

Sustainable consumption beyond the market. Relevance and perspective of informal consumption in the context of environmental change

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This paper outlines a new approach towards sustainable consumption. In the following argumentation I suggest that an involvement with specific forms of informal consumption affects an individual's consumption practice towards having less environmental impact.

1. Looking at consumption from an economic perspective, it describes what is being used up, regarding disposable income and market offer as main determinants. Seen from a business angle consumption is anything not production or distribution, consumption being part of a chain of events governed by a system of provision, in which primary resources are transformed into marketable products, intended to be consumed. Within both these perspectives, the consumer basically is seen to make choices between different goods available for purchase (Warde 2005, 132). The main criteria for decision making is seen to be value for money, or price (Cooper 2005, 58). Consumption from this point of view assumes essentially passive individuals as consumers, participating only through the act of purchasing products, rendered by a system of provision (Cogoy 1999, 386).

Social sciences introduce a different perspective on consumption, opening up the concept to individual activity beyond just choosing from market offers. This brings into the picture a whole new set of parameters, like competence, social practice, ideology, cultural meaning (George 1999; Jackson 2005; Miller 2006; Shove 2007). Left behind are simplistic assumptions of informed consumers who make rational choices according to market determinants. Instead, consumption can be looked at as a socially and economically embedded aspect of the way of living, shaped by various internal and external factors. This broad scope of influencing factors for actual consumption behaviour has to be rendered manageable in the context of a specific research agenda.

The purpose of this study, the examination of self-providing as an influence on consumption behaviour requires an understanding of consumption beyond seeing it as a counterpart of production. A suited approach lies in understanding consumption as an account of the desired way of living: "Consumption is understood as the life-process encompassing all kinds of social activities necessary to the life enjoyment-objective of individuals." (Cogoy 1999, 386). Accordingly, it includes having and doing, as well as buying and making. Consumption

is thus seen as an activity that combines market and non-market elements (Cogoy 1995, 170). The former comprises the acquisition of goods and services, the latter can be defined as activities performed to generate goods and services for consumption without immediate market transaction. Such a definition of consumption reflects on the idea of self-providing and includes and acknowledges the individuals' various capacities for an engagement with production.

2. Despite its scale and significance as a social phenomenon it has not yet been explored extensively why self-providing / DIY are taking place or what effects they can release, on the individual and on a structural level. Particularly, there is a lack of research approaches investigating it as a domain of consumption and of practice (Shove et.al. 2007, 43ff). Having looked at different approaches to the phenomenon, a conceptualisation of self-providing for the purpose of this research emphasises the following aspects: First, its specific economic character as a non-market productive activity is taken into account. Second, possibilities to acquire and refine knowledge and skills, the cognitive dimension, are regarded an explaining factor for getting involved with making. Third, its nature as an activity, which includes social involvement and emotional experiences, is taken into consideration. To sum up, self providing is for the following pages defined as a consumer practice, involving social exchange and learning experiences while providing goods or services for personal consumption and for exchange. It includes activities in the areas maintenance and repair work, gardening, conserving foods, making clothes, construction work, entertainment, carpentry and more.

Throughout the last century private consumption has been more and more determined by the purchasing capacity of an individual or a household, both in terms of the consumption level as well as concerning the mode of private consumption. The consumption level nowadays mostly depends on the monetary budget available (Schubert 2000, 85). Household production capacity has been sidelined, compared to the significance it had prior to industrialisation. Certain mechanisms make the current economy of production and consumption rather unsustainable, like economies of scale, planned obsolescence and perceived obsolescence. Despite of these quite effective mechanisms of capitalist production, there is evidence that a re-differentiation of consumption is taking place. Recent publications and articles describe different ways in which consumers regain influence in and become part of production (Campbell 2005; Friebe & Ramge 2008; Spargaaren 2003).

This suggests that the role of 'the consumer' is more multifaceted than it is being described

in current discourse. To some extent, studies on consumer behaviour in the past have focussed on what happens once a product is for sale, during information management, decision making, purchasing act, product usage and discarding. What has been rather neglected is the role of the private consumer in the providing. An involvement with the various stages of production goes along with a unique interest in and involvement with the product and its making beyond the ascribed value of benefit. The following section now aims to specify the proposed significance of self-providing in the context of sustainable consumption. In the structural context of market economy it is not expected to have an immediate effect on the system of provision. Neither is a positive ecological effect conjectured or sought on the level of the output of such activities. What is argued here is that self-providing has multiple effects on an individual's values and preferences and that it influences her or his consumption strategies in ecologically significant ways.

