Contentious Commitments:

Assessing Green Consumerism’s Ability to Further Green Initiatives

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Word count:

ABSTRACT

Green consumerism is sometimes theorized as being a viable strategy for fostering environmental citizenship and furthering social and environmental goals in a capitalist system. While there are some benefits to green consumption, ultimately it is insufficient as a model to address environmental problems. I argue that green consumerist advocates place an undue emphasis on individuals’ ability to shape a capitalist market and for this market to yield meaningful social and environmental change. They fail to recognize the qualities inherent in capitalism that discourages the achievement of green goals. Proponents of green initiatives should evaluate the structural impediments that these causes face and begin to re-think the capitalist system that has created and reinforces these problems.

Keywords: capitalism, citizenship, critique, dependence effect, environmentalism, green

consumerism

Several weeks ago, a friend made a public appeal to our neighborhood coalition via our neighborhood Facebook group. He implored us to stop using pesticides in our gardens and lawns. All six of his (relatively) long-thriving beehives and their resident colonies had just collapsed simultaneously. He pointed to the obvious: with spring around the corner, the neighborhood was beginning to see new pops of color on dormant fruit trees and bushes. Large trucks marked with lawn care company names were starting to appear outside homes, hauling with teams of young men wielding humming gas-powered weed whackers and swinging canisters of lawn growth chemicals and pesticides. Citing recent studies by biologists, chemists, environmentalists – private and government commissioned – my friend attributed the collapse of his hives to the recent influx of chemicals in the neighborhood. His experience and argument reflected those of some friends and colleagues. An amateur beekeeper, he belongs to a small network of keepers, some professional and otherwise, who were also seeing colonies suddenly fail and die throughout the state of Washington, following nationwide patterns of collapse as well. Clearly – he pointed out – this problem was a serious one affecting millions of bees in our state alone, one that surely would not be resolved quickly or easily. He acknowledged the need for greater political action through the regulation of pesticides in the face of the dire consequences of a world without enough bees to pollinate flowers, fruits, and other plants. His understanding of the scope of this problem was clear, that it is quickly becoming a global concern with a need for large-scale action. But in this instance, he merely requested that those persons in his immediate community adjust their own behaviors by re-thinking purchases and approaches to lawn care and alter them to better support the safety and survival of local bees.

His strategy was a simple one. He targeted the purchases that his neighbors made, trying to persuade them to approach their consumption with an eye towards environmentalism by providing them with what seemed to be the necessary information to convince them of this act’s importance. He then listed places and products that he endorses as environmentally safe, making the opportunity for others to adopt these practices more convenient, hoping to greater incentivize them to make the change. In other words, he sought simple acts to address community-wide matters, advocating for local change as a means to approach the extensive problems he did not know how else to address or could hope to control. ‘Please,’ he asked, ‘be good neighbors, good citizens – think carefully about how what you buy and use impacts those around you.’

This story reveals a part of what I see as a tension that currently resides in much of environmental thought addressing climate change and other issues: one between freedom and action. The increasing complexity of a rapidly globalizing world makes it difficult to plan and implement direct actions of a sufficient scale to effectively ameliorate environmental problems. For those who are committed to various forms of environmentalism and ecologism, it is clear that whatever course of action is taken, it must be drastic and widespread in order to have any significant impact in slowing down climate change or addressing its consequences and may require totally reshaping the daily life of millions – or billions – of people. Liberal commitments to freedom pose an obvious problem to what environmental action requires. How can we justly infringe on the material conditions of daily life of significant proportions of the world’s population in the name of environmental action without abandoning a commitment to freedom? Many have explored this question with deftness, imagining valuable contributions to a growing conversation. The realization of such plans, however, cannot and has not come quickly enough. What we generally seem to be left with instead are small, limited, and dare I say piecemeal acts that we hope will aggregate and grow, eventually building up to greater, structural change. Like in the story above, many of us know that the actions available to us as ‘ordinary’ individuals are not enough, but we are still pleading with our friends, neighbors, and fellow citizens to confront the mounting evidence that environmental problems are both imminent and severe and to make even small changes in their lifestyles. We are striving to appeal to those around us in a language that they can understand and accept, while searching for actions that might bring about some meaningful change, often concluding that it can only come at the cost of drastic, likely coercive, action. We settle for trying to mobilize those around us to take micro-actions to advance environmental goals, fully aware that there is more to be done.

