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The citizen-consumer dilemma: green consumerism or critical sustainable consumption?

Abstract

This article focuses on the concept of the citizen-consumer to examine the role of consumption as a tool for environmental sustainability. An ethical view of both citizenship and consumption is introduced to assess the potential of the citizen-consumer as an agent for socio-environmental change. To this end, the notions of ecological citizenship and sustainable consumption are used as a framework for analysis. Ecological citizenship is described as an ethical account of citizenship aimed at changing behaviours and attitudes, and spreading environmental values. Sustainable consumption is an archetypical manifestation of ecological citizenship that seeks to nurture ethical and pro-environmental choices when making decisions in the sphere of consumption. Yet being an ecological citizen means more than acting as a consumer; in fact, citizen and consumer identities are sometimes in conflict. This conflict is explored in the context of environmental sustainability. Despite the tensions, a positive reading is suggested. This is based on the view that a particular account of the consumer should be part of green understandings of the citizen, that democracy and democratisation shall be extended to the sphere of consumption, and that equality is a necessary aspect of sustainable consumption.

Keywords: citizen-consumer, sustainable consumption, green consumerism, ecological citizenship

1. THE CITIZEN-CONSUMER: TWO DIFFERENT VIEWS

Citizenship and consumption have traditionally been considered as opposed and conflicting spheres (Soper 2007; Barry 1999). While citizenship is often understood as related to the common good, collective life and the community, in line with the civic republican tradition, consumption is widely described according to neoclassical economics as dealing with the rational and economic individual concerned about private interest (Torgerson 2001; Sagoff

1988). However, there has been a "politicization of consumption": activists in the fields of social and environmental justice, labour and gender issues have turned into "political participants in the marketplace" (McGregor 2004, 1). Recent consumption practices suggest that consumption has now a civic element, and that it is turning into a site for the practice of citizenship (Berglund and Matti, 2006; Soper 2007; Soper and Trentmann 2008; Seyfang 2009; 2005). The line that divides citizenship and our sense of civic duty from our concern with private interest has become less clear (McGregor 2004). These ideas are expressed through the concept of the "citizen-consumer", a radical agent of change that can make a positive impact in the public sphere and trigger political transformation (Slocum 2004, 767).

Is this picture accurate? Despite the consolidation of the term citizen-consumer, talking about consumption in terms of citizenship is rather controversial. The citizen-consumer connection raises many problems, noted by different scholars of both citizenship and consumption. On this matter, the way current neoliberal politics approaches the citizen as a consumer has been highlighted (Berglund and Matti 2006; Barry 1999; Slocum 2004). From a Foucauldian perspective, Rachel Slocum (2004) argues that the citizen-consumer is constructed as a passive subject that accepts neoliberal arguments transmitted through public consumer policy and environmental policy. This results in the "normalisation" of the citizen-consumer. According to Foucault, one of the effects of power is the normalisation of individuals, which compels them to assume an identity leading to the execution of unintended actions. For example, in industrialised countries citizens have been normalised to sustain a throw-away culture (Darier 1999). Similarly, state policy encourages recycling and thus normalises "the integration of personal environmental responsibility and cost effectiveness" (Slocum 2004, 765), which is, arguably, the state's own interest in environmental protection. Citizens are not persuaded to reduce waste through practices such as buying goods with less packaging; nor are we explained what happens with the sorted waste that we bring to recycling points. We are simply asked to internalise and adopt certain routines more or less automatically[1].

From this point of view, the good citizen is defined in relation to her consumer practices (for instance, the good citizen is the one who recycles) and citizenship loses its political meaning associated with participation in the public sphere. So it could be argued that consumption has become a substitute for citizenship, replacing political engagement (Bauman 2008). In contemporary consumer societies driven by the economic growth imperative, consumerism and productivism, most people do not have time to take part in political life. Technology - and the increased labour productivity that it made possible - has not resulted in shorter working

[1] The normalisation process is resisted by those who do not want to be normalised. The green movement would represent a tactic of resistance against the normalisation of the throw-away mode of consumption (Darier 1999).

days. After work most individuals' free time is devoted to consumption activities (including travelling and leisure, but also those aimed at sustaining life) with no time being left for political engagement and community relationships (Sempere 2009).

