

Consuming Paradise?

unsustainable consumption in cultural and social-psychological context

by Tim Jackson

in

Hubacek, K, A Inaba and S Stagl 2004. *Driving Forces of and Barriers to Sustainable Consumption*, Proceedings of an International Workshop, Leeds, 5th-6th March, 9-26.

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‘An individual’s main objective in consumption is to help to create the social universe and to find in it a creditable place.’

Douglas (1976: 207)

Behind the Consumer Society: Commonality and Difference

We are living in a consumer society. To say this, is not just to make obvious points about the massive expansion in the availability of consumer goods in developed economies over the last fifty years. It is not just to point to the structural reliance of those economies on consumption growth, or even to highlight the extensive commercialisation of previously public goods and services. All these things are important. But almost certainly there is more going on. Fundamental aspects of our cultural identity are different now from what they were a hundred and fifty or two hundred years ago. Modern consumer society has its own logic, its own dynamics, its own epistemologies and ethics, its own myths and cosmologies. And all of these are identifiably different from those of other times and places (Baudrillard 1970, Baumann 1998, Campbell 1987 & 2003, Cushman 1992, Giddens 1991, Robbins 2002, Taylor 1989).

None of this is very surprising. What defines culture is difference. Anthropologists and sociologists would be surprised – and worse still out of a job – if different societies at different times were all found to operate in pretty much the same way, under the same logics and the same narratives. At the same time, most social sciences – including anthropology and sociology, and almost certainly psychology – would founder if it were not possible to regard at least some aspects of human functioning as common across even quite striking cultural differences. At the very least, these sciences would be absolutely useless to us in understanding either society or human motivation if it were not possible to identify some features of both that could be regarded if not as strictly constant, then at least as evolving rather slowly over time.

A part of the aim of this paper is to illustrate how this ability to negotiate between commonality and difference is vital to an understanding of (unsustainable) consumer society. It is also as I shall argue extremely useful in helping us to develop policies for a sustainable society. The substantive part of my paper however is to argue in favour of four inter-related social-psychological ‘propositions’ which I hope can help us both to understanding unsustainable consumption and to further sustainable consumption.

The Naming of Names

Before elaborating these propositions, however, let me illustrate this balance between commonality and difference with two specific examples, whose relevance will I hope become clear later on.

The first example comes from anthropology. Anthropologists have always placed a good deal of importance on the existence and functioning of exchange rituals. Gift-giving, barter, trade, betrothal, slavery, dowry, the ‘droit de seigneur’, human sacrifice, and the swapping of football cards amongst (usually male) teenagers: these are all examples of exchange rituals. There are often striking differences between the particular kinds of ritual which predominate and the forms these exchanges take in different cultural groups. Indeed, these operational differences can be as profound as whether private property rights are or are not recognised within a particular group;

whether the rights of the individual are more or less important than the rights of the group; or, more spectacularly, whether one cultural group recognises the basic rights of another cultural group at all – as for example in the case of slavery. But the importance of exchange, its relevance to kin relations within the family, to social relations within the group and to the defining of similarities and differences with other groups is taken as read. In other words, exchange is regarded as a necessary pre-requisite for certain kinds of social functioning – in all societies (Levi-Strauss 1949, Douglas 1976, Douglas and Isherwood 1980).

A second example of the balance between commonality and difference is provided by the concept of social or psychological ‘anomie’ – a potentially catastrophic ‘loss of meaning’ that can threaten the stability both of society and of individuals within society. Sociologists and social philosophers have paid considerable attention to this phenomenon ever since Durkheim’s work on suicide. But they have also emphasised the countervailing force of ‘nomization’ – a continuing social process of meaning creation and maintenance that is essential to keep anomie at bay – both at the personal and at the social level. Meaning is created, maintained and sometimes destroyed through a variety of different kinds of social and institutional processes and relations, including personal and social identity, nationalism, communalism, kin relations, governance, cultural narratives and various forms of religious structure and organisation (Berger 1967, Camus 1966, Durkheim 1897, Giddens 1991, Weber).

The specific forms of these processes again differ widely in different societies. In one society organised religion plays a key role. In another society anomie may be kept at bay through strong nationalism and binding institutions. In yet another, meaning is negotiated via myths, story-telling and forms of folk religion. What these societies hold in common is their aim of negotiating meaning and staving off anomie.

The two examples are connected. One of the key avenues of nomization – as the etymological roots of the word indicate – is the ‘exchange of names’ (Levi-Strauss 1949). When male teenagers (and sometimes grown men) exchange pictures of their favourite football players, or engage in hours of banter regarding the latest exploits of their favourite team, they are – to use Mary Douglas’ (1976) phrase ‘enjoying the conversation of names’. When a whole nation unites behind a particularly skillful fly-half who has dramatically clinched victory in a world cup competition by drop-kicking a spectacular goal in the dying minutes of extra-time – they are engaging in a process of nomization: the maintenance of social and cultural meaning – pursued through the collective recognition and repetition of a name: in this case, of course, Jonny Wilkinson.

And just in case we find ourselves tempted to dismiss this kind of activity as puerile and beneath contempt, we should perhaps pause to recognise that ‘sustainable consumption’ is itself a name. There is a sense in which what we are engaged in here at this workshop is an exchange ritual. And much of what we exchange here, in addition to erudite papers, constructive comments and the occasional ascerbic barb, can be construed as a process of nomization. As a research community, we define ourselves around a name, ‘sustainable consumption’, and set of ideas expressed in a common language which for us provide a framework of meaning within which communication is possible. And if you think carefully about this name, sustainable consumption, you will find that it only really makes sense within a particular context:

the context of a certain community, operating in a particular history of policy development and dialogue, and probably within a limited period of time.

