CONSUMPTION IDEOLOGY AND THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS: IS DEMARKETING CONSUMPTION THE SOLUTION?

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of the ideology of consumption (that consumption is equated with happiness) in the ecological crisis. The works of Fisk (1973; 1974) are examined and expanded upon to develop a model through which the process can be critiqued. It is suggested that the domain of inquiry must be expanded to include political, economic, and technological dimensions if the role of consumption in ecological degradation is to be minimized. This suggests demarketing consumption as a strategy.

Introduction

The recognition of a potential ecological crisis first appeared in the marketing literature in the early 1970's. Fisk (1973) first suggested that the ecological problem was related to the process of consumption in Western industrial societies. In addition, his seminal book, Marketing and the Ecological Crisis (Fisk 1974), placed the problem in the larger marketing context and marked the beginning of a flurry of research activity related to the conception of the ecological problem at the time. Even into the 1990's, special issues of major marketing journals have had environmentalism/ecology as their focus.

There is an interesting development in the research subsequent to Fisk however. The primary focus has been on defining ecologically conscious consumers as target markets or developing scales to identify such consumers. While developing markets for ecologically benign products was extolled as a necessary condition for an ecological marketing perspective, it was clearly not a sufficient condition as might be deduced from subsequent ecological research. Also considered even more necessary was the recognition that levels of consumption must be curtailed and that a new view of the nature of consumption must be engendered in consumers. This is even more true now in light of the increasing globalization of marketing.

Further, the literature that has developed has used such terms as green, environmentalism, and ecology interchangeably. A perusal of the contemporary ecologically related literature suggests that, within ecology, these terms are not synonymous and, in some cases, might be considered
political antitheses, particularly regarding the role of consumption in the ecological process. Partially because of this inconsistency in the research, no coherent theoretical framework has been developed in the ecologically based marketing literature through which to examine the consumption process. This is indeed ironic since, within Fisk’s (1974) work, a basis for that framework can be divined. His insights seem to have been largely ignored despite their consistency with the ecological research that is now being developed almost twenty years later. The purpose of this paper is to rectify these perceived deficiencies in the marketing literature. Beginning with Fisk (1974), a theoretical framework for the multi-dimensional ecological construct will be developed. From this, a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity of the imminent ecological crisis and its relation to consumption can be developed and serve as a guide for future research.

**Marketing and the Ecological Crisis**

Fisk (1974) argues that if consumers and individuals in business acknowledged the imminent crisis in ecology, they would change their behavior and priorities. Consequently, new social institutions would form and instill ecological values. Further, disregarding the situation will not make it go away. The marketing implications of this are varied. Some of these are that more ecologically benign products are necessary, new modes of advertising must not promote ecologically damaging products, new modes of distribution that minimize ecological impact must be developed, frivolous consumption must be curtailed, and material acquisition as a life-style should be deemphasized. His overall assessment is that marketing must begin to respect the ecological imperative (ecological forces that constrain behavior) that will impose restrictions on the freedom of consumers and marketing managers.

In examining the possibilities of rational, socially responsible consumption within an ecological perspective, Fisk opens three avenues of analysis that are relevant for this paper. The areas of interest are specifically, science/technology, politics, and economics. The next section provides a brief synopsis of his argument in each of these dimensions. Following that, a more complete development based on analyses subsequent to Fisk’s prescient work will be provided. From this a clearer picture of the relationship between consumption and ecology can be developed.
Science/Technology Dimension

While marketing technology has contributed significantly to our current ecological situation, its mollification is immanent in the marketing process as well. Technology has become the link between growing populations and the transformation of resources into artifacts for consumption. This development has been undertaken with little or no reflection on its future consequences. With the rational application of technology, however, it is argued that problems created by runaway technology can be alleviated (Fisk 1974, p. 3) But while the potential exists, it has yet to materialize in a significant way.

Economic Dimension

From the consumption standpoint he argues that we must achieve "ecologically responsible consumption patterns in an interdependent social system" through taxation, licensing, voluntary simplification, and encouragement from marketing organizations. These should all deemphasize (demarket) the acquisitive life-style. Irresponsible resource use from high level mass consumption as in the U.S. must be curbed if an incipient human "population crash" is to be averted (Fisk 1973, p. 25).

This requires two fundamental changes in the mode of consumption. These are a new perspective on the meaning of consumption and a new social organization. This essentially reduces to discouraging both extravagant consumption in Western industrialized societies and increasing populations in under-developed countries.

