

CONSUMPTION IN DEVELOPING SOCIETIES

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Summary

Fundamental changes in the organization of time and money have pushed many developing society households into contemporary patterns of consumption, even with relatively low incomes.

This is strengthened by the spread of global consumer ideology promoted through changing systems of class relations.

A reasonable standard of modern consumer living can be had by all the people of the world, which is environmentally sustainable, but this will require strong political movements from below.

It will require major changes in systems that supply goods and resource or energy flows to consumers, and it will require very extensive redistribution of assets and income. Without this, we will have neither full development nor sustainability.

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

Consumption in developing societies presents two issues for sustainable development. On the one hand, developing society households often lack or make considerable sacrifices to obtain material items and resource flows that are vital to their survival and human development. On the other hand, in the aggregate developing society consumption contributes to unsustainable human practices on regional and global scales, although the per person and (in most instances) total impacts are lower than those of overdeveloped societies. Resolving this paradox is fundamental to enduring human life support. To begin, consumers are not possessive individuals but members of households with their consumer goods viewed as cultural equipment for living. In acquiring and using this equipment, households link to supply systems, both human and natural; three examples are piped fresh water, electrical utilities, and national television networks. Such supply systems, together with their users, are the fundamental nexus connecting consumption with environmental impacts. By addressing how consumers obtain environmentally sensitive resources, considerable progress can be made in resolving the paradox of global consumption and development. Inequality on both global and national scales also exacerbates the environmental impacts of consumption. It is suggested that the household-system nexus can best be addressed not by voluntary individual consumer choices (desire, self-denial, etc.) but by systematic political movements in developing societies.

1.2 Defining Consumption and Development

This article considers consumption in developing societies in light of the concept of sustainable development. Consumption has two definitions, which work well in combination. A commonsense definition of consumption is purchases of goods by individuals and households, and more widely, by governments and firms. Starting strictly from a biological and physical systems perspective, however, consumption is far broader: “human and human-induced transformations of material and energy,” as Paul Stern writes. In order to focus on a delimited and well-recognized subject, this essay addresses individual, household, and to some extent, organizational consumption, but it will view that topic through the lens of the biophysical processes mentioned in the second definition. Turning now to sustainable development, which is discussed thoughtfully at many places in this encyclopedia, it manifests a contradictory relationship to consumption. On the one hand, consumption transforms materials and energy, often in ways that reduce their future usability. Piped fresh water, its use in sinks, baths, and toilets, and its disposal in sewage systems can, if untreated (and even after primary treatment), degrade its human and natural usability. This kind of observation may make consumption appear to be the enemy of sustainable development. But anyone with a humane concern for people in developing societies recognizes that access to clean water is “development” in a real sense, reducing the incidence of gastrointestinal diseases, while piping it reduces the labor burden on women and children. The point is that adding certain consumer goods and services is vital to development, but that accomplishment is futile if these developmental goods are not sustained in the human–natural system: for example, if people have clean water for

twenty years but then the system degrades to the point that they revert to drinking dirty water, with the wealthy consuming bottled water.

1.3 The Debate over Consumption in Developing Societies

One difficulty in writing about consumption in developing societies is the conflict engendered by the contradictory qualities of humanist optimism and ecological caution illustrated in the water example. It must be said at the outset that a strong environmentalist reading of consumption in developing societies is justifiably resented by people who recognize that the biophysical impact of consumption in the overdeveloped countries is greater than the developing ones while the consumers of overdeveloped countries rarely lack for consumer goods essential to their well-being, as the poor of the world often do. (The generalization about internationally disparate environmental impact is valid in most cases, and is almost always true for impact per capita, because people in overdeveloped nations use many more resources per person.) Deforestation is the only certain counterexample, while greenhouse gas production may be speculatively projected as in the future evening out between overdeveloped and developing societies—and for that example, we must consider persistent past contributions as well as new annual production. Furthermore, in the rhetoric of environmentalist worries about population and consumption in developing societies there hides a hypocritical projection of guilt about overconsumption and waste by the globe's rich: a fear that one's own lifestyle, about which one feels ashamed, will be adopted by hordes of poor people. This motivation is unacceptable, but conversely, it is unhelpful to ignore the real environmental impacts of developing society consumption, not least because poor and relatively powerless people are themselves put at risk by effects such as Mexico City air pollution, tropical storms, and coastal inundation caused by climate change. Avoiding the polarizing rhetoric, it is possible to proceed with this topic in an ethical and empirically robust fashion.

