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Competing Discourses of Sustainable Consumption: Does the ‘Rationalisation of Lifestyles’ Make Sense?

KERSTY HOBSON

Sustainable consumption is a key concept in the sustainable development paradigm, which calls for individuals in high-incomes countries to consider, and take action on, the environmental impacts of their household consumption practices. Within recent international policy framings, sustainable consumption is part of an efficiency-focused rationalisation discourse, representing distinct theories of the environment, the state and the individual. This article considers how this discourse resonates and impacts upon the very citizens it has been constructed to affect. ‘Alternate’ discourses of sustainable consumption and critical social science research suggests that politically dominant approaches mean little to members of the public. This suggestion is tested here through interviews with participants of a sustainable lifestyle programme in the UK called Action at Home. This analysis argues that social justice, not sustainable lifestyles, has the most resonance with interviewees. As a result, not only do calls for rationalisation carry little cultural meaning, they also actively alienate individuals from the project of sustainable consumption. This is because the idea of rationalising lifestyles appears to actively ignore, and is unable to address, individual’s pressing social concerns. Hence, the rationalisation of lifestyles makes little (common) sense.

Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed growing political and scientific acknowledgment that current levels of public and private consumption in high-income countries need to change for the sake of environmental sustainability. ‘Consumption’, along with ‘production’ and ‘population’, is now argued to be one of the main causes of global environmental change, and it has become a core concept in the sustainable development paradigm. For example, Agenda 21, the non-treaty action plan for achieving sustainable development [Grubb et al., 1993] clearly states the causal links...

Sustainable development is predominantly defined as economic and social development that meets human needs now without compromising future generations’ ability to meet their needs [WCED, 1987] (although see McManus [1996]; O’Riordan and Voisey [1997]; Dobson [1998]; Sachs [1999] for further discussion of definitions). In keeping with this framing, policy definitions of sustainable consumption can be loosely described as ‘doing more with less’ (as the Australian Department of the Environment has called their sustainable consumption initiative; see http://www.environment.gov.au). That is, individuals should be able meet their own consumption needs whilst also taking the environmental impacts of their actions into account. More specifically, the United Nations, which has emerged as a key player in the international sustainable development arena, defines it as ‘The use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, whilst minimising the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardise the needs of future generations’ [IISD/United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 1999: 1].

By this definition, sustainable consumption is the ‘rationalisation’ of lifestyle practices [Smith, 1996; Sachs 1993], which entails making them more efficient and shaping them according to the logic of instrumental rationality, as part of a prevailing ecological modernisation paradigm. This paradigm posits that the ‘scientisation’ of consumption practices necessitates the use of technologically driven and expert-led solutions (see Cohen [1998]; Hajer [1995, 1996] for further discussion). Such an approach has been also labelled ‘weak sustainability’ [Auty and Brown, 1997], wherein scientific knowledge directs and feeds into rational policy debates, that are then transferred into price adjustments, which are finally reflected in individual behavioural adjustments. Thus, to make sustainable consumption happen, this framing argues that consumers will have to learn about how toxic materials and waste emissions feature in the life cycles of the products they buy, and as a result of this new knowledge, individuals will change their consumption behaviour.

This framing of sustainable consumption is often presented in policy debates as a simple ‘common sense’ approach to addressing problems in a world where resources are limited and getting scarcer. This article critically examines whether such a framing is indeed common sense. It considers the prevailing conceptual framing of sustainable consumption under the premise that no discourse tells us ‘how it is’, or is a neutral, free-floating entity that encompasses and defines all individuals’ concerns and needs [Bourke and
Meppem, 2000]. Rather, discourses implicate sets of social, political and economic relations, forms of practice and power [Darier, 1999a, 1999b; Latour, 1993; Murdoch and Clark, 1994; Mills, 1998] and epistemological positions, which in turn inform policy approaches. Prevailing discourses of sustainability have become ‘privileged narratives’ [Bourke and Meppem, 2000] that tell one story about the causes and solutions to environmental problems. Are there other stories and less privileged narratives to be heard, which offer alternate framings of sustainable consumption?

This article positions policy discourses of sustainable consumption as founded upon neo-liberal ideas of international relations, the state and the individual. This is argued by examining how the rationalisation discourse has been constructed within prevailing environmental policy structures and relations. Then the relevance of this discourse to its intended audience is considered. That is, how do individuals read and react to these sustainable consumption messages? This is an important question as ultimately the purpose of sustainable consumption is to affect changes in individuals’ values, attitudes and actions [UNCED, 1992]. This question is addressed by analysing interviews with participants of a sustainable lifestyle initiative in Britain, called Action at Home. The central argument to emerge is that not only does the rationalisation discourse of sustainable consumption have little resonance with individuals who embrace other, ‘alternate discourses of consumption’, it also actively alienates them from the very causes it seeks to promote, thus reinforcing the status quo.

Forging the Sustainable Consumption Agenda: Trading Vested Interests in the Name of Common Good?

