

ANALYSIS

The dynamics of willingness to consume

Inge Røpke

Department of Technology and Social Sciences, Technical University of Denmark, Building 322, DK-2800 Lyngby, Denmark

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Abstract

It is increasingly acknowledged that the growing consumption in the North constitutes an important part of global environmental problems. To improve the possibilities of dealing with this aspect of the problems, this paper explores some of the driving forces behind the growth in consumption. The first section introduces the environmental debate on consumption including the relationship between final consumption and the consumption of resources, the recent political acceptance of dealing with consumption, and the fundamental conditions for consumption growth in the North. In the following sections, a cross-disciplinary approach is applied in a broad search for the driving forces behind the willingness to consume. Throughout the exposition two questions are explored: (1) Why are productivity increases largely transformed into income increases instead of more leisure? (2) Why is such a large part of these income increases used for the consumption of goods and services with a relatively high materials-intensity instead of less material-intensive alternatives? The explanations are divided into three groups: first, the economic explanations, including socio-economic aspects related to the institutional set-up of the economy; second, socio-psychological explanations focusing on consumption from the perspective of the human being embedded in specific social relations; third, historical and socio-technological explanations focusing on different aspects of everyday life. The paper concludes with some reflections on the political implications of the analysis. © 1999 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. The environmental debate on consumption

1.1. Consumption of resources and final consumption

In the environmental debate, the concept of consumption is used in two different contexts that

are interconnected, but important to distinguish from each other: consumption of resources and final consumption. The first application of the concept is related to the basic idea of ecological economics that the human economy is a subsystem of the biosphere (Daly, 1991; OECD, 1997b). Three conditions are necessary for the economy:

that humans can appropriate resources from the surrounding nature, that they can return waste to nature, and that the mechanisms of the biosphere continue to function in a way that enables humans to survive in it. When the relationship between the human economy and the biosphere is conceptualized, the concept of consumption is used in the sense: appropriation of resources from nature. This appropriation—the quantity of resources consumed—results in environmental problems, both directly through the extraction and use of the resources and indirectly through the waste generated later (Schmidt-Bleek, 1993). The scale of the consumption of resources and the related environmental problems are determined by the functioning of the economy as a whole, but it is very difficult, not to say impossible, to analyse the functioning of the economy as a whole and thus to explain adequately the background for the resource consumption.

Because of the complexity of the economy as a whole, it seems more realistic to analyse the dynamics behind resource consumption from several different, complementary perspectives. As a helpful point of departure, a definitional relationship can be used. Resource consumption correlates with

- The micro efficiency in production: how effectively do the single production units transform the resources of nature into useful goods and services?
- The macro efficiency in production: how effectively are the efforts of the productive units combined in the provision of goods and services for final consumption?
- The quantity of final consumption per capita.
- The size of the population.¹

In this relationship the concept of consumption is used in the second application, as a concept defined inside the framework of the economic

system. The concept of final consumption is based on the idea that consumption can be distinguished from production: goods and services are produced, often through long chains of production where the end products of one firm are just inputs for others, but in the end they are finally consumed. However, as human beings are carriers of the labour power that is also a necessary input in production, the consumption of food, shelter, education etc. could just as well be seen as intermediate products, and then the concept of final consumption disappears. Nevertheless, the concept has an intuitive appeal because large groups of human beings live at levels far beyond the fulfilment of basic needs. Of course, it can be argued that in modern societies labour power has to be educated, transported etc. to function properly as inputs in production: the system would fall apart, if people had only their basic needs fulfilled. But still it seems to be quite important for a human being, whether he or she is a wheel in a system with high or low living standards, and the concept of final consumption is a way to conceptualise this difference.

The two concepts of consumption are related to each other, as the economically defined concept of final consumption is one of the determinants underlying the consumption of resources that link together the economic system and the biosphere. Obviously, other determinants are important for the growth of the economic system in relation to the biosphere, and consumption is, in fact, an integral part of the complex social processes behind overall growth. Even though it is problematic to separate one aspect from a complex whole, the issue in this paper is not economic growth as such and the related consumption of resources, but first of all the dynamics behind the growth of final consumption.

1.2. Change in political focus

In political discussions about the background for environmental problems and the possible strategies to cope with the problems, the focus is slowly changing. In Rio sharp contrasts were obvious, with the North arguing that population growth in the South was the main cause of envi-

¹ The relationship corresponds to IPAT, except that the T is here split into a micro component (how effectively is the individual good produced) and a macro component (how effectively are individual goods combined into final consumption). The split directs attention to macro efficiency, which is often overlooked in the preoccupation with technological change.

ronmental problems, while the South pointed out that the North appropriated ever more resources through increasing consumption (Redclift, 1996). Even though the North demonstrated very little understanding for the views of the South, Chapter 4 of Agenda 21 stated that the rich countries should take the lead in achieving sustainable consumption and production. Characteristically, consumption and production were mentioned together, because the preferred strategy to cope with the problems was to promote technological change in order to safeguard consumption and economic growth. However, since Rio, the focus has slowly been changing, and it is increasingly acknowledged that growing consumption in the North contributes substantially to environmental problems, and considerations about the need to change lifestyles are popping up in official publications (Natur- og Miljøpolitisk redegørelse, 1995).

As a part of the follow-up after Rio, OECD in 1995 established a Work Programme on Sustainable Consumption and Production (OECD, 1997a). The Programme still reflects OECD's preference for pointing to increased production efficiency as the main way 'to uncouple high living standards from natural resources input and pollution output' (back page), but it is acknowledged that consumption and lifestyle must also be discussed.² However, it is emphasized from the beginning that consumption as such is not a problem: 'the sustainable consumption and production debate is not de facto an agenda for reducing consumption in general. Action to promote sustainability must be based on a case-by-case analysis of potential constraints to consumption and production of any particular good, service or natural resource' (p. 7). The report mentions the problem of 'rebound effects': 'The achievements gained through an eco-efficient economic development strategy could be overwhelmed by continued growth in consumption

(and the production which that engenders)' (p. 24), but the awareness of this problem is not really used to question the case-by-case strategy. Obviously, the environmental benefits of a change in consumption practices in one area can easily be counterbalanced by increased consumption in other areas, if overall growth is not limited. For instance, a successful policy to reduce private motoring would imply the saving not only of energy, but also of money, which could be converted into extended weekends by plane to interesting places entailing increased energy consumption (the example is not taken at random, as this area of consumption is growing very rapidly).

The intention in this article is, therefore, to look at aggregate consumption. Obviously, different consumption activities differ very much with regard to their environmental impact, and in principle, it is easy to imagine a continuous growth in the economically defined consumption without a corresponding growth in the consumption of resources—even under the assumption of unchanged technologies. This would be possible, if the population used income increases to buy labour-intensive goods and services: theatre and music performances, courses in new skills, lectures on interesting topics, art objects, high quality clothes and houses made as handicrafts, child care, and massage treatments. However, little indicates that such a re-orientation of consumption is actually taking place. On the contrary, the growth in consumption seems to be materials- and energy-intensive, also in the rich countries, as is indicated by the increasing number of housing square meters per person (Hille, 1995; Danmarks Statistik, various volumes), the number of cars and the distances travelled (Durning, 1992), the growth of air travel (Durning, 1992), the household ownership of appliances (Durning, 1992), and the spread of air conditioning (Wilhite et al., 1996). These indicators of final consumption can be supplemented by input and waste indicators that also support the thesis of materials-intensive growth: e.g. the growth in paper consumption (OECD, 1997a), electricity consumption (Redclift, 1996) and waste generation (Redclift, 1996; Wuppertal Institute, 1995; van der Wal and Noorman,

² The need to focus on more than just efficiency is exposed in a table on commercial energy consumption (p. 42): even though energy consumption per \$ of BNP was 538% higher in Russia than in USA, energy consumption per capita was 56% higher in USA than in Russia in 1993.

