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Theories of (Un)sustainable Consumption

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Abstract

In this discussion paper we review and contrast alternative theories of consumption in terms of the intellectual basis they provide for understanding sustainable behaviours. A defining aspect of the modern literature in this field is the emphasis on the individual as a volitional agent who engages wilfully in the decision to consume. This is in stark contrast to earlier literature that concentrated on the structural lock-in of individuals to undesirable consumption patterns and the powers of corporations in creating consumer demand for their products and services. We argue that, in order to unravel consumption in its full complexity, and as a matter of utmost importance, understanding must include both the buy-in of individual agents, whose consumption activities contribute to their self-identity, and the structure imposed by the institutions of society, that frame the context of actors' decisions. More than this, any move away from the current unsustainable consumption patterns prevalent in modern societies requires a richer conceptualisation of consumption that involves an awareness and examination of the political economy in which humans live.

Keywords: sustainable consumption, structure, agency, nudging, social practice theory, technostucture, corporate power, social ecological transformation.

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Introduction

This discussion paper explores different theories of consumption and explains alternative disciplinary perspectives on the determinants of (un)sustainable behaviours and practices. Consumption is a major concern for social ecological economics because of the recognised need for societal transformation away from material and energy intensive economies and lifestyles in order to reduce environmental impacts (Krausmann, 2017). Policy interest in the field has also increased due to the mounting pressure to ‘decarbonise’ the economy to prevent human induced climate change.

A core policy objective is to achieve higher rates of economic growth decoupled from energy and material use. Reducing the material intensity of consumer lifestyles allows the continuation of ‘business as usual’. This weak sustainable consumption approach is linked to ecological modernisation, adjusting prices via market-based policies and using voluntary instruments (e.g., eco-labelling). Businesses via developing (product and process) innovations and consumers via adopting these innovations through their purchasing choices are assumed to act as key agents of change mediated through the market as an institution of efficient resource allocation. However, paradoxically, technologies that are meant to increase resource efficiency have actually led to increased total resource consumption; something called the rebound effect or Jevons paradox (Dieter, 2017; Polimeni, et al., 2008).

In contrast, notions of downshifting, voluntary simplicity, degrowth and post-growth call for both a change in consumption patterns and a decrease in absolute consumption levels of material and energy resources (Demaria, et al., 2013; Kallis, et al., 2012; Paech, 2017). Such strong sustainable consumption claims a double dividend—degrowth of consumption lessens environmental impacts while reduced work time increases well-being. The consumer

economy is criticised for creating temporary hedonic pleasures and failing to deliver the ‘good life’ for all. The emphasis of economic growth on material affluence has been criticised for ignoring, and indeed denigrating, the non-pecuniary aspects of life (Easterlin, 2003), such as social relationships, health and playfulness (Fellner, 2017). Consumption as a means for providing status is a continually self-defeating exercise that prevents economic growth from making everyone socially ‘better-off’ (Hirsch, 1977). Such critiques pose the questions: what is the meaning of consumption and what is it for?

Understanding consumption requires accepting that there are some fundamental social, psychological and biophysical realities underlying, and acting as co-determinants of, all consumption behaviour, but also multiple causal mechanisms that combine to create actual behaviour in dynamic and multi-faceted ways. This discussion paper starts by reviewing some standard approaches to consumption from different disciplines (e.g., economics, psychology, sociology, anthropology). We highlight the dichotomy of agency versus structure, and attempts by theories of social practice to move beyond this, while noting the prevalence of individualistic approaches. We then outline some of the long standing structural explanations for consumption practices. This presentation reveals an ongoing tendency within the field of consumption research to draw divisive dichotomies—structure vs. agency, determinism vs. voluntarism, social vs. individual—that compete to provide ‘the’ single dominant explanation for consumer behaviour. An alternative would be to take a dialectical approach consistent with critical realism (Puller and Smith, 2017). In noting future directions, and consistent with this suggestion, we highlight the importance of connecting understanding of individuals as social agents with the institutions and social structures within which they operate.

Alternative conceptual models of consumption

Different disciplinary biases are important for understanding how researchers conceptualise consumer practices, the role of consumption and the causal mechanisms attributed to consumer behaviour in general and sustainable behaviours in particular. Mainstream economics is devoted to the rational individual actor model of *homo oeconomicus*. Social psychology focuses on values, attitudes, and norms as causes of sustainable behaviours. Sociology emphasises the symbolic values of products in a consumer society and stresses that people do not consume products *per se* but the meanings attached to them. Social anthropologists place the individual in a social context of rituals and shared practices. Evolutionary economists attribute consumer practices to predetermined dispositions that are claimed to have formerly aided survival. These approaches appear to offer considerable variety as to how consumption might be understood.

