

The SAGE Reference Series on
Green Society
Toward a Sustainable Future



Green Consumerism

An A-to-Z Guide



JULIANA MANSVELT, GENERAL EDITOR
PAUL ROBBINS, SERIES EDITOR

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Green Consumerism

About the Editors

Green Series Editor: Paul Robbins

Paul Robbins is a professor and the director of the University of Arizona School of Geography and Development. He earned his Ph.D. in Geography in 1996 from Clark University. He is General Editor of the *Encyclopedia of Environment and Society* (2007) and author of several books, including *Environment and Society: A Critical Introduction* (2010), *Lawn People: How Grasses, Weeds, and Chemicals Make Us Who We Are* (2007), and *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction* (2004).

Robbins's research centers on the relationships between individuals (homeowners, hunters, professional foresters), environmental actors (lawns, elk, mesquite trees), and the institutions that connect them. He and his students seek to explain human environmental practices and knowledge, the influence nonhumans have on human behavior and organization, and the implications these interactions hold for ecosystem health, local community, and social justice. Past projects have examined chemical use in the suburban United States, elk management in Montana, forest product collection in New England, and wolf conservation in India.

Green Consumerism General Editor: Juliana Mansvelt

Juliana Mansvelt, Ph.D., is a senior lecturer in human geography at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand. She is author of *Geographies of Consumption* (2005) in which she argued a consideration of issues of power, ethics, and sustainability are essential to understanding how people, places, and consuming are connected in a globalizing world. She has recently completed a series of review articles on consumption for the journal *Progress in Human Geography* and has published on consumption-related topics in a variety of books, journals, and encyclopedias. Her teaching has primarily been in the field of geographic theory and qualitative research techniques, geographies of consumption, and globalization. She has received a number of teaching awards, including a National Tertiary Teaching Award for sustained excellence in 2006. Mansvelt is a qualitative researcher and her recent research has focused on catalog shopping, ethnic food marketing, and also aging. She is currently involved in several research projects that endeavor to explore relationships between aging, consumption, and place, with a view to investigating purchase, use, and divestment of commodities across the lifespan; the interactions of older consumers with organizations; and factors influencing standards of living for older people.

Introduction

Perhaps no change has been more evident over the last century than the growth of consumer society. Though the chronology of the emergence of consumer society is much debated, it is generally accepted that its rapid expansion has been a 20th-century phenomenon. The rise of the advertising and marketing industries; the development of Fordist and post-Fordist industrial processes enabling swift production of different commodities; improvements in transportation, logistics, and information technologies; the emergence of communicative means such as the Internet, television, and mobile technologies; and political, cultural, and economic changes associated with globalization have meant few places in contemporary society are exempt from the impact of consumer culture. Processes of commodification have resulted in an increasing volume and variety of goods and services sold in the marketplace and the emergence of new forms of markets, particularly with regard to digital technologies. Such changes have led some commentators to suggest that consumption, rather than production, is now a key engine driving societal change. The incursion of more and more commodities and the images surrounding them into the spaces and practices of everyday life has encouraged consumerism, that is, the process whereby individuals' work and private lives are intricately connected to the acquisition of commodities, and where goals surrounding these become a part of life course trajectories.

Whether people are in situations of material lack or plenty, consumer culture and consumption processes have become a pervasive and visible part of material and imagined landscapes, and of the social relations and practices that comprise everyday life. Commodities provide a means of mediating human relations, and they may offer liberatory, narcissistic, and even hedonistic possibilities for self-fulfillment and self-expression. Consumption can be a medium for processes of identity formation and subjectivity, with commodities and their meanings facilitating consumers' reflexive constructions of multiple and changing selves. Yet commodity relationships cannot be reduced to possibilities for identity formation, as commodities themselves form an important part of material cultures, social relationships, and meaningful places. Capitalist systems of accumulation rely on consumption as a mechanism for realizing the value inherent in the production of commodities. Consumption is critical for production systems to thrive, and for reinvestment of profit from commodities. Though consumerism plays a role in securing the economic and individual well-being, it does so in ways that both enhance and diminish this. Consumer choices and actions may influence social and environmental relations at the time of purchase and use, or in the future. Similarly, consumer actions may impact environments positively or negatively in local contexts (such as in households and communities), or at a distance (for example, via connections through production or disposal processes).