1995). While the increase in consumption can thus be accompanied by increasing resource consumption, the increase is not necessarily proportional. For instance, the study by Biesiot and Moll (1995) indicates that growing income is accompanied by a less than proportional increase in both direct and indirect energy consumption. Some data point in a different direction, illustrating for instance a decrease in the use of steel in the OECD (Glyn, 1995), but it is beyond the scope of this paper to deal extensively with the relative importance of the different evidence. It seems likely that the overall growth of final consumption implies an increase in the consumption of resources, so it makes good sense to go beyond the case-by-case analysis and deal with overall consumption in an environmental perspective.

1.3. *Driving forces*

Historically, the growth of consumption gathered momentum with the industrial revolution. The dramatic extension of the division of labour and the urbanisation in the wake of the industrial revolution created the conditions for a way of living where few people grow their own food, while most people work in the formal economy and buy their necessities in the market. Inside the framework of this way of living, the level of consumption has grown immensely. Household income has increased concurrently with the labour productivity increases resulting from the processes of industrialisation and market competition. Besides the forces of market competition, the generation of income in the North has been based on two fundamental pre-conditions. First, the availability of cheap fossil fuels has been decisive, and only the fact that the social and environmental costs of industrialisation have not been paid by the producers has made the labour productivity increases possible. Had the system somehow internalised the environmental costs, the technological development would have focused far more on improving resource productivity—implying fewer environmental problems and a lower material standard of living. Second, political and economic mechanisms have secured an immense transfer of resources from the South to the North,

without which the North could not have consumed so much (Martinez-Alier, 1990, 1995; Leff, 1995). Fundamentally, consumption growth has thus been conditional on the division of labour, urbanisation, industrialisation, competition, the use of fossil fuels, and the appropriation of resources from the South. These fundamental driving forces are still active, and immense transfers of resources still take place from the South to the North (Wackernagel and Rees, 1996; Redclift, 1996; Røpke, 1994).

When the ever growing consumption is questioned for environmental and distributional reasons, the question arises of whether people in the rich countries will be ready to halt the forces behind this growth. In mainstream economics this would seem to be very difficult, because the growing consumption is seen as a result of people's demand: people obviously want to consume constantly more—otherwise they would not do so (they just reveal their preferences). On the other hand, environmentalists and cultural critics have often argued that the enormous growth in consumption has not really made people happier. Up to a certain level, material progress increases welfare, but most people in the rich countries have passed this level long ago (a few examples from the abundant literature on this issue are Argyle, 1987; Max-Neef, 1992; Durning, 1992; Jackson and Marks, this issue; Røpke, forthcoming). Some would even claim that growing consumption is the result mainly of the intense efforts of industry to seduce people into buying goods that they fundamentally do not want (Spargaaren, 1997). If this were the case, it would probably not be so difficult to reach a consensus in democratic societies that market forces should be curbed to reduce consumption. Unfortunately, the situation is much more complex. While, on the one hand, the neoclassic perception of consumption desires is too simplified and apologetic, the critical view, on the other hand, tends to underestimate the importance of consumption. Besides the fundamental conditions for consumption growth, mentioned above, several more specific factors and circumstances drive consumption and contribute to explaining why it is so difficult to get political support for measures to curb consumption. Con-

sumption is woven into everyday life, the activities that are decisive for the quality of life and the images of the good life, so consumption is difficult to isolate as something that can be reduced without diminishing quality of life. Paradoxically, this can very well be the case, even if it is also true that well-off people do not become happier with increased consumption. The main point here is to emphasise that we are neither completely happy with ever increasing consumption, nor merely victims of producer-forced consumption. The driving forces at work are much more complex, and the intention of this article is to take a closer look at the more specific mechanisms behind the growth of consumption. This does not mean that the more fundamental conditions for growth are not appreciated, such as the transfer of resources from the South, the international trading system etc., but priority is given to include some perspectives that have not had so much attention in the economic debate so far. To deal with the environmental and distributional problems related to ever increasing consumption, it is necessary to understand not only economic forces, but also human motivations—as a pre-condition for creating support for political intervention.

The paper thus focuses on more specific answers to the question: What are the driving forces behind the growth in consumption, and especially behind the willingness to consume? Such a broad question invites a cross-disciplinary approach and a broad search for answers. The idea of the paper is to include a great variety of explanations drawn from several different social science disciplines to illuminate the problem from many sides and reveal the scope of the different explanations. In relation to ecological economics, the paper is in the socio-economic tradition that includes social and institutional perspectives (Norgaard, 1994; Gowdy, 1994; O'Hara, 1995, 1996). However, consumption has not been a central issue in this tradition so far, so few studies can be directly referred to.

The explanations are divided into three groups: first, the economic explanations, including socio-economic aspects related to the institutional setup of the economy; second, socio-psychological explanations focusing on consumption from the

perspective of the human being embedded in specific social relations; third, historical and socio-technological explanations focusing on different aspects of everyday life. The three groups are partly distinguished from each other by the inspiration from different disciplines, but they also tend to differ, as the economic explanations focus relatively more on macro or systemic aspects, while the socio-psychological explanations are more micro oriented, and the historical and socio-technological explanations belong to a meso level. Furthermore, the first two groups of explanations attach more importance to abstract theoretical aspects combined with more historically concrete aspects, while the third group emphasises the historically concrete. The paper assigns relatively more space, for instance, to the anthropological perspectives that can be expected to be less well-known to readers of *Ecological Economics* than the discussion of relative prices.

Throughout the exposition two questions are explored from different perspectives: (1) Why are productivity increases transformed relatively more into income increases instead of leisure in the postwar years? Juliet Schor, who has studied the American situation, puts it this way: 'Since 1948...the level of productivity of the US worker has more than doubled. In other words, we could now produce our 1948 standard of living...in less than half the time...We actually could have chosen the four-hour day...In 1990, the average American owns and consumes more than twice as much as he or she did in 1948, but also has less free time' (1991, p. 2). In the US the work week shortened slightly from 1950 to 1970, but lengthened since then. In Germany and France as well as in Scandinavia, the number of work hours has declined, both due to a shorter work week and to longer vacation leaves, but—using Denmark as an example—the reduction for the individual has been accompanied by an increase in the number of work hours for the family as a whole because of the increased participation of women in the labour force. (2) Why is a relatively large part of these income increases used for the consumption of goods and services with a relatively high materials-intensity instead of less materials-intensive alternatives? Why does the composition of con-

sumption not change relatively more towards a pattern of less materials-intensive consumption? In countries with low material standards, it is not surprising that productivity increases are transformed into higher standards of living with high materials-intensity, but it is not clear why this trend should continue to be dominant. The discussion of the different explanations to these questions is concluded with some reflections on the political implications of the analysis.