However, a common underlying and restrictive methodological individualism tends to prevail. For example, in critically reviewing a core anthropological position, Røpke (1999: 409) states that “human beings are conceived of as social, but they are just as unpleasant pursuers of their own interests as they are in economics”. Theories of practice have promised of a more comprehensive approach. However, practitioners of this newer perspective have also tended to ignore, trivialise and/or downplay structure, power, and biophysical aspects in their empirical case studies. We critically review and contrast the dominant individualistic theories with theories of social practice, before turning to a third, much older, set of currently neglected arguments relating to power and structure as determinants of consumption.

Theories emphasising the individual agent

The conventional microeconomic view on human behaviour conceptualises the individual as an utility maximiser who calculates how to allocate a fixed income across consumption choices on the basis of relative prices. This individualistic account of consumer behaviour rests upon the assumptions that the consumer is sovereign, has fixed endogenous preferences and perfect information. Despite being a purely deductive model, this account still dominates conventional consumer policies. It is employed to promote the use of price signals to correct 'market failures' by 'internalising' social and environmental costs, and support information provision (e.g., labelling, advertising) as a means of raising awareness and altering attitudes, with the ultimate aim of behavioural change (Southerton, et al., 2011). Implicitly, motivators (e.g., attitudes, norms) are claimed to determine behaviour, although economists have no such explanatory relationship in their model.

What lies behind the promotion of this approach appears to be a political ideology that encapsulates an idealised liberal political economy. This reflects a form of governance that regards consumers as citizens free to choose and responsible for making the right choices. Government is then deemed to have a legitimate role in achieving market perfectionism and correcting market failures. Hence, citizens are mainly "addressed as autonomous shoppers whose choices, in the aggregate, determine the fate and future of the planet" (Shove, 2004). Their choices only go wrong due to a lack of information and incorrect pricing (i.e., an information deficit model).

In parallel with this microeconomic view, environmental and social psychologists describe an attitude-behaviour gap. They argue that information based measures might influence attitudes but fail to translate into actual behavioural change (e.g. Vermeir and Verbeke, 2008). Social

psychologists further distinguish between intended and actual behaviour, and show how these can also be divorced from one another. Indeed, attitudes may play no role in mediating actual behaviour. For example, increasing awareness of environmental consequences, such as climate change, and pro-environmental attitudes, fail to change consumer behaviour that remains locked-in to environmentally destructive acts, such as fossil fuel consumption.

More generally, environmental and social psychologists conceptualise sustainable consumption as a conglomerate of different pro-environmental behaviours (e.g., recycling, eating less meat, using public transportation) and use empirical methods to study the causal factors hypothesised to be responsible for these behaviours. They then employ scales to measure broadly defined concepts such as values, worldviews and norms. They aim to understand the reasons behind individual actions and develop strategies that encourage pro-environmental behaviour. This perspective tends to regard sustainable consumption as involving a conflict between individual and collective interests (e.g., travelling by public transportation is better for the environment but less convenient for the individual).

In such approaches, the question arises as to the extent to which individuals consciously deliberate over and control their actions. Contrary to the information deficit model, many everyday decisions and behaviours appear to be motivated by subconscious routines. The attitude-behaviour and intended-actual behaviour gaps may then be explained by habits, social norms, and the use of prevalent technologies and material infrastructures. Consequently, simply providing new information and appealing to consumer preferences is at best ineffective, and at worst a distraction from the necessary means required for bringing about behavioural change towards more sustainable consumption patterns. In addition, people

simplify complex decisions by employing a variety of mental shortcuts or loosely defined rules, called heuristics, that can operate subconsciously.

The concept of heuristics has been adopted by behavioural economists to explain systematic behavioural bias, i.e., relative to the expected actions of ‘rational economic man’. Behavioural economics integrates findings from psychology (e.g., bounded rationality), and more recently neuroscience, with microeconomic theory, which is then updated by considering the impact of cognitive, affective and social factors on the decisions of economic agents. This would appear to offer a potentially radical critique of economics. However, the dominant position, driven by economists from the United States of America (USA), has largely become one in which the mainstream economic model employs psychology to bolster the core concept of *homo oeconomicus* by placing psychology within economics, rather than learning why this core concept is fundamentally flawed and placing economic behaviour within the context of psychology (Earl, 2005).