There now exists a general consensus within political communities that global environment problems can be linked directly to consumption practices of high-income countries. Figures abound to illustrate the grossly uneven geographical distribution of global populations in comparison to resource their use. For example, Agenda 21 states that developed countries have 24 per cent of world population, but use 75 per cent of its energy and 92 per cent of its cars [UNCED, 1992; also Jordan and Brown, 1997]. Intuitively, it would seem that addressing this inequality is easy. High-income countries have to drastically cut consumption levels, by a factor of ten according to some research [IISD/United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 1999]. Yet, understanding the causes of environmental problems does not necessarily lead to shared views on how to, and who should, address them [Conca et al., 1995]. Nowhere is this more true than in international environmental policy forums, that have witnessed ongoing struggles over collective solutions to environmental problems.
These struggles partially stem from how the environment is conceptually framed from a policy perspective. Environmental problems have been recognised as requiring international cooperation and partnership [Tickell, 1977; UNCED, 1992], as their causes and effects cross international boundaries, making them truly global problems [Beck, 1992]. Yet, sitting down at the negotiating table sees the translation of the ‘environment’ into a set of externalised resources or ‘natural capital’ [Pearce and Turner, 1990] whose ownership and entitlements require both bargaining and cooperation [Barrett, 1992] to secure national interests. This translation process can be seen in the framing of forests as ‘carbon sinks’ for one. Equally, environmental ‘bads’ are traced to their sources and framed as the responsibilities of particular nation states or regulated through international directives. The pragmatics of such an approach is easily arguable and is not debated here. Rather, this point is made to argue that this translation process – of the environment from ecology/nature to bundles of ‘goods’ and ‘bads’ to be managed in the name of risk mediation – is the first crucial step in the construction of prevailing rationalisation approaches.

This is because, as these ownerships, entitlements and blames are negotiated in the name of common good, environmental regulation becomes mapped onto on-going international policies, processes and allegiances. These have in turn shaped the international sustainable consumption agenda. For example, it is well-documented that in the run up to the Earth Summit conference, high, transitional and low-income countries all had different ideas about the main causes of global environmental problems, how obligations should be shared out, and which actions amounted to ‘just’ solutions [Barrett, 1992].

High-income countries pointed to population growth in the ‘south’ as being central to global environmental problems, arguing that continued economic growth was one way to alleviate the detrimental effects of poverty. To counter this, low-income countries argued that consumption levels in the ‘north’ were key, accusing some countries of attempting to practise forms of post-colonial control over southern economic development and domestic policies [Grover et al., 2001; Kamieniecki, 1993]. Thus, ‘Rather than global partnership, there was mutual suspicion and deep controversies over very basic questions’ [Jordan and Brown, 1997: 272]. In the name of reaching a palatable form of consensus, the numerous discourses apparent at the start of negotiations were traded, distilled and rewritten to create the more moderate discourses that now prevail in Agenda 21, which have in turn been handed down to national governments to enact. These are ‘sustainable livelihoods for the south’, and ‘sustainable production and consumption for the north’.

Through this process, high-income countries succeeded in constructing a
sustainable consumption discourse that embodied their own interests, enabling them to remain part of, take leadership in, and hence have tangible controls over future international frameworks of environmental governance. Being a rich country negotiating with poor countries has distinct advantages, as the financing of sustainable development frameworks remain a vital and contested issue [Jordan and Brown, 1997]. As a result, a discourse has been formed that does not threaten consumption as a form of practice but seeks to bind it to forms of knowledge – science, technology and efficiency – that embody the locus of power held by high-income countries in international relations. To paraphrase George Monbiot (Guardian Weekly, 26 July–1 Aug. 2001, p.13), asking high-income countries what to do about over-consumption is like asking prison inmates what to do about crime.

The process whereby the sustainable consumption agenda was formed is important to this paper because its epistemological and ideological foundations have subsequently shaped national policy approaches. This includes how messages of sustainable consumption have been translated into public discourses intended to affect the practices of citizens. Also, it has partially shaped the meanings attached to being a good citizen in contemporary high-income societies, framing how individuals are normatively expected to respond to sustainable consumption messages, which is discussed further in the following section.

Why Sustainable Consumption Fits: The Neo-Liberal Discourse of Rationalising the Citizen-Consumer

Any government in a high-income country that attempts to force its citizens to consume less would invariably find itself ousted come election time, except perhaps in times of war or other national crises. This is not only because any such enforcement is an affront to the tenets of liberal democracy [Achterberg, 1993], but also because these very tenets have emerged alongside the historical trajectory of consumption as a social and political project. This trajectory began in early modern Europe through the development of international markets, the subsequent growth in trade and the emergence of a new urban social class that valued forms of conspicuous consumption as identity and status markers [Chaney, 1996]. By the eighteenth century, expansion in modes of production had given rise to a ‘consumer culture’ in countries such as England [Chaney, 1996]. This ‘culture’ and the forms of governance relations that have co-evolved with it, have continued to evolve and to be transformed both culturally and politically over the centuries [e.g., Baudrillard, 1998; Featherstone, 1991; Slater, 1997], making consumption now ‘the single most important objective of modern politics, more or less unquestioned right across the political spectrum’ [Jacobs, 1997: 47].
With it has evolved a framing of social relationships and interactions between individuals and the state, which form part of the central tenets of neo-classical and neo-liberal theory [Booth, 1993]. This ‘evolution’ however, has not been a gradual affair. Instead, decades of state protectionism in high-incomes countries gave way in the 1970s to avid free market approaches strongly favoured by Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Regan in the US [Smith, 1994], which have, arguably, remained the leading ideologies of these countries to date. These economic policies seek to, and have substantially succeeded in, ‘rolling back the state’. This is the argument that regulation interferes with free-market operations. Environmental regulation has also been subject to this ‘rolling back’, illustrating how its form and existence is essentially a political outcome that is always in ‘a state of dynamic tension with prevailing centres of economic and political power’ [Gandy, 1999: 69].

An essential part of this ideology is the framing of individuals as consumers [Booth, 1993]. The story goes that all individuals possess a utility function, which incorporates their tastes and preferences. The free market exists to satisfy the needs and wants of these autonomous consumers. Thus, a state of ‘consumer sovereignty’ exists, where freedom and consumption are inextricably linked [Smith, 1994; Walsh, 1994]. If individuals care about the environment, it will be translated into preferences that are expressed through acts of consumption [Hackett, 1995].