Ecological thinkers have long opposed this model of consumption and production, not only for strictly environmental reasons, but also on the grounds that it restricts people's freedom and self-determination (Carter 2001)[2]. Few movements have been as critical with consumerism as the green movement, which has claimed since its origins that the capitalist economy and individualist social relationships reduce citizens to passive consumers, only concerned with personal, individual rights (Berglund and Matti 2006). If these arguments are accepted, then the consumer appears as the antagonist of the virtuous citizen and the term citizen-consumer becomes an oxymoron, given that it is exactly the aspiration to keep to a high level of consumption what prevents citizens from being political agents in the public arena.

To further explore the concept of the citizen-consumer and the tensions it generates when related to the environment issue, I examine a particular account of the citizen-consumer. In this account, the citizen element of the dichotomy is informed by the notion of 'ecological citizenship' while the consumer dimension is understood as 'sustainable consumption'. So I will be moving from the citizen-consumer to the ecological citizen-sustainable consumer. My main argument is that this specific understanding of the citizen-consumer is problematic because it builds on a narrow view of sustainable consumption (understood as green consumerism) and on an equally narrow conception of environmental sustainability (related to green growth and ecological efficiency). In the final section, I conclude with a few suggestions that may help thinking of the citizen-consumer in different terms that are, I believe, more appropriate for the politics of ecology.

2. THE ECOLOGICAL CITIZEN AS A SUSTAINABLE CONSUMER

First, I want to focus on the implications of the citizen-consumer nexus for a green political theory that seeks to develop more socially and environmentally responsible forms of social organisation. In order to undertake this analysis I introduce the concept of ecological citizenship, as it allows for the connection between citizenship, consumption and environmental issues. Many approaches to sustainability are regulatory and economic (such as fiscal incentives, eco-taxes and environmental legislation). These measures are external incentives aimed at individual behavioural transformation. Yet sustainability demands changes in values and attitudes too. The citizenship path to ecological sustainability promotes

[2] There were critics of consumerism before the birth of modern ecologism, for example Karl Marx in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1961).

these deeper, long-term changes (Dobson and Valencia Sáiz 2005; Dobson and Bell 2006; Dobson 2007). Within green political thought interest on citizenship originated in the 1990s, a time coincident with the revival of citizenship debates (Latta and Garside 2005; Valencia 2005). Different terms have been used to capture the citizenship-environment relationship, namely "ecological citizenship" (Christoff 1996; Dobson 2003; Smith 1998; Curtin 2002; 1999), "green citizenship" (Dean 2001; Smith 2005), "environmental citizenship" (Dobson and Bell 2006; Luque 2005), "sustainability citizenship" (Barry, 2006), "environmentally reasonable citizenship" (Hailwood 2005) or "ecological stewardship" (Barry 2002; 1999).

A very influential concept has been developed by Andrew Dobson (2003). In his account, ecological citizenship is related to the assumption of responsibility for the social and ecological impact of one's acts of production and reproduction of life. This notion transcends green reinterpretations of the liberal, civic republican and cosmopolitan traditions and defines ecological citizenship as a new model: post-cosmopolitan citizenship. From this angle, ecological citizenship is a virtue and duty-based notion of citizenship, yet it differs from the civic republican conception with regard to membership. Political space and the extension of the political community are determined by the idea of the ecological footprint.

According to Dobson's conception, each living being on Earth is entitled to a share of ecological space. But in an asymmetrically globalised world, available space, natural resources and environmental risks are unequally distributed. Some use more ecological space than what is due to us and this has a negative effect on others – distant in space and time - and on the environment. These asymmetries, triggered by the socio-environmental effect of daily activities, constitute relationships of injustice, and give rise to non-contractual, asymmetrical and non-reciprocal duties, in the sense that they are not correlative to rights or owed by everyone to everyone else. Only those falling into an over-use of ecological space, with over-sized ecological footprints, have ecological citizenship duties. Insofar as quotidian practices have repercussions on the environment, fellow national citizens, members of other states and future generations, the ecological citizen's main duty is to reduce her ecological footprint motivated by a sense of justice, where justice is understood as a fair share of ecological space or resources.