Thus, behavioural economics maintains the methodological individualism of mainstream economics and its preference utilitarianism. Humans are regarded as being predictably ‘irrational’, so that their behaviour can be corrected (Earl, 2017). In that context, addressing environmental problems is a matter of getting all the autonomous self-interested *homines oeconomici* to cooperate for the common good. Such an approach enables researchers to easily link with new institutional economics to engage in mathematical models, set up games and conduct social ‘experiments’ to show how carrots (benefits) and sticks (costs) can work to counter free-riders and rule breakers. They extend preferences to social and ‘other regarding’ behaviour, and squeeze in concepts, such as fairness, in the guise of utility providing commodities. Under such assumptions, a better, more caring, society requires education,

creating empathy for others and making people feel that others are part of their ‘in-group’, so that they gain more personal benefits from helping those others (Spash, 2016).

Arising from this literature is a popularised concept called ‘nudging’ (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009), that combines choice architecture and libertarian paternalism. Choice architecture under an evolutionary approach connotes: “the design of complex structures or systems that consumers construct as a means for coping with life” (Earl, 2017: 102). It might then have some correspondence with critical institutional economics (Vatn, 2017). However, it tends to be reduced down, by authors like Thaler and Sunstein, to the subtle use of psychological signals in the presentation of simple options to get a desired outcome. Libertarian paternalism conforms to the neoclassical economic idea that government can help perfect the institutions of the market, while leaving undisturbed the individual’s freedom to choose. The key proposal is to adjust the choice architecture in order to nudge people towards making pro-environmental choices ‘voluntarily’. The nudging approach has been adopted as a policy tool in countries where neoliberal politics has become dominant, e.g., Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the USA.

Although psychologically based approaches to sustainable consumption have gained much popularity, they rely on a narrow understanding of human behaviour. The approach ultimately individualises responsibility as an act of finding ‘solutions’ to ‘problems’. The complexity of institutions and social issues surrounding consumption is removed and human volition may be trivialised as a simple choice between corporate products. Sustainable consumption then means that individualised everyday actions and decisions—such as buying organic, eating less meat or composting waste—are meant to be positioned in relation to their role in causing, or alleviating, environmental problems as evaluated in terms of individual costs and benefits.

The burden of social ecological transformation is placed on the individual who, as sovereign consumer, is solely accountable for achieving sustainability.

What this consumer choice model fails to recognise is that humans are neither perfect calculating machines, maximising their own utility, nor are they best converted into such machines, via nudging or otherwise. People are fallible and struggle with everyday choices including what they should, or should not, buy. They face conflicts between plural values that confront them with incommensurable options (O'Neill, 2017). Changing embedded and group reinforced norms of purchasing is a far cry from a simple cost-benefit exercise for the achievement of efficient personal welfare gains. Indeed, consumption patterns are not explained by 'preferences' because preferring something offers no explanation of 'why?' (Spash, 2008). A deeper explanation requires understanding consumption as a conglomerate of acts embedded in social and cultural practices that are constitutive of personal identity.

Theories of social practice

In the journal *Ecological Economics*, Røpke (1999) provides an introduction to a sociological perspective that explains consumption as interwoven with perceptions of living well. In effect, she argues that individuals are willing participants in the game of consumption because it meets several social and cultural functions and is necessary for participation in modern consumer society. This involves a complex of causal mechanisms from the social technological (e.g., having the latest gadgets) to the way in which family life is conceptualised. The meaning of consumption then involves a conflict between identity as defined in modernity and its negative environmental, social and economic consequences (Brand and Wissen, 2017). Røpke (2009) has advocated theories of social practice as the

potential route by which ecological economists could improve their understanding of (sustainable) consumption.

In sociology, theories of social practice offer an alternative to the individualistic perspective on consumption. Such theories regard the structure of social systems as both constraining and enabling agency, and as both the medium and outcome of the practices it recursively organises. In his theory of ‘structuration’, Giddens (1984) describes the domain of study for social sciences as being social practices ordered across space and time. Theories of social practice focus on the daily ‘doings and sayings’ in which people are engaged (Welch and Warde, 2015), rather than on individual choices, consumption decisions or behaviours (Reckwitz, 2002; Røpke, 2009). Attention is redirected away from individual decision-making and people are treated not as consumers but ‘practice carriers’. As Welch and Warde (2015: 85) state:

“Practice theories’ central claim is to move beyond problematic dualisms like structure and agency, methodological individualism and holism, determinism and voluntarism, and subject and object.”