In this paper, I critically examine one method of micro-action aimed at helping to address a range of environmental concerns, “green consumerism.” Green consumerism is a kind of ethical consumerism, in which consumers purchase products with reduced adverse environmental impacts, relative to other products recently or currently on the market. Green consumerism (GC) tries to reconcile the tension between freedom and action for environmentalists. Through education and incentives, GC advocates try to incite consumers to choose to purchase environmentally responsible products, thus freely expressing a commitment to a kind of environmentalism each time they engage in the activities of shopping and consumption. Forms of green consumption reflect a neoliberal approach to environmental problems. It understands freedom as a matter of choice and choice is channeled through an economic market system. Reducing barriers to green consumption and improving education about the importance of green action preserves the freedom of consumers while also promoting green goals.

Within this mode of action is the same tension that characterizes much of environmental political thought. Although green consumption is able to offer some benefits ultimately it is unable to bring about significant change, sufficient to combat climate change and other global concerns related to the health of the planet. I am skeptical of GC’s effectiveness for many reasons, but primarily I find that it places the impetus for change of regarding a global issue on individual consumers as part of a system that is ultimately unable to accommodate the kind of radical action that I’ll be looking at the problems inherent in GC on its own. I advance my argument in two parts: first, by examining and critiquing the practice of green consumption itself and then the economic market system that it is a part of. I conclude by suggesting that in order to overcome the economic system that stymies environmental action, we might have to re-think what we mean by “freedom” and prioritize green goals and the lives and safety of others over choice in the market.

**GREEN CONSUMERISM AND GREEN INITIATIVES**

In past decades, consumption and consumerism have come under attack in the academy (Muldoon 2006). Consumerism has been criticized for its relationship to materialism, which emphasizes the inherent value of material goods. In its most extreme form, material goods themselves are thought to bring individuals happiness and make serious contributions to individual wellbeing (Martin 1993). In other instances, consumerism is criticized for perpetuating gender, racial, and class stereotypes and norms through the glorification of Western, heterosexual, white, middle-class culture and values in advertising (Smith 2010).] Environmentalists and ecologists have chastised the disposability of cheaply made products that coincide with consumerism filling landfills and contributing to pollution (Martin 1993).

But an interesting contrast to the highly scrutinized consumerism at large has been the recent rise of green consumerism. Green consumerism has become increasingly popular amongst thinkers of many disciplines as a way to advance environmental and social causes. This term sometimes refers to products where a percentage of the profits are donated to a charity (Richey and Ponte 2011). It can refer to the processes in which products are made, their ingredients, the locality of their production, or the conditions for workers doing the producing. Therefore the buying of products that are fair trade, chemical free, locally produced, sweatshop-free or organic (and more) all fall under the umbrella of green consumerism. In each case, the product is thought to embody and further a socially or environmentally just cause (Peattie 2010).

Proponents of green consumerism often argue that this kind of consumption provides a means for individual citizens to play a role in establishing more just social practices in production and bringing more environmentally responsible products to the market (O’Rourke 2011a). We might think that green consumerism successfully evades the criticism of environmental scholars that consumption of any kind necessarily perpetuates the production, use, and disposal of cheap goods. Products with reduced environmental impacts or associated with just social practices are bought by green consumers who are using their consumption for a positive purpose. Consumption, therefore, is both empowering and democratic as we ‘vote with our dollars’ (Johnston 2007; O’Rourke 2011a; van Heerden 2011).

GC helps to craft an attractive model of environmental citizenship and alone it is an alluring activity to pursue and promote. In whatever piecemeal way, individuals may help to move us to a more desirable place in the eyes of green advocates. This is in part due to its convenience. A beauty of GC is that individuals need not radically or suddenly change their lives to make a difference as to how goods are produced, they only need to choose to purchase the product that aligns with greater social and environmental goals. This simple step has the power to fuse private interests and values with public commitments to green initiatives, creating a citizen-consumer hybrid (Johnson 2008).