But my point here is not to deconstruct the underlying anthropological nature of the sustainable consumption debate. It is rather to illustrate how anthropology and sociology and psychology continually negotiate between commonality and difference, between underlying psychological, sociological or anthropological concepts and processes (for example: exchange, anomie, nomization) and historically and culturally contingent social phenomena (such as football cards, rugby matches and sustainable consumption workshops). To be more precise what these sciences help us to do is to understand contingent phenomena in terms of underlying processes.

A Proposition about Human Functioning

But let me proceed straight to the first of my propositions about these underlying processes. This is something I have in a sense already primed you for. In my 'naming of names' example, I already suggested that both anthropologists and sociologists recognise the importance of exchange to certain social and psychological processes. My first proposition is a social psychological proposition that links these processes to human motivation.

Proposition 1: The motivations of human beings can be construed in terms of a variety of common 'functionings'.

It would be hard to believe from a casual observation that this seemingly innocuous proposition is in fact an attempt to negotiate an extraordinary minefield of disagreements both within and outside the discipline of psychology. You might perhaps be able to recognise the source of these disagreements if I replaced the word 'functionings' with the word 'needs'. In fact, in this form, Proposition 1 would look very much like something that characterised the development of social psychology for around the first sixty or seventy years of the twentieth century. From William McDougall's early characterisation of instincts to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, social psychology has made a series of concerted efforts to understand motivation in terms of underlying needs. And it might have made a lot of sense for me to phrase my proposition in terms of needs, precisely because the discourse of needs is something that sustainable development is broadly familiar with (WCED 1987).

Unfortunately, that discourse attracts as much criticism as it does praise, particularly amongst anthropologists and sociologists (whom I would, for the moment at least, like to keep on-side). These social scientists tend to accuse proponents of needs theories of a variety of crimes. Baudrillard (1968), for example, argues that the whole needs discourse is a 'naïve and absurd moralism'. And Campbell (1998) suggests that the use of the word need is a purely rhetorical device whose aim is to impute moral legitimacy to the object of the alleged need. The claim 'I need a pair of Nike trainers' appears to carry more moral weight than the statement 'I want a pair of Nike trainers' or 'I desire a pair of Nike trainers' and to offer greater moral legitimacy to sweatshop labour in the process!

As recently pointed out in a paper which I jointly authored with Sigrid Stagl and Wander Jager (Jackson et al 2004), there is a sense in which these arguments are missing a critical distinction – highlighted by later needs theorists such as Mallmann

(1980) and Max Neef (1992) – between needs and satisfiers. But for the sake of avoiding this by-now almost intractable argument, I have couched Proposition 1 in terms of functionings.

Interestingly, this language was offered to the debate by nobel laureate Amartya Sen (1984) precisely in order to avoid using the word need. So it clearly fits the job I intend it for. And it is relatively easy to see that what Amartya Sen had in mind in talking about functionings is not dissimilar to what needs theorists had in mind in using the term needs. So for example we can talk about healthy or effective physical or physiological functioning. Or equivalently we can talk about the need for subsistence or protection (Maslow's physiological needs). We can talk about social and psychological functioning or we can talk about needs for identity, participation, affection, belonging and so on (to use Max Neef's (1992) categories). Participation and belonging are means of social functioning just as nutrition and protection are means of physiological functioning.

It is already clear from this discussion that the range of functionings in which we might be interested is more than purely material. Healthy physical functioning is essential to survival of the organism, and requires certain minimal nutritional inputs, and material requirements for physical protection – clothing, houses, and so on. But as any cursory overview of the basket of consumption goods of the modern household will reveal, our consumption habits motivated as much by social and psychological factors as by purely physiological ones.

For the purposes of discussion, I want to distinguish here five possible interrelated kinds of functioning in which we might be interested. These are illustrated in Figure 1. Interestingly, not all of these functionings find a corresponding category in the needs theoretic frameworks. For example, reproductive functioning is not included in either Maslow's hierarchy or in Max Neef's categorisation. And yet, one of the key lessons from evolutionary psychology (Jackson 2002) is that reproductive functioning offers some explanation for motivations – and in particular for consumer motivations – which have the character and flavour of sexual desire (Baumann 1998, Belk et al 2003, Campbell 1987). In fact, noone who has been living on planet earth for any length of time could doubt that we are motivated – in no small measure – by reproductive functioning!

The fifth element in my framework – spiritual functioning – may look a little unusual too. It is perhaps questionable to some whether human motivations have anything to do with spiritual functioning – or indeed whether there is any such thing as spiritual functioning, as distinct from psychological or social functioning, at all. On the other hand, the self-actualisation need – in Maslow's terminology – and transcendence – offered as a possible tenth need in Max Neef framework – clearly have some suggestion of functioning that transcends social-psychological functioning. So for the moment at least, I would like to retain the possibility that spiritual functioning is an identifiably distinct component in the mix.

