ARTICLE

Consumption embedded in culture and language: implications for finding sustainability

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In this article I ask how deeply consumer culture has become embedded in contemporary American society. I suggest that we need to begin with greater conceptual clarity, particularly on terms that are part of the very phenomenon we are trying to study—consumption and freedom, for example. Metaphor theory helps to distinguish between folk concepts and analytical categories as a basis for understanding why consumption is so central, so deeply embedded in fundamental concepts of family, gender, individualism, ethnicity, and nationality. It also helps reveal inconsistencies in environmentalists’ ideas about freedom, individual action, and the role of the state in regulating consumption. The article concludes with the deliberately provocative argument that “sustainable consumption” is not the best way to phrase or frame the goals of reducing the amount of energy and materials used and wasted in the United States.

KEYWORDS: resource consumption, social behavior, language, ethnography, world problems, communication, ecosystem sustainability

Introduction

There are a number of obstacles in translating academic research and theoretical insights into practical recommendations for policy and effective messages for public and educational purposes. The ways trained scientists and social scientists think about problems are often far from the ways the same issues appear in public discourse. The current case in point is global climate change, where much of the public, and many of their political representatives, do not understand or accept the clear scientific consensus. Why is there such a gulf between popular (folk) knowledge of the world and the more formal models used in professional analysis? Of course, there are issues of complexity and barriers to communication, as well as the public influence of powerful corporate and private interests. But are there more fundamental differences which reflect alternate modes of thought and comprehension? If our goal is to turn good science into effective public policy for urgent matters like climate change, then this communication problem is of central importance.

One of the more productive approaches to understanding the relationship between folk and analytical concepts has been work in cognitive linguistics that falls under the general term of “metaphor theory” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1987; Kronenfeld, 2008). At its most general level, metaphor theory proposes that human beings think prelogically and metaphorically, and that intellectual comprehension is grounded in bodily experience (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). More specifically, in each individual culture, particular metaphors structure the understanding of worldly phenomena, to the point where people rationalize or do not even perceive objects, behaviors, thoughts, and actions that do not fit metaphorical structures. Different metaphors of the same phenomenon can compete in the same culture, and people often use more than one set of folk categories, just as they can learn to speak and think in different languages.

Metaphor theory says that the world as perceived by individuals does not consist of carefully defined categories of objects and phenomena, with discreet lists of qualities and characteristics following a platonic ideal. Instead, the categories of thought are fuzzy sets, with prototypes at their center, each consisting of an image of an action or object that has all of the category’s essential qualities. At the center of the category of “dog” lies a generalized image, so all other members of the set are more or less doglike, and the transition to other categories like coyotes or foxes is gradual rather than categorical. Most tellingly, for the purpose of thinking about consumption, the members of a category are not necessarily related to one another at all—they are bound together by their common relationship to the prototype.

The meaningful world therefore consists of categories of things and actions bound together in ways that seem completely natural to members of that culture and are rarely questioned. The concepts are made
tangible through a metaphorical linkage to objects with which people have direct physical experience, so they feel the rightness of their perception as much as they think it. At the same time, to a person from another culture, or in an external and “objective” analytical standpoint, that same set looks arbitrary and could be reconfigured in other ways that would make equal or greater sense.¹

Ethnography is the practice that allows us to learn the folk categories of another culture or group, the starting point for comparative analysis aimed at finding more general principles following the practice of theory building in social science. Much of the “science vs. postmodernism” conflict in anthropology and other social sciences over the last decades has revolved around whether or not this comparative “scientific” approach is really just another “western” folk model, a conceit by a privileged class that hides its own worldview behind the shield of science. From the point of view of metaphor theory, the conflict is not so clear-cut, because while there are many formal modes of logical analyses through mathematics, statistics, modeling, and probability, in the end the results are always communicated through metaphor, and they acquire their power in the world through their linguistic framing. McCloskey (1985) makes this point extensively and convincingly in work on the use of metaphor and other rhetorical tools in economics. This means that in the practice of social science, folk and analytical categories are always closely connected and even intertwined (see Princen, 2010 in this issue).

Bruno Latour (e.g., 1996) has been perhaps the most effective ethnographer of technology policy, showing how firmly “policy options,” categories of legitimate agents, and expected physical outcomes are determined by the folk categories of the techno-scientific world. In addition, studies of the cultural specificity of mechanical technicians (Dorsey, 1995), medical administrators (Bowker & Starr, 1999), and genetic laboratory scientists (Rabinow, 1997) tell us that it is impossible to communicate social research findings directly into effective policy recommendations. The best we can do is to first understand the limitations of our own abilities when it comes to our research and the discourse of the other specialists we work with, and then to research and understand how our audience thinks, so we can communicate our findings in convincing and accurate ways. We might study, for example, how economists think about consumer desires as a natural force like gravity. We may want to suggest that it might take the application of “energy” to “move consumption in another direction.” Or we may suggest better metaphors to get our message across, for example, to use the word “wish” instead of “demand” when we talk about what motivates consumers in the marketplace.