3. An engagement with supplies and techniques is seen to have an influence on the individuals' relation to the world of objects, and products in particular (Miklautz 2005, 43; Sennett 2008, 125). Curiosity and attention required and knowledge accumulated in selfproviding can be seen to facilitate a general understanding of the 'made-ness' of products. These effects of making are expected to raise awareness for constituent parts and production techniques of products and for their environmental effects. Such experiences are seen to instill a life-cycle oriented way of thinking (Cooper 2005, 55), and to raise interest in what and how is being produced in market economy.

This kind of attention is expected to activate the formation of additional decision criteria for purchases. The most influential factor in purchasing decisions is typically price or value for money (Cooper 2005, 58; Jackson 2005, 21). Only on the basis of additional knowledge and personal values can other criteria, like durability, fair production, energy-efficiency or ecological footprint be taken into consideration and, in a next step, become relevant for action. This differentiation of decision making criteria beyond a products monetary or utility value is going to influence future consumption decisions to consider external effects. It is therefore likely to shift consumer choices of products and of consumption strategies towards sustainable consumption.

Further, the involvement with self-providing can be seen to contribute to an individual's psychic health. For one, it offers ample opportunities for social interaction. Practitioners take part in an immediate, non-monetary exchange of knowledge, experience, supplies and goods, interactions which are rare within market based consumption (Fuchs & Lorek, 278f;

Schubert 2000, 85). Self-providing implies and requires an active and physical involvement with what surrounds us, which is considered to positively influence human well-being (Cooper 2005, 53). In addition, making is known to provide a particular kind of selfaffirmation, and a sense of empowerment (Sennett 2008, 294). It is regarded a contemporary field to realise and express creative aspects of human nature (Campbell 2005). Eco-humanistic critique suggests that existing patterns of consumption threaten our quality of life not only for their environmental impact, but for their failure to satisfy our non-material needs (Jackson 2005, 25). This failing is seen to originate in ongoing attempts to satisfy nonmaterial needs with material consumption. From this point of view, self-providing can be considered a pathway towards a dematerialisation of needs and consequently towards lowering levels of consumption while offering a field of practice for the satisfaction of nonmaterial needs.

4. To finish off, I am going to take into consideration social structures and institutional arrangements framing the field of informal consumption. Since sustainable consumption can't be achieved on an individual level but requires intervention and change at the societal level, it is crucial to consider dynamics of economy and politics shaping an infrastructure which in turn encourages or hinders certain forms of consumption to take place (Barnett et.al. 2011, 77; Jackson 2005, 29).

Neither in the academic discourse nor in official politics is informal consumption considered relevant for sustainable consumption. Being an informal activity, there is little statistical data available suited to represent scope and effects of self-providing in an ostensive way. This lack can be seen as one of the reasons for the disregard of this field within environmental politics, since political culture in recent years has increasingly been shaped around the agency of numbers and quantitative indicators. Another apparent reason for the lack of political attention for informal consumption and its economic implications can be described with Schor, who postulates that "a successful path to sustainability must confront our commitment to growth", a rather unpopular position with many government officials and business representatives (Schor 2005, 38). Most economic writing still suggests that scientific advance plus market competition will be sufficient to fend off ecological crises. On the level of social acceptance, limited consumption is by many still associated with poverty, while poverty is seen to embody personal failure (Schubert 2000, 126). In short, societal overall trends systematically support unsustainable consumption patterns (Fuchs & Lorek 2005, 279; Seyfang 2009, 43).

It becomes apparent that there are various structural constellations in place hindering a

proliferation of sustainable consumption. After assessing ecological potentials of forms of self-providing theoretically, in a next step actual effects on individual consumption behaviour and on the formation of consumption patterns need to be surveyed. The phenomenon of selfproviding offers empirically accessible research grounds to explore consumption strategies and practices taking place beyond the current system of provision with its unsustainable working mechanisms. This research approach enables assessing hidden potentials for sustainable development within the sphere of social innovation. In addition to surveying environmental effects, it depicts social and economic structures supportive of sustainable consumption.

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