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Article:

Pickerill, J. orcid.org/0000-0002-2070-705X (2018) Sustainable communities and green lifestyles: consumption and environmentalism. *Local Environment*, 23 (12). pp. 1225-1226. ISSN 1354-9839

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2018.1522622>

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Local Environment* on 24/09/2018, available online:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/13549839.2018.1522622>.

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Sustainable Communities and Green Lifestyles: Consumption and Environmentalism

Tendai Chitewere, 2018, Routledge

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The question of how to live an ethical life, minimise your environmental impact and be an active supportive member of a diverse community, continues to be challenging. For some, ecovillages offer an opportunity to do just this. Tendai Chitewere spent 545 days conducting ethnographic research of EcoVillage at Ithaca (New York State, USA), critically examining the original mission and its disjuncture with their lived everyday practices. It is one of the most robust interrogations of ecovillage life to date. Chitewere manages to combine an obvious passion for intentional community with a deep political critique of what EcoVillage at Ithaca (EVI) is and represents.

The main argument of the book is that residents in EVI have primarily engaged in a green lifestyle that prioritises green consumption and personal benefits, over tackling structural or collective environmental injustices. As a result at various points in the book EVI is classified as a green gated community, a themed idealised space, ageographic, an exclusive commodified space of experiences, an elitist place with exclusionary boundaries, an enclosure, and a form of green flight. Far from being a model of sustainable living which all can enjoy, Chitewere details the many forms of exclusion; from the high costs of house purchase, to the time and energy demanded of residents to actively participate in communities and work teams, assumptions about the

need for homogeneity for effective communal decision making, resistance to EVI being an educational space, and to how the green space EVI protects is actually 'private-public space' (89) only accessible to members. As a result only those "with both the economic and social capital" (140), who have money but only work part-time or from home, basically who are upper-middle class and white, can join EVI.

It is not that residents are oblivious to this issue. Many left because they desired more fundamental change, others have struggled to introduce affordable housing and diversify residents. But Chitewere convincingly argues that unless capitalism is structurally challenged, and therefore the broader structures of inequality and exclusion tackled, then issues of diversity especially of race, ethnicity, class, age and affordability will not be resolved. In other words, personal or individual environmentalism will not alter the culture of capitalism or result in broad scale environmental justice.

While we are likely all implicated in contradictions in how we live (I am an environmentalist who owns a car, for example), living at EVI appears to enable residents to avoid facing their own contradictions, with many asserting by virtue of membership that they were doing their bit. This is even when they subsequently choose not to actively engage in community activities, instead just "consuming the spaces ... and experiences" (60). Chitewere likens this logic to treating EVI as a commodity, where "residents are able to purchase a pre-packaged way of life" (118). It was not just that residents only reduced consumption when they encountered financial limitations, but they resisted sharing anything that limited their personal freedom (like cars), or which required sharing beyond EVI (using public transport); thereby resisting any form of sacrifice. Instead residents spoke of how their car used an alternative fuel or that they

shared a laundry room. These are potentially ineffective forms of performative eco-consciousness, and the ecological practices of EVI are not unique; “the things EVI argues make it special are in fact adopted by other individuals and communities without the distinction of creating an innovative community” (135).

The focus on consumption in the book misses both a significant literature on the geographies of consumption and a history of campaigns seeking to reduce consumption (from the 1970s) including the extensive anti-capitalist (and anti-consumption) campaigns of the 1990s that, certainly in Britain, emerged from environmentalism, and the contemporary de-growth activism. In other words I wonder the extent to which a belief that capitalism will enable environmental protection is an uniquely North American (mis)understanding.

There are also certain confluences in this book that I question. Chitewere equates ecovillage life with environmentalism, and then critiques it as an ineffective form of personal activism. However she later acknowledges that many residents professed little environmental intent. There is an obvious tension here in that eco-villages are not necessarily a form of environmentalism, a type of action more equated with politically active lobbying and direct action, rather than lifestyle changes alone. Environmentalism, a form of social movement, is an outwardly facing quest for collective change. Similarly ecovillages are conflated with cohousing, despite many ecovillages employing a large array of differently formed housing.

Chitewere also suggests that it is the rural location of EVI that is most problematic and ultimately created many of the problems of exclusion. The reliance on the automobile is clearly problematic here, but that Chitewere argues there is a problem in trying to “create a community in harmony with nature by building in nature” (137) misses many

other existing examples of more harmonious rural living. There are important arguments for more peopled-landscapes and low impact developments that challenge an unhelpful division between nature and people. This is not to disagree with Chitewere's call for more ecovillages in already-existing urban places, but instead to question the validity of such a sharp rural-urban distinction and a presumption that inequality and injustice do not already exist in rural places too.

Beyond a revealing examination of EVI, Chitewere calls for more critical research to be done with ecovillages; "finding or identifying weaknesses is not rejecting hopefulness, but creating a space for change and progression" (135). It would be productive to apply Chitewere's approach to enable more robust interrogations of eco-communities elsewhere.

Ultimately Chitewere illustrates a danger of ecovillages being too inward facing. Ecovillages can become time and energy sinks which distract from participating in broader social justice and environmental struggles. Unless an ecovillage actively reaches out beyond its boundaries, or makes its borders fluid, it will have little impact on broader social justice problems and then it just becomes concerned with protecting the privileged few.