Constructing and mobilizing 'the consumer': Responsibility, consumption and the politics of sustainability

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Abstract
This paper advances critical perspectives on the governance of sustainable consumption by exploring the ways in which 'the consumer' is constructed and mobilized by strategic actors and organizations. Existing approaches draw on theories of practice to emphasize the limitations of governing through behaviour change. Whilst this provides a welcome corrective to the overemphasis on individual responsibility in sustainability research and policy, fundamental questions concerning changes over time, variation across substantive domains, and the mechanisms through which authorities and intermediaries responsibilize 'the consumer' are neglected. By way of rejoinder, we suggest that attention should be paid to the project of sustainable consumption and – following Clive Barnett, Nick Clarke and colleagues' analysis of ethical consumption campaigning – the ways in which it engages consuming subjects and mobilizes the rhetorical figure of 'the consumer'. To illustrate, we present the findings from an empirical study – drawing on documentary sources as well as 38 key informant interviews – of how the challenge of food waste reduction has been framed, interpreted and responded to in the UK. Our analysis suggests that initial responses to the issue made claims on the responsibilities of individuals as consumers, but that this quickly gave way to an emergent sense of shared and distributed responsibility. To conclude we argue for the importance of exploring specific instances of sustainable consumption governance and their underlying political rationalities, as well as periodizing these accounts.

Keywords

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Introduction

The consumer is a well-established figure in contemporary politics and commerce, and there are strong tendencies – both colloquial and academic – to treat it as a self-evident category. Contrary to these trends, there are perspectives that explore the contingency and construction of 'the consumer' alongside the ways in which this shifting subject position has been mobilized in pursuit of various political and economic projects (Barnett et al. 2011; Hughes et al. 2015; Miller and Rose 1997; Trentmann 2006). This paper considers the ways in which the idea, the vocabulary and the category of 'the consumer' feature in relation to the politics of sustainability. In doing so, it joins debates that bring the geographies of responsibility into dialogue with contemporary understandings of consumption (Goodman et al., 2010; Jackson et al., 2009; Mansvelt, 2008; Meah, 2014; Ormond and Goodman, 2015; Popke, 2006; Walker, 2015). Inspiration is drawn from Clive Barnett, Nick Clarke and colleagues (for example Barnett et al., 2008, 2011; Clarke et al., 2007a), whose analysis explores the political rationalities of ethical consumption and the claims it makes on the responsibilities of individuals as consumers. Accordingly, the analysis that follows is less interested in consumption and consumers *per se* than it is in how civil society, state and commercial actors mobilize 'the consumer'.

Where Barnett and colleagues focus on ethical consumption, this paper focuses on sustainable consumption. Delineating the field of sustainable consumption is fraught with difficulties insofar as it has an undeniable ethical dimension that 'criss-crosses and works through a multitude of consumption-related behaviours and scales' (Hinton and Goodman, 2010: 246). We take the view (following Evans, 2011) that sustainable consumption differs from the field of ethical consumption in its primary objective of reducing the resource intensity of production-consumption systems (effectively consuming less rather than consuming differently). Sustainable consumption is a specific political project that can be traced to the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, where attention was drawn to the environmental impacts of consumption patterns in industrialized countries. The task of transforming unsustainable patterns of consumption was quickly established as a strategic priority in the global environmental arena. The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg identified Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) as one of its three overarching objectives, and its plan of implementation called for the development of a 10-year framework of programmes (10YFP) on SCP. The Marrakesh process – an international 'bottom up' multi-stakeholder consultation – was initiated in 2003 to develop this 10YFP and at the Rio+20 conference in 2012 it was adopted as a global framework of action.

Our starting point is the observation that the project of sustainable consumption has now unfolded in a direction that brings efforts to shape the conduct of individuals to the fore. For example the Oslo Symposium on Sustainable Consumption in 1994, an early attempt at naming and defining the field, focused on the 'life cycle' of products and services. In contrast, The Johannesburg plan of implementation drew a clear distinction between sustainable production and sustainable consumption, equating the latter with 'consumer behaviour'. More generally notions of behaviour change became something of a 'holy grail' (Jackson, 2005) for environmental policy, which is perhaps not surprising given the prevailing vogue for governing through behaviour change initiatives (Whitehead et al., 2011) and tackling complex global problems through appeals to the responsibilities of consuming subjects. Objections to these manoeuvres are not difficult to find and the following section considers the variety of available critique in more detail. For now it is instructive to zoom in on Elizabeth Shove's influential diagnosis of climate policy and its reliance on what she terms the ABC framework – in which 'A' stands for attitude, 'B' for behaviour and 'C' for choice (Shove, 2010: 1274). Shove posits links between academic perspectives and the

approaches to governance that they sustain, noting that '[t]he popularity of the ABC framework is an indication of the extent to which responsibility for responding to climate change is thought to lie with individuals whose behavioural choices will make the difference' (Shove, 2010: 1274). In response, Whitmarsh et al. (2010) have acknowledged Shove's concerns about individualizing responsibilities for social change but caution that we should not 'move too far in the other direction' (Whitmarsh et al., 2010: 259), suggesting that the role of individuals should not be excluded.

