EDITORIAL

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Cultural change for a bearable climate

Introduction

The use of war metaphors has increased over the past few years in discussions about climate change. Particularly notable is a doubling between 2006 and 2007 in the number of English-language news articles mentioning the war on/against climate change. Also relevant in this regard was the move in 2008 by industrialist Richard Branson to establish the Carbon War Room to fight climate change. There is even now in the UK a discussion of war-time-esque carbon rationing (Cohen, 2010). But will this be enough to "mobilize" society to address climate change? A social media effort produced in 2010 by over two dozen animators—created to energize the "troops" to deal with climate change—raised an essential point: "a war on global warming needs to be a war on consumerism."[1] It is rare that this connection is made so clearly. Of course, the narrator then indicated that governments will not fight this war because they are locked into a paradigm where their perceived survival depends on perpetual economic growth centered on consumer spending (either directly or, for export-heavy countries, indirectly).

Making this connection is an important first step, and now, perhaps we are ready for the second step: surrendering the war against climate change altogether, and mobilizing for an all-out shift away from the consumer culture and proactively engineering a culture of sustainability. Such a change would entail working to shift cultural norms so that living sustainably becomes as natural as living as a consumer feels today. Only by intentionally harnessing key societal institutions—namely education, business, the media, government, traditions, and social movements—will we be able to transform cultural norms (and the resultant economic, social, and consumption patterns that stem from them) to the extent needed to stabilize the climate and prevent severe disruptions of human society.

The Unsustainability of Current Consumption Patterns

Before describing the necessary cultural shift away from consumerism it may be worth exploring why such reorientation is required in the first place. The evidence unambiguously demonstrates that current consumption patterns are unsustainable and must be altered if human society is to remain stable and at current (or even larger) population levels. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA) carried out from 2001 to 2005 found that approximately 60% of ecosystem services, including climate regulation, freshwater provision, fisheries, and many others were either being degraded or used unsustainably (MEA, 2005). This comprehensive review of scientific research also reminds us that the climate system is just one of the several vital ecosystem services being destabilized by modern society.

What has caused the human species to live so far beyond the means of the planetary systems on which it depends—to the extent that the board of the MEA even warned that "human activity is putting such strain on the natural functions of the Earth that the ability of the planet's ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted?" In part it is our sheer numbers: human population has more than doubled since 1965, to 6.8 billion people. However, as the well-known ecological footprint indicator reveals, population alone cannot explain our current crisis (Ewing et al. 2008). The Earth can sustain various numbers of people without depleting total biocapacity of the planet. The critical variable is how much we consume. For example, if all lived like those in low-income countries—averaging a per capita equivalent of about US$1,300 per year, the world could sustain roughly 13.6 billion people.[2] If we all were to live like high-income country residents (earning an average of US$33,000 per person), the Earth could sustain just 2.1 billion people. While shocking, these numbers should not surprise, for it is

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[1]See "Coalition of the Willing" available at http://coalitionofthe willing.org.uk.

[2]Monetary value is expressed here in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP).

the rich, not the poor, who have large homes and cars, fly in airplanes, use large amounts of electricity, eat more meat and processed foods, and buy more stuff—all of which have considerable ecological impact. Indeed, according to a study by Stephen Pacala (2007), the world's richest 500 million people (roughly 7% of global population) currently emit 50% of the world's carbon dioxide emissions, while the poorest 3 billion emit just 6%. Of course, higher income patterns do not in all cases equate with increased consumption, but where consumerism is the cultural norm, the odds of consuming more go up when wealthier, even among ecologically conscious individuals.

The Spread of Consumerism

Consumerism, at its simplest, is a cultural paradigm (or orienting pattern) where people find meaning, contentment, and acceptance primarily through what they consume. While consumption is a natural part of being human—one must eat, drink, and have basic clothing and shelter to survive—the level of consumption is almost completely driven by cultural norms. And in consumer cultures, that level has continued to increase, stimulated by new products and technologies, and new cultivated desires and needs.