The global proliferation of commodities and the extent of commodification and consumerism have become a source of environmental and social concern. Changes in consumption have occurred unevenly, reflecting and producing social division. Wide material disparities exist between both First and Third Worlds, and within many nations, regions, and local spaces. Concerns about carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas emissions and their contribution to global warming have coincided with a continuing recognition of limits to growth based on the use of nonrenewable resources, and evidence of the negative impacts of commodity consumption on the environment. The consequences of inputs to production processes can be detrimental to society and space (for example, unsustainable farming or horticultural practices, land degradation, and pollution), and problems may also occur as a consequence of the characteristics of commodities produced and their consumption (the packaging, durability, energy efficiency, and biodegradability of commodities). The use and disposal of commodities can have harmful consequences for both current and future generations through such activities as the leaching of chemicals into soil and water, the burning of fossil fuels, and the creation of stockpiles of inorganic waste. Consequently, the kinds of commodity practices people engage in, the types and amounts of commodities consumed, and the potential reuse and recycling of commodities must be considered with regard to effects on people and environments.

The 20th and 21st centuries have not only seen a proliferation of commodities and consumer choices, but also efforts by firms, marketers, organizations, and governments to construct consumers in multiple ways. Governments informed by neo-liberal ideologies shape notions of citizens as responsible, knowledgeable, and sovereign consumers purchasing everything from food to health care and education through the market mechanism. Advertising and marketing industries appeal not only to capacities of goods and services to fulfill material needs, but also to a multitude of symbolic needs. Advanced information and technology systems and forms of consumer surveillance enable the construction of sophisticated consumer profiles, yet the diversity of people, orientations, and products mean the notion of "the consumer" is impossible to sustain. It is in the context of multifaceted relationships involving the state, trans-state institutions, private sector firms and organizations, and civil society that green consumerism has emerged as a distinctive sphere of consumer practice, politics, and identification.

Despite the promotion of green commodities as a distinct alternative to other goods and services available on the market, the range of products and practices associated with green consumerism are diverse, with multiple characteristics. For example, green adhesives may be made from natural rather than synthetic substances, may have chemical compositions that mean they emit less hazardous vapors, or may be specifically designed to reduce energy loss in buildings. Green consumerism encompasses a range of practices centered on lowering consumption, consuming more sustainably, or ameliorating the negative social and environmental effects of consumption (such as reducing carbon footprints, reusing, downshifting, dumpster diving, and recycling). The concept also applies to commodities and services that are intended to reduce harmful effects on people and the environment, and that may be framed in relation to their role in production or consumption processes, or the ways these might be regulated. For example, in relation to their production, green products may be derived from renewable or recycled resources, may be natural rather than synthetically produced, involve fairly traded labor or sustainably produced material inputs, and engage with humane animal practices. With regard to their consumption (involving purchase, use, and disposal) green commodities may aid energy efficiency, be commodities that are more durable, reusable, or recyclable, or may be products that avoid

toxic or other emissions and reduce waste. Though green consumerism is associated with minimizing overall environmental impact, this often involves consideration of the human and health impacts of commodities sold, with many green products promoted on the basis of securing more sustainable futures.

The construction of green consumerism as a mode of being, a way of thinking and acting on the world, and a form of consumption is both influenced by and an outcome of wider social, economic, political, and environmental processes that are formed relationally in place and across time. Much of the visible work of shaping green consumerism is undertaken by agents (everything from firms to charities, activist groups, and individuals) keen to reveal the connections between producers and consumers by focusing on the material connections along commodity chains and networks, and in linking the symbolic meaning of commodity production and consumption to notions of knowledge, ethicality, fairness, and transparency. The revealing of the commodity fetish can rest on the assumption that knowledgeable and informed consumers will behave in an ethical and socially responsible manner with regard to their consumption, and that this will influence the firms making and marketing the goods and services to produce more green products and to further green their production. There are numerous examples of where producers, manufacturers, distributors, and marketers have responded to calls for more green products or have altered their production processes. Consumer activism and a knowledge of consumer demand and preferences has prompted firms to formulate codes of corporate responsibility, create environmental profiles, and to develop systems for tracking, monitoring, and auditing aspects of green production. In addition, green, eco, and fair trade labeling and quality assurance systems have emerged to assure that production is green; enabling customers to make trusted and informed purchases. However, there is unease surrounding green washing, where firms' professed changes may be more cosmetic than substantive, and about the ways in which green politics and practice might be subsumed within neo-liberal agendas or forms of corporate and institutional power.