To effect these changes bringing consumption in line with ecological imperatives, consumers must learn to value the long run and incorporate this view into their consumption behavior. This raises questions about economistic thinking within the twentieth century which extols economic growth as the sumnum bonum of progress, an essential aspect of the dominant social paradigm (dsp).

Political Dimension

Rather than the sweeping changes advocated by ecologists, Fisk argues for adjustments in the prevailing system. While advertising could be used to engender socially responsible consumption, critics argue that it does the opposite, expand consumption of resource intensive
products. The only responses advertisers and marketers make in the direction of ecology are under duress from consumers or government. Can advertising be used to demarket ecologically damaging consumption? Fisk argues that it can. If mass persuasion is as effective as its proponents claim and environment is an indispensable 'product,' then advertising is a cheap and effective means of creating the climate of opinion needed to accomplish ecological goals (Fisk 1974, p. 74).

However, if advertising continues to misuse its power in promoting false ecological claims, then its power to ameliorate the problem will diminish. Self regulation is proffered as the solution. Kangun, et. al. (1991), however, found that 58% of a sample of environmental ads contained misleading or deceptive claims so evidence from the intervening sixteen years indicates we may not have made much progress here. Consequently, we must revert back to Fisk who suggests that, in the long run, ecological sanctions will motivate consumers to alter consumption patterns if other methods fail. Fisk's (1974) analysis then suggests that the solution lies within the capabilities of the existing political and socio/technical apparatus. We must recognize the problem and effect the necessary changes.

Optimistic Prognosis

While the evidence does not seem to support the efficacy of advertising in engendering ecological values, Fisk (1974) was sanguine about its prospects. In short, promotion can increase substitution of goods with low environmental impact for goods with high impact, conservation of irreplaceable resources, and antientropic use of energy (p. 100)."

He further argues that this would be most effective when the synergism of marketing decision variables is allowed to develop. Specifically, pricing, distribution, and product development will be most effective when used in combination with advertising and all have the same focus, ecological values. Ill founded marketing strategies offered as ecological solutions will be detrimental to the process of value change and the problem will be exacerbated. But as Fisk points out, "ecological sanctions do not read public-relations releases (p. 101)."

Thus, Fisk (1973,1974) is arguing that the fundamental changes in consumption and marketing practices are necessary if we are to avert an ecological crisis. He suggests that the
requisite changes can be effected within the dsp. However, as will be shown in the next section, this belief is not shared by contemporary ecological thinkers. The new ecological perspective conflicts with the basic tenants of neo-classical economics and these conflicts regarding such factors as growth, property rights, and distribution of wealth must be reconciled before a solution to the imminent crisis can be found (Capra 1980; Kassiola 1990; Schumacher 1973). It conflicts with eco-political theorists who do not generally envision the possibility of transformation within the framework of traditional democratic institutions (Dobson 1990; Bookchin 1990; Kassiola 1990). And finally, it conflicts with the prevailing view of the role of science/technology in the process (Porritt 1984; Capra 1984; Marcuse 1964; Ehrenfeld 1978; Habermas 1971).

**Contemporary Ecological Perspective**

An examination of the contemporary ecological literature paints a much less optimistic picture than that which presented itself twenty years ago. If Fisk presented such a clear picture of an imminent ecological crisis, why has so little changed? While progress has been made in limited areas such as recycling, the overall assessment of the development of the type of ecological mindedness and consumption orientation extolled by Fisk is extremely limited. The developing global ecological crisis has not been abated.

It will be argued here that the answer to the question lies in the nature of the changes that have been deemed necessary. Admonishing consumers to change their habits is one thing, having them change is quite another, even when the necessity for the change is evident. Why this is the case can only be ascertained when the consumption process is examined within the context of the technological, economic, and political ambits in which it has developed. Fisk (1974) alludes to this problem when he suggests that contemporary marketing practices are based on a material existence that no longer exists. He argues that the value premises of marketers do not correspond to the ecological imperatives of the contemporary world and that they are disparate in three areas. These correspond roughly to the political, economic, and technological dimensions discussed earlier. This condition, meets Mannheim's (1936) criterion for ideology, i.e., beliefs that fail to consider new realities applying to a situation. Fisk apparently underestimated what has been
referred to as the ideology of consumption (Hetrick 1989) (which suggests that consumption leads to happiness) and its power to subvert substantive change in the dsp which sanctifies consumption, economic growth, technology, and domination of both people and nature (Porritt 1984; Dobson 1990; Merchant 1980, 1993; Capra 1980). Because consumption is so intimately related to the three areas, each will be examined for its role in maintaining the prevailing view of consumption within the dsp despite mounting evidence of its unsustainability in the long run. While space does not permit a complete examination of any of the dimensions, each will be examined briefly to ascertain two factors: how they are related to the ideology of consumption and how they are conflated in a mutually reinforcing relationship continuously reproducing the dsp. Since the dsp was most directly the product of Enlightenment thought (Rifkin 1980; Merchant 1980), the analysis will begin with that period.