The force of GC comes from the collective benefits of the activity. The mainstreaming of green consumption can move the prevalence of these products towards the norm, generating greater demand in the market for green products and putting pressure on companies to adjust their practices accordingly. Green consumption expresses a commitment to environmental goals, accommodating different values and many objectives. This can be the first step to greater political action. But the benefits of the activity for individuals remain. Responsible consumers may feel a sense of pride, which may incline individuals to deepen their commitments to socially and environmentally just causes. A qualitative change in consumption is compatible with a change in the quantity of goods consumed. Green consumption may entail a commitment to lifestyle changes where fewer goods are consumed and disposed of (O’Rourke 2011). This perspective celebrates the consumer who makes particular choices in the market. This discerning shopper displays virtues of maturity, responsibility, and awareness. This model of the citizen-consumer hybrid fuses public commitments to social and environmental causes with private acts and behaviors (Johnston 2008).

Much of this may sound idealistic, however GC advocates recognize that on a large scale, consumers are unlikely to suddenly change their purchasing behavior, even as social and environmental issues become more publically salient. O’Rourke and others note that despite the commitments that individuals express to the purchase and use of green products in polling, the actual occurrence of purchasing green products is not nearly as common as polling results would suggest (O’Rourke 2011a; van Heerden 2011). Other criteria play heavily into consumption choice, for instance price, perceived efficacy of the product, convenience, and simple habit (O’Rourke 2011a). Consumption is not collection of isolated acts that express citizen desires or beliefs, it is a behavior. Behavior being the repetition of acts in response to material conditions, perceptions of the act, and–most important for GC advocates–knowledge.

GC advocates have proposed increasing consumer exposure to information about green characteristics (or lack thereof) in a wide range of consumer products. This taps into a long tradition of citizen-shaping through transparency, education, and information. Knowledge of company practices and products is thought to increase the chances that buyers will shift from consumption to green consumption. The obvious consequence of this practice is that the GC model does not direct consumers to which green objectives to pursue. As mentioned earlier, there are sometimes competing values of green products. To an extent, the information of green products must be harnessed and organized to be useful. (O’Rourke 2011a; O’Rourke 2011b; Schor 2011). How ought one determine which is more important – organic or local? Fair trade or chemical free? Dara O’Rourke (2011a; 2011b) is one of the co-founders of electronic application, ‘GoodGuide,’ that consumers can use on their phones to find information about specific products, which they can use to inform their shopping decisions. It is an app geared towards consciousness-raising by rating products based on their ingredients, production methods, worker conditions, product testing, and other measures of green initiatives. Products are given a score based on these qualities, which synthesizes the available information for consumers and aids them in making judgments about what to purchase. Users can filter their searches within the app to identify products that best fit their interests and commitments, helping consumers not to feel overwhelmed by competing green qualities and information (O’Rourke 2011). This preserves the freedom and choice to individuals while removing some barriers to making environmentally and socially just choices.

Accounts such as O’Rourke’s praise consumers for having significant potential to alter social and environmental conditions through the markets of capitalist economy. There is no conflict with individual liberty in this account because barring approval by government agencies regulating product safety, there are no restrictions on what consumers can buy. Rather these authors assume that with adequate information rational individuals will choose to buy more green products (O’Rourke 2011a). GC may have failed to take place on a large scale, but this is not necessarily due to a lack of citizen desires to promote green goals. Rather, it is because consumers generally have insufficient knowledge of green products or are overloaded with information about product “greenness” and need a way to process, organize, and evaluate that information.

We ought to remain skeptical of GC, because while it is compatible with an environmental *ethos*, its ability to affect the global problem of environmentalism is limited. It puts the impetus of change around global issues into the hands of individual actors and consumers. It may be unfair to say that GC advocates assert that radical change can begin in the day-to-day lives of private persons. But a focus on microactions like GC risks misconstruing the scale of environmental problems. It places the responsibility for change on individuals, who in reality have a limited ability to influence corporate practices and governmental policies, which have a more direct impact on these issues. Neoliberalism espouses an optimism about the power of the citizen-consumer and his faith in the market, the opinions and habits of consumers is unlikely to influence international trade agreements, restrictions, or policies. It is ultimately these factors that determine what appears on store shelves and how they get there, rather than a demand generated solely by private consumers.