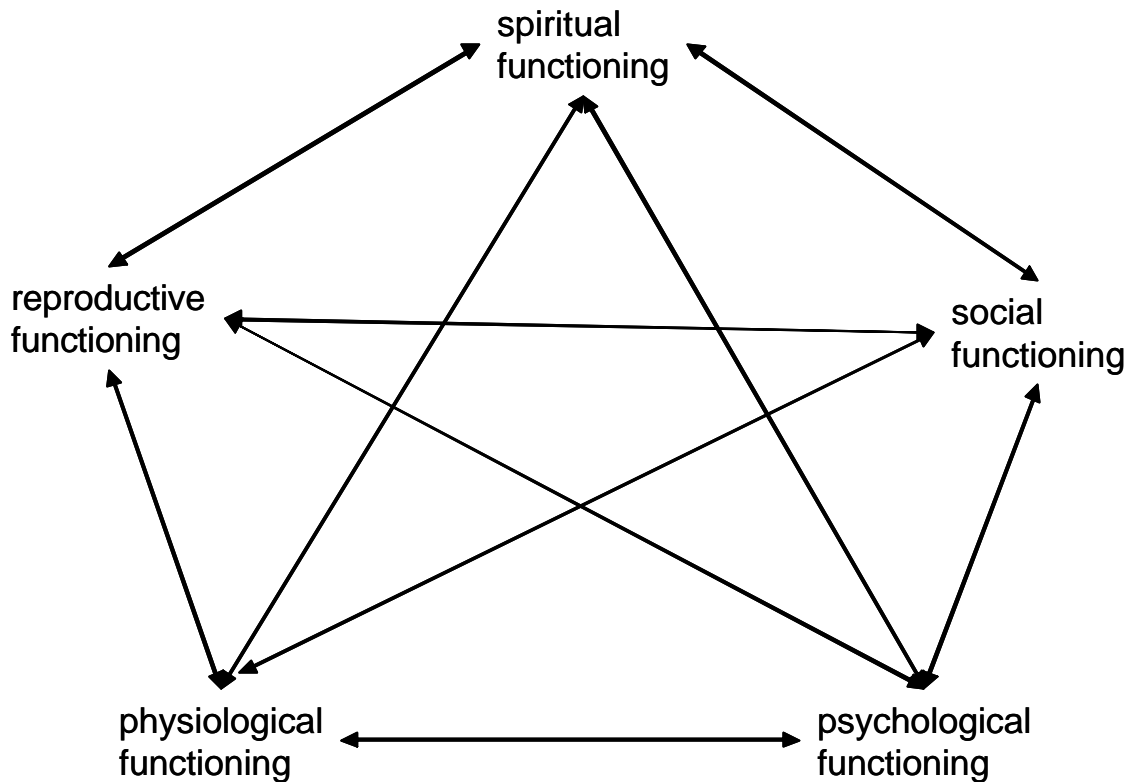


Figure 1: Five inter-related forms of human functioning

It might be tempting to suggest that some of these kinds of functioning – for instance physiological or reproductive – are more important in terms of underlying motivations than others. After all if we don't get enough food, we die. If we don't reproduce, the species dies. However, there is strong evidence to suggest that good social and psychological functioning is also key to survival and continuance. One of the key reasons for the sociological interest in *anomie*, was to begin to understand why apparently healthy individuals would commit suicide in spite of good physiological health (Durkheim 1897). Lessons from evolutionary psychology on social positioning indicate that higher social status is allied with increased chances of bearing healthy progeny, and increased chances of them surviving (Wright 1994). Recent work on the relationship between health and inequality has suggested that those in lower income groups suffer higher health risks not simply because they have worse access to basic services but also because of the psychological stresses associated with being in a lower position in the 'pecking order' (Wilkinson 2000).

This evidence illustrates an important aspect of this model of functioning: namely that the different types of functioning are all strongly inter-related. For example, anthropological evidence suggests a key role for social relations in providing resilience in the face of physical shocks (Douglas and Isherwood 1980). In the case of an emergency – the lights go out, unemployment looms, a loved one dies – the strength of our social relationships can make the difference between a successful transition to a secure new support base and a potentially disastrous collapse of the support mechanisms that guarantee full physiological functioning. Social functioning is important not just for its own sake but because it contributes to physiological and reproductive functioning. That social and psychological functioning are strongly inter-related is a point I shall return to below.

A Life without Shame

At this juncture, and before proceeding to my second proposition, it is worth pausing briefly to explore briefly the relation between functioning types and material requirements. This after all is of paramount interest to us from the point of view of sustainable consumption. We would clearly like to know how much or how little material consumption we can get away with in seeking to achieve healthy functioning in these various categories. And in particular it is vital to contemplate whether we could get away with less material consumption without impairing different levels and kinds of functioning.

At a first glance, it would appear that only one kind of functioning – physiological – demands, *a priori*, given levels of material inputs: specifically, of course, as I have already mentioned: food, water, clothing and shelter. There seems no *a priori* reason to suppose that social, psychological or spiritual functionings require material inputs. Belongingness, affection, transcendence, for example, do not obviously and necessarily appear to be mediated by material goods – although clearly in our society they often are.

Perhaps more interestingly, there is now an intriguing body of evidence to suggest that healthy psychological and social functioning may actually be impaired by high levels of materialism (Kasser 2002). In fact, this suggestion has provided the basis for a long-standing critique of materialism that had its roots in the debate between the Stoics and Epicureans about the nature of happiness several millennia ago. This critique was renewed with some vigour in the neo-Marxist critiques of industrial society that populated the first half of the twentieth century. And the same basic idea still informs many modern green critiques today: far from being necessary to our survival, materialism threatens our environment, engenders inequality and does not even make us happy.

If this were the whole story, it would be a very happy state of affairs for sustainable consumption. Reducing material consumption would not only protect the environment it would also make us all happier. We could all live better by consuming less. Unfortunately, things are not so simple, as Sen himself has pointed out. In a passage harking back to something Adam Smith (1776) once said about the desire to live a ‘life without shame’, Sen (1998, 298) argues that:

‘To lead a life without shame, to be able to visit and entertain one’s friends, to keep track of what is going on and what others are talking about, and so on, requires a more expensive bundle of goods and services in a society that is generally richer and in which most people have, say, means of transport, affluent clothing, radios or television sets, and so on... The same absolute level of capabilities may thus have a greater relative need for incomes (and commodities).

Sen is clearly saying something recognisable about modern consumer society: namely that in this particular society we do appear to require a more expensive bundle of goods and services in order to carry out the functions he identifies. And we could certainly at this stage agree – provided that we accept Proposition 1 – that these functions are themselves fundamental aspects of human motivation. At the same time there is something unsatisfactory in Sen’s explanation. Or rather, it is not really an explanation at all, merely a description of a contingent state of affairs: we behave this

way in rich societies, because this is what rich societies are like, Sen seems to be saying.