Ecological citizenship goes beyond the territorial boundaries of the nation-state and embraces both the private and public spheres. Drawing on feminist citizenship theory, relations between citizens themselves within the family and the household – and historically relegated to the private realm - are included in the political sphere of citizenship. Dobson's notion draws our attention to what motivates pro-environmental action – a sense of justice - and highlights that citizenship is about daily activity as much as it is about political or legal status.

Moving from theory to practice, there are different venues for the articulation of ecological citizenship. Green political theorists have predominantly focused on political institutions –

especially rights and environmental decision-making processes - as sites for the promotion of ecological citizenship (Eckersley 2004; Bell 2005; Smith 2003). But trying to live sustainably and reducing one's ecological footprint often involves activity and choices in the economic terrain, notably in the sphere of consumption. So it appears that one of the most common manifestations of one's ecological citizenship would be sustainable consumption.

What are the implications of conceiving the ecological citizen as a sustainable consumer? As Gill Seyfang notes (2005) the most obvious one is that ecological citizens should make ethical and environmentally conscious decisions in their acts of consumption so as to reduce the size of their ecological footprint in order to do justice. The consumption of wealthier countries is not only higher but also more ecologically and socially damaging, since we use more natural resources than what is our fare share and more ecological space than what is due to us. This overuse constitutes an unjust restriction of resources and ecological space of people in less industrialised countries. Although they contribute less to global consumption and resource depletion, people in the South suffer to a greater extent the negative impact of world consumption and the deterioration of the global environment. So consumption should be linked to a decrease in the spiralling ecological debt of the North towards the South (Simms 2005).

Yet this asymmetrical distribution of environmental goods and risks does not only pervade North-South relations; it can also be appreciated in the huge differences in wealth and access to consumption goods between social groups in wealthy states. Given inequalities in consumption levels, and taking into account the high environmental impact of consumption, being ecological citizens in our consumer relations connects with both aspirations for social equity and environmental sustainability. There is, thus, a double justification for ecological citizenship exercised through sustainable consumption: on the one hand, social or distributive, and on the other hand, ecological (although both are clearly interconnected, as the notions of ecological footprint and ecological debt illustrate).

3. SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Let me now focus on the concept of sustainable consumption, on how it relates to the objective of ecological sustainability, and on what it means for the individual citizen. As it happens with sustainable development, the notion of sustainable consumption has diverse readings. While sustainable development is related to the impact caused by production processes, sustainable consumption affects demand, that is, the possibilities of consumer choice (McGregor 2004).

In 1998, the United Nations Development Programme devoted its annual report to Consumption for Human Development. The report identifies the existence of a global model of unsustainable consumption, based on polluting technologies and production processes. It

concludes that world consumption patterns should be replaced, and suggests that consumption should be: *shared* (that is, "ensuring basic needs for all"), *strengthening* (in order to develop "human capabilities"), *socially responsible* ("so the consumption of some compromise the well-being of others") and "sustainable" (to secure "the choices of future generations") (UNDP 1998, 1). Hence sustainable consumption aims at the transformation of consumer patters in the North while at the same time securing the provision of the basic needs of the socially excluded, both in the more economically developed countries as well as in the less affluent societies (Carter 2001). Although the naturist movement of the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century could be seen as a forerunner (Sempere 2009), the "global movement for sustainable consumption" is said to have originated at the 1992 Rio Summit and its Agenda 21 (McGregor 2004, 3).

When environmental issues first hit the public agenda, ecological problems were mainly framed as the result of economic activity and industrial processes. Consequently, responsibility was placed above all on governments and corporations. The Rio Summit represents a turning point (Seyfang 2009). For the first time, the international consensus was that the main causes of the ecological crisis are over-consumption and the lifestyles of individuals in rich countries. Changes in habits and consumption patterns were presented as the solution to unsustainable development. Post-Rio environmental politics, both in academia and government circles, emphasises the way in which the everyday activities of individuals and their choices as consumers, citizens and householders have a great impact on the global state of the environment, and stresses the role they have to play in the project of building sustainable societies.

