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# *What is consumption, where has it been going, and does it still matter?*

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*Abstract* This paper considers the relationships between consumption, the environment, and wider sociological endeavour. The current vogue for applying theories of practice to the policy domain of ‘sustainable consumption’ has been generative of conceptual renewal, however the field now sits closer to the applied environmental social sciences than to the sociology of consumption. The analysis proceeds via a close reading of the intellectual currents that have given rise to this situation, and it identifies a number of interrelated issues concerning conceptual slippage and the exclusion of core disciplinary concerns. Accordingly a more suitable definition of consumption is offered, an agenda for re-engaging with foundational approaches to consumer culture is established, and a renewal and reorientation of critique is proposed. Working through and building on the contributions of practice theoretical repertoires, this paper suggests that consumption scholarship offers a distinctive set of resources to discussions of current ecological crises and uncertain social futures. These are briefly described and the conclusion argues that consumption still matters.

*Keywords* Anthropocene, Consumer Culture, History of Ideas, Theories of Practice, Sustainable Consumption, Alan Warde

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# *What is consumption, where has it been going, and does it still matter?*

## **Introduction**

In a 'keywords' essay, anthropologist David Graeber (2011) addresses the intellectual and historical trajectories that lead certain phenomena to be identified and analyzed through recourse to the concept of consumption. He notes that 'those who write about consumption almost never define the term' (Graeber 2011: 491) and suggests that this lack of clarity means that 'consumption' might be better approached as an ideology than as an analytic category. Further, or however, he argues that by adopting too broad a definition of 'consumption', those who use it have surrendered their capacity to engage critically with the ideologies that they are trying to problematize. As somebody who researches consumption I am necessarily more positively inclined towards the concept, however the overall tenor of these arguments is compelling. They evince a number of reflections that I wish to present concerning trends in consumption scholarship, their relationship to questions of environmental sustainability, and connections to broader theoretical and disciplinary endeavour.

My starting point is the observation that to the extent that these three issues are linked and addressed, it occurs under the auspices of social scientific engagement with the policy domain of 'sustainable consumption'. In an endorsement for a recent collection dedicated to the topic (Kennedy et al. 2015) Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier suggests that 'sustainable consumption has become one of the most dynamic fields in the social sciences' and goes on to note that '[t]he social practices approach has become the best alternative to behaviorist and rationalistic theories of social action'. It is certainly the case that the 'practice turn' in social theory has proved highly influential in the development of contemporary consumption scholarship (following Warde 2005), and that 'the most vigorous application of practice theoretical repertoires [...] may be found in the interstices between technologies, utilities, resource consumption and the problematic of sustainability' (Halkier et al. 2011: 5). As will be seen, these resonances have worked in concert with the naming of a policy field to suggest that 'sustainable consumption' is a unified topic of sociological concern. This paper is motivated by increasing disquiet about this apparent unity, and I would go so far as suggesting that there is currently precious little 'consumption' in the sociology of sustainable consumption.

This deliberately provocative position warrants further consideration. 'Sustainable consumption' is a broad field in which myriad disciplines are responding to a policy agenda without making claims on the (sociological) study of consumption. This is not in itself a problem, nor, for the purposes of this article, is the fact that 'consumer behavior' (i.e. non-sociological) perspectives are well represented. My objection is to work that exhibits little resemblance to the sociology of consumption<sup>1</sup> being presented as such. I do not wish to single out specific instances but there are increasing tendencies for topics such as domestic energy use or behaviour change – typically the preserve of the applied environmental social sciences – to be deemed automatically relevant to the sociological study of consumption and consumer culture. These studies are no doubt significant in their own terms, however I struggle to

recognize them as consumption scholarship. Beyond simply policing the boundaries of a domain in which I am invested, I flag this up because the conceptual slippage identified by Graeber is particularly pronounced in the field of sustainable consumption. Here it seems that almost any activity can be legitimately thought of as ‘consumption’ meaning that the unique contributions of consumption scholarship are muted and folded into the applied environmental social sciences. A primary aim of this paper is to delineate some more specific moments of consumption, propose a definition that is fit for purpose, and defend its value as an analytic category.

A second, related, aim is a plea to expand the range of perspectives from consumption scholarship that are brought to bear on questions of environmental sustainability. With few exceptions (Jackson 2006, Urry 2010, Smart 2010), ostensibly sociological approaches to sustainable consumption are now marked by the dominance of theories of practice. There is no wish to belittle the achievements of the turn to practice, rather, my concern is that the interdisciplinary field of sustainable consumption exhibits a degree of conceptual amnesia. It is unaware or unwilling to acknowledge that the sociology of consumption is comprised of rich and varied traditions that are not exhausted by a narrow focus on ‘social practices’ (see also Evans 2017, Evans et al. 2017). This paper proceeds via close reading of the intellectual currents and ‘blind spots’ that have given rise to this situation and makes the case for re-engagement with the theoretical and substantive preoccupations of cultural approaches to consumption (cf. Warde 2014 see also Welch 2018)