Before I offer a structural critique of capitalism and its inability to generate radical environmental and social change, I would like to assess O’Rourke’s account of the citizen-consumer. Assuming that citizen-generated demand alone is sufficient to yield the supply of greener products, then what are the limits of this account? Here I argue that it is not merely the limited efficacy of individuals in a market system to solve global issues, but rather the archetype of citizen-consumer itself is undesirable and inconsistent with justice.

One of the proposed benefits of green consumerism is that it has the potential to generate greater commitments to green activism both in the case of individuals and on a societal level (O’Rourke 2011a). For individuals, with the assistance of GoodGuide and other information resources, consumers are able to feel confident that the purchases they make are compatible with their values. Having knowledge of the practices and ingredients that are inconsistent with the consumer’s values helps to prevent them from perpetuating said practices and being accused of hypocrisy. Rather than recognizing that global injustices exist, upon which individuals can have little or no influence, consumers may feel a sense of pride in their shopping choices. Consumer activism transforms a mundane chore into a meaningful act. This perception of efficacy is empowering and has the potential to generate deeper commitments to just practices and causes.

Individuals who adopt and use GoodGuide or resources similar to it are those who are already more likely to be inclined to green practices and value green initiatives. Increases in information and transparency merely facilitate the actions of green consumers, but do not generate new green consumers.

But for the sake of fairness, I will assume that the use of GoodGuide and green practices have a social contagion effect. As a few individuals become more informed about green issues then they are likely to tell their friends, family, and coworkers about what they have learned and the value of green products. This will lead to a gradual spreading of green consumption, which GoodGuide and other resources may facilitate. The clear and understandable rating system of this app and others like it can help consumers from feeling overwhelmed by the information that goes into green consumption. Citizens will more easily be able to spread the gospel of consumer-activism and recruit converts to the cause.

But the danger of the GC model on this individual level is that it does not *demand* that individuals go beyond responsible shopping practices to solidify their commitments to just causes. This is the goal and proposed effect of GC, but consumption itself focuses on the market practices of individuals. It does not speak to other private or public activities or commitments that may make a greater contribution to furthering green initiatives. This is arguably unproblematic if consumers have a significant effect on the workings of the market. Broader societal change in consumption is a more realistic goal than trying to turn all private citizens into active, public participants for environmental causes. The efforts of the few individuals and organizations that do make greater commitments to green initiatives will not be undermined by green consumption. Therefore, assuming that citizen demand is sufficient to significantly alter the production practices of companies and influence what they put into their products to align with social, environmental and ecological values then green consumerism has the potential to offer a valuable model of change.

However, many citizens do not ‘demand’ green products so much as they claim they would acquiesce to the use of green products if there were no other alternatives, did not have to sacrifice product quality, did not have to change where they shop, and do not incur a noticeable increase in price (O’Rourke 2011a). It is also true that green consumerism facilitates activism in some issue areas more than others. On a spectrum of green initiatives having top priority (worker conditions, fair trade, organic/environmentally-responsible production, limited ingredient products, etc) consumers are not evenly distributed, indicating that some causes are more important to consumers than others, even though these causes may have equal moral worth.

Green consumerism is most often motivated by personal health concerns, meaning that individuals alter their shopping habits to protect themselves and their families from harmful products and ingredients (O’Rourke 2011a). Self-interest is what motivates consumers to ‘go green’ when health is the primary reason for adopting the use of green products, not large-scale social or environmental concerns. This suggests that this account is unable to morph into greater commitment to social practices because the importance of green consumption is derived from how it benefits the consumer herself. Where the effects of consumption or the costs of production are unseen (such as in the working conditions of laborers), then the green consumer struggles to find a reason to pay the extra dollar or alter her lifestyle to support change.