George Lakoff has played a major part in bringing the tools of cognitive linguistics to the task of persuasive policy with his work on “framing.”² He argues that the way a public policy debate is framed—the vocabulary and metaphors used to lay out the terms and stakes—tends to predetermine the outcome. Once the issue of terrorism and violence is successfully defined as a “war on terror,” the only question is which side you support. If social scientists simply accept the metaphors created and used by expert communities, public opinion, news media, and politicians, they will be reduced to mechanically supporting one position or another, unable to do effective analytical work that truly informs policy and opens up new possibilities. This trap includes questioning the way the “climate-change community” has framed causes and problems; these might very well be ineffective frames for useful action. If we follow this logic, it is worth asking if the “problem of overconsumption” is best framed as a choice between freedom and restraint or discipline, equity and inequality, the individual versus the common good.

Consumption

After this long prologue, it should not be any surprise that I believe that consumption is a folk category with a specific history, rather than a rigorously defined analytical term.³ The category of consumption includes many disparate activities, some of which are environmentally destructive, while others are benign or even necessary parts of the cycles of nature. The way we use the word consumption in both popular and academic parlance is essentially metaphorical; it is a fuzzy set without clear boundaries, the members of the set are not clearly related to one another, and they are all related to central prototypes. The term consumption allows us to map abstract concepts and categories onto common concrete

¹ Unfortunately, metaphor theory as originally defined has tended toward a static analysis, just like previous forms of structuralism. We are still working our way toward an understanding of how systems of metaphor constantly change, and here I will depend on the concept of “reframing” as formulated in Lakoff’s recent applied work through his Rockridge Institute, which is devoted to progressive political change.

² Lakoff was a major strategist and advisor for the Democratic National Committee from 2006–2008. His work on politics includes the popular books “Don’t Think of an Elephant,” “Thinking Points,” and “Whose Freedom.”

³ I discuss the metaphorical nature of consumption at greater length in a previous article on which I have drawn from here (Wilk, 2004). I have also written previously about why metaphorical thinking leads easily to moral judgments about over and underconsumption (Wilk, 2001).
and physical experiences. Consumption is also what Lakoff calls a “graded category,” in that some things strike us as better examples of consumption than others. One scholar trying to define consumption says, “plants consume carbon, animals consume plants” (Borgmann, 2000), but the transformation of carbon through photosynthesis seems much less like consumption than cows eating grass. Why?

The basic metaphor in many Indo-European languages for consumption has a prototype of “fire.” We therefore expect consumption to involve destruction, like a fire burning, that liberates needed energy and produces worthless (and generally dirty) waste. Some kinds of everyday consumption fit this metaphor very well, particularly those having to do with industrial processes that transform energy and resources into consumer products, and activities like purchasing, using, and throwing away consumer products that have short use-lives, like razor blades. Something is “used up” and in the process we realize some tangible benefit and have to deal with the resulting byproducts. But what about the consumption of services? Or objects that are curated for long periods—like furniture, houses, or landscaping—gaining value over time and leaving no trace? The burning metaphor also starts to break down when we try to apply it to full commodity chains, where waste from one process becomes an input to another, where substances mix and have complex lives, so it is hard to determine what is really being “used up.” This is why attempts to account for the “annual consumption” of average Americans have such an arbitrary flavor. Nevertheless, the power of the “consumption as fire” metaphor is that it leads us to assume that consumption is a linear process, during which a valuable substance produces a tangible benefit to the “consumer,” leaving behind some form of waste.

In physical reality there is a huge difference between a natural fire that renews a grassland in the spring and a destructive forest fire set by land developers who want to turn rainforest into pasture for cattle. Both are “consumption,” but one is part of a natural cycle of renewal, and the other creates a grazing area that may take a thousand years to regenerate into forest. Eating an apple grown in your backyard and listening to an mp3 music file are both forms of “consumption,” but it is objectively difficult to identify what the two actions have in common, so it is hard to see how any single measure could be used to compare the “impact” of the two.