The clue to enabling us to get beyond this, I contend, lies in the word ‘shame’. Shame is both an affective and a cognitive construct – an emotion and an idea. Certainly we *feel* shame – but usually as a result of cognitive responses to a specific situation. Equally importantly, however, this ‘shameful’ situation is always an interpersonal one. In feeling shame, an individual is responding to a relationship between his or her individual actions and others or the expectations of others. Shame defines itself *between* the individual and the group. It is also, vitally, a key signifier of the boundary between meaning and anomie – a point to which I return below. This apparently innocuous appeal to ‘a life without shame’ thus points us to an absolutely vital element in the search for an understanding of unsustainable consumption: the relationship between self and other.

A Proposition about Self and Other

A little reflection shows that shame is not unique in this sense. Pride, approval, disapproval, loyalty, envy, belonging, affection, even disaffection and hate: these are all negotiations between self and other, between the individual and their peer group. The injunction to a life without shame is one that demands that we look to our relationships with others in pursuit of healthy functioning. We are driven, in other words, towards an undeniable overlap of social and psychological functioning, and to a second key proposition in support of our understanding of consumer society.

Proposition 2: The self is socially constructed.

This overlap between social and psychological functioning is, once again, a key contribution from the field of social psychology. One of the earliest and most influential writers to make this relationship between self and other explicit was George Herbert Mead. For Mead (1934), both the mind and the concept of self arise out of a fundamentally social process: communication. He distinguished two evolutionary phases in the communicational processes of species. The first phase he called the ‘conversation of gestures’ which he described through the now-famous analogy of a dog-fight:

‘Dogs approaching each other in hostile attitude carry on such a language of gestures. They walk around each other, growling and snapping, and waiting for the opportunity to attack... The act of each dog becomes the stimulus to the other dog for his response. There is then a relationship between these two; and as an act is responded to by the other dog, it, in turn, undergoes change. The very fact that the dog is ready to attack another becomes a stimulus to the other dog to change his position or his own attitude. He has no sooner done this than the change of attitude in the second dog in turn causes the first dog to change his attitude. We have here a conversation of gestures.’

This essentially unconscious process – prosecuted through gestures that are recognised only implicitly by the participants in the conversation – is to be distinguished from what Mead called the ‘conversation of significant gestures’ in which participants in the conversation remain not only fully aware that they are participating in a conversation, but must also gain familiarity with the ‘significant symbols’ (ie language) through which communication occurs. This transition from the conversation of gestures to the conversation of significant gestures is an evolutionary process. Only in humans, according to Mead, is a conversation of significant gestures possible.

It is clear from his writing that Mead is thinking of the conversation of significant gestures mainly in terms of language itself. However, it is in principle possible to envisage linguistic processes that are not carried out in full consciousness or awareness. The concept of cognitive scripts that facilitate more or less habitual communicational responses – even in language – blurs the distinction between significant and non-significant gestures. Likewise, we can in principle conceive of non-linguistic ‘conversations’ in which it is possible to retain a level of awareness or reflexivity on the process itself. For example, clever use of ‘body language’ is not always unconscious. Just ask the cat-walk model!

Aside from these subtleties however, Mead’s concept of a conversation of gestures is still a useful one for understanding processes of social communication. In humans, according to Mead, the conversation of significant gestures – ie conscious or aware communication – supercedes – although it never entirely replaces – the unconscious conversation of gestures. That we communicate both consciously and unconsciously through these social conversations has important implications to which I shall return below.

The most important aspect of Mead’s ideas about communication is their implication for the concept of self and for identity. For Mead (1934, 135), the self only exists as a result of conversations of significant gestures.

‘The self is something which has a development; it is not there at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his [sic] relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals in that process’.

The self only exists in relation to social conversation. Personal identity, in other words, is an emergent property of inherently social relations. In Mead’s view this emergent self plays an essentially evolutionary role. It is there to support the cohesion of the group. And it is able to achieve this precisely because it is a result of social conversations. These social conversations provide the mechanism both for negotiating and for internalising (in personal identity) the values, attitudes and beliefs of the social group. At the same time, it is clear that the concept of the self also plays a key role in negotiating and perpetuating culture. Cultural norms are internalised in individuals by way of social conversations.

The relationship is a dialectical one. Some of those conversations may, subtly and over relatively long periods of time, shift, mould and fashion the cultural beliefs themselves. Without this dialectic, culture itself would remain essentially static. But by the same token, the process of cultural transition can never be one that is within the gift of any one individual. Indeed, at the individual level – and sometimes even at the societal level – cultural transition is an inherently violent process. It threatens the entire meaning-structure on which social cohesion depends. For an individual to challenge this, as many would-be revolutionaries have discovered – is to invite resounding punishment.

There is a clear link here to the conversation of names alluded to above. Indeed, the retribution inflicted on dissenters and revolutionaries has something in common with the violence inflicted by one set of football fans on another. The conversation of names defines a social territory. To know and to applaud a particular name or set of names defines allegiance to a territory, and membership of a social group. To

challenge those names is to invite hostility from that group. What appears at one level puerile is, at another level, a powerful agent for social stability and the repression of dissent – as Bourdieu (1984) has pointed out.

The Boundaries of Rationality

The implications of this view for understanding consumer society are quite profound. In the first place, of course, it undermines key principles of modernity, such as the centrality of individuality and individual choice. The suggestion implicit in Proposition 2 is that individualism is in some sense a kind of myth. Methodological individualism – which holds that it is individuals operating as more or less unilateral agents under the influence of largely free choice who determine behavioural patterns – looks almost entirely untenable under the assumptions of Proposition 2.