The apparent dominance of theories of practice has distanced the sociology of (sustainable) consumption from broader theoretical and disciplinary concerns. Elizabeth Shove (2010:283) suggests this represents an area of ‘conceptual renewal’, guarding against the tendency for social theory to ‘see itself’ and default to ‘classic problems’ – such as capitalism and nature-culture relationships – when tasked with thinking about global environmental challenges. Nevertheless, it will be recalled that consumption was once a key reference point for more general sociological debates about the contours of modernity and postmodernity (for example Featherstone 1991, Slater 1997). Writing in *London Review of Books*, Benjamin Kunkel (2017:24) notes ‘what was once true about [...] postmodernism is true for the Anthropocene today: it names an effort to consider the contemporary world historically’. It is curious, then, that the sociology of consumption is all but absent from the development of social scientific perspectives on the scientifically provisional Anthropocene thesis<sup>2</sup>. It is even more surprising in light of the suggestion current ecological crises might be more accurately gathered together under the heading of the Capitalocene (Moore 2015). The idea here is that under capitalist forms of economic and social organisation, human engagement with the rest of nature may bring about abrupt and irreversible change in climate systems in turn signalling uncertain social futures (cf. Coleman and Tutton 2017). There can be little dispute that patterns of consumption in the Global North are implicated in these entanglements (Jackson 2006, Urry 2010). Accordingly, this paper argues that in confronting the environmental consequences of consumerism, the sociology of consumption should

not stray too far from the ‘classic problems’ that it has elided in order to develop new conceptual approaches.

The following section introduces the interdisciplinary research and policy field of ‘sustainable consumption, suggesting that the bulk of sociological engagement has arisen under the aegis of ‘social practices’. This is followed by a brief précis of key interventions in the sociology of consumption over the last c.25 years, demonstrating that the ‘turn’ to practice theoretical repertoires emerged out of fundamental tensions within the subdiscipline. Acknowledging that these debates have, at times, overlapped with the development of perspectives on resource use, technologies and sustainability, the analysis identifies a number of interrelated ‘wrong turnings’. Unravelling these threads permits a sharper definition of consumption and reconciliation with foundational sociological accounts of consumer culture. Bringing these contributions together, the discussion suggests that the environmental consequences of consumption call forth a renewal and reorientation of consumer critique. Working through and building on the contributions of practice theoretical repertoires, I conclude by suggesting that consumption still matters.

### **Sustainable Consumption and the sociology of consumption**

Sustainable consumption is a named policy domain 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. It is sometimes referred to as ‘Sustainable Consumption and Production’ (SCP) in recognition that reducing the environmental impacts of consumption necessitates improvements in the environmental performance of production processes. The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg identified SCP as one of three overarching objectives for sustainable development, leading to the adoption of a global framework of action at the Rio + 20 conference in 2012. There have been increasing moves to disentangle ‘sustainable production’ and ‘sustainable consumption’ insofar as technological and organizational innovations to improve the environmental impacts of production are not, in isolation, going to deliver sufficient reductions in the resource intensity of production-consumption systems. It follows that attendant changes in ‘consumer behaviour’ and ‘lifestyles’ are required. Against this backdrop, disciplines such as behavioural economics, social psychology and marketing have explored the ‘drivers’ of unsustainable consumption and ‘barriers’ to the uptake of more sustainable ways of living.

These approaches have been subject to extensive critique (following Shove 2010) for their overemphasis on the attitudes, behaviours and choices of *individuals*. In response, the development of sociological approaches to sustainable consumption have for the most part taken their cues from theories of practice. Theories of practice are, of course, multiple (see Nicolini, 2012) and so it is important to clarify which version is at stake here. Despite modest variation (eg. Spaargaren, 2011), a very clear lineage from Schatzki (1996) and Reckwitz (2002) via Warde (2005) and Shove (2003) resonates in the sociology of sustainable consumption. This work starts from the ontological position

that ‘practices’ – as opposed to individuals, social structures or discourses – are the primary locus of the social. In this view, practices are recognizable and discernible *entities* that are configured by the intersection and alignment of heterogeneous elements. They encompass practical activities and their representation, and are routinely *performed* by individuals without too much in the way of conscious deliberation.

Applying these ideas to the study of consumption, Warde (2005: 145) establishes that a good deal of consumption occurs not for its own sake, but within and for the sake of practices. The consequences of this manoeuvre are not trivial. First, it suggests that explanations should look beyond the discretion of sovereign individuals in order to explore the shared requirements for accomplishing a satisfactory performance of a particular practice. Second, it expands the gaze of consumption scholarship beyond ‘shopping’ (which is a practice that involves clear and multiple moments of consumption) to encompass a focus on activities that are not colloquially understood as ‘consuming’. A simple example should suffice. It may be tempting to think of canoeing or hiking as activities that do not involve, and may even represent something of an alternative to, consumption. Warde’s dictum forces recognition that ‘moments’ of consumption – for example purchasing specialised equipment, securing access to these experiences, and representing their legitimacy to self and other – are necessary in order to perform these practices in accordance with prevailing standards of normality and appropriate conduct. While these advances arose independently of any concern for sustainability or sustainable consumption, they provide the basis of what is now known as the ‘social practices’ approach. This is the only approach derived explicitly and ostensibly from the sociology of consumption that appears to have registered in the interdisciplinary research and policy field of sustainable consumption<sup>3</sup>.