Because environmental problems are viewed as a product of individual lifestyles, it is widely agreed that effective public policy relies for its success, to a large extent, on citizens' behaviours and practices. It is assumed that the individual or household level is the right one for problems to be addressed, and that efforts made by states at both national and supranational levels will be pointless unless individuals do their bit. However, governments are aware that they will be very unpopular if measures that place an excessive economic burden on citizens (such as road taxes) are adopted. So they seek to encourage individuals' voluntary choice to care for the environment. Diverse mechanisms are used in environmental policy worldwide to get citizens change their lifestyles, usually by making them assume responsibilities which are translated into household-related activities, such as waste management and sustainable transport and consumption.

Seyfang (2009; 2005) argues that when it first became a policy objective, measures to foster sustainable consumption included both market mechanisms as well as more transformative solutions, like decreasing consumption levels. It was acknowledged that deep changes in societies and their economies were required to develop more ecological and socially fair

patterns of human consumption. Yet in Seyfang's view, the Rio Summit also marks the consolidation of technology and market-based approaches to the sustainability issue. On this regard, it represents a transition from early ecologism towards mainstream forms of environmentalism. The more radical proposals asking for a redefinition of prosperity and wealth were gradually excluded in favour of market solutions and technological innovations seeking resource productivity and ecological efficiency, like the ethical and green industry (with products such as organic food, fair traded goods and low-energy consumption products), eco-labelling schemes, environmental taxes, clean technologies and the 'polluter pays' principle, all of them widely accepted across different social sectors. These "top-down 'ecological modernisation' strategies" (Seyfang 2009, 30) are part of what has become the dominant conception of sustainable consumption, endorsed by governments worldwide. In this picture, sustainable consumption means "the consumption of more sustainably-produced goods through increased efficiency in production, economic instruments to discourage the most polluting technologies and techniques, and provision of consumer choice for greener products in the market" (Seyfang 2009, 30). It is based on an account of sustainable development as the attempt to make economic growth compatible with environmental protection. The objective of this dominant model of sustainable consumption is ecological efficiency, that is, to provide the same well-being and services using fewer resources and generating less waste (Sempere 2009). Here the role of the state is to set regulations on the market, correct prices, encourage legislation in order to make producers be 'cleaner', offer consumers a wide range of ecological and ethical goods, and educate consumers through public campaigns.

4. Sustainable Consumption and the Citizen-Consumer: a Critical Assessment

I now turn to examine the position of the (ecological) citizen-(sustainable) consumer in the scenario described in the previous section. As Seyfang notes, the ecological consumer "is a key actor in this model, for interpreting environmental information in markets, and sending 'green' signals back to producers" (Seyfang 2009, 30). The dominant conception of sustainable consumption assumes that ecological sustainability will be achieved through lifestyle change and individual acts of consumption. This view is grounded on the idea that individual citizens bear greater responsibility for environmental problems due to their high levels of consumption. Citizens are asked to live less affluent lives, to change consumption patterns by carrying out activities such as recycling, buying organic goods or using public transport instead of cars. So citizens are encouraged to act as consumers and react to signals, to consider how much they are willing to pay for sustainability. The whole question is

reduced to each individual cost-benefit analysis (Barry 1999). Seen in this light, sustainable consumption is not treated as political or citizenly but as a matter of consumer preferences. This leads to an individualist and moralist approach to green issues and political responsibility, which creates a false divide between the good green citizen and the irresponsible one, and makes the condition or attribute of citizenship depend on consumer practices. We should nonetheless consider whether this is asking too much of the individual citizen, whose interests as a consumer may sometimes conflict with her sense of civic duty and environmental awareness.