At this point, consumerism is no longer simply an economic phenomenon but it has co-opted many elements of cultural systems. Brand logos, jingles, and "spokescharacters" have become dominant symbols. Cultural norms, such as diet, increasingly reflect consumerist influences. Even traditions are increasingly centered on consumerism. Rites of passage, like weddings and funerals, are celebrated in ways that consume significant resources and are perceived as abnormal if they do not. For example, the average funeral costs about US$10,000 in the United States and requires significant financial and ecological resources (Harris, 2007).

One commonality among all these consumerized elements of culture is their intentional cultivation by dominant institutions. Businesses, the media, governments, and educational institutions have played a central role in orienting cultures toward consumerism.

Arguably, business interests have been the strongest driver of this cultural shift. On a diverse set of fronts, firms have found ways to coax more consumption out of people. For instance, the liberalization of credit drove an 11-fold increase in consumption in the United States between just 1945 and 1960. Manufacturers intentionally designed products to have short lives or to go quickly out of style (strategies called, respectively, physical and psychological obsolescence). And American workers were encour-

aged to take pay raises rather than increased time off, a process that elevated their disposable incomes.

Perhaps the most powerful tool for stoking consumer cultures has been marketing. Global advertising is now a US$643 billion dollar industry. In the United States, the average "consumer" sees or hears hundreds of advertisements every day, and, from an early age, learns to associate products with positive imagery and messages. Plus, billions more are spent on subtler, more manipulative forms of marketing, like product placement (US$3.5 billion annually).

Businesses, even as they pursue very limited agendas to expand sales for their products, play a significant role in stimulating consumerism. And, whether intentionally or not, they transform cultural norms in the process. Automobile companies, for example, have aggressively shifted cultures to be car-centric. In the United States, as early as the 1920s, manufacturers heavily lobbied governments for increased road construction, supported organizations that fought against regulating car usage, and even bought up and dismantled several public trolley systems. Fast food companies have used a combination of strategies to shift dietary norms, especially by targeting children with advertising, toys, restaurant playgrounds, and cartoon "spokescharacters." Alone, McDonalds spends over US$1.2 billion on advertising each year.

This is not to say that reorienting cultures around consumerism starts and ends with business interests. The media play a powerful role as well, now exposing audiences during one third to one half of their waking hours to various myths of consumer cultures in many of the world's countries. During this time, much of the media output reinforces consumer norms and promotes materialistic aspirations, whether directly by extolling the high consumption lives of celebrities and the wealthy or more subtly through stories that reinforce the belief that happiness comes from being better off financially, from buying the newest consumer gadget or fashion accessory, and so forth.

Governments reinforce consumerism through subsidies and policies that stimulate consumption growth, and educational systems also reinforce consumer norms both by allowing businesses to shape some of their curricula and by failing to teach children about the consequences of high consumption lifestyles. A lack of nutritional education (and of modeling proper nutrition in the lunchroom), a lack of media-literacy programs, and a dearth of basic ecological awareness (namely humanity's dependence on a stable Earth system for its survival), are major educational deficiencies that help to prop up the consumerist cultural paradigm.

Not surprisingly, as cultural norms have become increasingly centered on consumerism, participants in these cultures have become active players in driving, perpetuating, and spreading consumerist patterns. However, while consumerism has become normalized, that does not mean it is realistic over the long term. Because we live on a finite planet, defining our success and happiness through how much we consume is not a viable option. Moreover, there is a growing body of evidence that high levels of consumption do not effectively increase human well-being.[3] Materialistic values have been shown to lower personal lifestyle satisfaction. The side effects of high consumption lifestyles, most notably obesity, increase illness. Moreover, the inequitable distribution of resources reduces social health and, after a point, wealth plays a diminishing role in contributing to the enhancement of subjective well-being.

So consumerism is not effective at providing human well-being and is very effective at undermining planetary well-being. It therefore makes sense to intentionally shift to a cultural paradigm where the norms, symbols, values, and traditions encourage just enough consumption to satisfy human well-being while directing more human energy toward practices that help to restore planetary well-being. Under such circumstances, the vast majority of humanity could live high quality lives (unlike today where one billion people are undernourished) and do so in a way that would allow our own and countless other species to thrive long into the future.