This is not to suggest that sociological interest in the relationships between consumption and the environment is limited to theories of practice or engagement and recognition within the named field of sustainable consumption. Indeed, there is no shortage of work that draws on ecological arguments to buttress critical interpretations of consumer society (Schor 2007) or else stress the need for sustainability research and policy to confront consumption (Princen et al. 2002). What is missing, however, are insights from detailed sociological engagement with the process and content of consumption. My argument in a nutshell is that the sociology of consumption should not be losing sight of these critical orientations, especially given the heightened moral imperatives of the Anthropocene/Capitalocene. However, it seems sensible to reorient critique such that it is grounded in detailed understandings of practices and experiences of consumption. Before getting to this, it is necessary to work through some of the wrong turnings and blind spots associated with practice theories, their application in the sociology of consumption, and their dominance in the sociology of sustainable consumption.

### **And now it is all practice...**

In suggesting that the sociology of consumption is currently experiencing a 'turn' to theories of practice, it is not my intention to claim that all other approaches have ran their course. As contributions to this journal over the last c.20 years demonstrate (eg. Edgell & Hetherington 1997, Lee and Munro 2001, McFall 2011, Wheeler and Glucksmann 2015), consumption remains a vibrant and varied topic of sociological significance. Nevertheless, theories of practice not only dominate sociological engagement with *sustainable* consumption but are also starting to influence wider trends and directions in the subdiscipline. A cursory glance at the *Journal of Consumer Culture* – which promises sociological discussion of consumption and consumer culture – reveals that Warde's 2005 article is its most highly cited paper, exerting considerable influence on subsequent contributions to the journal. Similarly, theories of practice and their practical applications are a key concern to the European Sociological Association's Sociology of Consumption Network<sup>4</sup> (although they have barely registered among the American Sociological Association's Consumers and Consumption Section<sup>5</sup>).

This current vogue for studying consumption as practice betrays the likelihood that a general sociological readership will more readily associate the sociology of consumption with the study of consumer culture. Meanwhile, the field of sustainable consumption seems largely ignorant of wider themes in, and the history of, sociological approaches to consumption. It is therefore necessary to consider, if only with the broadest of strokes, the various tensions within consumption scholarship that culminated in the turn to theories of practice. Early sociological approaches to consumption – and their antecedents – were overwhelmingly critical and tended only to address consumption in the context of a wider intellectual schema (eg. the Frankfurt School's analysis of the culture industry and mass society). The 'cultural turn' both legitimated consumption as a research topic and ushered in a reaction against the elitist and moralistic biases of critique, stressing instead the dynamic and creative potential of consumption and popular culture (aesthetics, pleasure, resistance). For some (see Campbell, 1995) both traditions were overly reliant on an unsubstantiated view of consumption as social communication. Geographers raised parallel concerns about the emphasis placed on spectacular spaces of consumption such as shopping malls to the neglect of more mundane sites of exchange such as homes and thrift stores (Gregson and Crewe 2003). Writing in 1995, Nicky Gregson argued that pre-occupation with cultural questions of meaning, identity, representation and ideology was sidelining key issues of structural inequalities and material culture. Cutting across many of these points is Miller's (1995, 2001) insistence on the need for a more empirically grounded form of consumption scholarship to counter the 'myths of consumerism' that social theory was reproducing.

Accepting that the application of practice theoretical repertoires to the sociology of consumption is most readily associated (especially in the field of sustainable consumption) with Alan Warde, it is also important to remember that Warde himself was writing about consumption for some 25 years before the appearance of his 2005 article. This landmark needs to be situated in the context of a longer, and

remarkably coherent, intellectual project that has given rise of a number of interventions in the core axioms of consumption scholarship. Warde's initial vision for the sociology of consumption (1990) identified two promising lines of enquiry: 1) a revival in the study of consumerism, the production of popular culture, and semiotics, and 2) an approach that takes inspiration from urban and feminist sociology to explore labor, stratification, households and collective consumption. His preference is for the latter (although see Featherstone's 1990 contribution to the same collection for a discussion of the former) and he proposed an agenda that focuses on: 'the sector in which provision<sup>6</sup> occurs, the social rules governing distribution and access, the social circumstances of delivery, and the social relations surrounding the experience of final consumption' (Warde 1990: 4). Zooming in on experiences of final consumption, Warde's next intervention (1994) was a response to the then-fashionable theories that linked consumption as a site of identity formation to the anxieties created by the obligation to choose. His analysis demonstrates that consumption is subject to greater social regulation and involves greater opportunities for identification and integration than theorists of risk and reflexivity would have had us believe.

Together with Elizabeth Shove (2002), he later considered how well the then-dominant symbolic theories of consumption might explain the environmental impacts of escalating consumer demand. They conclude that since much environmentally significant consumption – for example household energy and water use – is invisible and 'inconspicuous', theories developed on the understanding that consumption is 'conspicuous' (related, for example, to status and identity) are ill suited to the task of analyzing it. The limitations of Veblen-esque theories (of which Bourdieu's analysis of distinction is presented as the apex) were explored further in Warde's fourth intervention – a plea (together with Jukka Gronow 2001) to acknowledge 'ordinary consumption'. Starting from the observation that consumption scholarship had hitherto focused disproportionately on 'spectacular' forms of consumption; they suggest much of what passes for consumption is rather more quotidian and unremarkable. They argue that activities such as grocery shopping are the quintessential forms of consumption and that, importantly, a different conceptual apparatus is required to make sense of them. In addition to bringing new phenomena into focus, these two interventions call forth new theoretical approaches to consumption: technologies, infrastructures and normalization in the case of inconspicuous consumption; routines and habits in the case of ordinary consumption. The development of these conceptual resources led eventually to Warde's (2005) programmatic statement on consumption and theories of practice.