Instead we must look to social processes, social conversations, interactions between self and other as being absolutely vital influences on behaviour at both individual and social level. None of this is to deny the existence of individual cognitive deliberations. But it all points to the limits of deliberative processes, and the centrality of social influence at the heart of those deliberations.

An immediate casualty of this position is the rational choice model that lies behind most economic analyses of consumer choice. The economic model suggests that people make choices on the basis of a cognitive deliberation over private costs and benefits. Provided that certain conditions hold – in particular the availability of ‘perfect’ information – then such choices are assumed to be in the best interest of the individuals (ie ‘rational’) and therefore to be robust guide to actual behaviour. The failure of the model in real life – people rarely behave as economists might wish them to – is usually attributed to either a lack of information, or else to the existence of a series of ‘hidden’ costs and benefits that act as barriers or perverse incentives at the individual level.

The policy prescriptions that flow from the rational choice model tend to be relatively few and relatively straightforward. Typically policy-makers are enjoined either to improve information flows (eg through labelling, information campaigns and so on) or else to use financial incentives and disincentives to shift the balance between individual costs and benefits to reflect the existence of hidden social costs and benefits.

The limited success of such interventions is one of the reasons for a resurgence of interest in understandings of consumer behaviour and public attitudes. From the social-psychological perspective outlined here, limited success is only to be expected. The individual is constrained in taking pro-environmental or pro-social action by a variety of important factors. In addition to the economic and physical constraints that are conventionally acknowledged, the individual must negotiate his or her own conflicting motivations in terms of the functionings defined in Figure 1. But in negotiating these, he or she is bound as much by the social fabric in which self is negotiated as by purely ‘personal’ constraints.

A Proposition about the Symbolic Role of Artefacts

Again, it is worth pausing here briefly to raise the question of materiality. What does this social conception of self tell us about our relationship to material goods? Interestingly, it does not yet tell us much. Of course, the fact that our identities are

socially constructed offers an insight into the vital importance of social and psychological functioning and some understanding of the interaction between these two. And as we have already seen social functioning has strong links to physiological functioning.

We also know, from experience, that identity is a key driver of material consumption in modern society (Gabriel and Lang 1995, Baumann 1998). But this appears on the surface to be only a contingent fact. It does not yet allow us to understand the underlying process which gave rise to this feature of modernity. We cannot yet understand this key difference of modern consumer society from its predecessors in terms of any underlying commonality with them. To make sense of the way in which the social construction of modern identity relies so heavily on material goods we need a third key proposition, namely that:

Proposition 3: Material artefacts embody symbolic meanings.

Over the second half of the 20th Century, the insight that material artefacts possess symbolic properties has become an increasingly important defining feature of sociological debates about consumption (Dittmar 1992, Miller 1995). The hypothesis itself has arisen from the confluence of some rather diverse intellectual influences including the semiotics of Charles Morris (1946), the structuralism of Roland Barthes (1966), the social philosophy of Baudrillard (1968, 1970), the social anthropology of Marshall Sahlins (1976) and Mary Douglas (1976), and the consumer and motivation research of Ernest Dichter (1964), Elizabeth Hirschmann and Morris Holbrook (1980), Russell Belk (1988) and others.

It would be impossible to do justice to the breadth and scope of this literature here. Nonetheless, the most important lesson from this huge body of work is very clear. Material commodities are important to us, not just for what they do, but for what they signify: about us, about our lives, our loves, our desires, about our successes and failings, about our hopes and our dreams. Material goods are not just artefacts. Nor do they offer purely functional benefits. They derive their importance, in part at least, from their symbolic role in mediating and communicating personal, social, and cultural meaning not only to others but also to ourselves.

The anthropological evidence for this symbolic role is perhaps the most interesting and most persuasive, in particular because it suggests that the symbolic role of artefacts considerably precedes modernity. Anthropological evidence for the cultural role of artefacts as symbols can be found in a wide variety of societies over long periods of time. Goods play key symbolic roles in exchange rituals, and have done for many millennia, as Levi-Strauss (1949) first pointed out. Douglas (1976, 206) points in particular to their role in the provision of what she calls 'marking services'.

'First, let us assume that the ultimate object of consumption activity is to enter a social universe whose processes consist of matching goods to classes of social occasions. Second, for entry into such a universe, the individual needs the services of fellow consumers. These services are either in the form of personal attendance at consumption events or of material contributions of goods (eg flowers) and their object is to create or confirm a grading of the occasion.'

Douglas' description of this process points to the apparent arbitrariness and unpredictability with which particular goods are associated with particular meanings,

and their value in terms of grading social activities. At one point it might be a particular brand of fine wine, at another a particular composer. These values both determine and are determined by social exchanges. In a sense the exchange of goods (and values) achieved in marketing services is quite precisely a conversation of gestures. The symbolic role attributed by human beings to material artefacts creates a whole new realm of symbols which become the subject and the object of whole new social conversations.

Whether these conversations are significant – in Mead’s sense – is a very interesting question. Given that material goods operate as symbols, and that the formation of symbols appears to require particular creative faculties that belong within the realm of awareness, then presumably Mead would have answered this question in the affirmative. However, there is also plenty of evidence to suggest that our everyday responses to symbolic signals occur at a sub- or semi-conscious level. We may be fully aware, at some level, that – as one respondent in Belk, Ger and Askegaard’s (2003) lovely study on consumer desire pointed out – ‘noone’s gonna spot you across a crowded room and say, “wow! nice personality!”’ But that doesn’t mean that we literally and consciously ‘clock’ every visual signal carried by material objects at every moment of our waking lives.

Sometimes our sense of whether we do or do not belong in a certain group is nothing more than an uncomfortable feeling of displacement. In all probability, it swept over us almost instantly upon entering the room, conveyed by a myriad subtle but undeniable visual signals: the clothes we were wearing, the clothes others were wearing, their demeanour, their haircuts, the way they tied their shoes, the shade of wallpaper on the walls, the kind of pictures hanging there, the fabric of the upholstery on the chairs.