A second important metaphorical construction of consumption is “eating,” which can be seen as a subset of “fire” in the sense that envisions the body as “burning” food to produce energy. The immediate bodily nature of the process of eating makes it a powerful and rich source of metaphors for many of the processes we call consumption. The stages of eating—hunger, finding food, purchasing, preparing, eating, digesting, and excreting—all have metaphorical analogues. So more generally, the desire for consumer goods becomes a kind of hunger, a physical need that if left unsatisfied leads to privation and starvation, or it can also be indulged as a serious pleasure, a frivolous entertainment, or out-of-control gluttony with dire physical and social consequences.

The metaphorical equivalence of shopping with hunting and gathering draws our attention to the skill, taste, and decisions of the shopper as the prototypical activities of consumption. Yet factually, most of our purchasing behavior has nothing to do with choice—it results from locked-in and long-term decisions and takes the form of dribbles of money spent incrementally on utilities and credit, often by institutions (or social groups like families) instead of individuals (Sanne, 2002). The powerful eating metaphor, nevertheless, constantly persuades us to think of consumption as a kind of eating that can be controlled, like appetite and where disorders are revealed as starvation or gluttony.

From the perspective of policy, the metaphorical construction of consumption as eating leads to a failure of focus on one hand and a moralistic approach to problems on the other. The lack of sharpness results from the fuzzy, graded nature of the category, so it becomes difficult to distinguish the kinds of activities that have serious environmental consequences (e.g., driving a car) from those that are relatively benign (e.g., collecting antique cars). It also makes it hard for us to focus on activities that use huge amounts of resources and have terrible impact, but do not easily fit into the metaphorical category of consumption. Sport, political rallies, research, and investing, for example, are activities that consume many resources, but they do not match any of the stages of the “consumption-as-eating” metaphor and receive much less scrutiny for this reason.

The moral opprobrium that emerges in discussions of eating leads to metaphorical constructions of the problems of consumption in terms of weakness and strength, good and bad decisions, when the actual use of resources is often beyond individual control. In the absence of strong evidence, a simple message to “consume less” may make metaphorical sense, but, as many authors have pointed out, individual decisions to consume less (in the limited “eating” sense) often have perverse effects such as increased consumption, rebound effects, and higher prices.

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4 The “appetite” model has even failed as a way of understanding food consumption since it makes it almost impossible to grapple with many contemporary situations, like the coexistence of malnutrition and obesity in populations and individuals.
We eat for nutrition, as a social act that draws communities together, and for our own pleasure. In every society, there is intense moral scrutiny of equity and balance in every stage of eating from production through waste disposal (Trentmann, 2007). The metaphor of consumption as eating makes it possible to neatly divide overconsumption and underconsumption, and to see one as deserving help and the other restraint. Underconsumption can only be explained by a failure of resources, ability, or group social conscience, and gluttony as a failure of will, morality, or social constraint. This is why the mixture of pleasure and political awareness in the Slow Food movement is so dissonant and controversial (Pietrykowsky, 2004). In fact, there is no real or necessary connection between consumption and pleasure (and the absence of pain), and nonconsumption with pain or the absence of pleasure.

The metaphor of consumption as eating, most seriously, leads us to envision environmental problems as the result of “using up” resources when they should be distributed more fairly or used more sparingly. However, rather than using up a fixed stock of the earth’s nonrenewable natural valuables, we are most in danger of destroying renewable resources like timber and fish through overexploitation. The most immediate ecological dangers from pollution, extinction, global warming, and climate change are due as much to waste, unregulated emissions, capitalism’s inherent growth mechanisms, and political corruption as to the “using up” of resources, as the consumption metaphor would lead us to believe.

**Standard of Living**

The eating metaphor also makes it hard for us to focus because it leads into several dead-end conundrums, eternal problems of moral philosophy that have no universal resolution (and therefore cannot serve as the basis for policy or international agreement). One perennial distraction is the attempt to find a dividing line between needs and wants. The question of “how much is enough” has no objective solution, despite efforts to find one by dividing up the world’s resources into per-capita pie slices, or universal metrics of well-being (see Durning, 1992; Kasser, 2002; Jackson, 2009). Historical evidence shows instead that the division between what is defined as a basic need and what is considered a luxury always changes (Horowitz, 1988). These definitions change within a lifetime as well—the basic needs of college students are hardly the ones they will experience later in life. Sociologists provide good evidence that well-being is also relative, so that groups measure themselves in comparison with others, rather than against an absolute scale. A universal poverty line is as illusory as a “luxury line” that could measure frivolity and, by extension, moral corruption. This does not mean that the question “how much is enough” is not useful in many ways. It certainly opens up productive lines of inquiry and forms the basis for important public policy debate, but we should not expect that research can objectively answer the question. This is why the concept of the “ecological footprint,” while an effective rhetorical tool, has not proven useful to scientists trying to compare resource use among groups. In part, this failure is because areas of land do not distinguish between renewable and nonrenewable resources, nor do they account for the difference between use and waste (Spangenberg & Lorek, 2002).