We do not wish to arbitrate between these positions; rather we take this debate as an entry point to consider a slightly different, but complementary, set of questions. Rather than commenting on the compatibility of intellectual traditions or on the appropriateness of the behaviour change agenda, we are interested in the project of sustainable consumption, its underlying political rationalities, and the ways in which it operationalizes the figure of 'the consumer'. The analysis takes food waste reduction in the UK as its case study and as such, other fields of sustainable consumption governance (such as water use and energy demand) are necessarily excluded from consideration. The transferability of our insights to these other domains remains an empirical question and this paper's contribution is to articulate a set of resources that can inform and steer future studies of their dynamics.

Specifically we proceed as follows. The paper begins by reviewing key insights from contemporary consumption scholarship and the ways in which they have informed sustainability research and policy. This is followed by a discussion of the theoretical insights that can be drawn on to push critical debates on sustainable consumption beyond the current state of the art. With this in place, we turn to our analysis of how the challenge of food waste reduction has been framed, interpreted and responded to. Drawing on empirical materials – including 38 key informant interviews with a range of civil society, state and commercial actors who have been active in the project of food waste reduction – we note that the real and discursive figure of 'the consumer' has been a consistent feature of this debate. We argue that within a relatively short timeframe there have been significant shifts in how 'the consumer' is understood, how it is deployed, and the claims that are made on the agency and responsibilities of consuming subjects. Accordingly, we suggest that contemporary responses are marked by two distinct phases (2007–2013 and 2013–2015) and discuss each of these in turn. To conclude we address the broader implications of our analysis for thinking about the governance of sustainable consumption, extending the contributions of Barnett, Clarke and colleagues, and reassessing political projects that appear to place consumers and consumption at their core.

Displacing the consumer

Having noted that the project of sustainable consumption is commonly thought to be premised on appeals to the responsibilities of consuming subjects, this section considers the critique of these tendencies. For some, the focus on consumers is emblematic of neo-liberal environmentalism (cf. Swaffield, 2016) insofar as it implies a market-based solution and a perverse turn to consumption to solve the problems caused *by* consumption. Similarly, the emphasis on individuals is interpreted as firms, governments and institutions abdicating their responsibilities (Maniates, 2001). Others have suggested (Young, 2003) that the politics of blaming people for outcomes that they are not directly, in any causal sense, responsible for rests on a problematic model of moral agency. In addition to overestimating the capacity of individuals to effect global changes (cf. Massey, 2004), these forms of governance neglect differences in capabilities – for example, along the lines of socio-economic status – to make the choices that the project of sustainable consumption deems responsible.

Sociologists of consumption have argued that the emphasis on consumer behaviour reflects a failure to recognize the role of infrastructures, institutions, routines and conventions in shaping (environmentally damaging) processes of consumption (Southerton et al., 2004). In response, there have been moves to bring insights from contemporary consumption scholarship into closer dialogue with sustainability research and policy. Notably, the development of critical social scientific approaches to sustainable consumption has been informed by the practice turn in social theory (Spaargaren, 2011; Welch and Warde, 2015). In addition to being one of the social science perspectives that Shove suggests as a way of going beyond 'the ABC' of climate policy, theories of practice have been highly influential in shaping sociological (and related) approaches to consumption over the last decade (following Warde, 2005). Summarizing the contribution of practice theories to the study of consumption, Warde notes:

> Against the model of the sovereign consumer, practice theories emphasise routine over actions, flow and sequence over discrete acts, dispositions over decisions, and practical consciousness over deliberation. In reaction to the cultural turn, emphasis is placed upon doing over thinking, the material over the symbolic, and embodied practical competence over expressive virtuosity in the fashioned presentation of self (Warde, 2014: 286)

As an approach to sustainable consumption, this has proved useful in developing understandings of the more mundane, ordinary, habitual and inconspicuous forms of consumption that are nevertheless environmentally significant (ranging from the invisibility of domestic energy consumption to the routine nature of the daily commute).

Unsurprisingly, work in this paradigm is critical of governance approaches that focus on the individual. Without wishing to single out specific examples, it is now rather commonplace for this research to begin by characterizing, perhaps caricaturing, the policy landscape as one in which responsibilities are individualized and consumers are responsibilized. Doing so provides a useful backdrop for arguments that stress the need to move 'beyond behaviour' in favour of focusing on the 'social' organization of the practices for which consumption occurs. In this view, environmentally unsustainable patterns of consumption have less to do with individual consumers than with the collective development of what we take to be normal ways of life – such as daily showering and meat-heavy diets. Studies that start from this position tend to focus on a specific sustainability domain (food, energy, water, mobility) and proceed via a substantive focus on the dynamics of everyday life. Typically, this takes the form of an empirically rich account of what people *actually* do, the complexity of which demonstrates the limitations of attempting to govern through behaviour change.

This is all interesting enough in its own terms, however in terms of theorizing the mobilization of 'the consumer', these perspectives neglect fundamental questions concerning variation across substantive domains (one would be forgiven for thinking that all sustainability challenges follow this logic) and changes over time (the implication being that once an issue has been framed as a matter of individual behaviour change, that it will remain so indefinitely). Importantly, they do not explicate the mechanisms by which authorities and intermediaries attempt to responsibilize consumers or give credence to the possibility that they may not be doing so.