Thus the conversation of gestures opened up to us through the symbolic role of material goods is one that is neither fully aware, nor fully unconscious. As such it protects itself with a peculiarly powerful veil of ‘collective misrecognition’ (to use Bourdieu’s phrase). We ‘know’ intellectually that the symbolic nature of goods plays an important role in social conversations. But we do not carry this awareness into every such conversation with us. And we seldom articulate it in a fully conscious conversation of ideas. As such, the symbolic conversation of gestures embodied in the use, exchange and trade of material goods presents us with an incredibly difficult domain for policy intervention. I shall return to this difficulty in the final section of the paper.

The key point here is this: that in facilitating an entire ‘new’ realm of social conversation (ie separate from the realm of animal gestures and separate from the ‘significance’ of the linguistic realm), the symbolic meanings of material artefacts fits them perfectly for an absolutely vital role in social and psychological functioning. Moreover, this is not – as some observers have suggested – a defining feature of modernity. The symbolic role of commodities was ever employed in this way.

Symbolic self-completion

There are few places where the symbolic character of material commodities is more naked to the popular scrutiny than in the case of the automobile, which has long been recognised as far more than a means of getting from one place to another. In spite of an equally popular disdain for the fact – cars have come to symbolise (for their

owners at least) a wide variety of cultural ‘goods’: social status, sexual prowess, personal power, freedom, and creativity (Freund and Martin 1994, Haggett 2000). Like many other material artefacts, they are now deeply imbued with cultural meaning, as the New York columnist Benjamin Stein cleverly illustrates:

Sometimes I test myself. We have an ancient, battered Peugeot, and I drive it for a week. It rarely breaks, and it gets great mileage. But when I pull up next to a beautiful woman, I am still the geek with the glasses. Then I get back into the Porsche. It roars and it tugs to get moving. It accelerates even going uphill at 80... It makes me feel like a tomcat on the prowl.. with the girls I shall never see again pulling up next to me, giving the car a once-over, and looking at me as if I were a cool guy, not a worried, over-extended, 40-year-old schnook writer (Stein 1995).

But the task of constructing and maintaining symbolic value – like the task of constructing and maintaining an identity – is a fundamentally social one. Symbols – like identity – are by their nature socially constructed. The value attached to symbols is constantly negotiated and re-negotiated through social interactions within a specific cultural context (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998). In the hands of certain sociologists and social philosophers, this insight has become the basis for a quite specific view of consumer society. According to this view, the individual consumer is locked into a continual process of constructing and reconstructing personal identity in the context of a continually renegotiated universe of social and cultural symbols.

Giddens (1991) points to the ‘dilemmas of the self’ faced by the individual in modern society, and the opportunities that modernity appears to offer for ‘symbolic self-completion’ (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982) through the continually enlarging choice of consumer goods. McCracken (1990) points out how effectively consumer goods embody displaced meaning – allowing us to pursue our highest ideals, by embedding them in consumer goods, without ever exposing the ideals themselves to the withering light of scrutiny. Baumann (1998) points to the convenient resonances between the process of perpetual reconstruction of identity, and the impermanent, transient nature of modern consumer goods. ‘Aggregate identities, loosely arranged of the purchasable, not-too-lasting, easily detachable and utterly replaceable tokens currently available in the shops,’ he writes, ‘Seem to be exactly what one needs to meet the challenges of contemporary living.’ Cushman (1992) postulates that this ‘empty self’ which is constantly in need of ‘filling up’ is a cultural artefact generated quite explicitly by and for the commercialism of modern society.

Once again, however, it is worth pointing out that the fundamental basis for this process – the symbolic conversation of gestures inherent in material use and exchange – is not unique to modernity. In the light of the anthropological and social-psychological understandings of the preceding sections, we must see symbolic self-completion as an essential feature of the human condition. And we must regard the use of material artefacts in this process as something with long roots in antiquity. Indeed, it appears that Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) construed symbolic self-completion in precisely this way. Narrative identity theory (Ricoeur 1984, 1992) also casts the problem of symbolic identity construction as a task common to the human condition. Jenkins (1996) emphasises how this task must be continually validated through social interaction. We are born, in some sense incomplete. We are faced as human beings with the project of social-symbolic self-completion. We use whatever resources are available to us for this project.

Clearly, the precise nature of those resources may differ from one society to another. In one society, symbolic self-completion may primarily occur through the social-symbolic importance attached to particular trades and capabilities. In another, it might be pursued mainly through the exchange of mythical social roles and narratives (Campbell 1959). What characterises our society, in the eyes of Baumann, Giddens, McCracken and others, is that symbolic self-completion is mainly pursued through the consumption of material goods imbued with symbolic meaning. But the project itself (Figure 2) is common across all societies.