For these reasons, “standard of living” is better understood as a metaphor for normality and community consensus, which is embodied in the form of level surfaces at different heights, a stairway, or a movable platform like an elevator. Using this metaphor, the platform can stand still or move up and down, so height is the key attribute that allows us to compare states. The standard-of-living metaphor has another important physical property—while held down by gravity, it moves more easily in one direction than the other. It acts like it is governed by a ratchet, perhaps also by a spring or counterweight that exerts pressure to hold it in place. As it rises, it is supported at each new level. If it stands still (is held down) or gets lower (is held back) pressure increases, so when it is released it tends to bounce or jump up.

Poverty, following this metaphor, is absolute bottom, almost equivalent to death. It is represented as a “hand-to-mouth” existence where people are starving and have no possessions at all. Wealth is at the top, a state where anything is available in abundance. In between are a series of steps or levels, each of which “looks down” on those below. Moving downwards is “falling” and upwards is “climbing” and both are forms of “mobility.” Confined by this linear metaphor, lower levels of wealth and fewer possessions will always be closer to absolute poverty. The language of “growth” and “utility,” so deeply embedded in economics and development theory, contributes to the idea that “more is good” and “less is bad” in ways that economists like Gunnar Myrdal (1957) long ago recognized as dangerous.

There is good evidence that the elevator or step metaphor works for both technical specialists like economists (who speak of “pent up” demand) and for the American public. Studies of countries undergoing rapid inflation, economic crisis, and rising unemployment (including the United States during the recession of the 1980s) suggest that people cling to their ideas of middle-class standards of living, that loss of income can be traumatic, and that periods of
recession create “pressure” to compensate during later periods of expansion and “boom” (Newman, 1989; O’Dougherty, 2002). The trauma of lost standards is described in terms like “falling” and having to “pick oneself up” and get “back on track.” Constant growth in consumption and increased wealth may become so normalized that even standing still, or growing at a reduced rate, can be perceived as decline or stagnation, as “stuck in a tunnel,” a phrase reported to Graham & Pettinato (2002).

Recognizing the metaphorical nature of the standard of living helps us recognize some of the peculiar properties that make the topic such a distraction from realizing substantial change in environmentally significant behavior. The linear quality of the metaphor will always draw us into debate about what is the best metric—gross domestic product, human development index, sustainable well-being—and the relationship between this metric and other variables. To be sure, telling people that money and material goods will not make them happy has a didactic purpose, but established religions have been sending this same message for thousands of years without changing the direction of consumer culture (Miller, 2004). There may even be a “moral rebound effect” where reiterating the message creates guilt, which drives the continuing bulimic cycle of binge and purge so characteristic of contemporary consumer culture (Nichter & Nichter, 1991; Wilk, 2007). Restraint creates the need for release.

Instead of a linear metric, there is every reason to think of individual quality of life as complex and multidimensional. Most of us can easily think of things that make us happy and unhappy, satisfied and unsatisfied, that are not in any way mutually exclusive or reducible to a common scale, a product of using resources or eating more or less. There is no particular evidence that using resources has anything to do with a search for happiness or contentment in life. Nor do anthropologists find any evidence that people who live hand-to-mouth with few possessions are miserable or insecure. In reality, they often think of themselves as superior to people who are slaves to their own possessions, locked into boring routines of endless work (Day et al. 1999).

Open-ended questioning reveals that while they know and use a linear notion of wealth and poverty based on possessions and wealth, most Americans and Europeans also have few illusions about their ability to achieve life satisfaction by earning more money. The metaphor is powerful, but in practice when people buy things, use energy, and accumulate possessions they are fulfilling social obligations, the demands of work, education, and careers, and gendered role expectations, while seeking fun and distraction in a process best likened to creative improvi-

sation (e.g., Holt, 1995; Holt & Thompson, 2004; Miller, 2009; and my own research). They are just as likely to use metaphors like “rat race” and “treadmill” for the reality of middle-class existence as they are to foresee a continued elevation.

