Sustainable Production, Consumption, and Livelihoods
The Global Research Forum on SPaC as a case of institutionalizing transdisciplinary research

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ISDRC19 Conference July 2, 2013, Stellenbosch
Why Sustainable Consumption research?

- (Over)consumption is a big driver of economic growth and crossing ecological boundaries.
- Traditional consumption research focuses mostly on individuals and their choices.
- Policies and campaigns to address (over)consumption have not been very successful. Causes?
  - Rational actor approach
  - Individualistic approach
- We consider consumption as a ‘lens’ into the larger complex system.
- “Transitioning” that system to a more sustainable one requires policies, technologies, and changes in lifestyles and values.
- Research should help to think through systemic change
Consumption and Production systems
Broadening consumption into systemic concept:

- **Material** consumption: life cycle: from resources to products to waste and recycling
- Consumption as part of *economic* system: investments; buying and selling; markets; economic growth
- **Cultural** lens: consumerist culture: identity, status, lifestyle
- Institutional system; *power* relationships
- *Systems of provision*: housing, food; transportation
2013 book, based on 2011 SCORAI workshop
Innovations in sustainable consumption (2013)

Three research directions brought together:

• New Economics; ecological boundaries; steady state and Degrowth; financial system reforms; local experiments
  – Little attention for consumers and consumption patterns

• Theories of Practice: consumption and consumer practices and lock-ins; habituation, culture, and technology
  – Little attention for economy and social change processes

• Socio-technical transitions: niches, regimes, and landscapes; systemic change
  – Little attention for economics and consumption

A fourth perspective was added in the book: social movements; grassroots innovations.
  – Inequity was hardly addressed
SCORAI 2013 international conference

June 12-14, Clark University:

The Future of Consumerism and Well-Being in a World of Ecological Constraints

• Keynotes:
  – Sheldon Garon (Princeton University), Beyond Our Means: Why America Spends While the World Saves
  – Carol Graham, (Brookings Institution) The Pursuit of Happiness: Toward the Economy of Well-Being
  – John Fullerton, (Capital Institute), Transition to the New Economy

• Other plenary speakers: Bob Massie, Juliet Schor, John de Graaf
The Future of Consumerism and Well-Being in a World of Ecological Constraints

June 12-14, 2013
Clark University
Worcester, MA
USA

For details and to register, visit the conference website:
www.scora.org

The conference seeks:
1. To improve our understanding of the complex driving forces underlying prevalent consumerist lifestyles in the wealthy parts of the globe.
2. To generate insights about fostering a necessary transition toward alternative ways of pursuing individual and societal well-being in a technological society cognizant of ecological limits.
3. To build on recent developments to establish a vibrant global research community focused on sustainable consumption.

Themes of the Conference:
+ Consumerism from different perspectives
+ Alternative visions and framings of post-consumerism
+ Emergent contours of post-consumerist society

Keynote Speakers
John Fullerton is a former Managing Director of JP Morgan and Founder of the Capital Institute, an online collaborative space for exploring the effect of economic transition to a more just, resilient, and sustainable way of living through the transformation of finance.

Sheldon Garon is the Nissan Professor of History and East Asian Studies at Princeton University. He is the author most recently of Beyond Our Means: Why America Spends While the World Saves.

Carol Graham is the Leo Pasvolsky Senior Fellow in Global Economy and Development at the Brookings Institution and College Park Professor at the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland. She is the author most recently of The Pursuit of Happiness: An Economy of Well-Being and Happiness Around the World. The Paradox of Happy Peasants and Miserable Millionaires.

Plenary Speakers
Juliet Schor is Professor of Sociology at Boston College and the author of Plenitude: The New Economics of True Wealth, the national best-seller The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure, and The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don’t Need.

John de Graaf is the national coordinator of Take Back Your Time, an organization challenging time poverty and overwork in the U.S. and Canada, and co-author of the national best-seller Affluenza: the All-Consuming Epidemic and What is the Economy for, Anyway.

For more information please contact
scora2013@clarke.edu

www.scora.org
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SCORAI and adjacent research fields

- Industrial ecology
- Ecological economics
- New economics
- Life cycle assessment
- Design for sustainability
- Cleaner Production
- Ecosystem services
- Earth system science
- Sustainability science,
- Etc, etc.....
• The SCORAI conference aims to bring together many disciplines and research directions.
• In the dialogue sessions, it aims at a dialogue between researchers and policy makers, business, and civil society.
• Its aim is not (yet) to develop a coherent research agenda.

• In parallel, the Global Research Forum on SPC aims to write both a review paper and a global research agenda (for Future Earth programme).
Global research Forum GRF-SPaC

- GRF-SPaC launched in 2011, initially as part of 10YFP of UNEP
- Inaugural workshop Rio 2012: 90 participants; 40 papers; JCP Special Issue in preparation
- October 2012 Beijing workshop as part of World Resources Forum
- March 2013 workshop GRF-SPC REDUCTIONS project at Wuppertal Institute
- July 2013 launch GRF-S. Africa at ISDRC19, Stellenbosch, S. Africa
- October 2013 plenary and workshop WRF Davos, Switzerland
- October 2013 session at WSSF conference Montreal, Canada
- February 2014 workshop in Guadelajara, Mexico
- June 2014 2nd International conference, Fudan University, Shanghai
- Listserv; website; 2 surveys; database in preparation.
- Aims at global network of organizations and individuals; bridging disciplines, perspectives, and the research-practice gap
- Aims to contribute to Future Earth global research Project
Global Research Forum

The mission of the Global Research Forum on Sustainable Production and Consumption is to strengthen the community of researchers and practitioners engaged in research on the worldwide transition to sustainable production and consumption systems. It builds on a 20+ year research tradition on SPC by numerous researchers, institutes, and networks around the world, and on many successful attempts to apply research findings into policy, civil society, and business. Explore our mission and vision here.