This consumer sovereignty has subsequently been translated into a basis of citizenship – the citizen-consumer [Abercrombie, 1994; Keat et al., 1994; Lunt and Livingstone, 1992; Sagoff, 1988]. As Aldridge [1994: 905] has noted, in prevailing neo-liberal economic policies ‘the consumer is encouraged to feel a duty as a citizen to promote the cause of consumerism; the good consumer is a good citizen’. Indeed, the incorporation of environmental concern into preferences is considered the only way to forge a sustainable consumption agenda, as ‘Ultimately the burden on the UK’s environment is attributable to the choices and the actions of the consumers. To a great extent producers are, quite naturally, responding to meet the preferences of the customers’ [Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 1998a: 4].

Criticisms of the assumptions implicit in the above statement have been heard from all corners of the academy. Questions have been raised about the legitimacy of ‘consumer sovereignty’ as a reflection of social and economic practices [Ciscel, 1984; Hansen and Schrader, 1997; Koritz and Koritz, 2001]; whether acts of consumption can ever be considered ‘rational’ [Miller, 1998; Williams et al., 2001]; along with debates over the moral foundations of capitalist systems [Harvey, 2000]. Yet, the rationalisation approach makes perfect ‘neo-classical sense’. It does not threaten consumption but seeks to
incorporate a new preference without impinging upon individual’s (supposedly) sacred and deeply entrenched lifestyles [Milton, 1996; UNCED, 1992]. Exactly how national governments have tried to make the environment part of individual’s consumption preferences will be discussed below. Before this, however, it is important to note the emergence of another policy discourse that looks beyond consumption as the basis of environmental sustainability and thus potentially erodes the privileged place of the citizen–consumer nexus. This is the concept of environmental citizenship.

Environmental Citizenship: A Threat to Rationalisation?

Environmental citizenship has become an internationally stated objective, which calls for individuals to know, care and act with care towards the environment [Hawthorne and Alabaster, 1999]. This entails the emergence of an active citizen, mobilised by responsibility and duty, rather than the passive citizen, bounded by rights and privileges, as neo-classical theory tends to suggest [Myers and Macnaghten, 1998; O’Riordan and Voisey, 1997; Pinkney-Baird, 1993; Selman and Parker, 1997]. Its emergence is indeed a move away from the language and framing of the citizen as merely a consumer, placing individuals as social actors who have key roles to play in making sustainable development work, as outlined in Agenda 21 [UNCED, 1992].

Thus, there initially appears to be two contradictory forces at play in sustainable development – the rationalisation of the ecological sphere versus the transformation of society through cultural critiques and processes, often referred to as reflexive modernisation (see Giddens [1991]; Smith [1996] for further discussion). Yet, it would be premature to suggest that in talking about personal and social values and responsibility, environmental citizenship presents a fundamental challenge to the privileged place that the rationalisation discourse of sustainable consumption occupies in policy framings (although it may certainly be argued to have a great deal more resonance with bottom-up approaches to change: for example, see Pinkney-Baird [1993]). This is because both discourses share underlying themes, despite their inherent contradictions [Sagoff, 1988]. For one, in neo-classical theory, increased public knowledge is believed to generate increased returns and stimulate growth [Langlois, 2001].

This idea has been applied to environmental problems, wherein growth in public and individual environmental knowledge creates a growth in pro-environmental awareness and behaviour [Ehrlich et al., 1999]. This proposition applies to both the provision of consumer information – and hence the citizen-consumer rubric – and the creation of environmental citizenship, which is driven by the provision of information through formal
education and public awareness initiatives [Hawthrone and Alabaster, 1999; UNCED, 1992]. Thus, an environmental citizen is someone who has internalised information about environmental problems, creating a sense personal responsibility and duty that is then expressed through consumption and community actions. Even though environmental citizenship operates outside of the realms of consumption, being focused mostly on local spaces, it is still causally driven by the incorporation of an ethic into practices framed by the rationalisation paradigm. In short, within policy discourses of sustainable consumption, morals and money are mixed together and overlap, to create a discourse coalition that pushes for individuals to bear the brunt of environmental ‘bads’.

Whether this push is legitimate is a contentious issue. For example, research from the independent charity WasteWatch UK [1999] suggests that only six per cent of land-fill waste comes from households. In Australia, just over half of energy use is used directly or indirectly by households, with the rest being used by manufacturing and export industries [Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001], which have been criticised for side-stepping the sustainable development agenda and adopting, at best, ecological modernisation, and at worst, ‘business as usual’ approaches [e.g., Welford, 1998]. It has been argued that prevailing policy discourses are attempts to ‘normalise’ individual practices and to instil social norms without having to resort to unpopular regulation [Darier, 1999a]. There is indeed strong support for this argument within this article’s analysis of sustainable consumption. Its current framing represents a fine line between liberty and hegemony, with high-income countries attempting to create a value-free space in public discourse of sustainable consumption to avoid (being seen as) coming down on one side or the other.

Marketing the Environment through Information

The drive to provide individuals with information, either to ‘create’ responsibility or to affect consumption, underpins the choice of national policy mechanisms used to forward sustainable consumption issues in countries such as the UK. With few exceptions, initiatives have been based on voluntary, consumer information, such as the EU Ecolabel scheme (see http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/ecolabel/index.htm), a green Claims Code to encourage more consumer information, and a series of public awareness initiatives [Blake, 1999; Geller, 1989; Hinchliffe, 1996; Staats et al., 1996].