To design programs that are effective in persuading people to change their consuming behavior, it would help to know a lot more about the metaphors Americans use to understand their position in society, their movement through the life course, and the rewards and pitfalls of daily life. This information could provide a basis for “reframing” the issue of wealth and poverty more effectively in terms that do not require forms of “consumption” that use large amounts of energy and materials. Only the power of metaphor can make us ignore our own perception and experience of life to the extent that we are willing to accept a concept like “standard of living” as a natural and objective social fact that can be measured on a linear scale. This metaphor also leads applied social scientists astray by helping us think that degrees of consumption (levels of wealth) are equivalent to degrees of environmental harm (levels of destruction). In reality, some extravagant displays of great wealth—a Rolex watch, an electric car—are relatively environmentally benign, and some consumption characteristic of the poor—driving an old clunker, using illegal waste dumps, buying disposables in small packages—have far greater proportional impact. So far, the discussion of sustainable consumption has tended to shy away from this complex and difficult set of issues. It could be useful to ask what kinds of metaphors would be better than “quality of life.” Even as small a change as substituting “qualities of life” would be an improvement, since it does not imply that there is a single linear metric.

Perhaps the most difficult problem facing us in imagining effective policy responses to climate change and resource depletion is the way the possible solutions are often constrained by a frame that opposes government regulation with consumer freedom. Lakoff (2006) has done us the favor of dissecting the metaphors of North American conceptions of freedom, including the whole strange loose agglomeration of different things like property rights, political speech, wealth, justice, and shopping. These concepts and practices are brought together not by natural order or logic, but by their common role in constructing the metaphor of “freedom” in its modern, and particularly North American, cultural form. Lakoff (2006) defines at the core something he calls “simple freedom,” which is based on an embodied experience, nonmetaphorical and uncontested:
Freedom is being able to do what you want to do, that is, being able to choose a goal, have access to that goal, pursue that goal without anyone purposely preventing you …Political freedom is about the state and how well a state can maximize freedom for all its citizens…A free society is one in which such “basic freedoms” are guaranteed by the state.

Freedom of this sort is visceral because it is metaphorically connected to the experience of being restrained, confined, or threatened. Freedom is experienced bodily by escaping confinement or reaching a destination, acquiring a desired object, or performing a preferred action, all of which involve moving legs and hands. The metaphors of simple freedom link desire—the physical experience of wanting something—with autonomous action to satisfy that desire. This connects quite well with the metaphor of consumption as eating, in which we experience desire (hunger), set out to satisfy that craving by finding and eating food, and then experience satiation and happiness, the reward of free action.

Lakoff proceeds to dissect the North American folk model of how freedom works, through the action of a homunculus-like agent residing in our heads called the “will.” Americans believe that this will motivates action, that it can be strong or weak, and that true freedom comes when the will prevails over internal weakness, emotions, and passions, and external obstacles and temptations. He goes on to show how this simple embodied form of freedom underpins American folk theories of rights, justice, property, security, law, and the role of the state.

This worldview accepts only two situations where free will can legitimately be thwarted or limited—by nature and through competition. Nature imposes limits—we may disagree about what is natural, but everyone agrees that when an earthquake strikes, or we are struck down by an injury, this is not an abridgement of freedom (Lakoff, 2006). We can certainly contest what is determined by human nature—whether homosexuality is caused by a gene or is the result of choice—but once the limitation falls under the laws of nature, it is generally regarded as acceptable. The other legitimate way freedom is limited is through competition for scarce resources. Freedom to compete is accepted, as long as the rules of competition are seen as “fair.” As Lakoff (2006) says, “If you are free to enter the competition, there is no abridgement of freedom. If you lose or are eliminated on the basis of rules, there is no abridgement of freedom."

This notion of fairness under competitive rules leads into contested territory because it turns out that a wide variety of different principles can be used to decide what is “fair.”6 This is crucially important for thinking about consumption, because it underlies ideas about equity of distribution and rights to use and own goods, and it may underlie our consistent failure to understand the values and processes used by people when making choices in the marketplace.7

Lakoff (2006) defines the following kinds of fairness, some of which are mutually compatible, while other combinations cannot coexist. They should be familiar to all of us from childhood arguments and family negotiations.

- Equality of distribution (one child, one cookie)
- Equality of opportunity (one person, one raffle ticket)
- Procedural distribution (playing by the rules determines what you get)
- Equal distribution of power (one person, one vote)
- Equal distribution of responsibility (we share the burden equally)
- Scalar distribution of responsibility (greater abilities, greater responsibilities)
- Scalar distribution of rewards (the more you work, the more you get)
- Rights-based fairness (you get what you have a right to)
- Needs-based fairness (you get what you need)
- Contractual distribution (you get what you agree to)

It is not hard to see that many of the debates about responsibility for causing and fixing climate change are founded in conflicting definitions of fairness. More fundamentally, framing issues in this way means accepting that carbon emissions are the product of free choices among autonomous individual entities with person-like qualities, acting according to a set of rules. Nations in this metaphorical construction are analogous to families, and their goal is to reach settlements on behalf of their members that will be “fair.” Among themselves, nations should each have a “fair share” of resources and emissions, acting

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5 In the United States, early experiences of this nature are often part of games, fights, competitions, and sports, leading to a lifelong tendency to use sport metaphors in thinking about freedom.