2. Economic explanations

2.1. Competition

As already mentioned, the basis of consumption growth is the persistent productivity increase, driven by competition that forces producers to strive for cost reduction to stay competitive with regard to price. The competition on costs and prices is accompanied by other forms of competition that stimulate consumption, as they are intended to attract customers. These forms of competition are extensively described as dynamic forces behind consumption growth (Durning, 1992).

Producers try to be first with the newest, so new products as well as new models and variants of old ones are incessantly developed. Product innovation has increasingly become even more important than process innovation in the competitive struggle (Dosi et al., 1988; Porter, 1990), and this stimulates consumption in several ways. Products are often replaced by new ones before they are worn out (even though they are not designed for durability), because they are not fashionable any more, or because they cannot cope with the new demands (cf. the rapid obsolescence of computers). Product development also implies diversification and specialisation: multi-purpose products are increasingly replaced by specialised devices for very specific purposes: for instance, different tools for all the different tasks in the kitchen, and different shoes for all the different kinds of sports, for running, for walking, for different social occasions etc. (Pantzar, 1992.) Finally, completely new products are invented and thereby create new consump-

tion desires.

Whether the products are old or new, enormous resources are spent on advertising them to consumers. For four decades, advertising has been one of the world's fastest growing industries (Durning, 1992), and as Durning states: Even if commercials 'fail to sell a particular product, they sell consumerism itself by ceaselessly reiterating the idea that there is a product to solve each of life's problems'. This impact of advertising is strongly reinforced by the spread of commercial television and by the commercialisation of public spaces which means that consumers are permanently immersed in encouragements to buy.

If consumers cannot afford to buy right now, retailers compete to attract them by the provision of credit facilities and hire-purchase arrangements. In itself, the postponed payment does not increase total consumption, but these institutional arrangements help to trap the consumers, as they have to keep up earnings to pay the instalments and keep the goods.

Competition thus creates an environment that pulls consumers by tempting offers to increase consumption instead of choosing more leisure time—a trend reinforced by the contribution of product development to increasing the need for material inputs in leisure activities. These pull mechanisms are supplemented by the push mechanisms dealt with in the next section.

2.2. Work and spend

Schor (1991, 1995) is one of the researchers who have been puzzled by the choice of income increases instead of leisure. She offers an explanation that emphasises institutional structures of the labour market. With special reference to the United States and Japan, she suggests that the postwar era has brought a cycle of work-and-spend. Employers set schedules and workers conform to them, and when productivity rises, employers pass the gains along in the form of higher wages rather than reduced worktime. Workers take the extra income and spend it, and they become accustomed to the new level of spending. The reasons the employers stick to the same schedules or even increase worktime are institu-

tional and technical. First, the ‘hours-invariant’ component of labour costs is considerable and has risen in the postwar period. This applies especially to the US and Japan, while countries with large public welfare sectors, as in Scandinavia, have a lower share of hours-invariant welfare spending borne by employers and tend to have shorter hours. Second, additional hours for salaried workers do not cost the employers anything because the pay itself is hours-invariant. In the US, salaried workers have significantly longer hours than hourly workers because of the employers’ requirements, and because hours may be used as a signalling device to identify loyal employees. Third, long hours are important to maintain high capital utilisation, especially in capital-intensive industries, and when firms cannot use shift work or face a limited supply of labour. The combination of these factors creates powerful incentives for employers to oppose working-hour reductions and thus constitutes a driving force behind increased consumption.

Other institutional and cultural features of the labour market stimulate increased consumption as well. For instance, salaries are often based on seniority, and this contributes to the dependence on continued improvements. Another example is the tendency to relate career-making to full-time employment and often to overtime. In many cases, promotion is blocked for persons not doing overtime work, and furthermore, overtime can be a precondition for having access to the more interesting tasks.³

2.3. *Relative prices and sectoral shifts*

Productivity increases are transformed into increased income and spending, but why does the

increased spending to such a large extent take the form of material consumption? Several factors play a part, but in this economic section it will be emphasised that the change in relative prices has favoured material consumption. The products that can be produced industrially persistently fall in price compared with products and services that cannot be provided industrially. As long as the social costs of industrialisation (such as environmental costs, social marginalisation and isolation, occupational health and safety problems etc.) are not paid for by the producers, production costs can be reduced by extending the division of labour and by substituting capital for labour. Thus wages can buy still more material products, and the opportunity costs of repair work, personal care, education etc. become still higher, measured in the sacrifice of industrial products. Even if increasing income implies that the consumer can better afford to buy the relatively more expensive labour-intensive products and services, the substitution effects of the price changes tend to be stronger, expressing that the opportunity costs of labour-intensive products and services are perceived to be too high.⁴

The change in relative prices also constitutes part of the explanation for the development of the so-called self-service economy (Gershuny, 1978). Instead of buying services like washing, cleaning, repair and maintenance of houses and flats etc., we invest in our own capital equipment and produce the services ourselves. Industrial production has reduced the price of equipment like washing machines, televisions, drilling machines and other tools, and when this is combined with the rising prices of buying services, self-service becomes attractive.

From an environmental point of view the self-service economy is inappropriate when the services require expensive capital equipment (Hinterberger et al., 1994). Individual ownership of this

³ The institutional factors promoting long hours meet with counter-tendencies. As Christer Sanne (1995) has concluded on the basis of several studies, many people want to choose shorter hours. Several recent experiments with shorter hours in Sweden demonstrate both economic advantages for the employers and improvements of quality of life for the employees (Olsson, 1997).

⁴ The shift in relative prices also contributes to answering the question of why income is chosen at the expense of leisure, as the opportunity cost of leisure is constantly increased.

equipment entails the use of more resources than an organised sharing would do, whether the sharing is organised via market activities or via networks in the civil society.

The trend towards self-service applies to some types of services, but the general trend is that activities are transferred from households to the formal economy. This applies to products that can be industrially produced, services that become specialised, and services taken over by the public sector. In a recent article, Cogoy (1995) stresses that the expansion of market relations into formerly non-market organised sectors of social life can have significant environmental impacts. These are not necessarily negative, but in many cases they are, as Cogoy illustrates with a few key examples, related to household energy conservation and to private transportation. It is crucial to the analysis that a given consumption target can be attained by different technical means (e.g. ‘comfortable dwelling’ can be attained either by heating or by insulation) and that these different solutions imply different social organisations. The point is then that the institutional setting and the vested interests in a specific social organisation block the choice of the most environmentally-friendly solution, and sometimes even block the choice of the most rational way to attain the consumption target seen from the point of view of the consumer.⁵ This result can come about in diverse ways, so Cogoy primarily intends to draw attention to the environmental importance of the borderline between market and non-market activities.