The Science/Technology Dimension

Capra (1983) argues that the shift from the organic to the mechanical world view resulted in a new conception of reality that has dominated our culture since the Enlightenment. Specifically, it manifested itself in two ways: our view of nature and our view of science/technology. It will also be shown that it impacted our views of political and economic thought. With respect to science and technology, the dominant figures were Bacon (1944) and Descartes (1916) who developed the contemporary view of science. Within their thought, the purpose of science and technology was predominantly the elimination of the "inconveniences of man's estate." Eliade (1962) adds, "It is the specific dogma of the nineteenth century, according to which man's true mission is to transform and improve upon Nature and become her master, ... (p. 172)" These two features combined to transform science and technology into the paragon of human achievement. The consequences of this project were spectacular to say the least. But they were not all benign.

The new vision of nature as raw material for the satisfaction of human material needs also removed proscriptions and constraints on the violation and exploitation of nature (Shiva 1988; Merchant 1992). Thus, the essence of science and technology was transformed from the Greek ideal of knowledge to the contemporary ideal of domination and control (Leiss 1972). Further,
this control would be achieved through deconstruction and reduction of nature. Nature as machine rather than living organism allowed the ascendance of humans in the hierarchy of being. We are no longer a part of nature, but above it and superior to it (Ehrenfeld 1978). As a result of the Enlightenment project, nature was demystified and reduced to instrumental value in the satisfaction of human needs (consumption) and has no higher purpose.

With the success of science and its practicalization, its union with industry became inevitable through the medium of technology. Both Bacon and Descartes extolled the application of technology as the means to compel nature to relinquish her fruits for the betterment of humanity. Of this union, Heisenberg (1962) states, "Therefore, natural science turned into technical science; every advancement of knowledge was connected with the question as to what practical use could be derived from it (p. 197)." And in almost all cases, the practical use became increased capacity to produce within industry and the concomitant increase in the capacity to consume.

**Political Dimension**

The relationship between the development of science and technology and English liberal thought forms the basis for their encroachment on political thought. There are several factors that require illumination as to their role in ideology of consumption that will now be addressed.

Since the new paradigm was working well in unraveling the mysteries of the physical world, it was a natural extension to apply the new methods to the social world. It is here that science and technology invade the political through the liberal philosophy of Locke (1963, 1954). It should be pointed out that at this time in the development of social theory, economics was still subservient to the political and the relationship was not to change fundamentally until Adam Smith (1934). However, the economic did not escape Locke whose works on property rights and material wealth were to set the stage for Smith and later, the ideology of consumption.

While Locke followed in the footsteps of Hobbes (1950), they differed in a critical way relating to their view of nature. The Hobbesian view was one of scarcity of resources while the Lockean view was one of material abundance. Within the cornucopian assumption of Locke lay the justification for the unlimited accumulation of material wealth which, under religious hegemony
of the preceding millennium, had been viewed with contempt. Within Locke, this was a transformation of monumental importance. He argues that, with the invention of money, the right to disproportionate, and unlimited accumulation of property rests in the industry of the individual. This was within the constraint that there was enough and as good left that others may proceed the same. Finally, and most importantly, Lock states, "The negation of nature is the way toward happiness (Strauss 1953)." This last statement captures the ecologist's nightmare. Nature is purely instrumental in the satisfaction of unlimited human wants leading inexorably to happiness: the ideology of consumption.