Negotiating the complex terrain of consumption may not be easy for individuals, groups, or organizations. The capacity of people and groups to effect change and to engage in green consumerism is uneven given disparities in income, material circumstances, life chances, and differential enrollment in and access to social and spatial networks. Individuals and collective actors also differ in their capacity to take action and to have their views and voices heard, acknowledged, and acted upon. Commodity and consumption practices arise from multiple motivations and moralities and are undertaken in the context of social, political, and economic structures that may both limit and enable possibilities for action. Consuming less, boycotting (avoiding some products completely), and buying or substituting greener alternatives, conservation/careful use, reusing (through practices such as dumpster diving, buying second-hand, composting, and recycling) are all strategies that have been employed by consumers. However, the unveiling of the commodity fetish with the aim of informing consumers about the environmental and social effects of their consumption decisions, or even consumers' professed beliefs in green values, may not be expressed in altered consumption behaviors.

In an article in the journal *Antipode*, "Consuming Ethics: Articulating the Subjects and Spaces of Ethical Consumption," Clive Barnett, Paul Cloke, Nick Clarke, and Alice Malpass argue that it is important to understand everyday consumption as ordinarily ethical. A view of green consumers as those who respond ethically only in relation to knowledge about products or production processes can tend to ignore the ways in which consumption practice is already constituted ethically, thereby obscuring possibilities for

how everyday practices and moral dispositions might be enrolled, reworked, and reproduced through policies, campaigns, and collective actions to secure green consumerism. Thus as Peter Jackson, Neil Ward, and Polly Russell argue in their recent contribution to the journal *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, moral and political economies are always co-constituted. In addition, the purchase and use of green products by individual consumers does not necessarily guarantee a reduction in overall levels of consumption, nor an affiliation with green politics, and there are questions yet to be answered about how green consumption can challenge or change issues of power, control, and inequality. As a result, how states, firms, organizations, and activist groups can engage meaningfully with individuals and vice versa becomes a critical issue in progressing green agendas and securing positive social and environmental outcomes.

This encyclopedia endeavors to present a wide-ranging examination of green consumerism, one that reflects the complexity of the subject, and the diversity of views and debates surrounding the concept. The multiplicity of topics and disciplinary perspectives provides a useful survey of the nature of green consumerism, the forms that it takes, the issues that impact it, and the practices it involves. The entries demonstrate in numerous ways how consumers' decisions about what might constitute green practices and products are not always straightforward. There are multiple social and environmental dimensions of commodity production, use, and disposal to address, as well as the costs and values to both the individual consumer and society to consider. For example, simply buying local does not necessarily mean the products have been ethically produced, or have fewer environmental impacts: purchasing food with lower food miles may not actually be more energy-efficient if the energy invested in production processes are taken into account; and the provision of alternative products and spaces of consumption, while less hazardous to the environment, must also meet the needs and values of the communities in which they are located. Leaving issues of the production, construction, and availability of green products and services aside, for consumers negotiating and engaging with a range of commodity choices and potential impacts, consumption is likely to be influenced by numerous factors, including: material and economic circumstances, one's enrollment in particular cultural and social contexts and networks, as well as knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and preferences regarding green products.

Together the contributors highlight the complexity of consumption, and in doing so provide insights into the social and spatial constitution of green consumerism. Many authors have provided specific examples from the particular geographical contexts in which they are situated. Beyond that, the entries illuminate the multifaceted and sometimes contested contours of green consumerism and the ways it is embedded and shaped in relation to wider cultural, economic, political, and environmental processes. Ultimately I hope readers will derive from the entries a sense not only of what green consumerism involves, but more critically, how it might evolve, addressing both limitations and possibilities for real and meaningful change.

Juliana Mansvelt
General Editor

Reader's Guide

Green Consumer Challenges

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Disparities in Consumption
Dumpster Diving
Durability
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Fish
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Baby Products
Books
Car Washing
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Cleaning Products
Computers and Printers
Cosmetics
Disposable Plates and Plastic Implements
Floor and Wall Coverings

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