Re-placing 'the consumer'

The movement of analytic perspectives away from the sovereign individual has effectively displaced the consumer and excluded its vocabulary from the existing state of the art. To speak of 'the consumer' is to risk reifying the figure and legitimating the policy attention lavished on it. One of this paper's central claims is that 're-placing' the

consumer can push critical perspectives on the governance of sustainable consumption forward. Indeed, the limitations outlined above can be overcome by engaging more systematically with the ways in which the real and discursive figure of 'the consumer' features in the project of sustainable consumption. This section considers the theoretical resources that can be drawn on in order to do so. Rather than treating 'the consumer' as a self-evident category – using and presuming it in an essentialist or descriptive fashion – or else denying its existence and performativity, we take a cue from approaches that explore the processes through which the figure of 'the consumer' has been constructed and mobilized. For example, Frank Trentmann suggests that it is important to ask:

> 'Which processes helped and which discouraged the formation of this new political and social category? What has been the relative role of *civil society, state and commercial interests* in different contexts? What *groups and agencies* have spoken as consumers or *on their behalf*, for what reasons and with what implications? (Trentmann, 2006: 2 emphases added).

At issue here is the point that all human societies have been involved in consumption but the connections between what people do and a sense of them being 'consumers' are only found in specific analytic contexts.

It is commonly assumed that the spread of markets, advertising and affluence automatically and inevitably led to the emergence of 'the consumer'. Against this, Trentmann demonstrates that the category of 'consumer' is one that needed to actively be made by commercial actors, and through mobilization by state and civil society. Further, he argues that its formation is an ongoing process rather than a stabilized category determined by past accomplishments. In this view, the figure of 'the consumer' takes myriad forms and is found in a variety of different contexts beyond its narrow associations with the purchasing end user, cultures of commodity consumption, and the Global North from the 19th Century onwards. These points are instructive for thinking about the contemporary figure of 'the responsible consumer' insofar as it guards against any claim that there has been a linear shift from the 'passive consumer' (the dupe of consumer culture) to the 'active consumer' (the politically engaged citizen), or that the historical formation of the former has enabled a politics that focuses on the latter. It is on these grounds that Trentmann dismisses governmentality perspectives and their 'temporal ring-fencing of the problem' (2006: 4). The point is well made but when governmentality is taken as an analytic approach (Foucault, 2000) – that is, as more than a stock critique of neo-liberal forms of government – it provides a useful set of resources for thinking about political projects, consumption as a site of subject formation, and the ways in which authorities and agencies below the level of the state govern through the conduct of conduct.

These resources are deployed by Barnett, Clarke and colleagues in their analysis of ethical consumption, which explores how 'the consumer' has emerged as a subject position through which individuals are required to assume, and able to express, their responsibilities as citizens. They fully acknowledge the historical contingencies identified by Trentmann and to this we add our own acknowledgement that the contemporary ideal of the responsible consumer exhibits continuities and resonance with the 18th and 19th century liberal ideal of the autonomous individual insofar as 'liberalism spoke also of the duty to consume with as much of a concern for others as for oneself' (Hilton, 2004: 106). In accounting for the contemporary phenomena of ethical consumption, Barnett, Clarke and colleagues caution against claims (for example Micheletti, 2003) that it was prompted by the concerns of individuals and so driven by the sudden and bottom up politicization of consumption. Rather, they relate its emergence to the changing nature of political mobilization and posit a focus on organizations and intermediaries such as campaigns, lobby groups and

ethical trading associations. In this view, the growth of ethical consumption is attributed to 'strategies and repertoires shared amongst a diverse range of governmental and non-governmental actors' (Barnett et al., 2011: 1).

Their analysis (presented most comprehensively in Barnett et al., 2011) draws attention to the ways in which campaigning activity seeks to engage and enrol consumers in ethical projects by problematizing everyday consumption, providing opportunities for individuals to reflect on their own ethical dispositions, and offering practical and moral instruction on how to consume more ethically. In addition to these efforts to make certain forms of individualized ethical conduct possible, they suggest that campaigning activity involves intermediaries mobilizing consumers by representing 'their expressed preferences as "ethical" subjects to other actors involved in making markets including state agents, corporations and regulatory agencies' (Barnett et al., 2011: 85). In this view, the politics of consumption is about how '[h]ow one set of collective actors (campaigns, NGOs, charities) engage with other collective actors (retailers, suppliers, corporations) through the real and discursive figure of 'the ethical consumer' (Clarke et al., 2007a: 238). Returning to the development of critical social science perspectives on sustainable consumption, we suggest that inspiration might be drawn from this analysis. It affords an approach that focuses on the ways in which the political project of sustainable consumption seeks to engage consuming subjects and mobilize the rhetorical figure of 'the consumer'. By way of illustration and application, and to extend the contributions of Barnett, Clarke and colleagues, the analysis that follows considers the project of food waste reduction.