I do not claim that practice theoretical approaches represent the apotheosis of consumption scholarship or that they resolve ineradicable tensions within the subdiscipline. This brief précis is intended as a reminder that practice-theoretical approaches – and the seemingly novel emphasis that they place on understanding how ordinary social processes shape discernable patterns of consumption – emerged out of long-standing debates and built on a number of prior developments. In a recent appraisal of how theories of practice have contributed to consumption scholarship<sup>7</sup>, Warde (2014)

suggests that they have directed attention successfully to phenomena and processes that were not emphasized in earlier waves of consumption scholarship. Moreover, he notes that theory is cyclical rather than progressive and posits that the ‘victory’ of any given position (theories of practice) over another (approaches associated with the cultural turn) is likely to be provisional such that its ‘mode of succession’ is liable to be ‘less obliteration than ingestion and accommodation’ (Warde 2014: 297). These reflections are instructive for the argument at hand, which works through the contributions of the turn to practice but also draws on broader themes within the sociology of consumption.

### **...What is consumption?**

Practice theories – and associated concepts of ordinary and inconspicuous consumption – are clearly appealing to those with an interest in environmental sustainability. It is therefore not surprising that they have proved similarly influential in the development of sociological approaches to the resource intensity of everyday life. As Halkier et al. (2011:5) point out, the development of these perspectives has ‘no doubt been led by Elizabeth Shove and colleagues’, however Shove’s high profile association with theories of practice (Shove et al. 2012) needs to be understood in relation to a longer-standing intellectual project. For example *Comfort Cleanliness and Convenience* (2003), her classic work on technology, resource consumption and the social organization of normality is not framed in terms of ‘social practices’. As with Warde’s ongoing engagement with consumption scholarship, the eventual turn to theories of practice formalized and consolidated a coherent research agenda developed across a number of prior interventions. Just as Warde’s *oeuvre* exhibits relatively little interest in the problematic of sustainability; Shove’s writing has progressively distanced itself from claims on the sociology of (sustainable) consumption. It is curious, then, that the intellectual currents related to consumption and those related to sustainability are treated interchangeably in the field of ‘sustainable consumption’. My concern is with the definitions and understandings of consumption that are presupposed when it is imported into discussions of sustainability. This section elaborates these concerns and proposes a definition of consumption that is fit for purpose.

To begin, I reiterate that the sociology of sustainable consumption more closely resembles the applied environmental social sciences than it does consumption scholarship. The presence of practice theoretical repertoires in both fields coupled with the naming of ‘sustainable consumption’ as a policy domain has permitted studies on the resource intensity of everyday life to present themselves as the sociology of consumption. Warde’s invocation to view consumption as a ‘moment’ that occurs within and for the sake of practices has seemingly been taken to mean that any activity involving environmentally significant resource use can be thought of as relevant to the sociological study of consumption. This is certainly not what Warde intended, not least because he has long expressed (1990) concerns about too many activities being brought together under the term ‘consumption’. Further, he makes no suggestion that the inconspicuous consumption of environmentally significant

resources should be the moments to focus on. Putting the applied environmental social sciences to one side allows for consideration of how Warde actually defines consumption:

I understand consumption as a process whereby agents engage in appropriation and appreciation, whether for utilitarian, expressive or contemplative purposes, of goods, services, performances, information or ambience, whether purchased or not, over which the agent has some degree of discretion (Warde 2005: 137)

In addition to succinctly summarising a number of his previous interventions, this definition points quite specifically to *appropriation* and *appreciation* as moments of consumption. Elsewhere Warde deploys the concept of *acquisition*<sup>8</sup> alongside appropriation and appreciation, and suggests that they are either ‘the three fundamental dimensions of consumption’ (Warde 2014: 281) or the thematic preoccupations of successive waves of consumption scholarship (2010). I therefore take from Warde that there are three concrete moments of consumption (acquisition, appropriation, appreciation) that arise within and for the sake of practices.

These three As warrant further consideration:

- *Acquisition* refers to processes of exchange and the ways in which people access the goods, services and experiences that they consume. It invites questions about the political, economic and institutional arrangements that underpin the production and delivery, and the volume and distribution, of consumption.
- *Appropriation* refers to what people do with goods, services and experiences after they have acquired them. It invites a focus on how objects of commercial exchange can be given meaning or incorporated into people’s everyday lives. For example, when a commodity assumes particular significance to somebody – a garment that is cherished for flattering one’s physique or serving as a reminder of an experience shared with a significant other – it is said to have been appropriated.
- *Appreciation* refers to the ways in which people derive pleasure and satisfaction from consumption. It invites a focus on frameworks of moral, social and aesthetic judgement, and it recalls Bourdieusian notions of taste, distinction and stratification.

Recent developments in consumption scholarship have highlighted a bias towards the ‘front end’ (Hetherington 2004) of consumption, and have shown that it is also about ‘getting rid of things, casting them out and abandoning them (Gregson 2007:3)’. To each of Warde’s ‘As’ I therefore propose the addition of a counterpart ‘D’:

- *Devaluation* is the counterpart to appreciation. Just as wants and needs are met, and pleasure and satisfaction derived, from consumption; so too can goods, services and experiences cease to operate effectively. Economic value might be lost over time or through wear and tear but so too can the loss of cultural meaning lead to symbolic failure. For example the experience of

frequenting a hard-to-reach travel destination may be devalued if it becomes more widely and easily accessible.

