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BOOK REVIEW

Gill Seyfang (2009) *The New Economics of Sustainable Consumption – Seeds of Change*. Palgrave Macmillan (Energy, Climate and the Environment Series) Basingstoke, Hampshire. 232 pp; ISBN 978-0-230-52533-7; £50.00

It is no understatement that our everyday consumption practices are key to the well-being of both our personal lives and the planet as a whole. Consumption patterns are inextricably linked to the socio-economic infrastructure of our societies and express our personal and collective identities, belief systems and values. In an age of peak oil and climate change awareness of our ecological footprint and the social and environmental costs of consumption is growing. Within less than two decades since the Rio Earth Summit sustainable consumption has moved to the top of policy and research agendas across the world. Yet 'sustainability' has remained a vaguely defined and contested concept and it has been appropriated by those very forces that promote economic growth and high consumption rates. The theory and practice of sustainable consumption has acquired different expressions among activists, policy makers, academics and consumers. Gill Seyfang's new book is the product of many years of research into grass roots initiatives in sustainable housing, food provision, and complementary currencies.

The New Economics of Sustainable Consumption introduces the reader to the central issues regarding consumption and provides an overview of existing theories from cognitive models through socio-psychological frameworks to contextual models. The book offers a detailed critique of the paradigms underlying government efforts to generate large scale behaviour change through social marketing and attempts to internalise ecological market failures through pricing mechanisms, information campaigns and taxation. Framing consumption practices and environmental problems in the language of market efficiency and optimising rational agents seriously constrains policy options as well as it allows environmentally damaging consumption patterns to persist. Seyfang argues that to really face the socio-technical changes required to shift towards sustainable consumption necessitates a break with consumerism and a radical re-envisioning and re-organisation of our economies.

Such rethinking entails new definitions of wealth and work as well as contesting the growth imperative inherent in economic policy. Seyfang situates her work firmly within New Economics integrating aspects like the informal economy, natural services, community building, awareness and ethics into economics. The first chapter is an introduction to the theories of sustainable consumption and this is followed by an analysis of the mainstream agenda in chapter two. A critique of this agenda – conceptualising sustainable consumption as a matter of correcting market externalities through market-based measures and a greening

of consumption – leads to the development of a New Economics framework for evaluating sustainable consumption in the third chapter. If the aim of the economy is to promote growth in human well-being, and not simply growth in material consumption, it is clear that increasing inequalities, environmental destruction, continual unemployment and free market ideology are signs of failure. The problem with standard methods for economic evaluation is that these aspects are almost always invisible.

To assess the contributions of projects and activities to sustainable consumption Seyfang develops “a new qualitative evaluation framework which is designed to incorporate the key elements of the New Economics vision of sustainable consumption” and which “builds on the theoretical foundations” of New Economics (p. 61). This model incorporates social and environmental values in a multi-criteria evaluation which she proceeds to apply to her research on systems of provision of housing and food and complementary currencies. Developing a sustainability index on the basis of “what counts is what gets counted” Seyfang proposes indicators measuring *localisation, ecological footprint, community-building, collective action, and new infrastructures of provision*.

The fourth chapter, co-authored with Adrian Smith from the University of Sussex, analyses grass roots initiatives from an innovation process perspective. Here, community activities are viewed as sites of innovation, or as innovation niches, in order to understand the potential and challenges for their evolution. The innovation approach offers insight into the psychological, social and institutional processes that influence consumption patterns and which often preclude sustainable options. This chapter bridges technological innovation and community action and should be of interest to anyone concerned with consumption policy and community work. The empirical research on food, housing, and currencies in the three following chapters are examined in light of their niche characteristics and the possibilities and obstacles for diffusing sustainable consumption practices into the mainstream.

It is these three chapters which warrant the “seeds of change” part of the book title. In the fifth chapter an alternative system of food provision, Eostre Organics in East Anglia, is evaluated for its contribution to sustainable consumption in terms of the aforementioned indicators. The sixth chapter looks at sustainable housing, in particular the straw-bale technology of the Canelo Project, Arizona, and the autonomous building experiments of Earthship Biotecture in New Mexico. Complementary currencies are the topic of the seventh chapter which builds on extensive research into different kinds of money. This chapter is different from the previous two in that it delves into the socio-technical infrastructure of money and expounds the well-established barriers against sustainable consumption embodied in the mainstream function of money. New uses of money play a central role in the New Economics vision of sustainable consumption. The chapter then proceeds to analyse three complementary currencies – LETS, time banking, and the Dutch Nu Spaarpas – according to the sustainability criteria and the possibilities for diffusing these niche currencies.

Here a forte of the multi-criteria analysis becomes apparent: it enables pinpointing strengths and weaknesses of a project or process suggesting changes to aspects that are less effective at promoting sustainable consumption. Seyfang addresses policy and legislative barriers to the functioning and diffusing of complementary currencies and suggests ways of re-orienting their development in a direction of stronger sustainability. The model lays out a pluralistic framework for assessing and guiding sustainable development which is goal-oriented and avoids the pitfalls of tending excessively to cognitive limitations or structural inadequacies in promoting behaviour change. The final chapter concludes on the research presented and

suggests how grass roots initiatives, ideas and values can translate into the mainstream with implications for both policy and research.

It is evident that values are critical for the effect of a technology. If values are not transmitted along with sustainable technologies their material impact could be almost as high as without it. Yet while values configure the use of a technology, a change in technology or infrastructure can facilitate a shift in values. It is a strength of the New Economics model laid out here that it recognises this duality and advances an argument for a multifaceted approach to changing our collective lifestyles, routines and world-view. The flourishing (and failure) of community initiatives affords important lessons for grass roots innovations, research agendas and policy. *The New Economics of Sustainable Consumption* develops a conceptual framework to examine the social, environmental and economic impacts of consumption as well as it provides an insight into what a New Economics of sustainable consumption might look like in practice. Although further research into the ability of alternative technologies to retain their initial values once they have entered the mainstream is necessary this book offers a pathway for the future of consumption to become sustainable.

In light of the arguments for conceiving grass roots initiatives as innovative niches the central problem becomes how to overcome the barriers for diffusion into the wider society. This has, for example, been an enduring difficulty for LETS. Although Seyfang proposes ways of overcoming such barriers by upscaling, replication, and translation this analysis is relegated to a few pages in the concluding chapter. Here generality takes place of the detailed empirical investigations of the previous chapters. It would be interesting to see what these suggestions could mean in practice to uncover the dynamics of the dichotomy of alternative and mainstream – it is my suspicion that such trade-off will invariably favour the mainstream. However, as the author asserts, the main concern of the book is framing a new research and policy agenda for sustainable consumption and this is undoubtedly achieved. Drawing both on theory and extensive research into grass roots innovations the framework presented here affords valuable lessons for the future of sustainable consumption. The book is aimed at policy makers and researchers alike as it offers a detailed critique of current policies and practices as well as suggestions for improving and re-framing our understanding and praxis. But it should be of interest to anyone interested in sustainability, whether student or expert, as it provides both an introduction into the subject and well-researched case studies of sustainable consumption practices. As someone with a general interest in complementary currencies and the possibilities of alternative systems of provision, I found *The New Economics of Sustainable Consumption* a thoroughly stimulating and absorbing book.

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