The latter approach generally has two aims. First, to promote the overall goals of sustainable development by filling an alleged public information deficit on the causes and consequences of global environmental change
Second, to tell individuals exactly what actions they should be taking, such as recycling or insulating their homes. Together, these initiatives represent the framing of consumption as being a public knowledge problem [Burgess et al., 1998; Eden, 1998; Ehrlich et al., 1999; Owens, 2000]. An implicit assumption is that environmental problems have immediate resonance with individuals. Individuals either want to ‘help’ but do not know what to do, or simply learn environmental facts, which then awakens a latent sense of environmental responsibility [Lanthier and Olivier, 1999].

In the UK, campaigns have included the Conservative government’s ‘Helping the Earth Begins at Home’ campaign [Eden, 1993; Department of the Environment’s Energy Efficiency Office, 1994; Hinchliffe, 1996] and their ‘Going for Green’ programme [Blake, 1999; Blake and Carter, 1997; Going for Green, 1996]. Most recently, the current Labour government’s ‘Are you doing your bit?’ campaign has used multi-media adverts to suggest that ‘a few changes in what you do at home, at work, when shopping or getting about, is all that you need to do’ [Department of Environment Transport and the Regions, 1999a: 2].

However, despite these policy efforts, patterns of sustainable consumption have failed to emerge in the UK over the past decade. As Hawthorne and Alabaster argue, ‘environmental citizens are not produced merely by programmes of education’ [1999: 40]. However, it is not the aim of this article to set up the ‘straw man’ of policy approaches, to simply knock them down. Ample research already exists to argue that ‘shallow’ approaches to promoting sustainable consumption practices, such as ‘Are you doing your bit?’ will be relatively ineffective in the face of the complexities and entrenched nature of individual consumption practices, positioned within contexts and infrastructures not conducive to living sustainably [Blake, 1999; Bulkeley, 1997; Burgess et al., 1998; Burningham and O’Brien, 1994; Darier and Schule, 1999; Harrison et al., 1996; Macnaghten and Jacobs, 1997; Myers and Macnaghten, 1998; Hobson, 2001a; Hobson, 2001b]. The question here is how the rationalisation discourse of sustainable consumption, and its framing of the individual and consumption outlined above, are read and reacted to by individuals. In short, sustainable consumption is not happening. What role, if any, does this framing have in this lack of public uptake?

**Other Voices, Other Concerns: ‘Alternate Discourses’ of Sustainable Consumption**

A starting point to address this question is to consider other discourses of sustainable consumption or more broadly, sustainable living. Although it is
not possible to discuss all the nuances of sustainability and consumption discourses here, the intention is to consider emergent strands or themes of some discourses. For example, some, which have arguably been around for many decades in various guises, focus on the nexus of consumption as a locus of power. Ethical consumption mobilises consumer power to ‘tread lightly on the earth’ [e.g., Bedford, 2000]. Others turn away from consumption as a legitimate form of social practice and instead look towards ‘voluntary simplicity’ [Librova, 1999].

Another and more increasingly prevalent discourse broadens the focus away from consumption per se, and into ideas of ‘sustainable societies’. This is not just about how resources are used but also about forms of social practice. It touches upon but still differs from the concept of environmental citizenship, as it is not about acting for the environment as an internalised norm. Rather the ‘environment’ is the context to, and an integral part of, a political project of social transformation. This transformation is ultimately founded upon the principle and ideal of social justice.

Some exponents look towards nature by focusing on caring for the earth. This approach is often espoused by conservation non-government organisations, environmental philosophers (as in the journal Environmental Values) and spiritually orientated movements. For example, ‘The guiding rules are that people must share with each other and care for the Earth’ [IUCN/UNEP/WWF, 1991: 8]. Others look away from nature as an ecological construct and towards social problems inherent in contemporary post-industrial societies. These discourses are voiced by social and environmental justice movements, women’s groups, trade unions, and anti-capitalist protest groups such as Reclaim the Streets, who are ‘A direct action network for global and local social-ecological revolution(s) to transcend hierarchical and authoritarian society (capitalism included), and still be home in time for tea’ (http://www.gn.apc.org/RTS: 1).

These are experientially and politically focused discourses that introduce the concepts of fairness and justice into future-orientated perspectives. As Friends of the Earth suggest,

Making societies fairer has long been the object of social struggle. Making them sustainable – so that present and future generations can enjoy clean air, ample fresh water, healthy soil and the company of other species – is more recent. Yet it strikes at the heart of continued human survival. Deteriorating social and environmental trends make the need for sustainable and fairer societies the central challenge of our times (see http://www.foei.org/campaigns/SSP/indexssp.html: 1, own italics).

Thus, sustainable living is no longer just about consuming products but
about how social and environmental resources of common good(s), spaces, networks, futures and relationships need to foster respect for each other and in turn, for the environment. In this sense, the environment is not (just) about ‘nature’, but about the total environment of lived spaces and daily experiences, the urban experience that is part of modern environmental histories [Castree and Braun, 1998].

It has been argued that environmental sustainability and social justice do not necessarily have mutually compatible aims [Dobson, 1998]. Yet, these ‘alternate’ discourses appear to be formed along the same lines as Bookchin’s argument that ‘Social inequality feeds environmental degradation and resource overexploitation. Societies constructed upon hierarchies of race, class and gender are … fundamentally based on exploitation’ [Conca et al., 1995: 12]. Thus, societies whose economic systems create and perpetuate inequality also create systems of environmental degradation.

An example how this discourse has been mobilised can be seen in the work of Women’s Environment Network UK, which have linked health concerns with consumption practices, environmental degradation and social fairness (see http://www.wen.org.uk). Other women’s groups have campaigned over ‘sweat-shop’ conditions and pay, and outlined how the push for over-consumption detrimentally impacts on women, and as a result, families, communities and their environments [Grover et al., 2001; Klein, 2000]. The UK Labour government has also recognised the need for ‘joined up thinking’ in relation to sustainability issues. Their 1999 sustainable development strategy entitled ‘A better quality of life’ outlined the importance of tackling social exclusion and poverty in the quest for sustainable development [Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 1999b].