- *Divestment* is the counterpart to appropriation. Just as goods, services and experiences can be personalised and domesticated, so too can these attachments be undone. Returning to the parable of the appropriated garment: if one's body changes or the relationship turns sour, investment in the garment might unravel leading to its divestment.
- *Disposal* is the counterpart of acquisition. Just as goods, services and experiences are *acquired* through differing political, technological and economic arrangements, so too can they be *disposed* of in myriad ways that do not automatically necessitate their wastage. Things that have been devalued and divested can be routed through multiple conduits of disposal – for example gifting or re-selling – such that they might be re-appropriated in second cycles of consumption.

My definition builds on Warde's to delineate six specific moments of consumption – the 3 As and the 3 Ds – and I present this as a useful starting point for the development of an approach that takes seriously the 'consumption' in sustainable consumption. The conceptual slippage that this definition responds to is symptomatic of some more general wrong turnings in a field that overstates the links between sustainability research and consumption research. In order to more fully recover the unique contribution of consumption scholarship to the sociology of sustainable consumption, these threads need to be untangled.

### **Some more wrong turnings**

One of the key contributions of practice theoretical repertoires has been to expand the remit of consumption scholarship beyond the analysis of individual choices to purchase goods that are acquired through market exchanges. Having already shown that this expanded definition of consumption requires clear boundaries to be set, I note here that somewhere along the line, social scientific accounts of commodities have been banished from the sociology of sustainable consumption. The logic here is that the invisibility and intangibility of environmentally significant resources (water, energy) means that people do not directly consume them, rather, they consume the services that they provide (cooking, heating). It is perfectly logical to insist that people do not consume (inconspicuous) resources in the same way that they consume (conspicuous) things. The assumption that this somehow necessitates that processes of commodity consumption are excluded from consideration is less convincing. It has been argued (Author 2017) that commodities are every bit as environmentally significant as resources – not least because of the impacts embedded in their production and distribution– and that theoretical approaches to commodification and the social life of things (cf. Appadurai 1986) shed new light on questions of sustainability and consumption. Further, this antipathy towards theorizing commodities has led to the erroneous conflation of 'appropriation' and 'use'. Whilst both terms do indeed draw attention to what happens *after* acquisition; use is a descriptive concept whereas appropriation is an

analytic one. Things are almost certainly appropriated in use but use does not presuppose appropriation. For example a garment might be appropriated through the ways in which it is used, however the environmental burdens of washing machine use do not intimate that energy and water have been appropriated.

From a different angle, the field of sustainable consumption treats concepts developed over a c.25 year period synchronically and interchangeably, giving rise to a suite of issues that require attention. First, the terms 'ordinary' and 'inconspicuous' consumption are conflated when in fact they are analytically distinct. Inconspicuous consumption refers quite specifically to the invisible but nevertheless environmentally significant using up of resources that are not consumed directly. Ordinary consumption is a more inclusive empirical category that also encompasses unspectacular activities such as listening to the radio. These forms of consumption are not invisible; they are simply mundane. Similarly, the distinction between bringing new empirical phenomena into focus and adopting the new conceptual resources that they call forth appears to have been lost. The sociology of sustainable consumption seemingly proceeds from the unquestioning assumption that acknowledging inconspicuous or ordinary consumption requires that the explanatory mechanisms of conspicuous consumption are discounted. It is myopic not to entertain the possibility that the invisible consumption of environmentally significant resources may in fact be explained by theories of identity and social communication. For example it seems credible that interior aesthetics might lead to the acquisition of energy hungry refrigerators, or that the fashion system might prompt escalating washing machine use. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that not *all* environmentally significant consumption is inconspicuous or ordinary. Many exemplars of conspicuous and spectacular consumption – new cars, smart phones, fast fashion, luxury world travel and disposable coffee cups – *are* environmentally significant, and theories of conspicuous consumption are perfectly well suited to explaining them (cf. Urry 2010).

Cutting across all of these issues is the problem of neglecting cultural approaches to consumption. Warde is quite explicit – in all of his major interventions – that the approaches he puts forward are intended as a corrective not just to methodological individualism but also to cultural excess:

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)

A number of observations fall out of this statement. First, there is a risk of equivalising 'consumer behaviour' approaches - the preserve of marketing, psychology and economics - and 'consumer culture' approaches that are not *prima facie* quite so objectionable to those of a more sociological persuasion. Warde is arguably guilty of a few sleights of hand here, for example when he reduces the

contributions of the cultural turn to a focus on ‘webs of cultural meanings which constitute symbolic resources for individual choice’ (Warde 2014: 281). There is a risk that applied social scientists drawn to practice theories principally as a corrective to voluntaristic models of social action – or via empirical interests in ‘inconspicuous’ (such as energy) or ‘ordinary’ (such as grocery shopping) forms of consumption – are then defaulting to a view that they must also stand in opposition to the biases of cultural analysis.