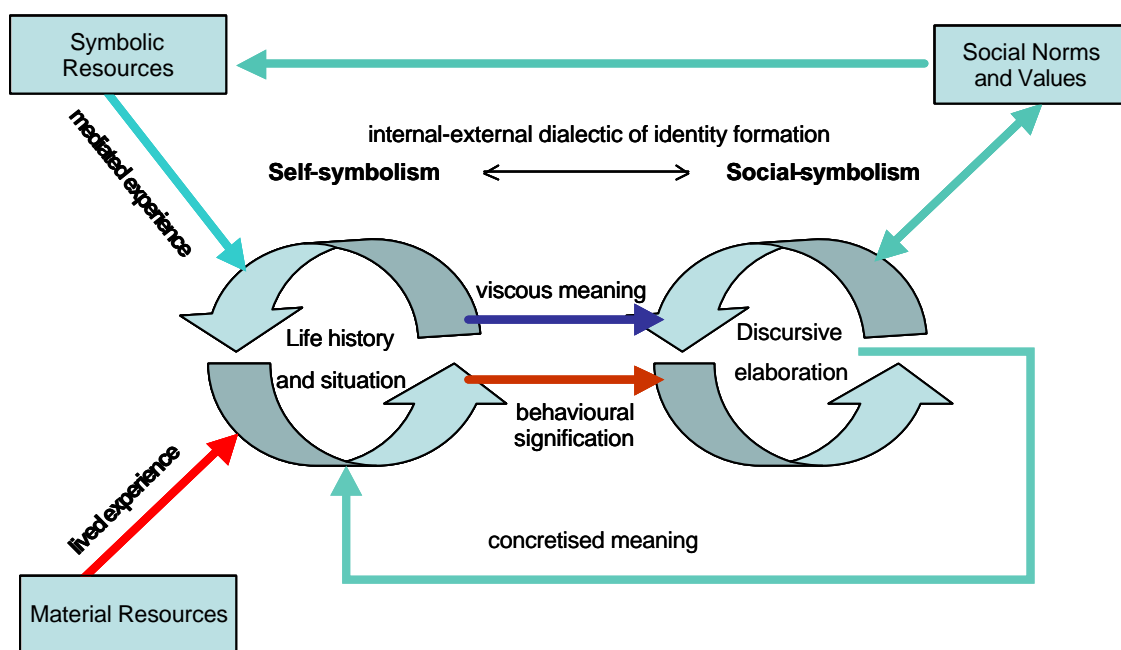


Figure 2: The social-symbolic construction of identity
(adapted from Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998)

A Proposition about Consumer Society

My final proposition is one that in some sense I have been building up to throughout this paper, and should come as little or no surprise to the reader, although it operates at a slightly different level than the other three propositions. It is a proposition about the nature of consumer society.

Proposition 4: Consumer society is a cultural defence against *anomie*.

In one sense, this is a fairly empty proposition. As we have already seen, and has been argued with enormous cogence by Berger (1967) in particular, *every* society is a defence against *anomie*. The evolutionary role of social structure is precisely to provide the social rules and institutions that preserve the integrity of the society in question and defend it against shocks and intrusions. Perhaps most importantly, these institutions must provide for nomization – the continual creation and protection of meaning – and defend against *anomie* – the ever-present threat of loss of meaning.

These threats to meaning occur in a variety of ways. For example, they can occur through the external influence of another cultural group. They can occur in addition through rogue elements – the disenfranchised, dispossessed and occasionally the purely sociopathic elements – within the given group or society itself. They also occur as a matter of course both at the individual level and at the social level through

disaster, personal and collective loss, bereavement, and the ever-present threat of personal mortality.

Collective loss – the recent earthquake in Iran, the Lockerbie bomb, the attack on the World Trade towers – is in a sense the polar opposite of Jonny Wilkinson's last minute drop-goal in the rugby world cup. A sense of helplessness and futility pervades our responses to such crises. All the collective meanings that we hold dear – our nationhood, our sense of cultural pride, our belief in progress, our adherence to the stability of global markets, our faith in humanity, our faith in the divine – all these things tremble and shake under the influence of such tragedies. That they are perhaps less common as occurrences in modern society (at least in the West) does not for a moment reduce the threat they pose, nor the efforts we take to create meaning structures with which to defend ourselves from them.

The same is true at the personal level, where interestingly there is only a rather marginal diminution in the frequency and severity of this kind of loss. There is less infant mortality. There is, in the West at least, less in the way of apocalyptic wars. Children seldom die in infancy now. Parents do not generally outlast their children. But the ever-present prospect of our own mortality and those of many of our relatives and friends still confronts our meaning-structures with a formidable task: how to ensure healthy functioning in the face of personal and social *anomie*.

In modern society, there is very little in the way of discussion of the social significance of this kind of meaning-threat outside the remnants of religious discourse, and the reflections of a few psychologists and sociologists (Becker 1973). Fortunately, however, the rather lengthy history of the concept of *anomie* within sociology, and the equally impressive discussion of rituals within anthropology provide us with a rich source of evidence for the importance of these issues to the structure and nature of society.

The insights from these sources suggest that every society must protect itself from the the threat of *anomie*. Every society engages in cultural myths and narratives that provide for a sense of continuity and meaning in the face of the ever-present threats from both outside and within. In earlier societies, this task was assigned mainly to religious institutions and structures. These institutions engaged in often rather complex 'theodicies' (Berger 1967) in defence of meaning: attempts to defend the central propositions of the religious order (the benevolence and omnipotence of deities, for example) in the face of personal and collective loss.

It should not surprise us therefore to find that the consumer society, at some level, incorporates these meaning-defence mechanisms into its own rationale. In fact, as I have proposed elsewhere (Jackson 2002), and others have also argued in some depth, there are some clearly visible meaning-defence mechanisms inherent in the consumer society. These include: the concept of economic growth – operating at the collective level to provide a sense of continuing intergenerational progress (Jackson 2004); the symbolic role of consumer goods in negotiating and defending boundaries between the sacred and the profane (Belk et al 1989); the evocative power of material goods to embody our displaced ideals (McCracken 1990); the function of consumer goods in processes of hedonic 'dreaming' (Campbell 1987); and the role of consumption as a terror-management strategy (Sheldon et al 2003).

Consumer society could not hope to operate in this way were it not for the symbolic power of material artefacts, the fact that symbolic meanings are negotiated socially through processes of discursive elaboration and conversations of gestures, and the fact that these processes overlap significantly with processes of symbolic self-completion. Social and psychological functioning in the consumer society are subtly intertwined and mediated crucially through the evocative power of material goods. Meaning is negotiated and defended. Nomization is facilitated. And for most of us, for most of the time, these vital social conversations hold *anomie* at bay and allow us to function.