Sustainable consumer policy does not always take into account the existence of such conflict, since it is based on neoclassical economics theory of consumer behaviour. This theory assumes that consumer choices are mainly determined by their private preferences and interests, ignoring other factors, such as social relations and cultural beliefs (Ackerman 1997). However, citizen attitudes and behaviours are shaped by the context in which they arise and develop, and they cannot be explained without looking at the socio-technical system that frames them. Some choices are not simply a matter of preference but imposed by social evolution, like computers and mobile phones for instance. Besides social and cultural constraints, other factors hinder the effective exercise of citizenship through mainstream consumption strategies, such as the lack of time to find the right products, the lack of information about the real environmental and social cost of the product, and the high prices of more ecological goods. Insofar as generally only a minority of privileged citizens have the time, information and resources needed to purchase environmentally friendly goods, mainstream sustainable consumption can become an elitist strategy that contributes to the exclusion of some social groups and moves them away from ecological citizenship.

A further important point is that consumer policy presupposes that it is enough to provide citizens with the right information through, for instance, eco-labelling systems, to get them make the right shopping choices. When public attention is directed towards encouraging pro-environmental and ethical shopping, discussions about what could be more effective – albeit more controversial - options, like reducing consumption or decentralising production, are avoided.

The key question is, then, whether the mainstream model of sustainable consumption truly contributes to the creation of sustainable societies as well as to the promotion of greener forms of citizenship. Firstly, it should be noted that non critical acceptance of sustainable consumption – understood as green and ethical shopping - can lead to the assumption that there is only one valid and universal model of sustainable consumption. Nevertheless, what may appear as an ecological option in one society can be highly detrimental for the environment and people elsewhere (Carter 2001). Think of biofuels, for example, presented as an eco-friendly alternative in the more industrialised countries (in the absence of debate about

the possibilities of a less car-dependent culture), while they are causing conflicts over resources in the South. This indicates that mainstream sustainable strategies do not always arise from public debate about the scope, causes and possible effects of environmental problems.

In addition, if the issue is examined from the point of view of ecological sustainability, to which extent does sustainable consumption contribute to sustainability? How many citizen-consumers are needed for individual acts of consumption to have a significant impact on the overall economy? And is the increase of sustainable buy relevant as long as unsustainable goods and consumption practices are not banned? Renewable energies, clean production and sustainable consumption are all important aspects of what the sustainable society might look like. But they are not enough, for two main reasons: first, because the amount of ecologically produced goods (including organic and fair trade) is still insignificant within the overall volume of sales; and second, because mainstream sustainable consumption does not influence the production side of the economy (Sempere 2009).

This last point deserves greater attention. When individual consumption is presented as the main tool for achieving market transformation, it is assumed that the citizen-consumer can communicate her demands and exert influence on production decisions through her acts of consumption. However, consumption choices and patterns are shaped by realities such as the market, businesses' interests or urban development plans. It could be argued that the theory of consumer sovereignty is not accurate since the way people consume and satisfy their needs is determined by the socio-technical system, that is, by existing structures of provision and distribution of goods and services (Sempere 2009). For instance, some citizens have to drive to work because there is no public transport that reaches their work-place or that is in operation at the time when they need to commute; low energy-consumption washing machines are available in the market but there is no shared-ownership option. Decisions that could largely affect the economy are taken elsewhere, far from the citizen and the public sphere (Seyfang 2005).

Hence sustainable consumption as described here is not likely to produce significant changes in the capitalist organisation of societies. It may even be counter-productive since it could lead to the proliferation of a green consumerist society with an anti-ecological internal dynamics. In this respect, green consumption consolidates a new market. The citizen-consumer is voting for the market economy, supporting it with her acquisition of goods (McGregor 2004). By engaging in mainstream sustainable consumption practices, the citizen-consumer contributes to the implementation of the logic of the market in all institutions (Slocum 2004). So our responsibility as citizens is used to sustain a consumer society based on an unsustainable economic growth, and our interests as consumers in economic growth are