Second, the research that has ensued could arguably be said to lack a coherent sense of project. To clarify: there is no doubt that key theorists working on issues of technology, resource use, sustainability and everyday life – such as Elizabeth Shove and her collaborators (for example Watson 2017) – have a very clear sense of project and are actively taking practice theoretical repertoires forward. The majority of the remaining literature, however, seems to be a variation on a theme that either rehearses the argument that ‘people do not consume [insert resource], they consume [insert service that it provides]’ or else offers an empirically rich account of what is really going on in [insert environmentally significant domain] to show that it is more complex than behavioural economics and social psychology would have it. Warde (2014) charitably suggests that the vast majority of studies undertaken in the name of practice theory tend to demonstrate rather than extend it. To this I would add that efforts to modify or extend it are often problematic. For example, and for good reason, there have been numerous calls for the sociology of sustainable consumption to pay greater attention to Bourdieu in order to strengthen its account of stratification and inequality. Were these studies to start from a more thorough grounding in the sociology of consumption instead of collapsing it into the applied environmental social sciences, they might find that many of the resources that they are calling for are already at their disposal.

Finally, this last statement serves as a reminder that the fault lines separating practice-theoretical and cultural approaches to consumption are not so clean as they may first appear. For example Welch (2018) – recalling Reckwitz’s assertion that theories of practice are effectively a branch of cultural analysis – notes that ‘social practices are always necessarily *cultural* practices due to the implicit schemes of knowledge or presuppositions on which they depend’ (Welch 2018). To this I would add that both ‘appropriation’ (pace Daniel Miller) and ‘appreciation’ (pace Pierre Bourdieu) are not only key themes in the sociology of consumption, but also that they belong to the cultural turn. Reading these traces alongside the aforementioned lack of coherent theoretical project, I turn now to a discussion of how the sociology of consumption could mark its distinctive contribution to the field of sustainable consumption by re-embracing the theoretical and substantive preoccupations of the cultural turn.

### **Discussion: A cautious return to critique**

The preceding analysis has developed the resources for thinking about how ‘sustainable consumption’ looks when approached from the vantage point of consumption scholarship. The first step was to offer a definition of consumption that is fit for purpose; the second step was to re-engage with

foundational approaches to consumer culture. To the extent that the sociology of consumption has found its way into discussions of sustainable consumption, it has been under the aegis of contributions defined by their opposition to symbolic theories and cultural approaches to consumption. The perspectives that this leaves out – the cultural logic of commodity accumulation, the role of consumption in creating social divisions and relationships, and aesthetics and desire – are more readily and widely recognisable as the sociology of consumption (Featherstone 2007). Having established that these concerns are germane to study of sustainable consumption, my suggestion is that the sociology of consumption could usefully turn its attention to these in order to signal its unique contribution. Given the expansive body of work that is already committed to the study of routines, technologies, inconspicuous resource use and the normality of everyday life, it seems sensible for the sociology of consumption to now ask different questions, interrogate different phenomena and animate different processes (cf. Warde's 2014 discussion of cyclical theory).

This agenda is deliberately broad and work in this area is already underway. For example Bente Halkier (2010) has made connections between everyday practices of food consumption, media campaigns, and contestation. More recently Dan Welch (2018) has proposed a focus on 'teleoaffective formations' that cut across practices of cultural production and intermediation on the one hand, and the practices of everyday life on the other. I focus here on the implications of the preceding analysis for thinking about critical and moral stances on consumer culture (Schor et al. 2010). As noted, the cultural turn introduced a number of caveats to well-established genres of consumer critique. Practice theoretical approaches to consumption are less explicit in declaring their orientations, however they lean towards more sympathetic or neutral interpretations. The emphasis on empirical studies of practices as performances means that analysts are not likely to be unduly critical of their research participants. And nor should they be. To the extent that these studies focus on practices as entities, the configurational elements that are then brought into focus do not lend themselves to theoretical analysis in a more critical register. For example a focus on technology and normality begets a very different interpretation to perspectives that stress the production of culture and the manipulation of consumer desire. When Shove and Warde collaboratively laid the foundations for what has now become the sociology of sustainable consumption, they led with the observation that despite the various criticisms levelled at consumer culture 'little of the critical opprobrium has been directed towards its negative environmental consequences' (2002: 231). It is ironic that the resources developed in the wake of this observation are the ones that have led the sociology of consumption away from sustained critical engagement with the environmental consequences of consumer culture.

I take the view that acknowledging the environmental impacts of consumer culture calls forth a renewal and, importantly, a reorientation of critique. To see why existing critical approaches to consumption require modification, consider the following:

‘For every hip Indy music connoisseur, there is most likely a bleached-blond, Coach-carrying, North Face-jacketed college student with a Tiffany heart bracelet around her wrist who is inarticulate about her consumer choices’ (Schor 2007: 24)’

Daniel Miller has raised concerns about moralism in consumption scholarship (2001), suggesting that critical approaches such as this often rest on certain caricatures of the consumer in which ‘this bogey of a deluded, superficial person who has become the mere mannequin to commodity culture is always someone other than ourselves’ (2001:229). His recommendation for consumption scholarship to ‘empathetically consider the perspective of the people one is working with’ (2001: 231) could usefully be taken as the starting point for any research that wishes to address the environmental consequences of consumerism (Miller 2012). Thinking back to the definition of consumption put forward in this paper, the concepts of *appropriation* and *appreciation* certainly help in recognising how ‘Nike trainers or Gap jeans might be extraordinarily eloquent about the care a mother has for her child, or the aspirations of an asthmatic child to take part in sports’ (Miller 2001: 229). Similarly, the concepts of *devaluation* and *divestment* help in recognising that processes of discarding are similarly ‘infused with love and care’ (Gregson et al. 2007: 683).

