megatrend. This is because, if left unaddressed, it will have the most serious consequences, such as species extinction and resource depletion. The rise of consumer culture and its inculcation into development and civilisation (market societies) permits a dynamic DSP to effect both change and restoration. It is notable that many of the very same companies that initiated unsustainable consumption are now presenting themselves as newly improved and offer their products and services to consumers, calling themselves 'solution providers'. In this way consumption levels continue to grow through newly marketed 'sustainable brands'. A key issue here is whether or not this offers too little, too late, but this is open to wide debates. Furthermore, the logic of consumption as articulated within the dynamic of the DSP after restoration is seductive from a consumer point of view. To know that trusted companies and brands have the situation in hand is reassuring, and to see some change occurring supports the premise of a passive revolution unfolding. This is, however, analogous to the people of nations being told to 'Keep calm and continue shopping' during times of intense aggression between states at war.

The counter-hegemonic element then has to once again return to the question 'What is to be done to get from here to there?' And, for the purposes of this chapter we are asking if a Gramscian approach focusing on hegemony and passive revolution might be a part of the answer. Can a move towards strong sustainability, focusing on sustainable consumption, be achieved via acquiescence, compromise and concession? If so, what will this mean for consumer culture? It would appear that the general will is pivotal at this juncture. The need to shift measurements of output for the productivist discourse (indicators of progress such as GDP) towards those more suited to conditions of strong sustainability within consumer culture is apparent. At this stage we now know that these may include the capacity to feed and provide water to a population, provide improved air quality, minimise toxicity and lower risk to personal health, provide cleaner energy supplies and repair polluted resources (the seas, rivers, fish stocks, etc.) all of which require increased capacity for scrutiny. The biggest hurdle for sustainability is its own ambiguity in a conceptual sense, as this delimits the capacity for the counter-hegemonic element to inform political consumers of the best alternatives to move towards sustainable consumption. Passive revolution is an on-going and contradictory project given that what needs to change has taken centuries to emerge and will not be easily altered. This should not, however, be a distraction because Green (1993) reminds us that any form of emancipatory politics involves '... a protracted and fundamental process of counter-hegemonic cultural contestation' (p. 175).

Conclusion

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) is now a well-established research field within the broader

consumer research field, and, as illustrated above, sustainable consumption has been an important (but limited) strand of research. In their ten-year review of CCT research Arnould and Thompson (2005) emphasised how ‘the politics of consumption’ has become a key pillar of CCT research and ‘politically engaged theory and practice’ will grow in importance in the future. Building on the current trend of assemblage theory in CCT, the authors argue for a future focus on power relations (as well as a specific focus on resistance); this, in conjunction with an emphasis on the politics of consumption, is centrally important if one begins to further theorise sustainable consumption through a hegemonic, passive revolution lens. This requires building on earlier sustainability research which has an institutional, societal and systems perspective (see, for example, Kilbourne, 2004; Prothero et al., 2011) and studies that have questioned the ideology of consumption (see, for example, Dolan, 2002; Kilbourne, Beckmann and Thelen, 2002; Prothero et al., 2011).

There is also further scope for consumer culture research to examine the appropriation of resistance (see Desmond, McDonagh and O'Donohoe, 2000) into what is becoming popularly communicated as corporate sustainability, and a need to unpack this by those seeking meaningful ecological change (McDonagh and Prothero, 2015). This is quite problematic given the power relations at play. It is feasible that large conglomerates can invest heavily in convincing the general public to endorse their improved market offerings under the banner of ‘corporate sustainability’ as this legitimises their right to continue in business. An analogous situation might be how the US government prior to the first Iraq war hired a public relations firm, Hill and Knowlton, to fabricate ‘atrocious stories’ about what was happening in Iraq, with the desired result being the public endorsement of an invasion of that country. Therefore, for some people, the emergence of corporate sustainability might be seen as a form of appropriation of sustainability issues that should be resisted. In this respect passive revolution requires even closer scrutiny than before as the DSP after restoration might best be critiqued as an intelligent system which is self-serving. As a result, the politics of resistance on grounds of sustainability may fragment first across a number of issues and second, depending upon whether or not there is weak or strong sustainability at stake, over some types of resistance perhaps being viewed as much more authentic than others.

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