Also the borderline between the private and public sectors is important from an environmental point of view. Stated very broadly, the welfare state has taken on tasks that were not profitable for private enterprises, but important for the functioning of society. Many of these tasks have been difficult to industrialise and are still relatively labour intensive and energy- and

materials-extensive. The continuous change in relative prices has therefore entailed problems for the public budgets with ensuing cuts, privatisation etc. These trends tend to increase the materials-intensity of consumption, as we are inclined to have different priorities as private consumers than we have as citizens. It seems to be more acceptable to pay a high price for care and environmental improvements, when such activities are paid for via the tax system—and some of them can only be paid for in this way.

3. Socio-psychological explanations

Productivity increases are transformed into rising incomes which are spent on consumption and especially material consumption. The section above demonstrates the push and pull effects of the economic system and some of the related institutions. However, these increases would never have been realised if we had not been ready to increase consumption instead of leisure. Of course, one can believe that increasing consumption results from the manipulation of consumers by the strong forces of capitalism, the creation of false needs, and the effective seduction through advertising. Explanations of this kind are as old as the capitalist consumption society itself, and they obviously have a considerable element of truth, but they have increasingly come under attack for being far too simplistic and exaggerated (Spargaaren, 1997). Therefore, it is necessary to look more closely at the socio-psychological aspects of increasing consumption.

3.1. *Insatiable wants and envy*

The easy explanation of mainstream economics is that human beings have insatiable wants—and often this is referred to simply as a fundamental part of human nature. In traditional utility theory this is just an assumption that does not need any explanation. When explanations are put forward, they will typically start by stating that goods are sources of enjoyment because they fulfil physical

⁵ As it will appear from the following sections, consumption targets are not always easy to define, so the apparently irrational can be desired by the consumer.

or spiritual needs. According to this point of view it should be expected that people would feel better the more they get. As this is obviously not the case—for instance, some poor people by Western standards do not regard themselves as poor, and some rich people are far from satisfied—a supplementary hypothesis is often added: a theory of envy as a driving force behind demand. There are many different versions of the theory of envy advanced as critical correctives to the assumption of insatiable wants (classical versions by Smith, Veblen and Keynes and a more recent version by Hirsch, 1976). The theories use concepts such as relative needs, social emulation, positional goods, conspicuous consumption and competitive display. The idea is to distinguish between absolute needs, which are felt independently of the situation of others and which can be satisfied, and relative needs, which are needs for feeling superior in relation to others and which are, indeed, insatiable.

The theory of envy is often combined with a critical assessment of human beings: people should not be so envious, it is really irrational, it is not to their own good. This moral assessment is the point of departure for the criticism that the anthropologist Mary Douglas and the economist Baron Isherwood (Douglas and Isherwood, 1980) voice against the economic theories of consumption. They share the fundamental assumption of economics that human beings act rationally. When economists tend to make critical assessments of consumers' motives as irrational, it is because economic theory has a very simplified and primitive conception of human beings and, therefore, cannot explain the rationality of human behaviour. Such an explanation is provided by the anthropological theory presented by Douglas and Isherwood, as it provides a much richer idea of social meaning than mere individual competitiveness and explicitly deals with the question: Why do people want goods? A more elaborate answer to this question is central to the issue of this paper, so the position of Douglas and Isherwood will be summarised in some detail—also because it is relatively close to economics. As my concern is different from that of the authors (who study the meaning of poverty), and as the arguments

have to be very condensed, I have felt free to structure the presentation in my own way.

3.2. *Goods as means for making sense*

Douglas and Isherwood apply a perspective where human beings are understood in their social context.⁶ It is not meaningful to abstract the individual from social life, and the analysis must always start by understanding the whole before attending to the individuals. As members of a society, human beings have a fundamental need to relate to other people, and their relations should be the starting point for analysing consumption.

To this general perspective Douglas and Isherwood add two more specific assumptions regarding societies and human beings. First, societies can differ very much from each other, but they are always hierarchially structured (this assumption is not made very explicit, but as far as I can see, it is crucial to the analysis). People are divided into different classes or groups, and consumption plays an important role in constituting these groups. Second, social life depends on the existence of a certain consensual basis, that is, a kind of agreement about meanings that are stable at least for a little while. When human beings take part in social life, they have a fundamental need to understand the world in which they have to act: they must make sense of their environment. The cognitive construction of the social universe proceeds by seeing differences, drawing lines, discriminating, and in this way the temporal dimension is demarcated, space is divided, persons and events are classified. Rituals are used as a means to establish meanings in a social context.

Goods enter this scene as ritual adjuncts. They play a very important role as a means for making the world understandable. Goods are used as markers for discrimination: for instance, food is used for discriminating between morning and evening, between everyday life and celebrations,

⁶ This perspective is closely in keeping with the institutional current related to ecological economics (Norgaard, 1994; Gowdy, 1994; O'Hara, 1995, 1996 etc.), but the contribution of Douglas and Isherwood is emphasised here because their discussion very specifically deals with consumption.

between different kinds of celebrations and so on. As goods are used as markers and classifiers, they make visible and stabilise the categories of culture—they, so to say, constitute the visible part of culture as the tip of the iceberg which is the whole of the social processes. In cognitive anthropological theory, goods constitute an information system, they are carriers of meaning. This function is not easy to see, as long as one focuses on the physical properties of the goods and the needs that these goods can satisfy. To see the working of the information system, it is necessary first to abstract from common sense observations and the knowledge of the use of the goods. Of course, many goods satisfy needs, but they are even more important because they help us to think and understand. They have the capacity to make sense, not as individual goods, but in the relationships between them.

Culture is always in a process of change, and goods are recruited for ever new projects of classification. Consumption is thus an active process, where social categories are continuously redefined. Goods are consumed and eventually demolished, but simultaneously the stream of goods leaves a cultural structure, a way of thinking. The process of redefinition can only take place when consumers meet. They invite each other to take part in consumption rituals, and these function as grade events, where assessments are established and changed.

How does a rational consumer act? Here the assumption of a hierarchial society must be recalled. Ultimately, consumption is about power, as Douglas and Isherwood put it. In a hierarchial society, it is important to attain and maintain a high position. A person's success in this matter depends on his ability to understand the social universe, to keep up to date with changes and, best of all, to be in a position to influence strongly the development of new meanings. To be in power over meaning, a person must attend many consumption rituals, so he must have many social contacts and be able to afford the necessary reciprocity related to the rituals. To be a person whose judgement will be relied on, he has to develop a natural mastery of consumption. This is done by increasing one's knowledge of consump-

tion in several fields and by integrating this knowledge into a synthesis. There are increasing returns to scale of consumption, so the synthesis becomes easier to achieve when the scale is increased.⁷

In this social universe it is perfectly rational to increase one's scale of consumption, as it facilitates the development of a natural mastery. The reciprocity and the need to be mobile to attend many rituals also stimulate the scale. Furthermore, it is vital to have the time to take part in the most important events. A person only has the time, if he is not bound by heavy periodicity constraints related to high-frequency work. When technological change provides goods that can relieve periodicity constraints, these goods can be expected to be candidates for developing from today's luxuries into tomorrow's necessities. The same goes for other scale-facilitating goods that have the capability to increase personal availability. Also this trend stimulates the demand for goods.