6 Lakoff originally worked out the different folk rules of fairness in his book Moral Politics (1996) that is the source behind his more recent political work.

7 There is now a substantial literature on the failure of consumers to live up to their stated green morality. See, for example, Östberg (2003), Belk et al. (2005), and the collections edited by Bevir & Trentmann (2007) and Boström & Klintman (2008).
like proxy people for accounting and negotiating purposes.

The metaphor of nations as individuals competing with one another obscures a key reality of the distribution of wealth, power, and environmental impact on the planet: every country has its own rich classes that have adopted a high-throughput lifestyle, which uses large volumes of energy and materials. These cosmopolitan groups have many more economic, cultural, and political interests in common, across national boundaries, than they have with the destitute and working poor of their own countries. The problem of regulation may be more manageable if we think about identifiable groups that are heavy users of goods, energy, and services, rather than nations or individuals (e.g., Chakravarty et al. 2009).

The other consequence of using the folk definition of freedom as a valid analytical construct is that it leads into a sterile debate which opposes freedom to regulation, as if this were a single linear scale. As we see from Lakoff’s analysis, freedom is actually a radial category, and at its center is a bodily sense of unfettered ability to reach a goal. The logic that binds law, rights, political action, and the marketplace is metaphorical, with many alternative alignments.

The metaphor of the nation-as-family, according to Lakoff, has two versions in North America—in the “liberal” one, the parents should be nurturant and caring, and in the “conservative” one parents should be stern disciplinarians. In one model the children (citizens) are inherently reasonable, and the state should give them the incentives and education they need to act responsibly. Then the children will build a commonwealth concerned with equal opportunities and care for the environment. In the other model, children are inherently unruly and immoral—even dangerous. A “stern father” has to teach them moral rules and respect for authority. The role of the state is to provide a structured set of rules that allows fair competition and then to impose discipline on those who transgress (Lakoff, 1996).

These two cultural models of family authority are rife with contradiction. For example, though the nurturant parent model places a high value on the democratic power of an educated citizenry, it presumes that real systemic change always begins at the top—it is the responsibility of the state. Conversely, the strict father model is based on an idea that people require exacting rules to get them to behave morally, but it denies that the state should have this power. These inconsistencies emphasize Lakoff’s point that these are cultural models held together by metaphor and embodied experience, not logical models that produce systemic explanations or reasonable policy, or analytical models that explain how the United States government actually works.

I would point out that in both the nurturant and strict parent models, freedom is always in danger. Under the liberal approach, the state may be neglectful and not give its citizens enough information to make informed choices, or it may not protect the vulnerable members of the community. Under the stern father morality, children should make their own choices when they grow up and deal with the consequences themselves. The state takes away freedom if it interferes and smothers initiative, makes unfair (or overly complex) rules, or fails to act according to strict moral principles. In both constructions, the state can only help by providing information and education, or creating a “level playing field” that ensures fair rules of competition.

If we accept these folk models, we lock ourselves into a logic where regulation and freedom are opposed principles, and one will always grow at the expense of the other. If we cannot force people to behave better through the discipline of higher taxes or regulations (justified as fair), we try to appeal to their conscience and morality, or teach them a “better” set of values than materialism. The nurturant parent expects that properly educated citizens will follow Maslow’s “hierarchy of needs” (1943) and Galbraith’s “Affluent Society” (1962), realizing that material goods do not really engender happiness, and therefore becoming more community-minded and spiritual (Trigg, 2004; Etzioni, 2009, see critique in Slater, 1997). The strict father will expect citizens to seek out the most hedonistic and reckless forms of consumption and thinks they will only pursue culture and learning if they are forced, trained, or coerced.

