Using the Sociological Imagination in the Classroom to Explore Green Consumerism

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In the fall of 2009, students in my SSS100, Introduction to Sociology, class learned how to cultivate and apply the sociological imagination to issues and debates about sustainable or “green” consumption. The term “sociological imagination,” a core concept in most introduction to sociology texts, was coined by the late C. Wright Mills, who, in a 1959 book of the same name, defined it as a form of reflective and historically-grounded thinking that enables people to establish a link between their personal experiences and choices and the social factors that influence them (5–8). For Mills, the sociological imagination is especially important because people are “[s]eldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives” (3–4) and the larger structural forces that shape them.

Although social forces influence us, we are not totally determined by them. A key task of the sociological imagination is to lay bare the connection between the ways that society shapes us and the ways that we shape ourselves – to grasp the way our activities both structure the social world and at the same time are structured by it. For Mills, grasping the “interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world” enables people to learn to “cope with their personal troubles in such ways as to control the structural transformation that usually lie behind them” (4).

Consumer Culture as a Way of Life
Understanding how cultural values and beliefs associated with consumerism have become an important feature of modern capitalist societies forms a key component in my Introduction to Sociology classes at LaGuardia Community College. The sociological imagination is a good theoretical lens to explore how our constantly growing culture of consumption impacts our daily lives and how we in turn influence
it. Consuming is both a deeply personal activity that is part of people’s lived experience as well as a socially-structured one. My Fall 2009 class examined how we consume, why we consume, and what impact our consumption choices have on society and the environmental health of the planet. In class, I focused on the ways that our attitudes and choices about how and what to consume are rooted in larger structural social, political, and economic conditions.

To help students understand the historical roots of our modern consumer culture and how it has become a pervasive force that structures and shapes attitudes, values, and everyday activities, I assigned selections from classic texts on the sociology of consumption such as Captains of Consciousness by Stuart Ewen, Enchanting a Disenchanted World, in which George Ritzer analyzed the role of “cathedrals of consumption,” No Logo by Naomi Klein, and Fast Food Nation by Eric Schlosser, as well as a chapter on consumption from the sociology textbook, The Real World, by Kerry Ferris and Jill Stein. I also showed a documentary video entitled The Story of Stuff, produced and narrated by environmental activist Annie Leonard. The film explores the structural component of individualized consumption and its economic, social, and environmental impacts. By placing our contemporary consumer practices in a larger historical and cultural context, these initial readings provided students with a theoretical framework that enabled them to focus and reflect upon the key tenet of the sociological imagination – the interplay between self and the social structures of society.

People in the United States have not always been enthusiastic consumers. Boundless consumption did not come easily to people socialized into a culture that stressed thrift and frugality. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, as the industrial system of mass production expanded, business leaders enlisted the nascent advertising industry to help sell their products. Having transformed the realm of production, business elites turned to the realm of consumption. According to Ewen, these captains of industry became “captains of consciousness” in order to reshape attitudes towards consuming so that people felt comfortable about shopping and purchasing non-necessities (4). Consumption increased greatly once businesses shifted from giving consumers what they wanted, to seducing them into wanting and needing the things they were producing and selling. Increased production required that continuous consumption for the sake of consumption become a
cultural norm. Gradually, the capitalist maxim “grow or die” became “buy or die.” In The Story of Stuff, Annie Leonard points out that shortly after World War II, retail analyst Victor Lebow outlined an economic strategy that was soon to become a guiding principle of society:

Our enormously productive economy . . . demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption . . . we need things consumed, burned up, replaced and discarded at an ever-accelerating rate.

Consumerism gradually emerged as a dominant ideology that functions like a secular religion. In our contemporary consumer landscape, malls and big box retail stores such as Walmart have become ubiquitous. These highly efficient and rationalized forms of retailing, which are structured in ways that almost compel people to shop, have, according to Ritzer, become “cathedrals of consumption” that exude an enchanted and sacred aura that makes a trip feel like a religious pilgrimage (8).

From the cradle to the grave, people are socialized to seek happiness through consumption with the result that living in a “branded world” becomes second nature (Klein). In short, consumption has become a pervasive economic and cultural force that impacts individuals, workplaces, communities, and especially, the environment.

The Discourse of Sustainability and the Rise of Green Consumerism

While consumer culture serves many functions, many environmental sociologists long regarded unbridled consumption as a major source of the modern environmental crisis. For example, the first Earth Day celebration, held in 1970, vilified unlimited economic growth and the excessive consumption that accompanied it as environmental evils. Environmental scholars and activists pointed out that the American consumer society created a culture of waste that used up resources and damaged the environment. But, within a relatively short period of time, partly as a result of the emphasis on sustainable development, consumption went from being an environmental sin to being a positive, virtuous activity that benefited both the economy and the environment.
By the twentieth anniversary of Earth Day, attitudes towards consumption had started to shift, as environmental activists began to preach the gospel of green consumerism and environmentally conscious shopping. Instead of damaging the environment, shopping came to be regarded by many as a way to save it.