Food waste

Current volumes of food waste generation – a third of global production, 1.3 billion tonnes annually according to recent estimates (FAO, 2013) – are firmly ensconced as a matter of concern to governments and their populations. The issue rose to prominence in the United Kingdom in 2008 with the publication of WRAP's *The Food We Waste* report. WRAP is the UK's Waste and Resources Action Programme – an arm's length government body, technically a not-for-profit company that is supported by funding from the EU and the four national governments of the UK, established in 2000 as a response to the EU's 1999 landfill directive (1999/3/EC). Whilst food waste was of course an issue prior to the publication of this report, it was for a long time rendered politically and culturally invisible by a post-war food regime of sufficiency and surplus (Evans et al., 2013). We confine our analysis to a focus on the re-emergence of concerns around the origins and consequences of food waste. Our suggestion is that contemporary responses to these issues are characterized by two distinct waves, marked by differences in how 'the consumer' is constructed and mobilized. During the first wave (c.2007–2013) the responsibilized consumer was the dominant framing of the issue, but this gave way to an emergent sense of distributed responsibility during the second (2013–2015). Certain nuances and continuities are necessarily lost when imposing a temporal break to slice through ongoing processes, however we are comfortable in demarcating these waves in accordance with the dominant narratives identified on the basis of the evidence available.

Our analysis derives from a mixture of empirical materials. Between 2014 and 2015,[1] we interviewed 38 representatives of organizations and intermediaries that were actively involved in framing and/or responding to the challenge of food waste reduction. Participants included representatives from the retail sector (including the 'big four' supermarkets and a range of others), trade associations, third sector organizations, activists and campaigners, sustainability consultancies, and government departments. Respondents were asked questions about how

they came to be involved in food waste reduction activities; current, past and future initiatives; their views on the roles and responsibilities of different actors, with a particular focus on the ways in which they understand 'the consumer'; their relationships with other stakeholders, and changes over time. These data were complemented by extensive analysis of secondary and documentary sources (policy reports, campaigning materials, company websites) alongside regular participation, observation and organization of multi-stakeholder events between 2009[2] and 2015.

We acknowledge the potential asymmetry between the materials that inform our characterization of the two periods insofar as the key informant interviews necessarily play a greater role in our discussion of the second. It should be noted, then, that the interviews were originally initiated to gather additional detail on our account – based principally on the analysis of secondary and documentary sources (see Evans, 2014 for additional empirical detail) – of the first period. Accordingly, the interviews focused on what we have categorized as the 'initial responses' period insofar as particular attention was paid to respondents' accounts of changes over time. It is these changes that led us to demarcate a 'second wave' of responses (see Welch et al. forthcoming for additional empirical detail), providing the impetus to write this paper. Whilst these changes feature more prominently in our discussion of the second period, our account of the initial responses and their evolution is informed by analysis of the key informant interviews as well as the secondary and documentary sources.

Initial responses (2007–2013): Responsibilizing the consumer

Initial responses to the issue provide clear evidence for claims that the governing of sustainable consumption involves the individualizing of responsibilities and the responsibilization of consumers. We do not intend to labour this point, rather this section considers the mechanics of responsibilization in relation to the specific project of food waste reduction in the UK. The key event in this period was the publication of WRAP's aforementioned *The Food We Waste* report, based on a study that quantified the amount of food wasted by UK households. The study itself cannot be seen as innocent or neutral insofar as the focus on household waste as opposed to, say, waste in harvesting and processing has political consequences. Given the old adage of 'what gets measured, gets managed' – and its resonances in waste policy (see Gregson and Crang, 2010) – this report can be viewed as generative of a politics that framed food waste as an 'end of pipe' (Alexander et al., 2013) issue. This focus was quickly legitimated by a series of figures (FAO, 2011; IME, 2013) that demonstrated food waste in so-called developed nations such as the UK occurs mainly in retail and final consumption.

In addition to WRAP, a range of governmental and non-governmental actors became active in the debate, including international organizations (such as the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations); formal political institutions (such as the European Commission); high-profile activists (such as Tristram Stuart); media outlets (including new social media), and cultural intermediaries (including celebrity chefs). The agenda was not driven by 'consumers' spontaneously becoming active citizens for food waste reduction, however these organizations and intermediaries frequently invoked the figure of 'the consumer' and they all seemed to agree that they (consumers) are at the root of the problem. In most cases, commentators observed levels of waste generation and read back to make unsubstantiated inferences and assumptions about why 'consumers' waste food. In doing so, they drew on powerful rhetorical tropes that make claims on the consequences of consumer culture, as exemplified by discourses of 'the throwaway society'.

In these accounts, food waste was attributed to profligate consumers not caring about the food that they waste, not knowing about the consequences of doing so, and not having the requisite culinary skills to avoid it. For example, the European Commission cited 'lack of awareness, lack of shopping planning, confusion about "best before" and "use by" date labels, lack of knowledge on how to cook with leftovers' as the key causes food waste generation.[3] Similarly, the Institution of Mechanical Engineers bemoaned the arrival of a 'culture with little understanding of the source and value of food' in which people are 'merely becoming food consumers' (2013: 27).