1.3.1 Aggregation Models

Inside the fear of expanding global consumption operate simplistic aggregation models of change and mechanistic modernization theories. In aggregation models, a consumer good is distributed at a certain frequency among an asocial set of individuals (usually, the number of people in the nation). Arguments are made about the potential rate of increase in that population's ownership of the good, often mechanistically either by the diffusion of broad-brush consumerism or an increase in incomes, without consideration of specific contexts of acquisition or use. To this is usually added the rate of national population increase. These two "forces" come together in dire scenarios for the world environment when the large numbers of people in developing societies own the polluting item in question (which is already owned at a high frequency in overdeveloped societies). For example, the otherwise thoughtful environmentalist Alan Durning speculates in this fashion about the prospect of the 100 million member Indian middle class purchasing cars.

Aggregation models have their place in a systems approach; we need them to sum up the environmental impact of a given practice. The article later will discuss appropriate aggregation methods. But for improving research and practice it is worthwhile

reviewing the limitations of aggregation models. By treating a population as a set of individual points, they neglect the multiple levels of analysis that are fundamental to both ecological and social sciences. What consequences does this have? First, it means neglecting social inequalities and patterns that affect the acquisition and use of goods, which in turn “consume” nature differentially. It is worth noting that Durning pinpointed the Indian elite and middle class, not that nation’s much larger population of urban and rural poor. Second, individuals may own goods, but their environmental effects often occur through large organizations or markets, such as refrigerator ownership having its environmental impact via electricity use in the form of national utilities that release locally and globally polluting emissions. Third, discussions of aggregates of individuals neglect a fundamental level of analysis, the household, and as a consequence miss critical dynamics that transcend the simple question of rates of ownership. Adopting a household view, for example, some consumption may actually reduce human environmental impact. Reduction in fertility comes from a fundamental household rearrangement: changing from children transferring property to parents to parents transferring property to children, especially by extending the period of education. Education certainly is a consumer good (of a type we will label collective consumption, below), while other property transfers involve consumer items, so that in an economy where children become net consumers rather than net producers, fertility will decrease, an environmentally significant result. The point is that consumption’s dynamics must be studied at appropriate levels of analysis, such as households and supply systems, and only then aggregated to regional and global scales of impact.

1.3.2 Modernization Models

Modernization models of consumption are more helpful, but still flawed and deceptive if used uncritically. All modernization theories rest on dichotomous thinking, that there is a traditional state of being and a modern one, and that change means switching from the former to the latter. In the consumption case, modernization involves a transformation from limited desires to unlimited desires. Whereas development theories of the 1950s might have viewed that change as an improvement, increasing national markets, the environmentalist consumer critiques of the 1980s and 1990s see it as dangerous because unlimited desire for goods cannot be sustained by the human adaptation in nature. In conjunction with modernization, there is afloat the notion that consumers in developing societies are increasingly influenced by homogeneous world systems of marketing and possessiveness, epitomized by the spread of Coke and Pepsi. As anthropologists know well, humans are often ambitious and avaricious but culture directs their desires in many ways, toward respect, prestige, ritual performance, as well as to novelty and material possessiveness. How, then, are desires for material goods induced, released, and condoned? What concrete social and historical circumstances encourage consumerist cultures? The deceptive feature of modernization models is that their linear and automatic qualities incline us to neglect these inquiries. Also, both aggregate-of-individuals and modernization models imply the voluntaristic idea that consumers have “flawed desires” that lead to “wrong decisions.” As this article will argue, it is important to question carefully the extent to which people in developing societies are constrained into becoming consumers, as much as choosing or desiring that path. Models are most helpful when they reveal rather than hide questions; to open such doors we now turn.

2. Basic Empirical Questions About Consumption

There are few thorough studies of the material possession sets of individuals and households in developing societies. This lacuna presents a rousing call to do relevant scholarship. Ownership-frequency rates used in aggregate models are often based on national census data or impersonal questionnaires, both dubious routes to learn about personal goods. Far better (e.g., more reliable) are field studies requiring the researcher to work in reasonable confidence with people. Robust field-gathered statistics are best, but even a few strong case studies of particular households, if intelligently chosen to represent social groups, would help greatly. Such studies would change the focus from the sheer rate of possession (e.g., percentage with sofas), toward seeing the item in relation to the total set of household or personal material culture, the use of items in daily life, their environmental inputs and outputs, and the relationship of item sets to the family economy. (For the latter topic, it is helpful to view the family consumer economy not just as a single figure, i.e., total income, but as a set of resources, such as labor time, inputs by various members both in cash and non-cash formats, and outputs of many kinds and timescales.) Here I sketch what such field studies might investigate, reflecting on lessons learned in my study of working-class material culture and economy in a Mexican northern border city.