In class, to show how this ideological shift came about, I discussed how the discourse of sustainability has reframed the way people think about environmental issues and problems. The term “sustainability” rose to prominence after the 1987 publication of a report by the World Commission on Environment and Development entitled *Our Common Future*, in which sustainable development was defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (43). The stress on sustainability represented a paradigm shift away from the then prevalent view which held that the economic logic of capitalism was inherently destructive of the environment and that there might be limits to continuous economic growth and development. Instead of viewing economic growth and development as an environmental bad, proponents of sustainability argued that it was possible to strike a balance among economic growth, environmental protection, and social equity. Advocates of sustainability began to envision win-win scenarios in which making profits and protecting the environmental health of the planet went hand in hand. Such a notion radically changed the way people thought about the environmental consequences of consumerism and shopping (Gould and Lewis).

Thus, for advocates of “green consumerism,” people’s buying power is a powerful force for change. By avoiding products manufactured under conditions that exploit workers and degrade the environment, consumers can vote with their dollars and influence the actions of major corporations. In a press release accompanying the 2004 publication of *Good Stuff? A Behind-the-Scenes Guide to the Things We Buy*, issued by the Worldwatch Institute, Lisa Mastny, co-director of the project, is quoted as saying:

Our purchasing can be a double-edged sword. When we aren’t aware of the impacts of our purchases on the environment and other people, we can do harm unknowingly. But when we do have the knowledge and the will to make informed choices,
our purchases can be beneficial – stimulating wider markets for products that improve our health, protect the environment, and help poorer communities around the world. (Worldwatch)

Using the Sociological Imagination to Think Structurally about Sustainable Consumption

While the interest in green consumerism is growing, green consumerism also has many critics and raises many questions. To give students a feel for the key issues, I assigned selections from Ecological Intelligence: How Knowing the Hidden Impacts of What We Buy Can Change Everything, by Daniel Goleman, a journalist and advocate of green consumerism and “ecological transparency;” The Myth of Green Marketing: Tending Our Goats at the Edge of Apocalypse, by Toby Smith, a staunch critic of green consumerism; and the article entitled “Individualization: Plant A Tree, Buy A Bike, Save the World,” by Michael Maniates, which offers another critical perspective. These works addressed key questions: Is green consumerism a real force for change or a subtle diversion from the questioning of our consumer culture? Does it inhibit people from thinking about consumption in systemic and structural terms – a key priority of the sociological imagination?

For Mills, at the core of the sociological imagination is the ability to recognize how our personal troubles are connected to issues of public social structure. It is precisely this ability that green consumerism problematizes with its emphasis on individual choice and behavior and its underemphasis on issues of public social structure.

In many cases, social movements reframe people’s personal or private misfortunes so that they are viewed as social problems that are caused by social structural forces. For example, the modern feminist movement was able to frame women’s psychological pain as a symptom of gender inequality and patriarchal oppression, insisting that “the personal is political” (Hanisch). In a similar vein, the environmental toxics and environmental health movements reframed people’s personal experiences as public issues by telling them that the miscarriages, birth defects, cancers, and high rates of asthma that were occurring in their communities were not private or personal tragedies but the result of irresponsible corporations that had polluted their environment. In recent years, childhood obesity and the health problems associated with it have also been undergoing the transformation from personal problem
to public issue. Is green consumerism part of a social movement that is reframeing the way individuals think about the relationship between their individual consumer choices and larger structural conditions? Or is it transforming a public environmental issue into a private trouble with the result that people go from being citizens concerned with changing political and economic structures and institutions to being individual consumers concerned with protecting or enhancing their lifestyles? Maniates refers to this individual response to environmental problems as the “individualization of responsibility” and argues that “[w]hen responsibility for environmental problems is individualized, there is little room to ponder institutions, the nature and exercise of political power, or the ways of collectively changing the distribution of power and influence in society – to, in other words, ‘think institutionally’” (174, emphasis in the original). In short, for Maniates, individualized green consumption reinforces and legitimates the culture of consumption – a major source of our environmental ills.

In *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills argues that when “the very structure of opportunities has collapsed,” then people are not really making choices about their circumstances (9). They are, instead, involved in an illusion of choice. For example, while people can choose to ride a bike or buy a green car, they cannot choose to alter the structure of our mass transportation system so that it is clean, efficient, and effective. In a similar vein, while they can choose to buy bottled water that is clean, they do not really have a choice about cleaning up the water supply and making our tap water safe for everyone.