It is curious to note, then, that the vast majority of stakeholders offered these explanations in the absence of any research on or with 'consumers'. Knowing how much food is wasted says nothing of *why* it was wasted. The exception here was WRAP, who engaged in more systematic efforts to understand consumer behaviour and so develop their evidence base. During this period, however, their 'ways of knowing' (cf. Miller and Rose, 1997) the consumer were informed, and so limited, by paradigms of individual decision-making. These axioms – and a view of consumption as 'a field of intervention that can be subjected to corrective actions' (Rumpala, 2011: 695) – spilled over into their food waste campaigning activity. For example, their influential and ongoing Love Food Hate Waste campaign focused principally on raising awareness about the consequences of food waste and giving consumers the information and knowledge required in order to change their behaviour. Whether the commentary was moralistic and rhetorical or more sympathetic and grounded, the important point is that despite limitations in understandings of consumption, virtually all of the campaigning activity during this period took 'the consumer' as its focus. It is therefore instructive to consider the shared repertoires and tactics that campaigning organizations and intermediaries used in their efforts to enrol consumers in the project of food waste reduction.

Firstly, narrative resources of ethical responsibility were deployed in order to problematize existing and everyday patterns of consumption (Barnett et al., 2011; Clarke et al., 2007b). At one level, this involved the circulation of anxieties (Jackson, 2015) related to food and food waste. Figures concerning the scale of the problem – such as global estimates or WRAP's (2008) suggestion that UK households were wasting one-third of the food that they purchased for consumption are, in themselves, alarming. Communicating these estimates is a powerful mechanism for transmitting anxiety, a process that is readily amplified by the persistence of waste's negative connotations (Hawkins, 2006) and food's status as necessity for life itself (Evans et al., 2013). In addition to simply calculating and communicating the enormity of the problem, food waste campaigning made use of more subtle calculative practices (Miller, 2001). This involved figures to contextualize the consequences of food waste (for example the claim that if food waste were a country, it would be the world's third largest greenhouse gas emitter after the USA and China) as well as messages that render abstract figures more tangible (for example translating the greenhouse gas emissions associated with the UK's 'avoidable' household food waste into their equivalence with the environmental impacts produced by ¼ cars on UK roads).

Of particular note was the tactic of emphasizing what all of this means 'per household', sending a clear signal – in a manner not dissimilar to the use of carbon footprint estimates (Ormond, 2015) – that individual households bear responsibility for the problems being recorded at an aggregate level. Where the case of food waste campaigning differs is that it focused mainly on the financial costs incurred by the average household. This can either be viewed as an appeal to the rational and calculating consumer or as working through existing ethical dispositions in domestic consumption such as the morality of thrift and good

household management. Regardless of interpretation, it demonstrates that food waste campaigning involved the articulation of an ethical obligation – whether to distant others, the self and significant others, or the non-human world. Further, the style of moral instruction that characterized this facet of campaigning made use of consequentialist ethics (see Barnett et al., 2005) insofar as the project of food waste reduction signaled to its subjects that making changes to waste less food will bring about certain (positive) outcomes such as reducing environmental impacts, relieving pressure on the food system, and preserving household finances.

In addition to moral instruction, Barnett, Clarke and colleagues suggest that ethical consumption campaigning involves various forms of practical instruction to help turn ethical obligations into actual conduct. Notably, Clarke et al. (2007a: 237) suggest that 'one way of analyzing the rationalities of ethical consumption is to investigate the proliferation of "how to" guides'. We find clear parallels to these claims during this first wave of food waste campaigning where guidance on 'how to' make the requisite changes to consume more responsibly and waste less was offered by a range of authorities and agencies ranging from bloggers and journalists, through activists and environmental charities, to food industry bodies and sustainability consultancies. Principally this took the form of generic advice on household and kitchen management, typically as a list of 'top tips' (for example 'make a list', 'organize and label the food that needs using up first', 'check your fridge before going shopping') or 'did you know?' items ('that you can freeze milk!' 'that you can keep lettuce fresh by placing its stem in a glass of water!'). Variations on this theme included interactive online tools for meal planning and the provision of devices that measure the correct amount of rice or pasta to help manage portion control in food preparation. WRAP's Love Food Hate Waste campaign website[4] usefully illustrates a number of these approaches. It has a section on 'portions and planning' that explains the benefits of planning (saving money) and getting portions right ('making the most out of your food'). This is followed by a series of tips linked to ready-made 'two week meal planners' (tailored to seasons and dietary requirements), interactive portion guidelines (tailored to specific circumstances), and recipes for using up leftovers (tailored to different ingredients).

Changing dynamics (2013–2015): Distributed responsibility

During the second wave, the issue of food waste reduction continued to gather momentum and examples that attest to its growing profile in environmental debate and cultural politics are plentiful. These include the 2013 World Environment Day being themed around a campaign on food waste,[5] Pope Francis[6] declaring that wasting food is like stealing from the poor, and the launch of the first global standard for measuring and reporting food waste.[7]

Returning to the UK, significant departures were made from the politics of blame that underpinned the individualizing of responsibilities narrated above. These developments parallel Young's plea (2003) for more collective notions of political responsibility and greater acknowledgement that responsibilities are distributed across more complex and extensive networks of actors (see also Barnett et al., 2011; Jackson et al., 2009). Analysis of our empirical materials reveals widespread recognition that: food waste is a systemic issue, that there is a need to distinguish between the cause and location of waste (for example retailer practices that pass the burden of surplus along to consumers, thus generating waste that gets counted at the level of the household), and that successful responses require collaboration between actors across the food chain. This consensus, we argue, provides evidence for an emergent sense of distributed responsibility that intimates a move beyond the constrained politics of responsibilizing 'the consumer'.