Locke also provides adumbrations of liberal economic theory. Unlimited accumulation of private property, possessive individualism, and the duty to produce individual wealth which will automatically benefit society in the process were championed by Locke and later became the mainstay of Smith's economic theory. The relationship to Baconian science is also evident in Locke's liberal political theory. The purpose of nature is to provide for human felicity (anthropocentrism), humanity is separate from nature (deconstruction), and nature has only instrumental value (reductionism). Rifkin (1980) summarizes the consequences of Locke's work as follows:

With Locke, the fate of modern man and woman is sealed. From the time of the Enlightenment on, the individual is reduced to the hedonistic activities of production and consumption to find meaning and purpose. People's needs and aspirations, their dreams and desires, all become confined to the pursuit of material self-interest (p. 26)

Finally, in Locke's political theory, the sole purpose of government was the protection of property (consumption?) through the consent of the governed. This provided the necessary link between politics and economics which manifests itself in democratic institutions prevalent today.

**Economic Dimension**

With the transformation of avarice from vice to virtue, the political was transported to the economic in the form of unbridled pursuit of self-interest as the sole motivator justification of behavior. The idea of self-interest held so strong an appeal that, as suggested by Hirschman (1977), no one even bothered to define it. It is significant to recognize that self-interest was originally a political construct not an economic one, and its use in economics signified a conflation
of the two disciplines. It was Smith (1936) who drove the intellectual wedge between politics and economics suggesting that economics could stand alone. With the successful application of technology to industry and the virtual elimination of moral and political restraint on consumption, the door to the ideology of consumption was wide open. With each individual pursuing economic self-interest in the form of unlimited material accumulation, all would be released from the political and social restrictions history had imposed on them (Ophuls 1980).

While it was not for another century that the political and moral dimensions were to be cleaved completely from economics, the "Invisible Hand-writing" was on the wall. It took the success of physics to sound the death knell for an economics "burdened" by the value non-cognitive elements of politics and morals. To be a "science," economics had to exorcise these scientifically unsavory constructs. The end result was a deconstructed, reductionist discipline with self-interest as the sole impetus and utility as the singular goal that became the apotheosis of the social sciences (Mirowski 1988, 1989).

Neo-classical economics, in a move matched only by the Creation, hypostatized an eco-mutant calculating machine who negotiated through a sterile culture in which institutions and social relations did not interact with essential market processes. With utility as a metaphor for production and consumption, the essence of each was reduced in a social deconstruction that separated them from reality. The locus of creation was separated from production and the locus of destruction was separated from consumption. This effectively negated the essential features of both, i.e., production is primarily consumption (of resources) and consumption is primarily production (of waste). This effectively removed the environment from economistic consideration, a condition that persists to the present when direct consequences of national economic activity are still considered "externalities," and its impact on social relations and ecological degradation in developing nations is largely ignored. The nature and level of U. S. consumption thus becomes independent of the global ecology and impacts our own only when we can see or smell its effects.

The political ideology which justifies economic growth, unequal distribution of wealth, and exploitation justifies itself through the concept of Pareto Optimality. By engendering the belief that
only absolute, rather than relative, wealth is important in economic justice, the imperative of
economic growth materializes as it is only through continuous growth that elites can incessantly
and uncompromisingly increase their wealth without appearing unjust. While justifying
maldistribution of wealth, both domestically and internationally, this condition promotes irrational
consumption and ecological degradation in its wake. Yet it is the mainstay of the economic
dimension of the d sp (Kassiola 1990).

It is the confluence of these three factors which make up the d sp and leads to the apparent
intractability of the ecological problem. They combine to create, not just a set of independent ideas
within individuals, but a consciousness. It has been forcefully argued that it is a false
consciousness, or an ideology in the pejorative sense (Habermas 1971; Marcuse 1964, 1969;
Laing 1967) engendered to benefit the elite at the expense of the many and the environment.
Demarketing consumption is problematic when the full implication of the context is appreciated.
For now we must locate the source of the ecological problem within a three dimensional construct
consisting of a technological, a political, and an economic dimension. To suggest that we must
demarket consumption in this context is far more difficult than if we assume there is a singular
entity labeled consumption behavior or ecological concern. This is the approach that has been
taken in virtually all research in marketing as it relates to the environment and it represents an
extreme over-simplification of the situation.

Elements of an Ecological Approach

The foregoing suggests that to understand and affect the imminent ecological crisis, we
must first understand that one's true ecological values (as opposed to the ones overtly expressed)
are intimately tied to technological, political and economic values. This is the domain in which the
solution lies. Admonishing consumers to be ecological aware or to consume more of the "right"
stuff, will be of only marginal value in effecting a solution because it leaves the root causes of the

crisis intact. Porritt (1984) states for example: Concern for the environment provides as good a starting point as any for green politics. But unless it then encompasses fundamental social and economic issues, it will contribute little towards eliminating the root causes of that crisis (p. 228).
Once this is understood, it is possible to develop a framework through which to address the ecological crisis in a substantive way. One of the main obstacles to this framework is, as suggested earlier, terminological. What does an ecological approach entail and how does it differ from an environmental approach? While the terms are used interchangeably in the marketing literature, environmentalism and, what might be referred to as ecologism, are qualitatively different constructs.