Another example is their ‘Sustainable Communities for the 21st Century’ programme launched in 1998, which acknowledged the importance of utilising appropriate scales of action, stressing the role of local government in bringing about sustainable development. In this way, discourses of sustainable societies that are increasingly prevalent in high-income countries have more in common with the ‘sustainable livelihoods for the south’ discourse of Agenda 21 than ‘sustainable consumption for the north’. Rather than linking up efficiency, science and the consumer through voluntary market mechanisms, as the rationalisation approach does, sustainable society discourses link up the moral citizen and personal experience with networked communities that range from global to local, through varied forms of overt and discrete social action.
Critical Social Sciences and the Environment: Alternate Discourses Reflected

These alternate discourses of sustainable consumption also partially reflect, and are reflected in, the work of critical social scientists, who have been asking questions about lay environmental perceptions, knowledges and concerns. This article is positioned within these literatures, as it is based upon the premise that valid contributions to changing how people think and behave – such as creating sustainable consumption patterns - require us to address values, beliefs, cultural assumptions and how these relate to cultural meanings [Reser, 1995].

To this end, researchers have been critically examining the environmental paradigm from the view of individuals who operate outside so-called ‘expert’ knowledge circles, to understand what they know and care about, and what forms of knowledge are implicated in environmental discourses [Murdoch and Clark, 1994]. In doing so, it has been argued that environmental issues in high-income countries are inextricably linked to cultural and political practices [Beck, 1995; Burgess et al., 1998; Grove-White and Szerszynski, 1992]. Individuals’ environmental concern and perceptions are a collage of experiences and information, which are mobilised for political ends [Burningham, 2000], and whose moral impetus are often concerns about local and distanced procedural and distributive fairness [Owens, 2000; Hobson, 2001a].

This would suggest that the prevailing sustainable consumption discourse coalition has little resonance with lay publics. To examine this point further, this article presents empirical material drawn from qualitative research, to explore what happens when individuals are confronted with environmental information instructing them to rationalise their consumption practices. Does the information make sense to them and how do they react, not only what is being said, but also the ‘hidden messages’ of the discourse? This research was undertaken with participants of a sustainable lifestyles programme called Action at Home, which is run by the charity Global Action Plan UK.

Global Action Plan: Origins and Aims

Global Action Plan began in the United States in the late 1980s as a way of encouraging and empowering individuals to make changes in their attitudes towards the environment and in their household practices [Gershon and Gillman, 1992]. A unique approach was developed, called the EcoTeam Programme, which entails a group of neighbouring households voluntarily joining forces to work through a set number of tasks outlined in the
EcoTeam workbook. This workbook details step-by-step actions to take. Each group meets regularly to offer support to each other, to feed back progress, and to summarise the Team’s behavioural changes, which are then reported back to a national Global Action Plan office [Harland et al., 1993; Staats and Herenius, 1995]. Through these groups, it is hoped that households can share experiences and work through the numerous barriers to change. It is also hoped that the sustainable lifestyles message will then diffuse outwards through personal networks, into neighbourhoods and communities, creating widespread behavioural changes [Global Action Plan Nederland, 1998; Rogers 1995].

In the early 1990s, Global Action Plan UK (GAP) was founded. GAP reworked the original EcoTeam model, aiming not so much for group cohesion but for widespread participation [Global Action Plan UK, 1998a; Global Action Plan UK, 1998b; Global Action Plan UK, 1999]. Along with programmes for school and work, they established the Action at Home programme, which is a 6 month voluntary scheme that aims to encourage changes in individuals’ household consumption practices by providing information, support and feedback [Church and McHarry, 1992]. It is not a nation-wide information campaign but is instead targeted sequentially at specific geographical areas, to enable the establishment of local support and diffusion networks.

Participants in Action at Home sign up with GAP and pay a small fee. They receive a ‘welcome’ questionnaire that aims to establish a base-line of household environmental impact called a Greenscore, which is measured again at the end of the programme. They then receive monthly information packs with step-by-step suggestions for making small changes to their practices, along with ‘money-off’ offers on various environmental products, and addresses for further information. The packs sequentially cover the topics of waste, water, transport, shopping and energy, ending with a ‘next steps’ pack about where to go once the six months is up. This makes Action at Home unique in terms of behaviour change programmes in the UK today, since its information sits within the rationalisation framing of sustainable consumption and yet offers an intensive, rather than one-off, access to information over a set period of time, as well as facilitating local and national support networks.

To date, over 30,000 households have taken part in Action at Home (see http://www.globalactionplan.org.uk), which has affected behaviour changes in many households (for results see Global Action Plan UK [1998b]; Global Action Plan UK [1998c]). However, due to low returns of the questionnaires GAP have been uncertain about what is happening to individuals as they participated in Action at Home. To address this issue qualitative research was carried out, which focused on the processes and experiences of Action at Home participants over the six-month period.
Researching Action at Home: Methods and Case Studies

Fieldwork took place between October 1997 and May 1999, in two separate locations. The first location was Bournemouth, Dorset, where Action at Home was being publicised and distributed by the local authority. At the start of the programme (October 1997) and again at the end (April 1998), semi-structured single interviews took place with Action at Home households to talk about their experiences and thoughts on the programme (see Burgess et al. [1988a]; Burgess et al. [1988b]; Crabtree et al. [1993]; Kvale [1996] for further method discussions). In total, 44 were carried out.