Rather than simply viewing this development as the triumph of shared over individual responsibility, it is important to consider the distribution of power to influence outcomes. Without disputing perspectives that collapse the distinction between global forces and local contexts of action (Massey, 2004), we nevertheless acknowledge the ways in which power-geometries govern not only the movement of goods and services, but also the distribution of responsibilities along and across the food chain. In particular, supermarkets have long been theorized (for example Burch and Lawrence, 2007) as focal actors in food systems with the capacity to influence activities upstream (with producers) and downstream (with consumers). A key feature of this second wave is that major retailers became much more active and visible in the project of food waste reduction. Their involvement, we contend, was a necessary pre-condition to the emergent sense of distributed responsibility. Several of our respondents, notably representatives from NGOs and government departments, noted that things might have evolved quite differently had supermarkets opposed the agenda. There are good reasons for thinking that they might have. According to recent estimates (HoL, 2014), supermarkets are directly responsible for just 5% of total food waste, despite the fact that their position and influence in the food system means that they are indirectly responsible for waste that arises elsewhere (for example, by rejecting produce from suppliers). One possible response would have been for supermarkets to take, at best, responsibility for the waste that they are directly liable and to blame for, leaving suppliers and consumers to take responsibility for the waste that they are able to pass along the chain. Precisely given the ready availability of discursive resources to apportion blame to consumers, this would have been unsurprising.

During this second wave of activity, however, supermarkets started to 'act at a distance' and assume responsibilities for waste that arises elsewhere as a result of their influence in the food chain. Many supermarkets have made changes to their promotional strategies (such as eliminating Buy One Get One Free offers – BOGOFS) to discourage excessive purchasing by consumers as well as developing innovations in packaging and labelling to help people waste less of what they do purchase. Similarly, the representatives of major retailers that we spoke to reported making changes to how they engage with producers and suppliers. For example one participant reported that they now guarantee 98% of their banana orders meaning that if there are unexpected changes to in-store demand, they no longer reject the produce and shift the burden of surplus onto the producer. Instead they now work with suppliers, ripeners and others in the supply chain to improve forecasting which in turn reduces the waste that arises from (their incentivizing of) overproduction. Further, they have committed to an orchestrating role in order to find a secondary market for the unwanted produce if these improved order predictions fail.

One interpretation, albeit a slightly lazy one, is that it is in the interests of supermarkets to reduce food waste on the grounds that doing so will reduce costs and increase profits. This may well hold in relation to the food waste that retailers are directly responsible for (or in the case of vertically integrated supply chains), however it does not really explain how the economic interests of (powerful) supermarkets are served by helping to reduce waste that would otherwise get counted at other points, or represent an economic loss to (less powerful) actors elsewhere in the supply chain. Further, judged purely by the economic logic of capital accumulation, it is far more sensible to assume that supermarkets might want their customers to waste more and so buy more. The Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) agenda – and wider issues of brand management (discussed extensively in Welch et al. forthcoming) – provide some explanation for retailer engagement in the project of food waste reduction. Indeed, supermarkets in the UK (as elsewhere) are very publicly involved in initiatives to redistribute surplus food from their own operations via charitable

organizations such as FareShare. This alone does not explain the broader context in which they have become actively engaged, nor the grounds on which they derive reputational benefits, nor the reasons why they are assuming responsibilities for waste that arise elsewhere as a result of their indirect influence.

In order to better make sense of these developments, it is useful to acknowledge the contemporary relationship between supermarkets and other stakeholders generally stands in contrast to the relationships often observed around contentious social, environmental and ethical issues, such as the genetic modification of food (Schurman and Munro, 2010). We might reasonably have expected to observe antagonistic relationships between large firms and civil society organizations (Davis et al., 2005). Existing theory predicts that we would find dialectic processes of supermarkets ignoring civil society pressures until public opinion dictated that something must be done, and that they would then reframe and reorient these challenges to suit their own agenda. We might also have expected to find disputed claims – including disputes between civil society groups – over who led the issue and what kind of an issue it is. In contrast to these predictions, our interviewees painted a picture that suggests: (1) the issue had been co-produced rather than driven by any single constituency; (2) there is broad consensus about what kind of an issue food waste is and how it should be responded to rather than rival problem framings and contestations around plausible solutions, and (3) the relationships between key actors engaged in the issue is one of cohesion rather than conflict. Taken together, and accepting that the way in which our respondents narrated the current situation may obscure some previous tensions, we posit the existence of a food waste discourse coalition (Welch et al. forthcoming) in which a dense interrelated network of stakeholders (including major retailers) have aligned around a shared set of understandings. Chief amongst these shared understandings are the suite of ideas that we have labelled distributed responsibility.