The laudable aim is to use aspects of both sides of these dualisms to create a different understanding, although the extent to which practice theories have fulfilled this promise is questionable. As also noted by Welch and Warde (2015: 97) “Practice theories at present lack persuasive theoretical or conceptual answers”.

Indeed, there is no single, coherent social practice theory, but rather a range of different theories unified by the focus on social practices as the unit of analysis. Also, there is no agreement about how to delimit a social practice. Social practices are regarded as comprising a set of specific elements. For example, Reckwitz (2002) talks about “forms of bodily and

mental activities, things and their use, background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how and notions of competence, states of emotion and motivational knowledge”.

Shove, Panzar and Watson (2012: 24) offer a simpler framework where social practices consist of “active integrations of material, competence, and meaning”. They argue that the source of changing behaviour lies in the development of practices—how they emerge, persist and disappear. They integrate theories of social practice with innovation studies to address the active and interactive relationship between consumers and producers. Such accounts discuss the mechanisms underlying changing practices and outline how specific practices emerge (e.g., a daily shower) and disappear (e.g., a weekly bath). Other scholars have integrated social practice theory with transition studies (e.g. Rauschmayer, et al., 2015). Spaargaren (2011), for example, employs social practices as connecting elements between individual lifestyles and social technical systems of provisioning. Environmental applications of social practice theories to sustainable consumption include: food waste, heating, fair trade and energy use. The vast majority of studies focus on domestic (and thus primarily inconspicuous) consumption practices of everyday life, rather than shopping. The emphasis is on mundane subconscious practices (e.g., showering) that are often habitual.

Groves et al. (2016) argue that social practice theory requires a better grounding in psychology, while maintaining its sociological understanding. They dismiss theories of practice that employ simplistic formulations of individual psychology (e.g., individuals defecting from or engaging in practices on the basis of internal rewards from doing so), and demonstrate how participation in particular practices are not simply about instrumental outcomes. They reject regarding practices as third-person explanatory variables and explain how practices matter to subjects, emphasising that the relationships humans form during their lifetimes create associations that are constitutive of their identity. Through a set of examples,

Groves et al. (2016) go on to explain how unsustainable practices are maintained because of a person's psychosocial biography. Attachment is described as helping individuals live with vulnerability and uncertainty, but this also means removing practices can break attachments and (re)create vulnerability. Agents are formed in part by their approaches to handling attachment and this shapes their perspectives on what is desirable and rational. The implications for social ecological transformation are that any policy intervention will involve changing practices that are part of a person's identity, and successful intervention will need to recognise the complexity of why people are attached to manifestly unsustainable practices (Spash, 2016). As Earl (2017) notes, people create complementarities in their construction of lifestyles based on sets of organising principles (e.g., coherence, order, consistency) that lead them to actualise their conceptualisations of self and self worth.

Structure, Corporations and Market Institutions

What the social and psychological literatures around consumption have revealed over recent decades is how people themselves buy into consumerism and unsustainable practices. In part this is the great success of corporate marketing departments and their expert psychologists who have targeted self-image, identity formation, in-group selection and childhood development (Bakan, 2011). Yet, the desire to recognise a richer social psychological understanding of why humans opt into the consumer society has led to an almost wilful neglect of structural factors. For example, the appeal of 'nudging' for neoclassical economists, neoliberals and classic liberals is that coercion is supposedly avoided in the attempt to get people to do what is wanted. The fear that coercion might take place is directed at government intervention, although 'nudging' is in fact most prevalent in society today due to corporate marketing such as advertising and product placement. Corporate nudging of people is pervasive and occurs through all kinds of traditional and modern social media (e.g., subliminal placement of

products in films, on television and online). The results are wide spread including: the creation of social norms in product use (e.g., mobile phones, computers), changing everyday language to corporate speak (e.g., through branding), and ultimately influencing the way in which people conduct their social interactions both privately and publicly (Spash, 2016).

The idea that there is more to consumption than individual choice, or freely adopted social practices, goes back a long way (Spash, 2009). For example, Devas (2009 [1899]) notes that the competitive industrial system can create “misdirected consumption”—supply of inferior goods—due to the profit motive. The consumer is not sovereign because they lack both information and power. Production needs regulation by the State to ensure quality, but a deeper issue concerns the manipulation of wants to encourage faster turnover, e.g., the idea of being ‘in fashion’ or ‘up to date’. Economics must then combine the technical and moral if the aim is to supply what achieves good ends for society. As Devas (2009 [1899]: 272) remarks:

“So little it avails to speak of the satisfaction of wants unless we can distinguish those that are leading us to destruction, and unless we know what is the true good of man.”

