"The fact is, though, that we can be law-abiding and peace-loving and tolerant and inventive and committed to freedom and true to our own values and still behave in ways that are biologically suicidal." Malcolm Gladwell.

Sustainable Consumption or Consumer Scapegoatism?
A provocation[1]

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The objects we admire most from lost worlds are artefacts of the cultures that consumed their great civilisations.

The Maya civilisation had elaborate and highly decorated ceremonial architecture, including temple-pyramids, palaces and observatories. Jared Diamond (2005) notes that Mayans were skilled farmers, clearing large sections of tropical rain forest and, where groundwater was scarce, building sizeable underground reservoirs for rainwater storage . Yet, today their story is told from ruins of their majestic pyramids scattered around Central America, standing as symbols of their one-time greatness. Similarly, 16th century Easter Island was a healthy, thriving civilisation flourishing with abundant sea life and farming to feed a growing population until as recently as the 18th century. After their sudden collapse, today cultural traits of their hitherto power are held up by remains of nearly 900 gargantuan stone statues, *moai*, some weighing 80 tons. The same tragic historical trajectory goes with the Norse. The Vikings who settled into the Eastern Settlements of Greenland a thousand years ago built law-abiding communities with a viable economy; fostered great trade relations with their neighbours, and were successful in agriculture to feed their economy. To celebrate their cultural superiority, they flaunted the typical wealth flags of the time: church bells, stained glass windows, bronze candlesticks, etc. The Norse civilisation lasted for 400 years and then vanished.

The message from history: societies that institutionalise cultures of consumption might have, in their heydays, seemed infallible; today we know that ecological limitations are unforgiving to those that think they can consume and grow forever.

And yet we think we are different, better. Our technology is more sophisticated, our military with stronger firepower, our food better genetically modified, our plastic more versatile and our machines and medicines keep us alive longer. This is the refrain repeated from our parliaments, our quick-fix TV stations, our corporations, our schools – the institutions that guard our culture. Anyone who reads similarities from history is ridiculed as a doomsday Malthusian. All responsible individuals have to do is consume more, to contribute to the economy that supports this great civilization.

Be it green or brown consumption, government and institutional embrace of any new label is circumscribed by the inability to imagine a world beyond consumer spending and economic growth. To pick on the individual consumer here is not entirely wrong, but it misses the stronger drivers and guardians of ever-increasing consumption patterns: Institutions are custodians of ways of life, of cultures.

An axiom that has shaped policy approaches to sustainable consumption (SC) is that if more consumers understand the environmental consequences of their consumption patterns, through their market choices they would inevitably put pressure on retailers and manufacturers to move towards sustainable production. The result is proliferation of the consumption of "green" products, eco-labels, consumer awareness campaigns, etc (Akenji 2012). In designing strategies and activities for sustainability, governments have relegated the role of consumers to end-users.

Hobson (2006, P 309) has noted in this approach the perverse framing that "all individuals possess a utility function" which the free market simply answers to. Applied by producers, being green strategically provides a market for products. Confirmed by de Boer (2003, P 258)

through marketing research, companies are mainly motivated to use tools such as eco-labelling if they can "always be translated into traditional business criteria, aimed at short-term and long-term profits".

The distorting lens here is continuous economic growth being the dominant paradigm; one which remains central to government legitimacy. On the one hand, conceptually SC at its most effective needs people to consume as little as necessary, in order to reduce environmental pressures and to free up consumption space for others. In contradiction, market-economy systems need to constantly increase consumption in order to sustain the economy. Consumption drives production, which drives economic growth. Witness the encouragement through advertisements, consumer loans and credit systems that have seen steady increases in consumer indebtedness. Sociologist Nick Turnbull surmises that "the state, rather than undertaking the risk of deficit spending to stimulate growth itself, is using policy mechanisms to encourage households to do this" (Spaargaren, 2003). Government and market conceptualisation of SC is thus carefully calibrated to not slow down the economy but to operate as a peripheral activity, that safeguards only against the most damaging and immediate environmental problems. Consequently, an increased emphasis is being put on efficient production and green consumerism, which allows governments to walk a fine line that pays lip service to SC while encouraging continuous consumption. At the same time, this places responsibility on consumers to undertake the function of maintaining economic growth while simultaneously, even if contradictorily, bearing the burden to drive the system towards sustainability. This is consumer scapegoatism!

A paradoxical consequence of promoting green consumerism, well demonstrated by the case of eco-household appliances, is the so-called "rebound effect": although washing machines and television sets have become more efficient, savings per unit have meant that people buy even more - the absolute amount of consumption has increased, outstripping the efficiency gains.

Princen and Clapp (Princen et al. 2002) have used the concept of "distancing" to explain one of the consequences of isolating consumers from a holistic view of the production-consumption system. To Princen, physical, cultural and other forms of distancing keep the consumer away from understanding how lifestyle purchases affect resource extraction for production. Similarly, Clapp argues that because household waste is conveniently and regularly collected and disposed of, people have little understanding of where the waste associated with the production of their purchases ends up. This leads to a growing mental, cultural and geographic distance between consumers and their waste. The more people are isolated as final-end consumers, green or otherwise, distancing causes ecological feedback to be severed, leading to decisions that perpetuate resource overuse and increased waste generation.

The intention with end-of-pipe green consumerism is not to change production processes, let alone the institutions that prop over-consumption, but to modify the products that are consumed. Sustainability is thus based on the subjective perception of the producer and the consumer, not necessarily on the facts of whether such behaviour would achieve the end objectives of sustainability. Activities such as buying energy-efficient drying machines rather than using natural sunlight to dry clothes, or buying bottled tap water packaged in recyclable PET bottles begin to take higher meaning under green consumerism. For the green end-consumer, a warm glow is

derived from believing the green-marketing hype and buying sometimes unnecessary eco-products, and not from any realistic understanding of the ecological consequences, especially as consumption accumulates.