In the interests of not over claiming, we stress that 'the consumer' was not deleted from this wave of activity. Despite the emergence of campaigns – notably 'Stop the Rot'[8] – that very explicitly stressed that 'consumers' are a red herring and that the real challenge is one of changing industry practices, a good deal of activity continued to focus on consumers. What sets this period apart from the initial responses is that different ways of 'knowing the consumer' – beyond the paradigms of individual decision making and moralistic critique of consumerism – began to take hold and form another of the 'shared understandings' that holds the food waste discourse coalition together. For example, many of our interviewees expressed the view that consumers care about and are deeply troubled by food waste. When asked for their views on why consumers waste food, our respondents discussed the 'multiple factors' that 'drive' it, including forces beyond the consumer's immediate control. Allied to this, many acknowledged that the task of changing behaviour is more complex than they first anticipated and that there is a need for more research, and 'new insights', into why consumers waste food. Interestingly, several interviewees made reference to insights from theories of practice and 'more sociological' studies of household consumption. Whilst this did not lead to a wholesale decentring of the consuming subject, it certainly led to greater awareness of what they commonly referred to as 'social context' – principally operationalized as a focus on household and family dynamics – signalling a move away from approaches that frame consumption as a simple matter of individual choice. Importantly, many interviewees explicitly presented these 'more nuanced' ways of thinking about the consumer as a departure from, and an improvement on, the ways in which they approached these issues during the first wave of responses.

From a slightly different angle, the rhetorical figure of 'the consumer' was deployed extensively during this period. Returning to the point about supermarket participation in

the food waste discourse coalition, it is instructive to note that the retailers we interviewed were candid in narrating the 'business case' (recalling the previous discussion of CSR) for taking action on consumer food waste. We should of course mention that they reported a variety of different 'motivations' – ranging from the moral imperative to reduce food waste (another shared understanding that holds the discourse coalition together) to the personal commitment of supermarket personnel and stakeholders – however, we were struck by the consistency with which retailers told us that their customers would shop elsewhere if they were not helped to reduce the food that they waste. Virtually every retailer that we spoke to told us that their customers care about the food that they waste and – echoing Jane Dixon's argument (2007) that supermarkets seek to develop customer loyalty by establishing themselves as cultural and lifestyle authorities who can help people solve problems in their everyday lives – that they look to 'their supermarket' for help and guidance on reducing it. There is an important question here about how supermarkets come to know their consumers' concerns about the food that they waste. We return to this in the conclusion but for now, the pertinent point is that the retailers who participated in our study drew on the vocabulary of 'the consumer' in order to account for their responses to the challenge of food waste reduction.

In addition to engaging with their customers to help them waste less food, many retailers invoked 'the consumer' as the figure for whom they take action. For example, one supermarket that we spoke to told how they were leveraging their position in the food system to reduce waste in supply chains 'on behalf' of their consumers. Again, they accounted for this through recourse to 'the consumer' and what they perceived to be customer expectations of their supermarket. This lends further support to Jane Dixon's arguments concerning the ways in which supermarkets seek to build relationships with their customers, but it is also an interesting variation on Peter Oosterveer's suggestion (2012: 162) that supermarkets can improve the sustainability of food systems by effecting changes 'behind the consumer's back'. Working behind the scenes to reform supply chains is a way to reduce waste without requiring consumers to change their behaviour. Finally, several of the retailers that we spoke to used the figure of 'the consumer' more tactically in order to influence events and outcomes. Notably, they reported doing so in order to engage with other firms and enrol them in a particular course of action. For example one respondent discussed the resistance they encountered when trying to persuade a supplier to develop 'split packaging' options to help people better manage portion control and keep food fresher for longer once opened. They went on to explain that they were eventually able to do so once they had conducted a customer survey that provided evidence that this is what 'the consumer' wants. On this point, they were quite explicit in describing the power of driving things through 'the voice' of 'the consumer'. This example supports the claim that the politics of consumption involves organizations and intermediaries 'making a collective of 'consumers' knowable through market research, surveys and other technologies in order to speak their name in policy arenas and the public realm' (Clarke et al., 2007a: 235). Using the figure of 'the consumer' as a rhetorical device to mediate the relationships between strategic and collective actors suggests that consumers can be mobilized in ways that do not responsibilize consuming subjects or even address them directly.

Conclusions and discussion: Beyond behaviour change

This paper advances critical perspectives on the governance of sustainable consumption by exploring the ways in which 'the consumer' is constructed and mobilized by strategic and

collective actors. We took claims that the project of sustainable consumption involves the individualizing of responsibilities and the responsibilization of consumers as our starting point, and focused on the case of food waste reduction in the UK in order to explore these political rationalities in more detail. Our analysis split contemporary responses to this issue into two distinct waves. During the first wave, we found clear evidence for the responsibilization of consumers and unpacked the institutional processes by which efforts were made to mobilize consuming subjects. Attention was drawn to the framing of food waste as a problem and possibility of individual consumer behaviour, and to the circulation of narrative and practical discourses of responsibility. During the second wave, we intimated a shift from this politics of blame towards an emergent sense of distributed responsibility. Attention was drawn to the alignment of different constituencies around a shared set of understandings concerning the nature of the challenge and the role of 'the consumer'. Here, more nuanced approaches to knowing and mobilizing the real and discursive figure of 'the consumer' began to take hold, and the responsibilities of other actors – particularly supermarkets – in the food chain came to the fore.