In this account of social life, human rationality is related to the striving to attain a high position in a hierarchial society, and increasing consumption is an important aspect of this process. To make the account credible it must be argued that this rationality is somehow related to the quality of life experienced by the individual. Douglas and Isherwood do not discuss this question directly, but three arguments can be extracted. First, one's ability to achieve and maintain a position can be decisive for one's chances to achieve fundamental human aims such as having a love relationship and having children. Second, the physical use of goods is obviously a source of enjoyment. Third, it is an even greater pleasure than the mere use of goods to take part in the sharing of names, that is, to discuss the subjects that one has invested so much time and money to learn about. Typically, the process of increasing the scale of consumption will thus be experienced as a source of enjoyment for the individual.

⁷ There is decreasing marginal utility of the consumption of a specific good, but not of consumption as such in this perspective.

In this perspective it is very intelligible that industrialisation has found an easy outlet for the mass production of goods. The scale of consumption activities has increased enormously, and consumers have become busier: 'Industrialisation has complicated the life for the consumer. Regarding material goods there are, indeed, more of many things. But to keep up with the exchange of marketing services necessary to happiness and necessary to a coherent, intelligible culture, he has to run harder to keep in the same place. Industrial growth means nothing more or less than extending the scale of operations'.

In my opinion, Douglas and Isherwood offer a much better and more persuasive account of human behaviour in relation to consumption than that of traditional economic theories. It is strong with regard to thinking of human beings as fundamentally social and with regard to emphasising their need to understand their social environment via an information system. However, this specific anthropological perspective also has much in common with economics. Even if it realises the social character of human beings, it is still a very abstract theoretical construction based on extensive reductions. The focus on rationality inside the framework of a hierarchial society gives the theory a deterministic touch. Drawing conclusions on this basis would entail the risk of committing the fallacy of misplaced concreteness as is well-known from critical perspectives on neoclassical economics (Daly and Cobb, 1989).

In relation to the issue of growth in consumption, it is on the one hand very relevant to use the theory of Douglas and Isherwood to stress that it will not be easy to dismantle consumer society. It is fundamentally necessary and legitimate for human beings to make their environment understandable, and goods are integral parts of this process. On the other hand, it is too deterministic to use the theory to argue that there is no voluntary escape from the never-ending consumption spiral. First, the passage cited above on the consequences of industrialisation indicates a possible contradiction between following the logic of the hierarchial system and experiencing quality of life. When the scale of consumption increases, business may seriously threaten the personal enjoy-

ment. This possibility is reflected in the movement for voluntary simplicity: some would probably be willing to give up the stress related to increasing consumption, if they could find ways to achieve the essential social contacts without it (Sachs, 1995). Second, human beings have more varied facets than the ones emphasised in the theory. We have the ability to reflect on and to see through some of the mechanisms influencing behaviour, which gives us the chance of liberating ourselves from these mechanisms—human beings are not just mechanistic agents of a structural determinism. Furthermore, human beings also have an ethical capability. In the account of Douglas and Isherwood, human beings are conceived of as social, but they are just as unpleasant pursuers of their own interests as they are in economics. They apply exclusion strategies, set up entry barriers to others etc. If it is taken into account that human beings are also ethical, a less deterministic perspective may arise.

3.3. *Justification*

Before leaving the more abstract discussion of why human beings have been willing to demand the enormous amount of goods that industrialisation has made available, one more perspective will be outlined briefly. Neither the person in economics, greedy and (irrationally) occupied with impressing others, nor the person in the presented version of anthropology, rationally occupied with securing his social position, is very attractive, and I wonder whether these 'images' are realistic, even as legitimate theoretical abstractions. The sociologist Campbell (1990) presents an interesting alternative—or at least a supplement. He criticises the mono-motive approach of Th. Veblen and others, because they presume motives instead of investigating them. He argues that interpretations of conduct are externally imputed and largely unsubstantiated by any evidence concerning what the people themselves actually think they are doing. Campbell rejects the widespread view that the conduct of individuals can be understood as primarily a self-interested attempt to manipulate or impress others. He suggests that human conduct—to the extent that it is conscious and

willed—is perceived by the individuals as ethical and moral. In other words, it is important for the individual to be able to justify his actions for himself. The individual strives to create from his personhood a character possessing some ideal qualities. Even if he thinks that he possesses these ideal qualities, he will from time to time need reassurance that this is in fact the case. This reassurance takes the form of conduct—he confirms the ideal self-image by actions. Justification is thus an integral part of action; it cuts across the specific reasons for actions and is not in practice fully separable from the direct motivations. If the character ideals prevailing in a particular period imply a behaviour involving high consumption, such consumption will be justified.

From a somewhat different perspective, the importance of justification is supported by a cross-cultural study on materialism carried out by Ger and Belk (1996a,b). They view materialism as a culturally agreed upon understanding of a mode of consumption and look into what materialism means in different cultures (American, West European, Turkish and Romanian). They find systematic cultural differences in the meanings of materialism, but all the cultures share in the condemnation of materialism. Interestingly, however, virtually all those studied combine their critical assessment of materialism with having a high level of consumption aspirations themselves. While they regard materialism as bad consumption, they see their own consumption as good. One's own consumption can be justified and legitimized in various ways, from the need to have control over life to the interest in being concerned with others.

3.4. Late-modernity and individualisation

The perspective of justification constitutes a good link between the more general explanations of why consumers so willingly have increased consumption in pace with the possibilities, and the explanations referring to specific historical circumstances taken up in this section. Individuals are formed by historically specific conditions, and we might have developed new features that sharpen our appetite for consumption considerably. It is a widely held view that this in fact is the

case. Consumption has acquired a new and very important role in relation to the formation of self-identity under the conditions of late-modern society. The latest phase of industrial capitalism has been characterised in many ways and dated somewhat differently, but most contemporary sociologists agree that two main tendencies have dominated social change (Halkier, 1998). One trend is an intensified process of individualisation: the individual is increasingly set free from traditional social bonds. Individuals are no longer tied very closely to social roles and cultural norms related to class, gender, locality and religion. The other trend is a process of formalisation and institutionalisation. The directly visible social relationships are increasingly being replaced by abstract and large-scale social structures and mechanisms through which we are integrated in complex and worldwide networks. In relation to consumption, the second trend manifests itself in the supply of goods from all over the world and in the different possibilities for individuals to get access to these goods, possibilities that are dependent upon the abstract mechanisms of the world economy.

The trend of individualisation has a profound indirect impact on the demand for consumer goods. The release from bonds and social constraints implies that a person's identity is no longer given by his membership in a community and by his social roles. With the historical decline of traditional ties, individuality emerges as a problem. The identity of a person becomes a project, as he now feels much more responsible for his own life and self-identity. In the process of constructing and sustaining a self-identity, consumption plays an important role. People use goods as one of the means to define themselves, as goods transmit messages to others. To some extent the project of the self is thus translated into a project of possessing desired goods. The maintenance of the self-identity is a never-ending process, so it entails a persistent and strong psychological impulse to consume.