Read the GRF blog here. We also welcome your contributions.

You can download the latest GRF newsletter here (January 2013), which includes results from a recent survey of the network. Archived newsletters can be viewed here.
Structure of a SC review paper (Vergragt and Lorek)(work in progress)

1. Introduction
2. History and definitions of SC
3. Frontiers of sustainable consumption
   a) Structural challenges
   b) Battles about content
4. The (re)search for solutions
   a) Micro approaches
   b) social change approaches
   c) policy approaches
   d) Macro approaches
5. Roles of societal actors and movements
6. Conclusions
Brief history and definition of SCP

• 1992: Rio Agenda 21: “[t]he major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production, particularly in industrialized countries, which is a matter of grave concern, aggravating poverty and imbalances.”

• 1994: Oslo declaration: “Sustainable consumption is the use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimizing the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations.”

• 2002 Johannesburg Plan of Implementation: “[f]undamental changes in the way societies produce and consume are indispensable for achieving global sustainable development [and that] [a]ll countries should promote sustainable consumption and production patterns, with the developed countries taking the lead and with all countries benefiting from the process.”
Brief history (2)

• Sustainable consumption has developed from a rather narrow concept (how to influence consumer behavior) to a much broader research and policy program

• This includes:
  – Green products and immaterial product-service systems
  – Connections between production and consumption
  – The consumerist culture
  – The economic growth paradigm and its challenges
  – Sustainable lifestyles
  – Socio-technical transitions
  – (in)equality
  – Well-being and happiness research

• It can thus be seen as a “lens” in a complex system:
Consumer society was deliberately constructed, socially engineered by corporations – government policies

Victor Lebow 1955: “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 and our ego satisfaction in consumption”
What drives consumption?

Hypothesis: high income and wealth inequality is one of the drivers of unsustainable material consumption.

Other drivers are:
• Short termism
• Profit-seeking financial and business systems
• Advertisements
• Peer pressure (keeping up with the Joneses)
• The “hedonic treadmill”
• Status symbols
• Cultural identity
• “consumerist culture”
• Ideology of economic growth
Health and Social Problems vs. Income Inequality (9 indicators combined)
From: Wilkinson and Pickett “The Spirit Level”

Figure 13.1 Health and social problems are more common in more unequal countries.
Towards systemic change

- Influencing individual consumption: through education; information; product labeling; choice editing
  - Limited effectiveness; emotions rather than information
- Creating peer pressure: ecoteams
  - Limited target group (5%)
- New business models: green products; sustainable product-service-systems; greening the supply chain; green procurement; circular economy (recycling)
  - Business and government approach; does not challenge economic growth paradigm
Systemic change (2)

- New roles for consumers: as *investors*; as *producers* (Prosumers; Røpke); as *innovators*: grassroots innovations (Seyfang, Smith); as *experimenters*: Bounded Socio-Technical Experiments (Brown, Vergragt)

- Social movements: slow living; voluntary simplicity; local currencies; transition towns; grassroots innovations; collaborative consumption; degrowth movement
  - Unclear how to mainstream them

- Challenging *economic growth paradigm*; alternatives for GDP as indicator for wellbeing
  - Mostly academics; some attention among policy makers (Sarkozy: Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi report on alternatives for GDP; Bhutan: Gross National Happiness Index)

- Sufficiency instead of efficiency
  - Mostly academics
“Leapfrogging” in the global south

- Some researchers and activists see the largest challenges in the global South.
- The BRICS countries aspire to fast economic growth and to becoming consumer societies.
- Chandran Nair ("consumptionomics") advocates that the Western model of consumption-led economic growth cannot be replicated in Asia.
- Spangenberg and Lorek (JCP 2013) argue for both a floor (poverty alleviation) and a ceiling (overconsumption).
- Anantharaman and Schroeder (SCORAI 2013) argue for policies to enhance “leapfrogging”: avoiding overconsumption patterns in the global south.
Future

• Towards a post-consumerist society?
  – Some scholars see the end of consumerism and economic growth in US: peak-car; less driving licenses; smaller apartments
    • Not sure how ubiquitous these trends will be

• The role of the economic crisis
  – Zero-growth as reality; rethinking of well-being and ecological impacts

• The case of stagnation: Japan
  – Many scholars start to see Japan’s “lost decades” as a new and rather attractive reality: frugality as virtue

• Autonomous trends: peak oil, peak everything
  – However: India and China keep following unsustainable growth paths

• The role of policies and politics
Towards a global SC research agenda

• The production-consumption system: understanding of its stability (lock-in) and the dominant power relationships (political economy of consumption); how to leverage change
• Technological innovation, new technologies and social media; and the change in values, life styles, and consumption patterns
• Relationships between well-being; (in)equity, consumption, and (political) economics
• Role of agency vs. structure; the battle of social movements and networks, business, governments, and researcher-activists vs. institutionalized lock-in.
• Role of “medium-level” crises as wake-up calls, teachable moments, mass-education,
• How to use design approaches to socially engineer more well-being with less stuff. Can a sustainable society be socially engineered?
• Role of governments and governance; democracy; policy instruments
• Etc etc. ......no coherence yet.........
Discussion: some questions

• Do we need more research; or: how to better guide action and social change?

• What are the main challenges for academic research and debate (role of social movements; education; democracy; role of business; how to connect micro-experiments with macro-changes, .....)

• How to better conceptualize social change processes?
Thank you

• Questions and comments?

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• http://grfscp.wordpress.com
• www.tellus.org

• SCP Roundtable: July 2, 1530-1700 Venue 4
  All welcome