rendered compatible with our interests as green citizens concerned about the environment. This is what sustainable development means, at least in its dominant conception (Barry 1999). Capitalism has resulted in the commodification of nature. It has led to the belief that production and capital accumulation can increase constantly. This is an irrational logic that externalises costs - which fall onto ecosystems and humans - and generates systems of provision that are clearly non-ecological: great deal of resources are used, and a considerable amount of waste and emissions is generated (McLaughlin 1993; Seyfang 2009; Sempere 2009). These processes produce inequalities, injustice, and bring suffering to millions of people worldwide. Only affluent individuals and societies have managed to protect the places they inhabit from ecological risks. Green businesses attract the privileged classes, shifting citizens' attention away from the unsustainable production processes and externalities. As a result, environmental discourses have become mainstream policy discourses. Capitalistic competition requires ongoing innovation and diversification of goods, advertising and creating wants, product changes and inbuilt obsolescence. For current consumption levels to be maintained, the deregulation of credits and financial services, as well as the promotion of a work-and-spend ethos are needed. Existing institutions support these processes – for instance, through the consolidation of full-time 40-hour working weeks - making it extremely difficult for individuals to resist this form of life. Dominant cultural discourses of industrialism, productivism, individualism and consumerism reinforce this dynamic and prevent people from acknowledging the dramatic consequences of prevailing global interactions. Faced with this, little can be achieved by encouraging individual changes in lifestyles and consumption patterns; while being immersed in structures that reinforce the paradigm of economic growth, it is not possible that citizens live sustainable and just lives.

These arguments are not new. Since the 1970s some schools of green thought like deep ecology, social ecology and ecosocialism, have warned about the dangers of the green business that promotes eco-friendly consumerism. What I hope that the ideas discussed here can add to the debate is the claim that the dominant understanding of sustainable consumption shapes the notion of citizenship in a particular way, one that is non-political, private and which overlooks the justice-related dimension of ecological citizenship.

5. Conclusion: Towards a Way Out of the Citizen-Consumer Deadlock

The problems indicated so far suggest a negative reading of the citizenship-consumption nexus. The conventional concept of the consumer as grounded on neoclassical economics seems incompatible with the notion of citizenship. From a political ecology standpoint, the ecological citizenship-sustainable consumption link can consolidate a new type of (green)

consumerism and produce greater inequalities. The value of decreasing consumption is neglected, since under mainstream sustainable consumption practices the end is still to consume.

Now, if trying to promote ecological citizenship through sustainable consumption can actually undermine it, should sustainable consumption be rejected altogether or is there a way out of this deadlock? I believe there is. What is needed is, first, to avoid the reduction of citizenship to acts of consumption, so frequent in environmental policy, for individuals' role as consumers not to eclipse their role as citizens. When the citizen is reduced to the category of consumer, not only is consumption depoliticised, but so is citizenship, which is detached from the political and collective dimension that comes into being with participation with fellow citizens in public life. And, second, rather than choosing between either being a citizen or a consumer, or attempting to replace the consumer with the citizen, a redefinition of both notions of citizenship and consumption is crucial. The key to move this idea forward is to conceive consumption as something more than the expression of interests and choices of individual and isolated consumers.

Consumption is not negative *per se*. Indeed, consumption as a means to satisfy human needs is imperative to survival. In this respect, a difference has to be made between consumption and consumerism. Consumerism is characterised by a reverential attitude towards consumption, to the extent that the acquisition of material goods becomes an end and the criterion to determine one's social and cultural position as well as the level of personal satisfaction (McGregor 2004). It is only when consumption is conceived as an end, when it degenerates into consumerism, that all other aspects and interests of human life, as well as natural resources and other species, are reduced to instruments.

Humans interact with nature through consumption. This is a political relation that includes issues such as what it is to be produced, how, in what quantities and to which ends. Currently these crucial decisions that affect our collective future are taken by big businesses, often with the support of governments that in some cases represent economic elites. To acknowledge the political dimension of consumption and of human-nature relationships implies accepting that consumption choices are not private and therefore they have to be adopted by society as a whole. Beyond sustainable practices such as recycling and green buying, being a citizen in the sphere of consumption requires opposing the privatisation of consumption that takes place in consumerist societies and assuming collective control of decisions that affect socio-environmental relations (Sempere 2009). This is, in my view, the positive reading of the citizen-consumer dilemma, one that makes it promising for the cultivation of ecological citizenship.