This position does not preclude critical engagement with consumption. For example Rick Wilk (2001: 246), who is no apologist for naïve or elitist versions of critique, stresses that moralism is both inevitable and necessary, and acknowledges that ‘[b]ecause each person’s consumption affects others, the issue of the common good can never be escaped’ (2001: 254). The problematic of environmental sustainability brings this issue into sharp relief and at issue here is a concern with the *volume* of consumption and the *distribution* of access. The concept of *acquisition* allows for questions to be asked about how much particular groups of people are consuming and the consequences of this *vis-à-vis* the common good. Similarly, the concept of *disposal* allows for a focus both on waste and how ‘getting rid’ affords further acts of acquisition. By this reading, the critique of overconsumption is moral rather than aesthetic. Put bluntly, the planet does not care if it is damaged by the consumption of a Tiffany-heart bracelet or by the use of specialized equipment to participate in the practice of hiking. This reorientation of critique is presented as a rejoinder to elitist biases (of the kind dispelled by the turn to culture) and by extension, represents a more robust criticism of consumption and its consequences.

There is a tension implicit in an approach that defends the moral legitimacy of consumption while also welcoming the critique of overconsumption. On this point, the following suggestion is instructive: ‘[b]y putting macro-level or systemic critiques of consumer culture off limits [...] the field has ended up with a certain depoliticization and difficulty examining consumption critically’ (Schor 2007:17). Warde (2014: 297) reaches a similar conclusion in conceding that theories of practice are not adequately equipped to explain the ‘macro-level or structural aspects of consumption’. By abandoning the ontological commitments of practice theory, consumption can be approached empirically and empathetically but then analysed in relation to the larger scale phenomena – global flows of capital,

corporate interests, brands and advertising, ideologies of consumption –that exert at least some influence on the environmentally significant moments of *acquisition* and *disposal*. There is no suggestion here that the critique of overconsumption can be mitigated by an appeal to appropriation or similar (cf. Sutton 2011). To the contrary, it seems credible that the phenomena under critical scrutiny may have a hand in configuring all moments of consumption, and that these may well amplify environmentally problematic patterns of acquisition and disposal. For example at least some of the meanings that enable the work of *appropriation* (what Nike trainers tell us about the aspirations of an asthmatic child to take part in sports) must surely be a result of branding and cultural intermediation. Similarly, proponents of the throwaway society thesis – although they are not without their critics – have argued that obsolescence is designed into consumer goods (shaping *devaluation*), and that advertising and marketing prompts the need to replace functioning products (perhaps shaping *divestment* and future acts of *acquisition*).

There is, of course, a risk that this balancing act could slip over into a totalizing critique that reifies consumer culture and reduces consumers to automatons who are prone to manipulation by commercial interests. Decades of scholarship carried out under the auspices of the cultural turn have demonstrated that consumption is a site of creativity and resistance that cannot be derived simply and unproblematically from production (Featherstone 1990). Accordingly, it makes little sense to think of consumer culture as a singular and homogeneous formation (Featherstone 2007, Miller 2012). Similarly, Warde (2005) is clear that persons should not be deleted from the study of consumption. The aforementioned distinction between practices as entities and practices as performances cautions that while practices are often performed consistently and faithfully across space and time (and so reproduced), they ‘contain the seeds of constant change’ and are ‘dynamic by virtue of their own internal logic’ (Warde 2005:141). It follows that any effort to ground critique in empathetic understandings of environmentally problematic consumption must still acknowledge the capacity for ‘consumers’ to ‘adapt, improvise and experiment’ (Warde 2005: 141), and so consume less.

### **Conclusion: Consumer culture, the Anthropocene and the sociology of consumption**

This paper has addressed the relationships between the sociology of consumption, the environment, and wider disciplinary endeavour. Without disputing that the current vogue for applying practice theoretical repertoires to the policy domain of ‘sustainable consumption’ has been generative of conceptual renewal, the preceding analysis highlights a number of problems. The direction that the sociology of consumption has recently been following – and its proclivity for *only* engaging with an area of conceptual renewal – has led to conceptual amnesia and disconnection from broader sociological concerns. Further, by embracing a particular approach to the environmental impacts of consumption, it has foreclosed sustained engagement with the ideologies and consequences of consumerism. By working through the blind spots and building on the contributions of theories of practice, this paper’s first contribution is to lay the foundations for developing sociological approaches to sustainable

consumption that are grounded in a wider range of insights from consumption scholarship. Crucially, the definition of consumption put forward (the 3 As and 3 Ds) introduces a useful caveat to the idea that almost any activity involving moments of resource use can legitimately be thought of as ‘consumption’. Outside of consumption scholarship, this definition may still appear too broad. For example, Graeber expresses concern that ‘any production not for the market is treated as a form of consumption’ (2011:502). This underscores a view that consumption is of limited social scientific concern and so this conclusion offers some thoughts on why it still matters.

The development of sociological approaches to consumption from the 1980s onwards was premised on its analytic separation from production. A number of research and policy domains have since paid lip service to the importance of acknowledging consumption, however developments in the sociology of consumption are rarely taken into consideration (see for example Goodman’s 2002 critical discussion of agri-food scholarship). Consumption is reduced to ‘shopping decisions’ and ‘consumer behaviour’, the aggregate of consumer choices that send signals in the marketplace, and used principally as a way to talk about production. The field of sustainable consumption is perhaps unique in its willingness to embrace insights – albeit selectively – from the sociology of consumption. In recent years, the sociology of consumption has been seeking to dissolve the artificial purification of ‘production’ and ‘consumption’ (cf. Munro 2016) in order to develop integrative understandings. These include Ritzer’s analysis (2014) of activities involving both production and consumption (‘prosumption’), Warde’s insistence (2014) on linking understandings of practice to the ‘institutional or systemic conditions’ of their existence, and Wheeler’s analysis (2014) of ‘consumption work’, which situates consumption in wider moral and political economies.