The social theorists Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman and Ulrich Beck (referred to here on the basis of Warde, 1994) emphasise the double character of this process seen from the per-

spective of the individual. On the one hand, it feels good to be free from social fetters and oppression, and consumption is a source of joy because it builds up self-identity. On the other hand, it feels very stressful and frustrating to be responsible for one's own life, and consumption is a source of anxiety and uncertainty, because the handling of choice is so critical. When individuals integrate themselves into society through their consumer behaviour, a wrong choice can be self-destructive. Warde (1994) is critical of this account of the double character of individualisation and consumption. He agrees that the pursuit of self-identity is an important aspect of consumption, but he doubts that it is the paramount goal. Warde finds that the model of the consumer as a displaced and disembedded person is somewhat exaggerated. Consumers are not so individualistic, and their choices are supported by their social contexts and many different channels of guidance. The consumers for whom the choice is very decisive are typically highly informed, and for others personal consumption is not very risky at all.

No doubt, individualisation has left human beings with an intensified need for confirmation of the self, a trend that is confirmed by many theorists of social psychology (Læssøe, 1992, 1995). It seems obvious that material consumption plays a part in identity-formation and that consumption is stimulated by the changes of individual psychology that are typical for the period. Whether these changes are also sources of frustration is perhaps less obvious, and it is less important in explaining consumption. However, the question is vital in relation to the discussion of possible changes ahead, as it might be easier to gain acceptance for consumption-reducing measures, if frustrations are widespread.

The stimulation of consumption due to the process of maintaining self-identity is an indirect consequence of individualisation. But individualisation has also influenced the choice of consumer goods in a more direct way. The process of the decline of traditional ties has been reflected in a process of changing values, as it has become an important value to be individually free and independent. Thus the history of the period after the industrial revolution has also been the history of

increasing interpersonal independence. In this century we have seen old people becoming independent of their relatives, women becoming independent of their husbands, and young people becoming independent of their parents. Of course, independence does not mean independence of social relations as such. The reduced dependence on close relatives has co-developed with increased dependence on worldwide networks, but the feeling of personal independence is much stronger.

The increased independence has far-reaching effects on material consumption. When old people get their own homes instead of living with their children, when young people get their own flats at an early age, and when divorces result in more single and single parent families, the number of households multiplies (van Diepen, 1995). This trend entails an enormous increase in the demand for housing and all the related kinds of equipment. Much of our income increase has thus been transformed into personal independence.

Also within households the individualistic trend has been effective. The different members of the family increasingly get their own rooms where they can withdraw and engage in their hobbies or work, and each child often has its own room at an early age. Furthermore, family members do not want to have their freedom of choice restricted by the activities of other family members, so increasingly a household has more than one television, tape-recorder/CD-player, car etc.⁸

The different accounts of consumption as being instrumental to different aims such as confirmation of the self and interpersonal independence have caused theoretical reactions. Sometimes the instrumental accounts leave the impression that consumption is a kind of hard work and not an end in itself. Thus, for instance, Warde (1996) has found it necessary to emphasise that people typically enjoy consumption for a wide variety of reasons. Consumption will often involve emo-

⁸ The quest for independence is also one of the factors behind the previously mentioned trend towards the self-service economy. Households could have organised sharing systems, and such collective solutions do exist in blocks of flats, but the trend has clearly been that households prefer to have their own washing machines, drills etc.

tional aspects—the driving forces behind consumption are probably all the driving forces behind human behaviour, or in other words, most human behaviour has a consumption aspect. We consume from love and hate, from care and personal enjoyment, from the desire to strengthen social relations and the desire to withdraw, from the wish to play and explore and from the wish to relax.⁹

4. Historical and socio-technological explanations

While there is a tendency to emphasise macro aspects in the economic explanations and micro aspects in the socio-psychological ones, the historical and socio-technological explanations tend to emphasise the meso level. They also tend to take a step further towards a more concrete level by focusing on the historical transformation of the patterns of everyday life.

4.1. *The dream and the family*

The story of the growth in consumption is not only a story about the impact of a number of general forces, it is also a story of the realisation of dreams both at the individual and the political level. These dreams emanate from both the problems and the qualities related to the living conditions prevailing in the early industrial society.

In a Danish context, the story has been summarised by the cultural researcher Nørregaard Frandsen (1994), who emphasises that the way the new economic possibilities were used was greatly influenced by the imprint of the society we came from. Nørregaard Frandsen dates the old society to the period from 1880 to 1960. The 1880s saw the transformation of Danish agriculture and the establishment of the co-operative movement (dairies, slaughterhouses) as well as the take-off of industrialisation. In the 1950s more than half the population still lived in the countryside either as farmers or in small towns economically related to

agriculture. The old society had a stable pattern of life. The positive side of this was the feeling of security related to living in bound social communities based on family and neighbourhood, close to the preconditions of existence and in direct contact with nature. The negative side was the hardship that had to be endured, especially by those low in the hierarchy, children, women and men without property: physical strain, worries, violence, corporal punishment, social branding, frugality. Industry was mainly localised in the cities, where most of the workers lived in small, dark and damp flats. After the Second World War, the housing shortage was acute: it was difficult to get a flat when founding a family and nearly impossible to get one without marrying. The take-off of economic growth came in the late fifties, and the following years brought a fundamental restructuring of society. The period from the middle of the fifties to the middle of the seventies became a period of migrations. It has been estimated that every Dane moved on average four times during these twenty years (Nørregaard Frandsen, 1994). The migrations consisted of two movements: one was the exodus from farming, and the other, much greater one, was the migration from the old town centres to the suburban areas. Industry, too, spread from the town centres throughout the country. 750 000 housing units were built (the population at the beginning of the period was 4.5 million people), some of them flats, but most were single-family houses with gardens. Through this enormous building activity many people tried to realise a dream—a dream combining a critical and a visionary aspect. The critical aspect was a revolt against the frugality, the closeness and feeling of being locked in, the social branding and the poor standard of health in the old society. The visionary aspect was the wish for light, air and privacy for the family close to nature, so a small garden around the house had a very high priority.¹⁰ As a result, a new form of urban lifestyle spread throughout the country, and the old differences between the lifestyles of city and countryside were partly dissolved. No

⁹ Consumption activities as well as the act of buying can also turn into an addiction. This aspect is dealt with in an article by Claxton (1994).

¹⁰ Politically, the vision was supported by tax benefits related to investments in housing.

doubt, this dream was a strong driving force behind the growth in consumption.¹¹

The ethnologist Löfgren (1990) points out that home-making became a very important activity and thus a central part of consumption in the twentieth century. The background was that the home emerged as a family project that unites wife, husband and children. Löfgren goes over the different phases that home-making in Sweden has gone through during the twentieth century: first, the phase of home-making as a moral and sacred activity, second, the modernisation related to functionalism and the scientific approach to house work, and third, the phase of creativity stressing informality and the fun of consumption. The many changes of form through these phases can leave the impression that lifestyles are very flexible and susceptible to influence from marketing and fashion. But, on the contrary, Löfgren emphasises that behind these vagaries of fashion there is a marked cultural stability on a more fundamental level. When people invest so much time, money and creativity in home-making, it cannot be explained by market manipulation. It is much more important that home-making is a family project and that it has become very closely related to identity formation.

Related to the dream is a conception of the ideal family—an ideal that contains a duality: on the one hand the idea of a warm closeness and on the other hand the idea of each person's inviolable sovereignty and individuality (Nørregaard Frandsen, 1994). This ideal, combined with the tendency for all members of the family to focus on their own achievements, has introduced a central contradiction in modern family life (Dencik, 1996). Taken to its extreme, the individualisation trend tends to dissolve family life, but at the same time the family is more important than ever as a place of refuge for the individual in this period of

cultural 'setting-free' and lack of a stable framework, traditions, role models etc. To keep the family intact and alive under these conditions requires conscious efforts, and these efforts will often imply a stimulus to consumption.