Organic food enthusiasts often claim that buying organic food is a political act and that their choice to buy it is changing the world one shopping basket at a time. Is choosing to buy green or organic food products the same thing as choosing to change the political economy and structure of our industrialized agricultural system? Pesticide residues, antibiotics, and hormones in food are the result of the way most crops are grown and farm animals raised in the United States. These systemic threats require system solutions, such as raising crops differently.

Does green consumerism’s emphasis on individual buying power divert people’s attention away from thinking about systemic change? Following Mills, does it reframe a social issue and transform it into personal problem? Is Maniates correct when he argues that citizens’ “individual consumption choices are environmentally important, but
that their control over these choices is constrained, shaped, and framed by institutions and political forces that can be remade only through collective citizen action, as opposed to individual consumer behavior” (183, emphasis in the original)? This was a key question that I wanted my students to reflect upon and write about by applying the tools of the sociological imagination.

Exploring the Life Cycle of the Stuff We Consume

To help my students dive a little deeper into these issues, I asked them to write about the environmental impact of their own consumption behavior and to use their sociological imagination as a framework to reflect on the relationship between their personal choices and wider cultural, economic, and political structures. In order to accomplish this goal, I developed a staged, three-part assignment. For the first part of the assignment, the students were asked to document briefly the growing concern with sustainability in general and sustainable consumption in particular and to discuss key issues and debates by referring to the above-mentioned readings.

Next, to concretize this macro-historical analysis, students were asked to perform a life cycle analysis of a particular food product and to rate it in terms of its environmental sustainability. Life cycle analysis, a methodology that emerged from the discipline of industrial ecology, teaches us to view the entire life cycle of consumer products “from cradle to grave,” taking into account the hidden environmental and social costs associated with the process by which they are produced, used, and eventually disposed of. The twenty-minute video entitled *The Story of Stuff* – an explanation of how the unseen costs of consumer products impact workers, communities, and the environment – illustrated the environmental life cycle approach to evaluating products (Leonard).

To evaluate the sustainability of their chosen food product, students used a tool called *GoodGuide*, a website that subjects approximately 75,000 products to life cycle analysis and rates their environmental, health, and social impacts. Increasingly, more and more similar tools are becoming available to businesses and consumers: Another example is *SkinDeep*, a website that analyzes ingredients in personal care products and ranks them according to levels of toxicity.

For the third part of the assignment, I asked students to write about how increased knowledge about a product’s environmental sustainabil-
ity might impact consumption practices. They were to reflect upon their own experiences with sustainability labeling as well as to explore its wider economic and social implications. In class, we discussed whether increased knowledge about the ecological and social impact of food products provided by tools like GoodGuide would influence shopping habits in any way. The class’s experience with GoodGuide as a tool to analyze food products was mixed. Many students felt overwhelmed. One student felt that having access to so much information made her shopping experience “a drag.” Another pointed out that “trying to eat green is a lot of work.” Overall, most felt that the exercise helped them to think about how the ordinary stuff that they purchased on a regular basis has far-reaching environmental repercussions. They also felt skeptical about the steady proliferation of green labels that are not substantiated. One student criticized a label on a rice casserole product that claimed to be “green and perfectly natural,” having found that it was “full of nasty chemicals.” Another showed the class an advertisement for an “eco-friendly and natural” chocolate candy bar “that was the same old junk food with a fancy name.”

The really big question that emerged from this project was whether such knowledge was a form of power that enabled individual consumers to change the political and economic structure of what Schlosser refers to as our “Fast Food Nation.” Do tools like GoodGuide, which enhance knowledge about the hidden ecological impacts of consumer products, thereby put power into the hands of consumers? Do they change the relationship between consumers and products by bringing about conditions of what Daniel Goleman calls “ecological transparency” (“Green”)? For Goleman, “as we are able to make choices based on full information, power transfers from those who sell to those who buy…. We become the shapers of our destiny rather than passive victims. Just by going to the store, we will vote with our dollars (Ecological 10). Does GoodGuide or tools like it enable people to really “vote with their dollars,” as Goleman and other advocates of green consumerism claim? While most students felt that more knowledge was a good thing, they also agreed with Annie Leonard who argued on The Story of Stuff Project website that our consumer culture poses a systemic, social problem in need of social solutions:

Our current consumption patterns are unsustainable and inequitable and must be changed. But changing consumer behavior
isn’t enough. Yes, when we shop, we should buy the least dam-
aging product available and affordable, but consumption is a
systems problem, meaning our choices at the supermarkets are
pre-determined and limited by political and institutional forces
beyond the store. (Leonard, “Consumption”)