Cultivating Cultures of Sustainability

Donella Meadows explains that the most effective leverage point for changing a system entails changing its paradigm—that is to say, the shared ideas or basic assumptions around which the system functions.[4] In the case of the consumerism paradigm, the basic assumptions that need to change include the notion that more stuff makes people happier, that perpetual growth is good, that humans are separate from nature, and that nature is a stock of resources to be exploited.

Reorienting cultures away from consumerism will demand the weakening of this dominant paradigm, instead strengthening an alternative sustainability paradigm where people find meaning and contentment not through their consumption patterns, but in living simply, restoratively, and justly.

Ecological restoration would also be a key assumption in this new paradigm. It should become as "natural" to find value and meaning in life through how much a person helps restore the planet as a person today finds value and meaning in how much she earns, how large her home and television are, or how many gadgets or shoes she owns.

Equity would also be important. As it is the richest who have some of the largest ecological impacts, and the very poorest who often by necessity are forced into unsustainable behaviors like deforestation in their search for fuel wood, more equitable resource distribution could help to curb some of the worst ecological impacts. Recent research also shows that more equitable societies have less violence, better health, higher literacy levels, lower incarceration rates, less obesity, and lower levels of teen pregnancy—all substantial bonus dividends (see, e.g., Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009).

More concretely, the role of consumption and the acceptability of different types of consumption could be altered culturally as well. Namely, consumption that undermines human welfare could be actively discouraged, through cultivation of new laws, traditions, rituals, social marketing campaigns, and so forth. The private consumption of material-intensive goods could be replaced with public consumption. Priority could be given to the consumption of services, or even minimal or no consumption when possible. And goods that do remain necessary could be longer lasting and designed in accordance with "cradle to cradle" principles (eliminating waste and being completely recyclable at the end of their useful lives).[5]

Having a vision of what values, norms, and behaviors should be seen as natural will be essential in guiding the reorientation of cultures toward sustainability. Of course, this cultural transformation will not be easy. Shifting cultural systems is a long process measured in decades, not years. Even consumerism, with sophisticated technological advances and many devoted resources, took two centuries to become dominant. However, as the spread of consumerism also demonstrates, specific actors can harness leading cultural institutions that play central roles in redirecting cultural norms.

The good news is that already significant efforts are being undertaken to reorient cultural orientations by steering several powerful institutions that have held key roles in driving consumerism: education, business, government, and the media, plus social movements and traditions, both old and new.

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[3] See Assadourian (2010) for a concise overview on this point.

[4] Meadows' writings on this theme are extensive. For an accessible overview of her work on system dynamics and societal change see Meadows (2008).

[5] See McDonough & Braungart (2002) for a useful introduction to the concept of "cradle to cradle" design.

In the realm of education, there are early signs that every aspect is being transformed—from pre-school to the university, from the museum to the lunch tray. For example, reformers are shifting school menus, and more food is coming from organic, local, and fair trade sources. Today, in Rome—a leader of this effort—68% of food served in schools is organic, 26% is local, and 14% is fair trade (Morgan & Sonnino, 2010). Schools elsewhere are integrating media-literacy training, communities are building toy libraries to encourage sharing and to reduce childhood commercialization. Even school commuting is being reworked to reduce ecological impact while modeling sustainable living, as demonstrated by "walking buses" (where children walk in chaperoned groups instead of being driven in buses) in Italy, New Zealand, and other countries.

The basic role of business is also starting to be readdressed. Social enterprises are challenging the assumption that profit is the primary or even sole purpose of business. From the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh to a restaurant chain in Thailand called *Cabbages and Condoms*, more businesses are putting their social mission front and center, helping people while being financially successful. New corporate charters—like the B Corporation (the B stands for Benefit) in the United States—are even being designed to ensure that businesses over time are legally bound to put the well-being of workers, customers, other stakeholders—and of the Earth itself—at the center of their business decisions.