To achieve sustainable consumption, the appropriate level of meaningful action is institutional; to change the logic and modify the social and physical infrastructure that promotes consumerism. This does not relinquish the consumer of his/her responsibility, of which there are many; rather it recognises the limits to individual action and highlights the risks that continuous consumerism, albeit green, will drive the planetary system beyond recoverable limits of resource extraction, social dissatisfaction and rampant pollution.

In a study (Akenji and Bengtsson 2010), we've looked at the relative powers of major stakeholders in the value chains of consumer products. Analysing each group's interests, its influence on other actors and the production-consumption system, and the instruments it uses to wield its power, we identified that the consumer is not the most salient stakeholder. Brand owners, retailers and consumers form a nexus of influence of the value chain, but it is the brand owner who is the lead actor. This emphasizes why a limited focus on consumers would only render frustrating results. Instead, the lead actor should be targeted so that it can use its power to shift the entire value chain. Beyond this, reform should not be limited to increased efficiency but to transform the corporate culture, to rethink how corporations organize themselves to meet societal needs.

Corporate reform should be accompanied with editing out unsustainable products from the market. When it comes to interfering on individual choices, policy makers regard individual consumption as a sovereign domain, which is beyond the reach of public intervention; "neo-liberal thinking cautions against using public policy to unduly manage consumer decision making" (Cohen 2005). Yet governments have always intervened in consumption, (e.g. of tobacco, firearms and alcohol) by employing such criteria as public safety and public health. Viewing the effects of unsustainable consumption as public concern, choice-editing demands that sustainability criteria be used to set minimum standards below which products will automatically fall off the shelf. This might not resonate well with the myopic crowd that espouses the now abused notion of freedom of choice; yet there is little logic in individual freedom that consumes away the livelihood of an entire planet!

Solutions must also address systems of provision. The extent to which everyday household consumption behaviour can change is not only dependent on consumer attitude but also on highly interdependent socio-technical networks or systems of provision (Chappells and Shove 2003) – i.e. how services or resources are produced, distributed and used. Demand for household services like energy, water and waste management is structured by the utility companies, manufacturers and regulators involved in specifying technologies and systems, managing loads and modifying resource flows. Therefore, a more effective framing of SC policy needs to look beyond individual actions.

Beyond environmentally conscious single-unit designs, we especially need broader physical planning that integrates multiple functionalities of housing, mobility, feeding, and work, to optimize resource (re)use and facilitate healthier community development. This should be combined with a sustainability audit of public utility systems and systems of provision. Possible outcomes include restrictions of

unsustainable options (e.g. non-renewable energy sources) and application of eco-friendly tariffs (e.g. progressive charges for water and energy bills).

Above all, we need to construct a new vision beyond economic definitions; one that engages positive attributes in people and inspires new solutions. At the heart of consumption is the drive to be better, for people to lead happier lives. But that is not registered in the parameters we use in evaluating success of a society. The widely used GDP has economic dynamism as a priority; in a society where growth has become an end to itself, human well-being has become subservient. A nursing mother's time with the new-born baby does not contribute to GDP growth; neither do non-consumptive leisurely activities like taking a walk, nor does helping a friend in the garden count. The things which experience and research show that make people happy without spending money – a sense of belonging to and trust in community, a meaningful contribution to society, physical health, love - have little direct resonance on the GDP. Instead, spending on cancer treatment or paying insurance against robbery stimulates GDP growth. It's ironic; our parameters of economic success come at the expense of our own happiness! And so the ways in which we are encouraged to demonstrate success are ultimately detrimental to the planet upon which we depend.

The Mayas, the Vikings, the Easter Islanders, are but a few examples of civilizations which, right at the peak of their cultures, when they were at their strongest, suddenly collapsed! Historical narratives have always preferred to isolate warfare as the cause of the collapse of great civilisations - which in some cases is true. But while the envy of militant neighbouring empires or warring colonialists have sometimes been the immediate cause, this view tends to ignore the preparatory work done by the societies themselves, the long term causes that led to their demise. Where history brings in nature, it has often picked cataclysmic events – natural disasters, epidemics – to justify that those civilisations were destroyed by forces out of human control. Mounting evidence from scientific research is beginning to show a more complete picture. It is the way we organise our societies, the institutions that guard our way of life, and our everyday patterns of production and consumption that determine our future.

In the last days of the Norse, as pressures increased on their limited forests and resources, they continued to thrash the trees, to trade in church bells, stained glass windows, silk, silver – artefacts that showed their society as supreme. On the Easter Islands, the palm trees fell beyond the ecological balance and nature came in with climatic extremes. Ancient Egypt is yet another example of a collapsed civilisation which we romanticise in our TV documentaries and movies, flashing crafted objects unearthed from burial tombs, measuring perfect geometric dimensions of their pyramids, and offering vivid narratives of their scientific supremacy and ceremonies lush with gold.

War and disasters might contribute, but they only succeed when we have laid the groundwork, shifting the ecological balance, and made the natural system upon which we depend to be so vulnerable that man-made or human disaster is only a trigger that pushes us over the tipping point. As Jared Diamond shows, our institutions are tuned to think more about our social survival – fashion, cars, TVs, fountains – and less about our biological survival – forests, water, energy. That logic needs to change; and the more we shift the burden from institutional to individual level, the

more we scapegoat individual consumers, the tougher the challenge to our civilisation.

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