Here he is referring to a lengthier treatise by his contemporary Mackenzie. The relevant passage in Mackenzie explains the concern further as follows:

“If our wants themselves should happen to be leading us to destruction, the means of satisfying them will hardly in fairness be regarded as wealth. Such objects would be more correctly styled, in the language of Mr. Ruskin, ‘illth’. We must distinguish, in fact, between what we really want and what we only think we want, before a true conception of what we mean by wealth can be attained.” (Mackenzie, 1895: 347)

Ruskin (1907 [1862]: 88-89) in turn explains wealth as combining both possession of the valuable and the character of the possessor. This means:

“that many of the persons commonly considered wealthy, are in reality no more wealthy than the locks of their own strong boxes are; they being inherently and eternally incapable of wealth; and operating for the nation [...] as mere accidental stays and impediments, acting not as wealth, but (for we ought to have a correspondent term) as ‘illth’, causing various devastation and trouble around them in all directions”.

Today the economy might well be regarded as creating an illusion of wealth by operating an economic system that aims to create possessions without regard to individual character or the self-destructive aspects of want satisfaction. Devas (2009 [1899]) explains “depraved consumption” as resulting from: the encouragement of excessive and unnecessary debt via credit systems, popular mass media (in his day music halls) appealing to the lowest common denominator, the profit motive encouraging gambling and normalisation of drug abuse (e.g., from alcohol to opium). To these, luxury and extravagance might be added in line with Veblen’s (1991 [1899]) concept of conspicuous consumption. These arguments question what specific acts of consumption are for and what makes them morally justifiable.

Hirsch (1977) explains the importance of asking and answering the “what for?” question, with respect to consumption, in order to be able to understand whether it contributes to well-being. In modern economics, the term ‘growth’ has replaced the earlier concern for ‘wealth’ as the determinant of economic success. As production and consumption become more complex so the range of ‘intermediate’ goods and services increases and, although these may contribute nothing to overall well-being, they are added to measures of successful growth. In a world of increasing environmental degradation, such intermediate goods and services entail expenditures to protect oneself and one’s family from harmful consequences. These ‘defensive expenditures’ are not a sign of progress whether undertaken by individuals or governments. Similarly, spending to protect one’s social position—conspicuous consumption,

fashion, keeping-up with neighbours—adds to the waste of the competitive market economy and not to well-being.

In line with these arguments, Kapp (1978) combines institutional, ethical, social and psychological factors in his analysis of consumerism. On the supply side Kapp, like Galbraith (1969 [1958]), recognises the oligopolistic power of suppliers that enables them to place their own concerns above those of the nation State. This goes well beyond merely pushing products on consumers. Kapp (1978) cites firms in the USA respecting contracts with German firms during World War II, and others have documented corporate involvement in supporting the Nazi regime and operationalising the holocaust to make profits (see Bakan, 2004; Black, 2001).

Galbraith (1969 [1958]) has a structured institutional theory describing how powerful firms operate outside of the market's regulatory controls—competition, profit motive, shareholder control—that are typically cited by economists as restrictions on their activities. The large corporation creates a power elite of professional managers that Galbraith terms the technostructure. He refers to such corporations as operating a “planning system”; a term which many relate to government, not the corporate world, but actually reflects how corporations are internally organised. The technostructure allies itself with government to create a mutually supporting system of political economy, embedded in the rhetoric of free market economics while actually being a totally different beast.

The myth of consumer sovereignty plays an important role in avoiding a realistic economic analysis of the firm and regulation of corporate activities. The ultimate aim of advertising is to provide a sustained propaganda on the importance of corporate goods and services while no

similar case is made on behalf of artistic, educational, or other humane achievements (Galbraith, 1970 p.476). Promotion of consumer 'wants' by producers works in an affluent society because consumer goods in such a society are not necessities, but frivolous pleasures to be thrown away whenever fashions change. Power in the market then easily extends to pushing products to encourage mass consumption and throughput.

Mishan (1969) adds to the critique of consumer sovereignty by raising the lack of choice an individual has over their work. He also argues that perceived wants are socially and culturally constructed, and can easily be changed through legislation provided there is the political will to do so. Later in life, Galbraith actually thought regulation was effectively controlling the corporation (see introduction by James Galbraith in Galbraith, 2007 [1967]). Like others of his generation, he failed to recognise the power of neoliberalism and the extent to which regulatory capture has persisted and spread. Indeed, the myth of the sovereign consumer has re-emerged with the rise of neoliberalism, which has allied with neoclassical economics to perpetuate the deception (Fellner and Spash, 2015).