Ecologism represents a political ideology based on a paradigm that deviates from the dsp in material ways. Environmentalism, on the other hand, does not represent a different paradigm and fits quite well within the dsp. Ecologism demands a transformation of social existence to a non-violent, non-patriarchal technological, political, and economic existence motivated by social and ecological justice. Essentially, it seeks to replace the paradigm that has dominated Western industrial societies for three hundred years (Pirages 1977; Cotgrove 1982).

Environmentalism circumscribes the domain of cultural critique within the dsp which views post industrial society as the technological, affluent, service society rather than as low technology, agrarian, and decentralized (Marien 1977). This limits the scope of analysis to quantitative change suggesting transformations in method compatible with the status quo. Within this mode of thought, it is believed that legislation and more technology will be effective in averting the crisis. Ecologism challenges the dsp itself demanding its replacement. It is described by Porritt and Winner (1988) as follows: ...the most radical [Green aim] seeks nothing less than a non-violent revolution to overthrow our whole polluting, plundering and materialistic industrial society and, in its place, to create a new economic and social order which will allow human beings to live in harmony with the planet (p. 9)

Thus ecologism is a true paradigm shift rather than a change in methods. As can be seen in the description offered by Fisk (1974), he assumes the environmentalist position arguing for legislation and changes in consumption patterns. He does not call for qualitative change in the technological, political, or economic domains. Rather, he argues for "rational" application of technology to solve problems created by technology, changes in consumption habits, and laws to force these changes. While he assumes a more ecologicist position in questioning the sustainability
of economic growth, he focuses less on income redistribution as a necessary condition for social justice. Within the framework established, Fisk’s approach would be considered more than mere environmentalism but less than ecologism. The majority of research in marketing and ecology falls squarely in the environmental ambit and thus represents minimal, though necessary, change and, according to more ecologically oriented thinkers, will be deficient if our goal is to avert an ecological crisis. While Fisk (1974) represented the ecological vanguard within marketing, contemporary ecological thought has extended his analysis in response to accelerating ecological degradation.

Summary and Conclusion

This paper poses the question, Can demarketing consumption avert the imminent ecological crisis? While Fisk’s (1974) seminal work, and arguably the best work to date in the marketing literature, suggests that it would be an efficacious strategy, the ecological literature is skeptical. The primary reason for this is that the nature of the problem, an ideologically based consumption ethic embedded in the dsp, requires a more substantive and comprehensive approach. Because of this, traditional approaches, themselves embedded in the dsp, will be inadequate and will serve to perpetuate the ecological crisis by leaving the root causes intact. The primary purpose of this paper was to demonstrate that the roots of the ecological crisis are much deeper than current marketing approaches assume. Identifying ecologically conscious consumers and offering them less damaging products will provide too little, too late. A more comprehensive approach considering technology, politics, and economics and their interaction with first, second, and third world nations is necessary.

While there is no consensus within the ecological literature as to the single best approach, almost all the different types take a more comprehensive perspective than ecologically related marketing analysis. Deep ecologists argue that the only viable alternative is to adopt an ecocentric approach which puts humans on an equal level with other members of the biosphere. Social ecologists argue that hierarchal social structures must be eliminated ending the domination of human by human before human domination of nature can be eliminated. Eco-Marxists argue that
ecological destruction is imminent in Capitalism. Ecofeminists take the position that social
relations must take on a more feminine orientation favoring nurturing over domination, cooperation
over competition, and interconnectedness over deconstruction. While these perspectives differ,
they do have one element in common. They all argue for fundamental, qualitative change in the
dsp. This distinguishes them from the environmental approach applied in marketing. Each
recognizes the multi-dimensional nature of the ecological problem and its embeddedness in
Western industrial cultures. The problem must be addressed from this perspective if the root
causes are to be exposed. Without such an approach, we end up focusing on symptoms rather
than problems. While alleviating the symptoms is critical, the environmental approach will be
insufficient in creating the conditions for a sustainable society. A holistic, ecologically based
examination of the technological, political, and economic dimensions of the dominant social
paradigm is necessary.

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