To follow this, during 1998–99, three companies in the north-west of England purchased Action at Home as part of a pilot project, offering the programme to employees to encourage changes in their resource-use behaviours both at home and work. As part of the assessment of this project, one in-depth interview group was established at each workplace. Each group met at the start of the programme (October 1998) and three months into Action at Home (January 1999). At the end of the six months (April 1999) group members was interviewed individually. All interviews were recorded and the following discussions are based upon analysis of the interview transcripts.

Emergent Debates and Moral Concerns: Action at Home as a Form of Discursive Practice

One possible assumption about Action at Home participants is that their involvement in the programme signalled an acceptance of the prevailing sustainable consumption messages, with them having internalised some norm of environmental responsibility [e.g., Eden, 1993; Finger, 1994]. This could also possibly be reflected in the fact that just under half of the Action at Home participants interviewed made changes to one or more of their domestic practices as a result of taking part in the programme. These were all low-cost or no-cost behaviours, such as turning taps off when brushing teeth, which were easy to do and could be altered in an instant. However, the majority of practices detailed in the packs did not change. This is not surprising, as many of the changes recommended take time and/or money [Krause, 1993; Tanner, 1999], and there is only so much ‘environmental space’ in individual’s lives to make behaviour or structural changes [Brandon and Lewis, 1999]. This lack of scope for change resonated strongly in the interviews, especially in terms of complex and/or socially contentious actions, such as transport use and shopping choices. For example:

Well I live in a rented flat, a first floor flat, no garden and although I totally agree with the objectives and sort of ideas of what you can do
at home, it is very difficult for me to implement them and totally impractical in cases. I found it frustrating (Female, Bournemouth, April 1998).

As well as the many barriers to sustainable outcomes, why participants took part in Action at Home and how they reacted to the programme can help explain this behavioural inertia further. This challenges the assumption that these individuals have signed up to rationalisation. That is, Action at Home participants’ motivations were not focused on the environment per se, but more towards using the programme to ask themselves questions about how they were living and how they fitted in to ideas about ‘right’ ways to live. As one interviewee commented at the end of the programme:

It was helpful for me to see where I stood. There was a few things that made me think, ‘do I do it and if not, why don’t I?’ I was really glad to see there were a few things that I thought were important (Female, Bournemouth, April 1998).

Rationalisation framings of how individuals alter lifestyles to make them more sustainable suggest a process wherein new information is learnt, weighed up against current practices, and then, contingent upon a number of factors, either accepted or rejected. What this framing misses are the emergent, and arguably most important, processes taking place when environmental information is read. Across all the interviews the information in the packs was constantly open to critique, argument and debate by participants. Interviewees asked questions about who is being (re) presented and given authority in the Action at Home information. Also, where does responsibility, both personal and social, lie for making the required consumption changes? How is it possible to live sustainably when society is not geared towards sustainable living? Whose vested interests are being represented? Who can you trust? Why is society structured so that the rich keep getting richer and the poor keep getting poorer?

In this sense, the discourses to emerge during the Action at Home interviews were about questions of personal and social rights and wrongs. Interviewees focussed on their concerns about the distributions and abuses of equity, justice and power that they see in their everyday lives. This included loss of community, loss of respect for each other and the environment, social forces that promote over-consumption, the lack of fairness implicit in economic systems, loss of positive social spaces for interaction, the continuation of colonial attitudes towards developing countries and fear of ‘where it is all going?’ [Grove-White and Szerszynski, 1992; Macnaghten and Urry, 1998]. As interviewees noted:

At one time there were villages and towns and in the main, villages
were a fairly close knit community where there was inter-reaction and inter-co-operation in terms of how you managed things and how you do things. Now that has all been blown away on the basis that everybody lives a fairly insular life. Because of the way my life is, I know very few people who actually live where I live (Male, North-west, Oct. 1998).

This lack of interaction and respect was linked to lack of respect for the (often local) environment. For example, interviewees were disappointed about the state of their towns, where: ‘There’s litter all over the place, nobody gives a damn!’ (Male, Bournemouth, Oct. 1997). Thus, they were not concerned with rationalising their own lifestyles, but rather with how these lifestyles were part of, and made a contribution to, ‘right’ ways of living, encapsulated in debates about lack of community, interaction and mutual respect. Ultimately these debates concerned the sites and allocations of who is responsible for creating positive social change.

**Arguing in Circles: The ‘Discursive Trap’ of Rationalising Consumption Practices**

With this in mind, it is clearer why so much behaviour is not ‘rationalised’ when individuals are exposed to new environmental information. There was little sign of an incorporation of an environmental preference or the awakening of a latent sense of environmental concern as framed by prevailing discourses. As participants became involved with Action at Home with the express purpose of being made to think, this is precisely what happened. That is, there were emergent inter- and intra-personal debates about what and why they can and cannot make consumption changes, which were inextricably bound up with broader arguments over social fairness and responsibility. As a result, not only did Action at Home fail to convince participants that it is dealing with what really matters to them, it also created a further distancing from the central messages of rationalisation.

For one, this was because the broad range of social and moral concerns that underpinned Action at Home participants’ involvement created a definite frustration at the static, limited and didactic nature of the environmental information provided in Action at Home. This was apparent through interviewees’ many comments on how ineffective and downright frustrating it was having to chart their lives, choices and limitations in questionnaires:

> I must admit there were a few areas where I was a bit critical of it and I’ve actually written hand-written notes on the forms as I was ticking the boxes (Male, Bournemouth, April 1998).
That sort of thing I feel you have to have a certain degree of your own autonomy over these things, you can’t follow the letter. But when you’re asked a straightforward question and then you are judged that you’ve got it wrong, you don’t have any chance to explain how you do the things (Female, Bournemouth, April 1998)

They also felt frustration at the way that the packs focused only on acts of consumption. Many felt that some recommended practices had no beneficial impacts on the environment whilst others felt they personally had no power whatsoever in the creating change in the market place. Some pointed out how being told to consume less was quite insulting when so many people can hardly afford to consume enough [Macnaghten and Jacobs, 1997], especially seen as many of the interviewees in Bournemouth were retirees and those in the North-west were sole earners in working class households. Indeed, some felt that there were more than just a few practices at stake and that, as outlined above, the sustainable consumption discourse was an attempt to normalise individuals’ practices. As one interviewee put it: ‘I think its not that simple, even something like where you buy your milk from, you are being pushed into a different lifestyle almost’ (Male, North-west, Jan. 1999).