**Moral Calculus**

The last decade has seen an outpouring of hopeful, cynical, polemical, and analytical writings about the need to bring moral and environmental issues more directly into the marketplace. The long history of ideas and practices of political and moral consumerism goes well back into the eighteenth century when abolitionist boycotts of “slavery sugar” were common and North American colonists burned English furniture and took pledges to buy only local produce during their revolution. In fact, a close look at the history of advertising and marketing shows that morality has always been part of the appeal of consumer goods, a normal part of everyday business. A deeper question might be what would lead anyone to imagine a marketplace in which commodities are completely anonymous and have no history, mean-
ing, or moral connections with society and nature (Wilk & Cliggett, 2006).8

Nevertheless, the dominant models of shopping and purchasing are still variations of rational choice and/or game theory, usually modified by constraints on information and people’s cognitive abilities (e.g., Parnell & Larsen, 2005). This approach conflicts with ethnographic work on daily shopping practices that instead reveals a world that is intimately moral, revolving around value judgments and balances between the interests of the self, immediate “others,” and broader communities (e.g., Miller, 1998; Östberg, 2003; see also Wilson & Dowlatabadi, 2007). It is easy once again to get distracted by the folk models, between individualistic and communal approaches, selfishness and altruism.

I think it is more productive to follow up on the fact that people do not live up to their stated commitments, neither consistently pursuing their own interests nor those of others. People claim they are concerned about animal welfare, but then eat hamburgers. They buy one pound of expensive fair trade coffee, but then drink a hundred cups of uncertified Brazilian blend in the office cafeteria. They say they are only doing what is best for their family, but then spend the college fund on a widescreen television so they can watch a football game.

This inconsistency leads some scholars to deep cynicism about the depth of individual commitment, or the impossibility of making informed choices in a world glutted with information and difficult contradictions between different kinds of “good” and “bad” products (e.g., Belk et al. 2005). And even positive choices in the marketplace do not necessarily have consistent environmental benefits. As Connolley & Prothero (2003) say, “Consumers, even when they are environmentally concerned, are still consuming, only they consume perceived green products and recycle more. The actual level of consumption is not identified as a problem.”

It is possible that some of these behavioral inconsistencies are just the results of hypocrisy, poor decision making, or lack of knowledge. Perhaps our expectations for ordinary people in a complex market environment during an economic recession are unreasonable, and once they feel prosperous again they will respond more enthusiastically to moral marketings, certifications, and fair trade [though as Connolley & Prothero (2003) argue, these practices evade the basic problem of their total level of consumption]. I think it more likely, however, that there is an underlying metaphorical structure that people use to make sense out of complex purchasing choices, and once again it draws directly on the “consumption as eating” core metaphor.

How do we avoid getting too fat or too thin? To some extent we can depend on our natural appetite to keep us from starving, though there are disorders where people starve themselves. But we are also constantly exposed to incentives to “give in” to “temptation,” which can lead us to overeat. The metaphorical extension of hunger and starvation is having no money or being unwilling to spend it, and the equivalent of gluttony would be overspending, buying more than one can afford, and falling into debt.

The way to avoid peril at both extremes is to find balance, by controlling impulses and inducements on one hand, and making sure we eat the “right things” and get proper nutrition (even if they taste bad) on the other. Periodically, we are likely to end up binging, which can only be corrected by dieting, exercising, and other activities that remove or balance the sin. In other words, we are using a system of moral accounting to guide us in addressing problems of saving, self-control, and temptation within a world of good and evil kinds of consumption (see Thaler, 1990; Shefrin & Thaler, 2004). Psychologists find evidence for moral balancing in studies which show that after people make a “green” consumer choice, they are more likely to act selfishly or cheat (Mazar & Zhong, 2010).

The visual metaphor of moral balancing is probably something like a see-saw, which balances evenly when equal weights are put on both sides, as in the “scales of justice.” My impression is that people seek balance in different ways and along different time scales. This can be an improvisational process with a running total that is never “added up,” or people may use a budget model with periodic “totals,” followed by judgment, and then penalties or rewards. Following either accounting method, it becomes perfectly reasonable for a virtuous act, purchase, or performance like joining a community-supported agriculture scheme or subscribing to a “green” power company that charges higher rates to serve as justification for “sins” and “guilty pleasures,” such as a shopping trip to Wal-Mart or a rainforest hamburger.

This is not to say that the balances people reach through the “see-saw” metaphor have anything at all to do with environmental impacts as defined by scientists. Nor is there any evidence that people keep separate mental accounts for goods labeled or identified as green, fair trade, ethical, healthy, or even
cheap and low in calories. We do not know the degree of transitivity between different kinds of sin and virtue—it could vary from person to person, or region to region, but we should not expect the partitions to match any scientific analytical categories. We should also recognize that people often seek to achieve balance not by adjusting their behavior, but by adjusting their assessment of the moral valence of the things they buy, use, eat, and own. When the price of organic fruit suddenly goes up, we might maintain our consumption and seek balance (by actually consuming more hamburgers, or other “sinful” products). Or we might decide that organic food is really not much better for you, so it should not count as such a virtue, or we might even redefine it as a luxury that should be counted as a sinful indulgence.