4.2. *The paradox of time-saving*

The dream of light, air and privacy and the continuous process of home-making contribute considerably to consumption growth. When a closer look is taken at the way lives are lived in practice inside the framework of the dream, further inducements to consumption are uncovered. These are, first of all, related to the busyness and lack of time that seems to characterise everyday life in modern societies and to the related paradox of time-saving. Generally formulated, busyness motivates the acquisition of labour-saving equipment, but the result tends to be that the technical improvements are converted not into reduced labour for a specific task but rather into increased consumption or improved quality—and the busyness remains. The phenomenon is thus a parallel to the tendency to realise productivity increases in the form of increased material consumption.

The phenomenon is well-known from the spread of the car. The car enables the owner to reduce the time needed for travelling, but it also opens up the possibilities of taking jobs further away from home, buying from shops that are not local, and taking part in new or more leisure activities. When car ownership became widespread, it turned into a condition in economic and political planning decisions, and the conditions of everyday life were changed in ways that made car ownership almost compulsory or at least made life rather inconvenient for people without access to a car. Instead of reducing the time needed for travelling, the car thus contributed to a dramatic increase in the distances travelled. This development has even been formulated as a 'law' of the constant use of time for travelling, called 'Zahavi's law' or 'Hupke's constant' (Tengström, 1991; Cronberg, 1987).

Within households, the same phenomenon is known, e.g. from washing machines. These could really reduce labour time for washing, but instead

¹¹ The growth of consumption during this period of change is an illustrative historical example of one of the findings in the study of more recent examples by Ger and Belk (1996a,b): people in dynamically changing countries are relatively more materialistic. Dynamic changes give the possibility of social mobility and spur social comparisons of every kind, and they are accompanied by a confusion in norms and an increase in the value of novelty.

of saving time we wash much more than previously: we have many more clothes, we use different materials that need more washing and have to be washed separately, and our ideas of clean clothes have changed (Andersen, 1985; Cronberg, 1987). Just as the individual choice of more transport in the case of the car turned into an outside force via economic and political changes, the individual choice of more clean clothes gradually changed into an outside force via the establishment of new social norms. If we want to be employed and to have social contacts, it is not enough to wash our clothes to the standards that were common 50 years ago.

This paradox, that the constant introduction of labour-saving devices has not been accompanied by a decrease in labour time for housework, has been studied in much detail and in a long historical perspective by Schwartz Cowan (1983). As the title of her book 'More Work for Mother' illustrates, she was first of all puzzled by the strange phenomenon that American housewives in the 1970s could still feel exhausted and overburdened in spite of all the technical devices for housework and the take-over of many former household tasks by industry. The story behind this phenomenon is very complex and goes back to the beginning of the 19th century, but the following intends only to summarise briefly the main explanations in general terms.

Much housework has been taken over by industry, and many tasks have become less time-consuming by the introduction of technical devices. However, a separate task can be rationalised in one way or the other without decreasing the burden of work for the housewife. Whether the burden is eased depends on a number of factors—which are in practice integrated, but separated here for analytical purposes. First, there is a division of labour in relation to housework, and the task that is eliminated or rationalised might be one that is done by others than the housewife. In the early days of industrialisation, men, women and children all did a large part of their work at home, and the first tasks to be industrialised were to a large extent those done by men and children. At a later

stage, a related process took place, when some of the tasks done by servants in the relatively rich (but not truly wealthy) families were rationalised and gradually taken over by the housewives, for instance with the availability of the washing machine. Second, a given task is always linked to other tasks, and when it is rationalised, other tasks in the chain might expand and new related tasks might occur. For instance, the cast-iron stove, unlike fireplaces, had to be cleaned at the end of each day and to be polished regularly, and when taps replaced pumps, the job of 'producing' water was replaced by the job of 'producing' clean toilets, bathtubs and sinks. Third, the introduction of technical devices was often accompanied by an increase in the amount and variety of services produced. The stove entailed the end of one-pot cooking or, rather, one-dish meals. The diet became more varied, while the time spent in preparing foodstuffs was increased, and the cooking chores became more complex. Fourth, while many tasks were taken over by industry and public services, other tasks moved in the opposite direction, one of the most important being transport. Before 1920 shopping and transporting took up very little time, but since then transport services have exploded. Fifth, a symbolic aspect was added to the combination of the factors above. For instance, white yeast bread became one of the first symbols of status in the industrial period, because it required both cash to buy the flour and time to do the kneading and to attend to the details of the process.

Even in the postwar period the spread of affluence and the availability of amenities were not accompanied by an increase in leisure, as the factors mentioned were still active (Schwartz Cowan, 1983). For the relatively rich the amount of work increased, because the help from servants was diminished, while the relatively poor experienced an increase in productivity. Housework thus became much more homogeneous across social groups. Women entered the labour market in large numbers, because they wanted to acquire the labour-saving devices and household amenities, and simultaneously, the productivity increase in housework

made it possible to manage. But women were left with an even greater workload due to the double burden of housework and outside employment. Thus the spiral of busyness and the acquisition of labour-saving devices is kept going. Through this process we have achieved very luxurious standards, and this also raises the question for Schwartz Cowan, why we do not break the spiral and give a higher priority to leisure. She finds part of the answer at the symbolic level. For instance, she observes a ‘backward search for femininity’: ‘People who believe that family solidarity can be bolstered by hand-dipped chocolates and hand-grown string beans are bound to spend a lot of time dipping chocolates and growing string beans’. She also emphasises that the memory of poverty is enshrined in the habits of our housework. Some unwritten rules generate more housework than really necessary, when, for instance, even small dirty spots are associated with poverty and loss of control. From the point of view of quality of life, Schwartz Cowan ends up calling for a neutralisation of ‘both the sexual connotation of washing machines and vacuum cleaners and the senseless tyranny of spotless shirts and immaculate floors’.

Schwartz Cowan’s reflections regarding the symbolic level and the legacy of former poverty can be supplemented by the phenomenon that our way of thinking co-develops with the changes of everyday life. One of the characteristic features of the thinking related to everyday life is the focus upon performance and effectiveness. This is reflected in the endeavour to save time by using labour-saving equipment and by planning and organising activities as effectively as possible. A means-ends rationality slips into everyday life, as many activities tend to get the character of means instead of ends in themselves. The aim seems to be to take part in a great variety of leisure activities and to have many experiences. Via the exciting experiences we ‘fulfil ourselves’, and when this goal is combined with the individualistic trend, including the ambitions we have on behalf of our children as well, we add to the busyness of family life. The combination of individualisation, busyness

and effectiveness is a strong cocktail contributing to the growth in consumption.