Thus, any idea that consumption is about instrumentally meeting individual needs was rendered meaningless in light of the multiple purposes that contextual forms of consumption served. For example, acts of consumption were linked to personal history and meanings, routine, servitude, social aspirations, finding spaces of leisure in modern urban settings, expressions of identity, as well as the creating and servicing of personal relationships [e.g., Appadurai, 1986; Livingstone, 1992; Jackson, 1993; Miller, 1995, 1998; Pred, 1996; Slater, 1997]. Thus, trying to map a rationalisation approach on to this complex and often partially obscured pattern of meanings and practices appeared a pointless exercise. Lifestyles formed through a multitude of personal and historical processes were being forced into a narrow, one-dimensional frame of reference that had little to do with the day-to-day experiences of interviewees.

These reactions call into question the prevailing approach of using the citizen-consumer or environmental citizenship as a means of encouraging social change. Participants did not feel like neo-liberal free marketeers whose exercise of preferences in the market place is the embodiment of consumer sovereignty. Rather their concerns made them feel like ‘semi-citizens’ who viewed their own consumption practices as placing them in ambiguous position of political power. That is, the importance and enjoyment of what they do and buy was openly and often proudly acknowledged. At the same time, there was a sense of entrapment and powerlessness through being defined politically by the project of
consumption. For example,

I think it’s dreadful the way that supermarkets have taken over. When I go into a supermarket and ask for certain items, they say, ‘oh there isn’t the demand for it’ and I say, ‘well you haven’t asked me have you?’ You know I am always one of these consumers who has never been asked about anything (Female, Bournemouth, Oct. 1997).

On top of this, the narrow framing of the ‘environment’ alienated interviewees even further from the project of sustainable consumption. For one, information is often presented as definitive when interviewees were more than aware of its ambiguity: ‘And also so many environmental things aren’t so black and white’ (Male, North-west, Jan. 1999).

The ‘environment as nature’ had little resonance. The reality of socio-structural changes in society surpassed any ecological concerns, which were felt to have little relevance to urban existence:

The sorts of changes within society, particularly the last five years, has meant that people’s focus is totally different. I mean, this environment business is irrelevant. I’ve got far more important things to worry about than these things (Male, North-west, Oct. 1998).

As a result of these many discursive forces and counter-forces, Action at Home often had the opposite effect than intended. That is, not only did little behaviour change but also in the process of seeing the environment through the rationalisation approach to sustainable consumption, interviewees felt distanced and angered from the project. This created a ‘discursive trap’. That is, through having their concerns and interests aroused by reading through and thinking about both the personal and social implications of the information contained in the packs, many realised it had ‘little to do with them’ and that it did not really address what was wrong with society. The vested interests embodied in the packs suddenly seemed more pernicious and suspicions of hidden agendas were roused. Why were they being told what to do and how to live when governing institutions did little to address consumption issues? As one interviewee pointed out:

Politicians are swayed by the money and industry. Look at that silly [ex-US president Bill] Clinton, you know he can’t say boo to a goose. His environmental things are total rubbish because he’s been taken by the short hairs by the car industry and the oil (Female, Bournemouth, April 1998; own brackets).

Thus, the discourse of rationalising lifestyles presents itself to Action at Home participants like a form of social control through self-discipline [Darier, 1999a, 1999b] – ironically, the exact opposite of its neo-liberal
foundations. In doing so, it does not address the ‘bigger’ and more pressing social concerns presented in interviewees’ discourses, that talk about working towards, in policy and in practice, sustainable communities.

The Future of Sustainable Consumption: Reshaping Policy Perspectives and Enabling Spaces of Hope

The project of sustainable consumption, through its prevailing policy framing, appears to fundamentally misrepresent what matters to individuals in terms of social and environmental concerns. Instead of ‘doing more with less’, it appears that ‘making the most of what we potentially can all share’ is really at the heart of Action at Home participant’s concerns. This suggests that in its current guise, sustainable consumption will not effect real changes in people’s lives. Maybe this is the political intention. Even if it is not, relying on voluntary information and lifestyle initiatives will constantly create ‘discursive traps’ in individuals’ lives, by using consumer-orientated information presented in impersonal media to ask highly contextualised and socially embedded questions.

Can anything be done to save the project of sustainable consumption? It would be overly simplistic to suggest a simple ‘national governments should change their sustainable consumption discourses’ solution, as that would ignore the structural and political contexts that the current discourse coalition has emerged from, and is embedded within. The rationalisation of lifestyles can arguably be seen as embodying the state’s position within the current environmental paradigm. That is, although governments are still looked towards providing solutions for all social ills, there are serious limitations to how effective national regulatory institutions can be in dealing with ever-increasing magnitudes of risk [Gandy, 1999; Jordan and Brown, 1997]. For example, at the ‘Rio +5’ review in 1997, the national results from Agenda 21 were considered ‘meagre and inadequate’ [Buck et al., 2000]. This may be caused by lack of will and effort but also by the inherent difficulty of effecting subtle and often intangible social changes through unwieldy legislative and regulatory instruments.