More visible purchases and social pressures are likely to spur green purchases (O’Rourke 2011a; Smith 2010). Where items are fashionable, indicative of an identity, or denote social status, those products are more likely to be incorporated into the consumer’s lifestyle. This indicates that the ‘green value’ of these products is tied to how they can benefit individuals, not necessarily on the basis of their contribution to furthering social and environmental causes. The political costs of these highly visible purchases are also extremely low. One may easily purchase a product that is suggestive of a certain lifestyle or commitment to a particular value without having to make a declarative political statement. One’s political and practical investments are low in consumerism, when compared to other forms of activism such as joining a club, picking up trash, working on a fundraiser, or protesting unfair and unclean corporate practices. Ultimately the benefits of green consumerism are based on the consumer’s self-interest and not on the commitment to just social and environmental practices. Green consumerism does not challenge this self-interest and as a result, its ability to influence greater environmental and in particular social change is severely limited.

Although self-interest is more likely to generate green consumption, some individuals do feel more altruistic inclinations to consume green products. For those experiencing these moral pressures, then ethical consuming may be perceived as a way to quell this concern. However, consumption often acts as a substitute for greater political action (Szasz 2011; Smith 2010). Szasz finds that the image of GC as a socially and environmentally responsible act is likely to calm individual concerns and can dissuade us from actually joining a movement, pursuing additional information about an issue or seeking higher standards of justice (Szasz 2011). Consumption of green products offers instant gratification and feelings of efficacy that other forms of activism may not offer in the same degree or so immediately (Smith 2010). This is equally true for products that are responsibly produced and ones where the profits generated from their purchases in part go to support charitable causes. In the case of the latter, companies have been known to use green initiatives to advertise their commitments to socially just practices and increase their profits. Most often, where profits are in part diverted to a charitable organization, the cause is in no way related to the product. This distracts consumers from the harmful effects or irresponsible production of the goods themselves, while simultaneously satisfying consumer demands to feel efficacious and just (Szasz 2011).

The other limit to green consumption as a model for environmental citizenship is that it isn’t equally available to all persons. Green products are (or are perceived as) more costly than non-green products. Consumers expect to pay additional money to support workers when a product has been labeled as ‘fair trade.’ Organic farming can incur additional costs in production and lower crop yields, which contribute to higher prices for consumers. Investment products such as hybrid or electric cars require upfront costs, although there may be savings in gasoline in the long run. This limits the availability of these products to certain people who can embody the citizen-consumer lifestyle. Presumably, this perpetuates a norm (at least in the U.S.) of the ethical consumer as white and middle-class. It puts the power for change and control of the system in the hands of those who it affects the least. Effectively it links our ability to be environmental citizens to our purchasing power.

Even for those individuals who do have the monetary resources to consume green products, there is not equal availability of green products around the world or in a single region. Oftentimes companies contract with retailers to stock shelves with particular products, limiting their availability at other stores and as a result restricting the people most likely to buy them. Green products are not equally available all over the country and geography can be an impediment to the acquisition of green goods. Urban areas are more likely to have a variety of products and for individuals to have access to them. Rural areas and parts of the country with low population will be less able to supply niche products, such as green items even where there may be an ethical demand by the persons who live in that region for them. While the Internet provides the opportunity for individuals to order products and have them delivered, there is the potential concern that environmental costs of having special delivery for common household items cancels out the environmental benefits of using green products.

Therefore it becomes clear that the model of green consumerism is seriously limited in its ability to affect social change and environmental justice. Green consumerism is unlikely to initiate a shift in the prioritization of green initiatives at the top of individual values. It doesn’t compel those who are green consumers to engage with the pressing social and environmental problems on a global scale, but instead encourages a perspective of self-interest and accountability. It perpetuates an insufficient and undesirable model of citizenship that views the financially established, white, middle-class individual as the key to change. However the greatest problem that the GC model faces is that it detracts from the global, structural impediments that perpetuate social and environmental injustice.

**CAPITALISM’S AVERSION TO GREEN INITIATIVES**

The need for a structural analysis of capitalism and the role that it plays in perpetuating and combatting social and environmental injustice has become apparent. The main defect of green consumerism is that it attempts to solve social and environmental problems through the system that has generated and perpetuated them. A critique of capitalism through a social or environmental lens is not new, however it remains an important critique that I will discuss here briefly to reinforce my argument that green consumerism is an inadequate approach to environmental citizenship and activism.