Future directions

While (un)sustainable consumption scholars commonly agree that individual consumption patterns are embedded in social, cultural and material contexts, and acknowledge the importance of adhering to the structural dynamics of consumption, studies still widely employ the simple frame of the individual. Maniates (2014) argues that consumption research is often trapped in an analytic framework that overemphasises the individual, because this is the main unit of analysis within the field's dominant disciplines (i.e., economics, psychology, business studies). He also notes the contribution made by the prevalence of the concept of consumers' sovereignty in traditional policy approaches.

This methodological affinity for the individual might also explain why issues of power have so far scarcely been discussed in sustainable consumption debates. Addressing power is essential for understanding how institutions (i.e., conventions, norms, rules) reinforce practices of unsustainable consumption and how such practices evolve and can be changed. Such an investigation should encompass the power exhibited by governments, corporations and the modern marketing machine, as well as socio-cultural institutions, and span ecological, ethical and social aspects of consumption. Future research needs to connect the historical literature on consumption with the modern to rectify the overemphasis on agency to the detriment of understating the institutions that structure our society.

A better understanding of the determinants of (un)sustainable consumption practices would be provided by an analytical (dialectical) dualism connecting social agents and society—duality of structure and praxis (Puller and Smith, 2017). This means that the specific set of institutional arrangements within which humans operate, and try to find meaning in their lives, become even more important, both as causes of empowerment and constraint. The institutional domination of human society by markets and materialism creates a dynamic that promotes a limited range of means, or satisfiers, by which a select set of human social and psychological needs are met (Rauschmayer and Omann, 2017). While agents are empowered by their consumer practices they are also trapped in them. The affluent society creates and promotes a very specific and narrow set of human values that are to be achieved through product purchase and accumulation. Research in social ecological transformation must identify how environmentally and socially just alternative satisfiers can be institutionalised.

Concluding remarks

A basic ontological premise of ecological economics is that biophysical reality imposes limits on human action. Social ecological economics extends the analysis to the social reality of how economies are structured and the institutions they employ. In studying consumer behaviour, this complex interrelationship between the individual consumer and biophysical and social realities becomes central. This requires looking beyond individual dimensions of consumption and addressing its social and material contexts. Individual choices and behaviours are interwoven in the respective social domains that implicitly and explicitly determine the dynamic and rationale of everyday life.

Societal transformation to sustainable consumption means implementing policies that deliberately aim at shaping consumption, and in the restrictive model of mainstream economists that can only mean shaping people's preferences. In the standard behavioural model there is no option but to change what motivates choice, i.e., attitudes, norms. Yet, creating formal and informal institutions to achieve these ends conflicts with a model where preferences are assumed fixed *a priori* and sacrosanct. There is then an inevitable tension between the idea that individuals have freedom to do as they please and the recognition that, as social animals, humans create institutions that impose constraints on such freedom in order to achieve communal goals and coordinated action (Spash, 2016).

Thus, the ongoing debate in the social sciences over whether human agency or social structure is more salient in determining human behaviour is also reflected in the discourse on (un)sustainable consumption and its alternative (disciplinary) perspectives on the causal mechanisms determining the decisions of consumers. Sustainable consumption research and policy requires a synthesis and integration of economic, psychological and sociological

accounts. Measures to foster sustainable consumption have to acknowledge that, despite good intentions and pro-environmental attitudes, consumers are often locked-in to habits, social norms and use of prevalent technologies. Hence, a purely individualistic approach is insufficient and ignores the simple truth that individual behaviours are embedded in social and institutional contexts and hence bound to the larger institutional dynamics of consumption and production. Regarding the individual consumer as responsible for the economic system contradicts the notion that a social ecological transformation of the current consumption system demands collective action. Put bluntly, an individualistic approach simply fails to reflect social reality as comprising interconnected networks of social relations that form personal identity. Hence, there is no way to nudge our way out of a systemically induced environmental crisis. A new synthesis is required that brings together: institutional analysis of the dominant role played by the modern corporation and marketing machine in consumption dynamics; the State as regulator, innovator and facilitator of institutional arrangements; an understanding of the social psychological formation of personal identity; the role of needs and their satisfaction relative to wants; and the ethical basis for judging what is of value. Ultimately, consumption must be put in the context of the reproduction of society.

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