In answering this important question, one student wrote about how
the emphasis on green consumerism produces a more skeptical attitude
toward the social and environmental impacts of excessive consumption.
“Shopping until we drop is now environmentally cool. What about
the environmental impact of the junk we buy?” He agreed with Toby
Smith, who argued that green consumerism deflects serious questioning
of our “expansionistic, growth-oriented ethic”(10). Another student
wrote that shopping for sustainability at the individual level would not
change larger institutional forces that promote unsustainability, even
though, she thought, it might exert some influence. Given that econom-
ics trumps environmental concerns when it comes to sustainability,
she argued that it is likely that green products and green shopping will
remain a marginal phenomenon for people with money who can afford
to shop at stores such as Whole Foods. In a class discussion, a nursing
student with a three-year old daughter raised a similar issue that reso-
nated with the entire class: “I think this information is great. I want to
eat healthy food that doesn’t harm the environment or the workers that
produce it. I just can’t afford it.” This comment got the class thinking
a lot about Walmart’s recent sustainability initiative.

**Walmart’s Sustainability Initiative**

*Corporate Greenwashing or Consumer Power?*

Walmart raised the issue of ecological transparency in 2009, when it
announced that it was developing a sustainability index that would
access and label the environmental and social costs of the products that
it sells in its stores. Given its size and influence, Walmart’s mission to
make consumption smarter and more sustainable could have far reach-
ing impacts throughout the globe. According to Goleman, Walmart’s
sustainability initiative has set off an “ecological earthquake” that
marks the dawning of “the era of ecological transparency in the mar-
ketplace” (“Green”).
As a class, we discussed some of the possible implications of Walmart's environmental sea change and questioned if the world's largest retailer, with its immense power and influence over manufacturing and production processes, could transform the way we produce and consume things. Many scholars and environmentalists, some of them former haters of the retail giant, are coming to the conclusion that Walmart, because of its sheer size, may be the only entity capable of making sustainable consumption a reality (Diamond). Could this “cathedral of consumption” finally bring about environmental changes that environmentalists have been fighting for but unable to achieve?

Walmart launched its recent sustainability initiative in the aftermath of negative publicity campaigns conducted by labor, community, and environmental organizations that portrayed the company as a behemoth that exploited its workers, squeezed its suppliers, and devastated communities and the environment. To familiarize students with recent controversies surrounding Walmart, I assigned short newspaper articles such as “Don’t Blame Wal-Mart,” by Robert Reich, “Not Ready for Wal-Mart,” by Tom Angotti, and “Will Big Business Save the Earth?” by Jared Diamond. We also explored pro and anti-Walmart websites such as WalMartWatch.com and the Walmart company website, and watched clips from the documentary films entitled Food Inc. and “Is Walmart Good for America?”

Since many students in the class had some familiarity with Wal-Mart’s image problem, I tried to assign readings and facilitate discussions that would build upon their previous knowledge. Many in the class shopped at a Walmart store whenever they got a chance. One student had worked in a Walmart store before moving to New York City and another pointed out that she hated Walmart’s destructive policies, she shopped there because of their “low prices and great bargains.”

In class, we explored some of the reasons behind Walmart’s attempt to make consumption smarter and sustainable. We debated whether Walmart’s greening strategy was a sophisticated public relations scheme to project a favorable image – a technique that has been called “greenwashing” – an attempt to increase profits by increasing efficiency and reducing waste, or a response to consumer demands for healthier and sustainable products.
It is likely that what began purely as a defensive, public relations marketing move changed, almost accidentally, into a sound business strategy after the company realized that its various greening strategies were big money savers. As Gary Hirshberg, CEO and founder of the Stonyfield organic yogurt company, argued in the documentary Food Inc., “Walmart’s interest in sustainability and organic foods isn’t about moral enlightenment – it’s basic business.”

The key question for the class was whether Walmart was pushed into this green and profitable business strategy because of the efforts of consumers who were demanding sustainable products and voting with their dollars. Only time will provide answers to this question. During discussion, a student made a comment that resonated with the class: “If Walmart can sell quality organic food at a price that I can afford, then I don’t care why they are going green. I just care that they are doing it.” Many others in the class agreed and felt that if Walmart would change its ways and sell organic products at low cost without exploiting workers or the environment in the process, then they might change their shopping habits.

Conclusion

In explorations and discussions about the interplay between individual consumption experiences and larger cultural, economic, and political forces, our class raised more questions than answers. However, by creating a classroom culture that encouraged and enabled students to cultivate their sociological imaginations, the course empowered the students to place their personal experiences of consumption in a wider context. They became familiar with the key arguments and debates surrounding sustainable consumption. More important, they used the sociological imagination to think about the link between their personal experiences and the social factors that influence those experiences. I hoped that, by reflecting and writing about how their personal choices interact with institutional arrangements, they would see corroboration of Mill’s claim that “[n]either the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both”(3).
**WORKS CONSULTED**