The researcher initially needs to establish categories of material culture that may be filled in various ways. Let us take the category of food storage and preservation. Such a category might not be filled with a globally recognized “consumer good” such as a refrigerator; it may be filled with a grain storage structure or a specialized dry room. This example suggests that in consumption we study not just purchased “modern” commodities but also regionally crafted/sold and household-made items. These are some useful categories: shelter and other buildings (materials and forms); house heating and cooling; water; solid and sewage waste; lighting and power; storage, sitting, sleeping, eating and working surfaces, and other furniture; weaving and sewing equipment; fabric, clothing, hats, and footwear; cooking devices (e.g., stoves, fires); food and liquid storage devices; cooking and eating utensils; food preservation technology; and food and drink themselves. Let us also list transportation equipment and mechanisms (including animals); house and device repair equipment; art equipment and materials; displayed objects of all types, sacred and secular; and entertainment and communication devices, including writing materials, books, magazines, comics, televisions, radios, movies, cassette tape players, telephones, and computers. Of course, these categories are imperfect, and some relevant ones may well have been overlooked here. The point is that consumption is not just the stereotyped “consumerist” objects that easily leap to mind (e.g., cars, televisions, and clothing styles) but the entire working material of people’s lives.

To a robust list of material culture, the scholar may add three other inquiries. The first addresses how each item was made or acquired, and is sensitive to issues such as credit, new/used status, periodic payment or through lump sums, barter, inheritance, individual ownership, etc. The second addresses bodies of knowledge and practice associated with particular material cultures. For example, Eugene Anderson shows how the venerable Chinese art of *feng shui*, locating houses and other structures relative to compass directions, wind directions, and landscape forms, serves as a practical role in adapting

construction to the local environment. Relevant to our interests, he also notices the decline of these practices in the midst of contemporary real estate booms. The third links household material culture to the environment in developing society contexts. It is important, however, to master the full range of environmental variables. Obviously, some modern devices use flows of gasoline, natural gas, electricity, and water that in turn can be linked to environmentally sensitive processes and effects. Also, certain older devices use inputs such as firewood. All of these flow-using devices can be studied in terms of their frequency of use and resource (often energy) efficiency. Every good embodies considerable energy of manufacture—in tropical developing societies, a house may consume fifty times more energy in its construction and materials than its annual use and maintenance—and this embodied energy may in turn involve considerable production of greenhouse gases, etc.

Every object embodies material flows also. In this regard, we should study the lifetime of objects and their re-usability or recyclability, in order to connect consumption to mining, wood, and paper production. Finally, some goods require extensive transportation linkages to deliver the items themselves and their inputs of energy and materials, such as the extensive pollution stemming from the global transportation of crude oil.

It is obvious from the antecedent list that investigators cannot isolate households; they must connect to other levels of analysis. Environmentally relevant choices by the household have impacts (appliance use, waste disposal, energy options) but so do linked supply systems, whose impacts are perhaps greater. This is particularly germane to developing societies where consumer technologies are disparate. Hence, linkage questions such as whether houses are heated by kerosene or wood in turn relate to major differences in environmental impact. Such impacts vary by location—cutting firewood may have more local impacts while burning propane more global ones—and spatial analysis, addressed throughout this encyclopedia, serves as a useful method to connect household to other forms of research.

It is also clear from the list of basic empirical questions that stereotyped environmentalist concerns must be subject to rigorous research tests, with important benefits in avoiding the denigration of consumers in developing countries. For example, many working-class Mexicans purchase used appliances and at much lower rates used cars (rather than no car at all). These devices are less energetically efficient than new models, and thus add an extra increment over the technical state of the art to global warming; also, they may worsen local smog. However, the manufacture of new consumer durables requires considerable additional energy and materials consumption while used goods simply extend the lifetime of some past acts of manufacture, thus improving materials and energetic efficiency. The relative balance of environmental impacts from these two considerations (operating efficiency; manufacturing effects) cannot be predicted in advance and involves factors such as lifetime and size of operating efficiency improvement. Used furniture—common among Mexicans—almost certainly benefits the environment, whereas used refrigerators that draw electricity from the power grid are a more uncertain proposition. In summary, consumption is a rich field of inquiry whose central nexus is the patterned activity of households and linked systems of provision.

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Biographical Sketch

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