There are a great many reasons why those working outside of the sociology of consumption may not be inclined to take insights from the subdiscipline seriously, especially when tasked with thinking about current environmental crises and uncertain social futures. For example, consumption might appear intellectually light and politically suspect by comparison to the weight of these topics just as there are deep seated intellectual divisions of labour that situate ‘production’ in the realm of politics and economics while positioning ‘consumption’ as the preserve of culture and everyday life. Rather than rehearsing these, the contribution of this paper has been to look within the sociology of (sustainable) consumption to suggest that in distancing itself from traditions of critique, it has effectively bowed out of key debates related to the Anthropocene and Capitalocene. While sociological studies of consumption that engage with the policy domain of sustainable consumption and explore topics such as domestic energy use and the limitations of smart meters are valuable on their own terms, there are much bigger issues at stake such as the ecological consequences of consumer capitalism (Urry 2010, Smart 2011). A sociology of consumption that attends to these is far more likely to be sociologically relevant beyond a specific empirical domain or subfield. Consumption – in its original etymological sense of taking ownership, using up, wasting and destroying (cf. Graeber 2011) – is apposite and germane to understanding the Anthropocene and Capitalocene. To end, then, I offer some reflections

on the distinctive resources that the sociology of consumption brings to these issues in light of the resources developed here.

First, it highlights the complexities of care and consumption insofar as it acknowledges both the morality of everyday consumption practices (what the Gap jeans reveal about a parent's love for their child) and how this often sits in tension with the ethics of 'caring at a distance' (the child labor involved in the production of those jeans, see also Popke 2006). Bauman (1988: 796) suggests that morality is 'a functional pre-requisite of a world with in-built finality and irreversibility of choices', and that postmodern consumer culture 'does not know of such a world'. If Urry's suggestion (2010: 191) that the consumer societies of the twentieth century have left a 'bleak legacy' and 'a limited range of possible future scenarios' is correct, then challenging questions must now be asked about what it means to care (for whom? about what? at which scale? over what timescape?) and how existing ethical dispositions in consumption can be reconciled with the urgency of the challenges at hand. Second, it draws attention to the distribution of responsibilities for enacting change. Where the extant sociological literature on sustainable consumption carries a strong critique of political tendencies to responsibilize 'the consumer' and govern through behaviour change (cf. Evans et al. 2017), the resources developed suggest that critique should be focused more squarely and systematically on the role of commercial actors and cultural intermediaries.

Finally, it provides a way of thinking about limits. Consumerism has long been theorized as a culture of excess (cf. Bataille 1991, Featherstone 2007): of overproduction, of saturation, of transgression, of waste. These tropes were developed against a backdrop in which culture and consumption were said to be in the process of liberation from economic conditions and social structures. It has hitherto been very easy to dismiss critical accounts of consumerism and excess as reactionary, elitist, totalising and moralistic. The preceding analysis suggests that these claims can be nuanced with insights from theories of practice. Further, the Anthropocene/Capitalocene thesis gives the sociology of consumption occasion to consider how its well-established theories of cultural excess and limits can be linked to questions of material excess and natural limits. Rigorous understandings of these relationships may help in thinking through strategies for addressing the problems caused by excess (cf. Abbott 2014) and navigating the ethical issues that are brought to the fore. It can also inform debates about how the world of goods might look in resource-constrained futures. For example, Kate Soper's (2007) alternative hedonism thesis – which suggests that the pleasures and functions of consumption can potentially be performed in ways that are less resource-intensive – was originally put forward as a way to mitigate looming environmental crises. Accepting that prevailing ideologies of consumerism will prevent such proposals from taking hold in time and that it is most likely already too late, I suggest that they may yet serve as a blueprint for adapting to life, and living well, in the Anthropocene (which may be possible if it ceases to be the Capitalocene, see Moore 2015). Either way, the resources developed here suggest that by reappraising the ethics and excesses of consumer culture, the sociology

of consumption may once again find itself a key reference point in thinking about modernity and its futures.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> ‘Sociology of consumption’ is used here and throughout to signal complementary approaches from a range of disciplines such as Human Geography and Anthropology.

<sup>2</sup> The thesis claims a new geological epoch in which human societies have become the primary force in shaping earth and climate systems.

<sup>3</sup> <http://scorai.org/sustainable-consumption-research-evolution-inter-related-fields>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.europeansociology.org/research-networks/rn05-sociology-consumption>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.asanet.org/asa-communities/sections/consumers-and-consumption>

<sup>6</sup> Highlighting state, domestic and communal modes of provision moves debate beyond the default assumption that all consumption is provisioned through the market.

<sup>7</sup> He also considers the limitations of practice theoretical repertoires beyond consumption scholarship, working through a number of potential criticisms including its alleged failure to handle questions of consciousness, deliberation and social change.

<sup>8</sup> Acquisition – via its concern with differing modes of provision – is implied in the definition above by virtue of the statement ‘whether purchased or not’.

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