GC advocates such as O’Rourke assume that individuals are able to generate sufficient green demands that the market will be forced to adjust to stay in business. Therefore, as green consumerism grows in popularity and the demand for green products increases, the corresponding level of supply of green products should result. The benefits of green consumption on the market will lead to overall greener practices on the parts of consumers that collectively can make a significant change in how societies treat the environment and the perpetuation of social injustices with regards to labor and wages. However, this is a flawed assumption on two accounts. First, the forces of demand are not wholly exogenous to those of supply. Citizen demand for green products are not generated outside of the capitalist system, rather capitalism has the power to introduce needs and wants into the market that may or may not align with green initiatives. Second, where green products do emerge, it is not necessarily the case that the practice or product with the lowest negative impact will survive in the market. Under capitalism, companies have an incentive to maintain and increase production, favoring the supply of some products over others, which may contradict green initiatives.

As Galbraith (1952) pointed out, the market actually generates false needs and wants through production and advertising. Economists typically assume that consumer demands are pre-existing to production and new technologies and goods are then created to address those market gaps (Hartley 2011; Galbraith 1952). This is sometimes true, many products are designed to address a specific want or need, but just as often they are created alongside the intention of producers to create a market. For many goods, there is an expectation that a new product will be sufficiently marketable and that through effective advertising strategies, consumers will come to believe that this good will add value to their lives in a way that they had not previously conceived of. This is the genius of capitalism.

To further explicate this idea, consider this (somewhat oversimplified) mechanism in greater detail: advertisements, discounts, and sale pitches all entice consumers into purchasing a product. Ads create an image of a product as something that is positive and adds value to the life of an individual. It need not be the case that consumers have a pre-existing demand for a product to be created. Rather, if companies determine that a product is marketable then they can use advertising to persuade consumers that it is worth purchasing. An image of an everyday affair or mundane occurrence is given new attention in the media and treated as an inconvenience for which the product is the solution. Discounts and sales both incentivize consumers to purchase a good and make them feel as though they have, ‘gotten a good deal.’ The perceived value of a product in proportion to its cost can be enough to generate higher purchases by consumers, yielding greater profits for consumers and an increased rate of consumption.

The implications of this for green products are significant. The increasing popularity of green consumerism necessarily means a commodification of environmental activism. While proponents of green initiatives are not necessarily being driven to these causes by the market, their efforts are in part contributing to the popularity of environmentalism as a brand. It can be marketed as a lifestyle with all the material trappings to accompany it. The green quality of products is becoming more important in consumption and this quality has been commodified, as a result we see an increase in green labeling of products and advertising products as green. As the framing of products as green becomes more commonplace then the market becomes more permeable to companies promoting new products that fit this image. It opens the door for companies to generate wants through advertising and production that fall under the heading of environmentally or socially just and responsible. Consumers are becoming primed to accept the value of goods that are seen as contributing to an environmentally and socially responsible cause, whether or not they actually need those specific goods.

In many cases we have seen and will continue to see the rise of alternative products to non-green material goods. These products may offer a better solution than other goods on the market by having a smaller environmental impact or being produced in a socially just way. However it is not the case that these products will necessarily provide the best solution, even where there is fierce competition for the superior product. Capitalism demands that companies, corporations, and profits continually grow. Therefore, it is in the interests of companies to expand their market and see consumption of their products increase. With respect to existing customers, a one-time purchase yields far lower profits than continual purchases of new ones and replacements for old ones. Similar to the generation of wants in production, companies are significantly incentivized to create a dependency of consumers on their products so that they come back again and again (Galbraith 1952).

Again, the implications of this “dependency effect” (Galbraith 1952) on green initiatives are great. The environmental defects of a product may become clear through the consciousness-raising efforts of green consumerism and resources like GoodGuide. But the competition that arises in the market after this consciousness-raising has a severely restricted ability to further environmental goals. The market only requires that companies provide a better alternative to consumer concerns than what presently exists. It is not necessary that the market solve the problems identified by consumers, only that it makes them seem as though they are being addressed to the best of the market’s ability. Corporations and industries even have an incentive to collaborate on what products or prices are sufficient for satiating consumer wants while keeping the industry alive. Again, advertising and other want-generating means come into play to try and seduce consumers into accepting the notion that their consumption furthers environmentally just causes. Therefore the best green products on the market that are the most cost effective and have the lowest environmental impact or adverse social consequence may prevail even though the most ‘green’ solution may be to abandon the purchase and use of that product or a variant of it altogether.