4.3. The socio-technical framework of everyday life

As it appears from the two sections above, consumption practices are always embedded in a socio-technical framework. The relationship between this framework and the consumption practices is dialectical: on the one hand the actual consumption practices are formed by the framework, and on the other hand the framework is changed over time by the practices. Sometimes single products stand out as important agents of change in relation to everyday life. Probably the product with the greatest capacity for independently influencing consumption patterns was the car, which by virtue of its strong symbolic radiation of freedom became a ‘must’ (Sachs, 1992). Another product with pervasive effects for everyday life was the television that influenced the time structure and the way families are together. But these commodities—as well as other ones—do not have their impact as single products, but as components of socio-technological systems. In the beginning they are introduced as single commodities, but gradually they are integrated in systems of related commodities, infrastructure, social practices and institutions. Such systems gain their own momentum and bring with them lock-in effects as well as ‘technological paradigms’ in consumption.

In Schwartz Cowan’s historical analysis of the changes in everyday life, the dialectical relationship is highlighted, because she also includes the technological and social innovations that did not succeed. She concludes that even women chose to reside in single-family dwellings, own their own household tools and do their own housework, even if other—commercial, co-operative or communal—solutions could have eased the burden of work. When given choices, most Americans still opt for privacy and autonomy over technical efficiency and community interest. Through a long historical process of successes and failures for different innovations, the tech-

nological systems that now constitute the framework of housework were established, and they were established in a form that is not subject to easy change. As Schwartz Cowan puts it, 'the individual household, the individual ownership of tools, and the allocation of housework to women had, almost literally, been cast in the stainless steel, the copper, and the aluminium out of which those systems were composed'. The socio-technical systems thus imply an inertia that makes it more difficult to change women's everyday life.

Consumption is often discussed as a matter of choice, but choices are bounded by the socio-technical framework. Otnes (1988a,b) has described how everyday life is framed by a number of collective socio-material systems. By a collective socio-material system he means a system that is a subset of the material built environment, that is fairly generally accessible, and that somehow connects its actors. In the course of the day we meet these systems when we carry out our routines: the electric power system, the sewage system, the mail system, the system of broadcasters and listeners, the school system, the road system etc. Much consumption consists of being served by, and serving, these systems. It is obvious that we are served by the systems, but Otnes emphasises that we simultaneously serve the systems, because they are dependent on competent and knowledgeable use and maintenance. As we interact with these systems, they have a powerful influence on our daily routines—not least because we often have only the choice between using the collective system or doing without the type of service they provide.

Much of our consumption is thus dependent on systems that appear as conditions of everyday life. Having been established, the systems tend to have their own momentum supported by the decision-makers directly taking care of the systems. From an environmental point of view, it is worth emphasising that the socio-technical systems constitute an important part of the ever increasing standards of living. As a contrast to the consumption that we consciously choose, for instance, to symbolise our status, Shove and Warde (1997) have very aptly characterised the creeping standards of living, which we are not really aware of, as the realm of inconspicuous consumption.

5. Political implications

The overview of the dynamics behind consumption growth in the North is meant to inform the discussion on the possible ways to curb this growth. Basically, the growth can be checked by eroding its fundamental conditions through changed patterns of trade implying reduced transfers from the South and through the establishment of mechanisms to ensure the payment of the social and environmental costs related to growth. However, this can only be a long-term ambition that has to be preceded by a great variety of measures and by popular support of the idea of curbing consumption. To this end, a broader understanding of the dynamics of willingness to consume can hopefully be useful.

The wide-ranging answers to the question regarding the driving forces behind consumption growth has taken us far around—even if many important contributions to the field have not been included (reviews of a wide variety of studies can be found in Miller (1995), Edgell et al. (1996), Keat et al. (1994)). To a large extent, the different explanations can be said to complement rather than contradict each other, especially when each explanation is understood as a contribution to a varied picture rather than an absolute or dominant explanation. An overview of the different explanations is given in Fig. 1.

The account of the driving forces behind the willingness to consume tends to be quite overwhelming: growth in consumption seems to be a very well-founded and understandable trend. On the one hand, I find this observation important for avoiding too much moralizing on over-consumption. Consumption makes sense to people, it concerns very important aspects of life, and much consumption has the character of welcomed gradual improvements of standards that arise more or less automatically from the social conditions. On the other hand, the growth also meets with counter-tendencies, and the trend is not unquestioned. At the individual level, many people experience the busy life as burdensome, and the values related to individualisation are accompanied by contradicting needs and ambivalences. At the collective level, both the environmental and the so-

	Abstract theoretical	Historically concrete
(Macro) Economic	Competition: - new products, new variants - diversification - advertising - reduce costs Expansion of market relations	+ increasing pace + commercial television + commercialised public space credit facilities Labour market institutions: work and spend The production of material goods easier industrialised Sectoral shifts
(Micro) Socio- psychological	Human beings need goods to make sense of the world in combination with the hierarchial organisation of society Justification	Ideals of the period The consequences of late-modernity for the construction of self-identity Increasing interpersonal independence, individualisation
(Meso) Everyday life	The importance of desires and emotions in relation to social relations Structure-actor interplay The inertia of established socio-technical systems	Home-building The duality of the ideal family The paradox of time-saving The momentum of socio-technical systems

Fig. 1. Overview of explanations.

cial costs of growth contribute to placing the need for changing lifestyles on the agenda.

A voluntary curtailment of consumption in the rich countries is, however, first of all an ethical issue. If and when we come so far that we are ready to face this challenge individually and politically, what can then be done? The main conclusion of the analysis in this paper is that a curtailment of consumption will require a broad variety of measures and initiatives and will involve many different actors. When the different driving forces are examined with reference to

ways in which they can be curbed, some insights are much easier to operationalise than others. Among the suggestions that immediately come to mind are those related mostly to the economic field:

- Carry through an ecological tax reform to change relative prices.
- Tax and/or restrict advertising. Restrict commercial television.
- Establish public spaces that are not commercial. Restrict the establishment of malls and the opening hours of the shops.

- Place limitations on credit and hire-purchase systems.
- Remove obstacles to shorter hours to break the work-and-spend cycle.
- Stimulate public consumption at the expense of private consumption. Support further development of democratic decision-making, so more decisions can be taken as citizens and less as consumers.

Many other suggestions are much more tentative and/or have a longer time perspective, and some have more the character of questions. Related mainly to the socio-psychological group of explanations are suggestions such as:

- Reduce social differences to curb the pressures of hierarchy. Stimulate the understanding that everybody should take part in the high-frequency tasks.
- Look for social markers and classifiers that can visualize culture in a less material way.
- Seek ways of confirming the self through environmentally motivated activities.

Finally, the suggestions related to everyday life can comprise:

- Curb the momentum of socio-technical systems towards ever-increasing standards.
- Invent occasions of social contact with a low material input.
- Invent collective solutions that do not interfere too much with privacy.
- Increase the awareness of the dreams that have already been fulfilled and of the standards of luxury that we have attained.
- Look for ways to cope with the central contradiction of modern family life by using more time and less material inputs.
- Increase awareness of the legacy of values and understanding that stimulate consumption, as awareness makes it easier to go beyond them.

These suggestions are far from a master plan, but it is probably a condition of life that master plans cannot be laid out. We have to acknowledge the limits of our understanding of the social processes and, therefore, also the restricted possibilities of social engineering. As we, however, have to do something to meet the challenge, experiments along the suggested guidelines as well as further thinking are invited.

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