Implications for Sustainable Consumption Policy

There is, in the literature on sustainable consumption, an on-going debate about the relationship between internal social psychological factors and external institutional constraints in influencing consumer behaviour. The emerging opinion is that a full understanding of environmentally-significant behaviours requires a model of both internal (social-psychological) and external (institutional, economic) factors but that once such a combined model is in place, it should be possible to identify appropriate policy interventions to encourage pro-environmental behaviours. The attitude-behaviour-constraint model and value-belief-norm model of Stern (2000) and his colleagues (Stern et al 1999, 1995) are attempts to provide exactly that sort of framework for environmental policy-making.

The arguments I have put forward in this paper, don't contradict that case. However, they add another – and rather considerable – level of complexity to it. What I have attempted to show in this paper is that some absolutely vital social and psychological functionings are mediated through our interactions with consumer goods. To the extent that we can achieve these functionings without the use of consumer goods, it would clearly be possible to shift attitudes and behaviours away from environmentally significant consumption towards sustainability. But the complexity of the relationships between identity, goods and social functioning should warn us against any simplistic prescriptions of social change in this direction. Moreover, the extent to which vital social functionings – such as identity creation, social cohesion and the defence against *anomie* – are mediated through material goods in the consumer society, suggests that resistance, indeed quite violent resistance to change is to be expected.

So what exactly can we offer policy-makers from the understandings pursued in this paper? Is it all just bad news for sustainable consumption? Or is there something positive we can take from it?

Certainly, in the first instance, we can make some quite useful recommendations about the way in which change is to be negotiated. Since identity is constructed socially, and social norms and expectations constrain individual choice in quite fundamental ways, we can certainly make a good case for arguing that behaviour change initiatives should involve peer groups, local communities, and social processes rather than attempting to effect individual change purely through generalised incentive or information schemes.

We can also point to the key role played by symbolic resources, both in the social construction of identity and in the negotiation of symbolic meaning. As Figure 2, illustrates these symbolic resources provide a vital link between the external and the internal dialectics of symbolic identification. But a crucial question arises here: who

or what controls these symbolic resources? Do they lie within the control of the social actors who make use of them? Are they amenable to public policy intervention? Or are they subject to control and influence by agents who seek to profit from their influence on others?

To some extent, all three of these relations hold. The one that is potentially the most problematic however, is the third. Control over the symbolic resources available for discursive elaboration of meanings and the social construction of identities lies mainly in the realm of the marketing strategies of corporate actors. These actors not only have a vested interest in controlling such resources, they also have a long and rather sophisticated experience in effecting this control to their own best advantage.

The commercial nature of this relationship is particularly problematic where children are concerned. From about the age of five onwards, social and developmental psychology suggests that the social community within which discursive elaboration of symbolic meanings occurs shifts gradually away from parental influence and towards the peer group. And yet it is clear that – at least until the early teens – this peer group lacks the critical faculties needed to resist, select or accommodate that complexities of these messages. It is precisely for this reason, that some Nordic countries have banned advertising for those under 12, and why the National Institute for Parenting and Families, in this country, has called for similar measures.

Though vitally important in relation to the young and more vulnerable members of society, concern over the social control of symbolic resources is by no means restricted to advertising targeted at children. Asymmetries of power and resources in the relationship between advertisers and their target audience suggest the need for much stronger public control of commercial media – extending at least as far as exerting strong advertising standards, and possibly including the outlawing of certain marketing practices.

The same asymmetry of resources also exists, incidentally, between commercial and public sector marketing. The idea that we can market sustainability through concerted public information campaigns fails to pass scrutiny, particularly when we compare the resources available to government for this task against those available to private sector interests.

There is moreover another structural asymmetry against which public sector marketing struggles. Commercial marketers have an extraordinary range of human motivations on which they can draw in suggesting, proposing, insinuating or otherwise negotiating symbolic meaning. This is particularly true, if they are also in the position of being able to shift their product strategies – and indeed their products – to maximise the use of such motivations. A good product – in a commercial sense – is one that has a ready-made marketing strategy with strong links to underlying human motivations. Take the gel-filled bra as a classic example. All this product needs in the way of marketing is the merest suggestion that it enhances the appearance of a key signifier of sexual attractiveness. The massive allure associated with reproductive functioning will do the rest.

The same strategies of persuasion are simply not available to those attempting to ‘market’ sustainability. The particular (pro-social, pro-environmental) nature of the message and the constraints on the symbolism which can be applied to marketing it

simply cannot compete with the free rein available to commercial interests. Those interests will always be able to out-run or out-last public sector information and behaviour change campaigns – unless they are subject to some kind of social control.

Advertising is only one of a number of areas in which government policy determines not so much the nature of individual choice, but the social context in which identity is constructed, symbolism is negotiated and individual agency is constrained. There are a number of other such areas including trading standards, product standards, corporation law, social policies (such as family support and distributional policy), education, support for public sector broadcasting, and the frameworks within which religious institutions and other community groups operate. A key lesson from the analysis in this paper is that government must seek to intervene more creatively not just in changing individual behaviour but also in shaping the social context within which individual behaviour is negotiated.

A particular attention should perhaps be paid to the question of religious and community groups. If the analysis in this paper is right, if a key function of the consumer society is the pursuit of meaning and the defence against *anomie*, then the transition to a sustainable society cannot hope to proceed without the emergence or re-emergence of some kinds of meaning structures that lie outside the consumer realm: ‘communities of meaning’ that can support the kind of essential social, psychological and spiritual functioning that has been handed over almost entirely in modern society to the symbolic role of consumer goods. To proceed without attention to this kind of insight into the underlying processes of consumer society – processes that are held in common with just about every society we know of – is to invite a spectacular failure, not just in environmental terms, but in social terms as well.

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