The evolution of responses to this issue and the changing role of 'the consumer' introduce an important caveat to the critique that is usually levelled at sustainable consumption governance and by extension the more general critique of projects that appear to focus on consumption and consumers. Within the extant literature, the invocation to move 'beyond behaviour change' is a familiar refrain (for example Strengers and Maller, 2015). Whilst we certainly agree that the governance of sustainable consumption must move beyond approaches that focus on attitudes, choices and individual responsibilities; we suggest that in the case of food waste reduction in the UK, things already *have* moved beyond behaviour change. At a more abstract level, this hints that the blanket condemnation of the behaviour change agenda runs the risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. By periodizing our account, we see that activity during the first wave of responses – in which the responsibilized consumer was the dominant framing of the issue – was generative of the political and ethical possibilities that were opened up during the second. At issue here is the point that the emergence of the food waste discourse coalition was contingent on the involvement of supermarkets. Their apparent willingness to assume responsibilities for their own contribution to the problem as well as 'acting at a distance' to reduce waste that arises elsewhere was a key factor in enabling the emergent sense of distributed responsibility. This invites questions about how and why supermarkets became active in the project of food waste reduction, and why they assumed responsibilities rather than passing them along the chain. Having already noted that retailer engagement was led by their understandings of what consumers care about and what they expect them to do, we suggest that these perceptions were an unintended consequence of food waste campaigning during the first wave of responses. Rather than having the (perhaps desired) effect of responsibilizing individuals, this activity may have served the altogether different purpose of driving the issue up the agenda, establishing consensus, and securing the participation of major retailers.

These conclusions are, of course, based on the analysis of a single case study in a specific national context over a short period of time. The transferability of these insights across different sustainability domains (our analysis of food waste says nothing about how, for example, the challenge of sustainable water consumption is being governed), different geographical contexts, and over time (whether or not the food waste discourse coalition in the UK will hold indefinitely) is necessarily a matter for future research. These questions bring our discussion back to the lacunae we identified in order to frame our analysis. Our

contribution to the critical literature on sustainable consumption is the development of an approach that allows these questions to be considered. Rather than focusing on processes of consumption to emphasise shortcomings in the project of sustainable consumption, we have focused on the project in more detail. Whilst this necessarily invites a focus on the strategies and repertoires of organizations, authorities and intermediaries (thus decentring the consumer), we have suggested that attention should be paid to the ways in which the real and discursive figure of 'the consumer' is constructed, mobilized and used to mediate the relationships between different groups of collective actors (hence re-placing 'the consumer'). We have signalled the limitations of applying generic critique to specific instances of sustainable consumption governance and have shown the importance of moving beyond static accounts of the political landscapes in which consumption is governed. In making these contributions, we have drawn heavily on the work of Barnett, Clarke and colleagues. By return, the preceding analysis extends their contributions by demonstrating the importance of exploring the temporal dimensions of political projects that mobilize the consumer as well as paying greater attention to the enrolment and active engagement of commercial actors in these processes. The significance of the latter is amplified when it is recalled that the field of sustainable consumption in general (and food waste reduction in particular) is characterized by a focus on consuming less rather than consuming differently.

The challenge for future studies of sustainable consumption is to pay greater attention to specific programmes of governance and their underlying political rationalities. Our analysis demonstrates how important nuances are made visible – notably the rhetorical figure of the responsibilized consumer being generative of a politics that more closely resembles the ideal of shared responsibility – when the detail of individual cases are brought into focus and periodized. Understandings of these processes then need to be brought into dialogue with accounts of how the ambitions of these projects are instantiated, or not, in patterns of everyday life (cf. Barnett et al., 2008). Limitations of space have meant that we have not been able to attend to these dynamics, however there are ample existing theoretical resources for the study of everyday live. Approaches to sustainable consumption that are inspired by theories of practice are particularly well suited to exploring the disjuncture between political projects and the lived experiences of those whose conduct they attempt to shape. However for as long as they are premised on generic glosses over programmes of governance, the critical potential of these accounts will remain unfocused and muted. Bringing the perspectives that inform this paper into dialogue with those that define the current state of the art offers the possibility of developing approaches to sustainable consumption that recover this critical edge and by extension, inform thinking on political programmes and their relationship to the responsibilities of consuming subjects.

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Notes

1. This study formed part of our Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded 'Households, Retailers and Food Waste Transitions' project (ref: ES/L00514X/1).
2. Evans has been an active academic stakeholder in debates around food waste reduction since 2009.
3. http://ec.europa.eu/food/food/sustainability/causes_en.html (accessed 6 July 2016.
4. http://www.lovefoodhatewaste.com (accessed 6 July 2016).
5. 'Think.Eat.Save, see: http://www.thinkeatsave.org/ (accessed 6 July 2016).
6. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/the-pope/10101375/Pope-Francis-says-wasting-food-is-like-stealing-from-the-poor.html (accessed 6 July 2016).
7. http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=54154#.V2Fxuvn6FvA (accessed 6 July 2016).
8. http://stoptherot.org.uk (accessed 6 July 2016).

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