To start rethinking both notions of citizenship and consumption, it is vital to relate consumption to the values and ends that a given society wants to endorse. Citizens can

participate through consumption in a process of construction of individual and collective identity. As Russel Keat (1994) suggests, one way for this end to be achieved is to place consumption within a deliberative democratic project. This would facilitate public debates about the relationship between, on the one hand, collective values and ends, and, on the other hand, individual preferences - including different discourses of consumption and perspectives not present in the mainstream sustainable consumption agenda, like non-anthropocentric views that acknowledge the autonomy of non-human animals. In order to redefine the meaning of consumption a different set of values is needed, one that accepts that consumption is political, ecological (and not just economic) and cannot be detached from production. But this has to be negotiated by citizens in the public sphere, rather than decided elsewhere.

Likewise, the collective aspect of both consumption and citizenship has to be emphasised. If ecological citizenship is to be promoted through consumption, citizens' acts have to be placed within a collective context (Melo-Escrihuela 2008). This is true for several reasons. First, because by inserting them in a collective context they transcend the private domain and acquire political significance. If considered on their own and in isolation these practices tend to be perceived as self-restraints and sacrifices. Second, because introducing a collective dimension will make them accessible for a broader number of citizens. Some sustainable consumption practices like vegetarianism or organic food intake are perceived by some citizens as eccentricities, fashions or trends, or even as counter-cultural and anti-system practices, and are rejected by those who do not identify themselves with the cultural groups with which they are associated. In some contexts, these practices are even reduced to forms of consumption for the privileged classes to the extent that disadvantaged groups cannot participate. Third, because only through collective action is it possible to produce the necessary conditions for citizens to act and choose in sustainable ways.

So the citizen-consumer has to be embedded in a collective project for social transformation that renders individual acts of consumption meaningful. This could be a localised and decentralised economy that reduces the gap between production and consumption, and encourages self-production when possible, so as to move towards lower levels of energy input and waste generation in socio-economic processes. In this context, ecological citizenship could be oriented towards the extension of the space for the informal economy, through initiatives such as food chains that bring producers and consumers closer, or time banks that would be promoting what Seyfang has referred to as 'alternative sustainable consumption' (2009, 2005). These practices facilitate non-monetary exchanges of goods, time and knowledge outside the market system. They can be more inclusive and accessible than other mainstream forms of sustainable consumption. Initiatives like this are based on a view of consumption and development that pays attention to socio-environmental criteria and human wellbeing, beyond economic considerations. Seyfang's work shows that besides

environmental benefits (such as reductions in transport emissions), these initiatives facilitate diverse forms of economic governance and more just social interactions. These new relationships would allow individuals to express, through their consumption practices, their identity as citizens, while resisting the construction of the citizen-consumer as a non-critical and individualist subject.

Yet it is difficult to see how the above changes could take place in societies in which economic decisions are not taken by citizens. What seems to be needed is the democratisation of all spheres of decision, including the political and economic realms and the world of labour relations. Just with acts of consumption, whether mainstream or alternative, in the formal or the informal economy, citizens cannot influence decisions adopted in other spheres far from public scrutiny.

Finally, overcoming inequality and social hierarchy also appears as a precondition for any transition toward a more sustainable consumption model. As I noted earlier, not all consumption is negative. If consumption is a satisfier of human needs, increasing consumption becomes a legitimate and fair aspiration of all disadvantaged groups and societies, since consumption is related to hopes for a better life (Barry, 1999). But while positional consumption exists, certain groups and individuals seeking social prestige will tend to mimic the consumer patters of the wealthy, which are highly anti-ecological and consumerist.

The implementation of socio-economic systems that use less materials and energy may result in happier and more rewarding forms of life, although it can bring suffering to many people. Not everybody is prepared to accept the social and psychological benefits of a more frugal life. But under conditions of equality, changes in lifestyles perceived by some citizens as sacrifices will be more likely to be accepted if they are seen as shared. Furthermore, if there is less to be used, consumed and distributed, the consequences of restrictions in consumption can fall on the less advantaged groups (Sempere 2009). So those seeking to promote sustainable consumption should emphasise the connection between consumption and equality.

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