

LOCAL PRACTICES VS. GLOBAL IDEOLOGIES: IS SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION COMPATIBLE WITH THE LOGIC OF CAPITALISM?

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This paper has two main purposes and corresponding parts. The purpose of the first part is to sketch a novel approach for studying sustainable consumption (SC) resting on three pillars: (1) the subject as an effect; (2) power as a field; (3) discourse as a site; explain how this approach can create insights on one of the most pressing questions of the sustainability discourse, and show that these elements can in some shape or form already be found in some socio-psychological and sociological literature on SC. The purpose of the second part is to demonstrate the usefulness of this approach by discussing power related to sustainable food consumption (SFC) in three different societies.

In more detail, the first part of the paper will focus on the three mentioned pillars of the proposed methodological approach:

(1) Subject as an effect: Following Foucault's (1966) fruitful problematisation of the notion of the autonomous subject, we 'de-centre' the subject, see the consumer as a product of 'the field of power', of concrete historic conditions, material institutions, practices and discourses, as an 'effect of language, desire, and the unconscious' (Kellner and Best 1991).

(2) Power as a field: We see power as a set of apparatuses, institutions, knowledges (savoirs) and political techniques permeating and ordering the body of the population, and penetrating and shaping the body of the individual. It is dispersed, 'interwoven with other kinds of relations (production, kinship, family, sexuality) for which they play at once a conditioning and conditioned role' (Foucault 1977). Since the beginning of the 19th century advanced liberal democracies saw a proliferation of a specific sort of power where markets serve in an important role and where 'responsibilised' citizens play an active role in their own self-governing, termed 'neoliberal governmentality'. Our view on power is multi-perspectival: its effects are not only repressive, but also constitutive, enabling and liberating – e.g. when consumers engage methods and techniques (the 'technologies of the self') to transform themselves towards what is perceived as more sustainable lifestyles.

(3) Discourse as a site: Discourses give meaning, regulate what is perceived as truth, guide behaviour and provide rules for situations, enable judgement, establish relationships, regulate distributions of social goods and enact social identities. Discourses systematically 'construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak' (Lessa 2006). They have a reflective relationship with non-discursive domains (material conditions, institutions, economic practices). They are sites of struggle and negotiation of power.

Although a body of literature on consumption utilising similar lenses exists, recontextualising these elements in the context of SC casts a light on problematic relationships between 'the logic of desire' and 'the logic of abstinence', between 'green consumerism' and 'sufficiency', between 'consumer sovereignty' and 'consumer responsibility'. This would allow us to theorise the possibility of a – in sustainability discourses much hoped-for – paradigm shift, a sustainability-oriented transformation of

the capitalist mode of production where mass consumption currently plays key roles of making continuous economic growth possible, maintaining the social structure of privileges and serving as a vehicle for social order, a question which gained on relevance in the context of the recent economic crisis (Hinton and Redclift 2009).

Part II of the paper will demonstrate the value of the sketched methodology on presented insights. We will study SFC discourses in three societies which differ in respect to the level of economic development, governmental action on SFC and positions and intensities of SC discourses: Austria, Slovakia and Serbia. During Jan–Mar 2012 we will conduct a discourse analysis of documents (government strategies, grey literature, advocacy, advertisement) and a series of interviews. Centred around themes such as authenticity, convenience, conscience, desire, space, time or trust, the aim of our inquiry is to throw light on the following questions:

Do the technologies of the self practiced through SC discourses represent instances of local resistance to the global neoliberal governmentality? Are these technologies of the self being colonised, invested, utilised, transformed etc. (through, e.g., databases or statistical indicators making the consumer observable and measurable or through product labels displacing local knowledge), i.e. subordinated to the logic of capitalism? What forms and effects does power have in relation to SC?