Governments can be accused of side-stepping the real forces behind consumption issues, such as manufacturing, and using concepts of duty and responsibility to attempt to enforce obligations upon citizens. This was the overwhelming conclusion of Action at Home participants. Yet, placing sustainable consumption in its political context, it can also be argued that governments in high-income countries have been hoisted on their own petard and that of the global historicity of consumption and the rise of the nation state. They are, in effect, now attempting to (partially) close stable doors after the horses have bolted. With this is mind, it seems that an
ecological modernisation approach is the only reasonable path any high-income government can attempt to take in current political climes.

This does not mean that the alternate discourses of sustainable consumption should be ignored. Instead, the role of policy instruments should be reconsidered in relation to the concerns of individuals like Action at Home participants. As it stands, policy cannot legislate the subtleties of lifestyles, nor should it try. Instead, it could go some way to trying to breach the divide that exists between the disparate discourse of sustainability.

For example, there is no doubt that building strong and effective leadership can have positive effects on public perceptions of an issue, and if government were seen to be abiding by the principles of fairness and equity underlying alternate discourses of sustainable consumption, positive social capital could be built.

I think if councils and governments – I’m not saying everybody because you always get people who just aren’t bothered – but I think a lot of people would help them in return. If they saw that something was being done, it would stir your conscience and even if you were doing it for whatever reason, it doesn’t matter. The fact that you’re doing it, you’re doing it, aren’t you? But you’ve got to see people helping you (Male, North-west, Oct. 1998).

It has been argued elsewhere [Hobson, 2001b] that before government can tell people to do ‘their bit’ they have to be seen to be doing ‘their own bit’. What exactly this ‘bit’ entails is perhaps what citizen’s debates and ongoing discursive monitoring of governing institutions is concerned with [Sagoff, 1988]. Some suggest that creating forms of public-regulatory interaction that are less expert-driven and more inclusive would be one way to close the discourse divide between the governed and the governing (see Healey [1997]; Owens [2000]; Rydin and Pennington [2000] for further discussion). Another suggestion is to create and support institutions and organisations at the appropriate level of governance, to tackle sustainable society issues [Blake, 1999; Rydin and Greig, 1995; Stoll-Kleemann et al., 2001]. That is, if current policy instruments alone cannot hope to address the complexities and contingencies inherent in the alternate discourses of sustainable consumption, they can offer support, financially and morally, for organisations trying to address some of the concerns manifest in the Action at Home interviews.

For one, organisations like GAP are working to improve and develop their programmes to make them more engaging and effective, and to focus on the contexts of consumption. Yet it remains woefully under-funded. Campaign groups like Friends of the Earth, who aim to engage in constructive dialogues about working towards sustainable communities, are often publicly labelled
as subversive and essentially anti-government due to their non-mainstream agenda and approaches. Local or grassroots organisations flounder due to lack of support, both politically and in their communities. In short, at all levels of governance, the potential, will and skills to address some of the issues that make up the ‘alternate’ discourse of sustainable consumption detailed in this paper exist. These span spatial and virtual networks that no longer fit simply into ‘local’ or ‘national’ spatial categories [Murdoch and Marsden, 1995; Silk, 1999] but cut across forms of communities that are constantly forming around public issues of justice and fairness.

One overriding problem is that such communities are often viewed as essentially anti-government and thus, anti-social. Therefore, it is perhaps not only an issue of policy but also one of perspective. George Monbiot (Guardian Weekly, 26 July–1 Aug. 2001), draws an interesting distinction between different forms of political action. Islamic activists describe enthusiastic but intelligent anger as hammas (a term that has been adopted by the Palestinian freedom movement but that does not essentially represent its chosen forms of conduct). This stands in opposition to uncontrolled, stupid anger called hamoq. When individuals voice social concerns that are grounded in wanting to see a fairer world they can be seen to be expressing hammas. Yet, when individuals start to question practices, such as consumption, as a legitimate moral basis for social practices, state and international actors treat them as if expressing hamoq. Individuals such as the Action at Home participants do not want revolution or anarchy. Rather, they are echoing age-old concerns about equity, privilege and justice. Their pathways towards sustainable societies have little to do with rationalising consumption practices or with exercising their alleged citizen-consumer power. Rather, it is about creating ‘spaces of hope’ (to paraphrase Harvey [2000]) for a fairer future, spaces that governing institutions have the potential to help create and foster. Yet many feel these spaces are currently marginalised by prevailing approaches to issues such as sustainable consumption and thus, as social actors, they will continue to remain distanced from these projects.

NOTES

1. However, this polarised distinction between north and south is now being reconsidered as multi-national companies are increasingly turning their attention to capturing the emergent markets of the four billion poor of the world out of ‘enlightened self-interest’ (Slavin, Guardian Weekly, 5–11 April 2001), with consumption levels in developing countries increasing. As a result it becomes more apparent that there needs to be constructive dialogue between north and south about how to achieve sustainable consumption at a global level [Grover et al., 2001].

2. This project still suggests that the role of local government in creating sustainable societies is to ‘inform consumers about environmental issues’ [Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 1998b]. Added to this, the Labour government has been criticised
by environmentalist, trade unionists and left-wing commentators for doing very little concrete to combat social exclusion and poverty in the UK, which remains high by comparative European standards [Gordon, 2000].

3. These companies were the electricity company Norweb in Preston, Lancashire; North-West Water in Warrington, Cheshire and British Aerospace in Warton, Lancashire.

4. He is talking about the ‘welcome’ questionnaire, received at the start of the Action at Home programme.

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COMPETING DISCOURSES OF SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION


COMPETING DISCOURSES OF SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION


Slavin, Terry (2001), ‘The Poor are Consumers Too’, *Guardian Weekly*, 5–11 April, p.27.