Hartley (2011) provides a potential response to this criticism of the market and its inability to sufficiently generate change and environmentally beneficial products and practices. He argues that to address environmental issues and social injustices we must look to technology and innovation to re-shape our approach to particular problems (Hartley 2011). Consumer demand is sufficient to induce companies to invest in stronger products and practices, the flow of money and capital is ultimately what has yielded humanity’s greatest technological advancements and the production of green products will be no different. Some simple examples are the development of mechanical equipment for farms that have allowed farmers to produce greater crop yields and address famine and hunger in many parts of the world. These practices do not necessarily have to have an adverse environmental impact and what does exist can be improved through investment to satisfy the demands of environmentally-minded consumers.

In part, I concede to the argument presented here. Technological developments are largely fueled by and dependent on capital investment from corporations and industries. The search for a newer, better, stronger product is a constant condition of capitalist market systems. These innovations have the ability to generate great technological improvements that are conducive to environmental goals. The increasing popularity of residential solar panels are perhaps one of the most visible examples in the U.S. today. However, these innovations are not beyond the criticism of other green products produced in the market. Companies look to invest in products and designs that will make them a profit. This either means creating products that will be marketed as a long-term solution to a specific subset of the population, addressing a niche set of needs and having limited availability to consumers, or producing goods that are cheap enough for a large number of consumers to purchase but will need maintenance or replacement within a timeframe short enough for the businesses to sustain themselves. Short of imminent environmental disaster or serious impediments to labor on the part of workers, even investments in the most advanced technologies are unlikely to impact private consumption any time soon.

Existing applications and services rating the performance of companies on different axes of green criteria have failed to address the relativity of production and quality found in capitalism.

Scorecards about the ethicality of products are graded on a curve, in relation to other companies and practices (Nova 2011). Therefore applications such as GoodGuide have not made a contribution to developing the ethical standards of just social and environmental practices. The evaluation that it lets consumers makes about the quality of products in accordance with their values can only be done in relation to what is currently available and doesn’t encourage consumers to demand more just practices or greener products from the producers of the products that with the top ratings.

**CONCLUSION**

I conclude my argument with a disclaimer. First, it would be a mistake for me to claim that green consumerism is insufficient to yield radical, global change on green issues, therefore we ought not to pursue it. While I heavily criticize the ability of green consumerism’s effectiveness in pursuing green initiatives or to generating environmental citizens I do not denounce the purchase of green products or the value of individuals using more environmentally social products or methods. These actions are compatible with anti-consumerist theorists, who call for a radical change to consumption habits as a whole (Locke 2011).

However it would also be a mistake for environmental theorists and ecologists to conflate the power of consumers to address green problems in the market. It is also imperative that our accounts of prescribing change do not stop at theories of how we ought to shop. Powerful though these practices may be, the structural challenges facing environmental initiatives are far greater than my or my neighbor’s inclination to clean my counter with vinegar and a rag as opposed to disposable, individually packaged, non-biodegradable Clorox wipes™.

The labeling of products as green and rating systems such as GoodGuide which can help consumers determine which products are the best aligned with green values are valuable assets to facilitating change and consumption patterns on an individual level. The development and incorporation of an independent standard of responsible production practices and other measures of green qualities would be an ideal addition to these rating systems. Though the development of this standard has been an ongoing project in the field of ethics, the difficulty of formulating this ideal should not stop us from pursuing it with the expectation that it will evolve and improve over time. Similarly, measuring company practices against this standard is likely to be very challenging and in many cases impossible, but few things in the world remain stagnant and the expectation that transparency will not increase with regards to production should not be counted among them.

Consumption is just one impediment to the dismantling of unjust social and harmful environmental practices, providing ourselves and each other perspective on the structural challenges that create and reinforce systems of inequality and pollution are essential for moving forward. But to implement some of the most effective practices, we need to evaluate our understanding of freedom. One that is not simply a matter of choice, able to be funneled into an economic system, but as something compatible with action.

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