In government, some innovative shifts are also taking place. A long-standing strategy known as "choice editing," in which governments encourage good choices while discouraging bad ones, is being harnessed to reinforce sustainable choices. Current interest in this issue ranges from questioning perverse subsidies and taxing unsustainable behaviors to outright bans of unsustainable technologies like the incandescent lightbulb. And more than that, entire professional fields are being reassessed, from security to law. New concepts like Earth jurisprudence, in which the Earth community has fundamental rights that human laws must incorporate, are starting to take hold of the public imagination. In September 2008, Ecuador even incorporated this notion into its new constitution, declaring that "Nature or Mother Earth, where life is reproduced and exists, has the right to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles, structures, functions and its evolutionary processes" and that "every person, community, and nation will be able to demand the recognition of nature's rights before public institutions."[6]

Films, the arts, music, and other media are all drawing more attention to sustainability. Even a segment of the marketing community is mobilizing to use its knowledge to persuade people to live sustainably. These "social marketers" are creating ads, Internet videos, and campaigns to drive awareness about issues as diverse as the dangers of smoking, the importance of family planning, and the problems associated with factory farming. While having only a tiny fraction of the resources as traditional marketers, with the help of social media these marketers are achieving dramatic effects.

Numerous social movements are starting to form that directly or indirectly tackle sustainability issues. Hundreds of thousands of organizations are working, often quietly on their own and unknown to each other, on the many essential aspects of building sustainable cultures. Together, these groups have the power to redirect the momentum of consumerism and to provide an appealing vision of a sustainable future. Efforts to promote working less and living more simply, the "slow food" movement, the "degrowth" movement, transition towns, and ecovillages are all inspiring and empowering people to redirect both their own lives and broader society toward sustainability.[7]

Finally, cultural traditions are starting to be reoriented toward sustainability. For instance, new eco-friendly ways to celebrate rituals are being established and are becoming socially acceptable. Family-planning norms are starting to shift. Lost traditions, like the wise guidance of elders, are being rediscovered and used to support the shift to sustainability (Aubel, 2010). And religious organizations are starting to use their mighty influence to tackle environmental issues—printing green bibles, encouraging their congregations to conserve energy, investing institutional funds responsibly, and taking a stance against abuses of Creation, such as razing forests and blowing up mountaintops for coal.

Of course, all of these efforts together may not be enough considering that consumerism is so ingrained, that the majority of resources and wealth are still overwhelmingly promoting this pattern, and that few are even aware of the need to shift paradigms and many will resist such a shift. But regardless of resistance, as scientist James Lovelock notes, "Civilization in its present form hasn't got long." Consumerism—due to its ecological infeasibility—cannot continue much longer. The more seeds sown by the many pioneers of a sustainability culture now, the higher the probability that the political, social, and cultural vacuum created by consumerism's de-

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[6]See http://www.asambleanacional.gov.ec/documentos/constitucion_de _bolsillo.pdf.

[7]For other examples of institutional shifts to cultivate cultures of sustainability refer to Worldwatch Institute (2010).

cline will be filled with sustainability ideals as opposed to less humanistic ideologies.

Then again, maybe the current economic and ecological disruptions will lead enough innovative "cultural pioneers" to start pushing dominant institutions to reorient toward sustainability instead of consumerism, triggering a dramatic cultural shift. Anthropologist Margaret Mead is often quoted as saying: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." With many interconnected innovators energized, organized, and committed to spreading a sustainable way of life, a new cultural paradigm could take hold—one that will allow humanity to live better lives today and long into the future.

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Erik Assadourian is a senior fellow with the Worldwatch Institute, where he studies cultural change, consumerism, ecological ethics, corporate responsibility, and sustainable communities. He is the director of Worldwatch's Transforming Cultures project (http://www.transforming cultures.org), which disseminates the idea that many of our environmental and social problems are primarily symptoms of cultural systems centered on consumerism and growth, and that fixing these problems will come from proactively reorienting our cultures on sustainability. Living sustainably should then become as natural as living as consumers feels today. These ideas are discussed in depth in *State of the World 2010: Transforming Cultures—From Consumerism to Sustainability* that Erik directed. He has also managed the preparation of two editions of *Vital Signs*, the Worldwatch Institute's annual analysis of sustainability trends, and codirected *State of the World 2005: Rethinking Global Security*. Erik can be contacted at: eassadourian@worldwatch.org.