Note the paradoxical effect of the see-saw metaphor. When we are convinced organic food is really “good” and then buy it, we may also be prone to consume more “sinful” food; then, when we consume less virtue, we also can consume less “sin” [as found in the experiments conducted by Mazar & Zhong (2010)]. The net result is that a “green” shopper can end up buying more of everything, especially if he or she lives in a household whose members disagree on what constitutes “good” and “bad” purchases. This example should give us pause in labeling a product like bottled water as purely “sinful,” rather than recognizing that every product presents a different mixture of positives and negatives from an environmental point of view.

It is very possible that the balance metaphor has wider generality for other kinds of environmentally relevant behavior. We know that Americans like their news to be “fair and balanced,” so when they are told the north polar icecap is disappearing and high altitude glaciers are melting, they expect that there is “another side” to the story and that the news cannot really be so bad. To some extent, the very process of governance and political decision making in the United States is envisioned through the metaphor of two parties in balance; whatever one says, the other will say the opposite. The truth (the state of balance) will always lie between, so any strong opinion or new proposal is automatically labeled “extreme,” way out on the edge, threatening to throw the whole machine out of kilter. For the same reason, as a folk theory of personality, the balance metaphor would lead us to think that other people, groups, or products that may appear to be virtuous, must have another perhaps hidden side, which is sinful and corrupt. This is very different from the “cynicism” that is often blamed for Americans’ failure to respond to green messages—it is instead a consequence of a fully formed and highly consistent folk theory based on a coherent metaphorical structure.

Invitation

Rather than close this article with a standard conclusion, I would instead like to issue an invitation to take folk models of consumption and the environment more seriously. As I have described them, the fire and eating metaphors of consumption, the elevator model of standard of living, the parental metaphors of freedom and government, and the balancing model of choice, all offer openings for us to reframe environmental issues in ways that give us some realistic expectations of changing behavior. At the same time, I hope I have also shown just how deeply the purchase, use, and disposal of material goods have become embedded in American culture. These metaphors show us that people think about their bodies, morality and personal conduct, families, and relationships with the government through consumption-related metaphors.

For some time, social scientists in a number of fields have worked toward a general “consumer culture theory” that would reconcile conflicting approaches. I have written a number of articles in this vein, most recently developing a practice-theoretical approach, building on work by Shove (2003), that tries to account for why most of what we call “consumption” is not really the result of what we could recognize as “consumer” choice. Instead, people pursue cultural constructs like comfort, convenience, hygiene, nutrition, and necessity, and buying and using energy and materials are just means to those ends. It makes sense, then, that we have not been able to successfully generate powerful and general consumption theories, since consumption itself is an unbounded category, from both folk and analytical points of view. People buy and large do not consume for the sake of consumption itself—they are always doing it to achieve some other end, but those ends are diverse and not necessarily connected to one another except in a metaphorical way. Folk categories of behavior may have a ready folk explanation but no corresponding scientific analytical theory.

In trying to build predictive and powerful models of how consumption can change, it is important that we learn more about the folk models that people use in their daily affairs. I would suggest important topics to begin with would include the idea of “fun,” which seems to motivate the use of a great deal of energy and materials. As others have argued, comfort and convenience are also crucial concepts, and there has been some work, for example, on folk theories of how thermostats work and how people measure energy costs (Kempton & Montgomery, 1982). It is especially important to know how the “consumption” of virtual goods and services—software, telecommunications services, web platforms—is related to the
consumption of material goods, and similarly if the consumption of services like car rental or sharing can substitute for automobile ownership. We also urgently need to know more about the kinds of “fairness” people deploy in trying to understand concepts of wealth and poverty on a global scale. What ideas of rights, living standards, and needs do people in Europe and the United States use to make sense out of the rapid rise of consumer culture in China and the dilemma this development poses for global climate change? Why is some trade “free” and other kinds “fair” and why should they be moral opposites (Trentmann, 2009)?

These are urgent issues, not just because of the sheer size of the ongoing global ecological catastrophe. I believe that in the next decade, scientists and policy makers are going to be vocal about truths that are more than inconvenient—they are unspeakable because they conflict with very fundamental aspects of the American worldview. Technology, for example, cannot by itself solve the problem of greenhouse-gas emissions and climate change, which are now growing at a relentless pace. Sharing, rather than owning, some categories of goods is going to be necessary. Some products are just going to disappear from the marketplace through extinction or tight regulation. Energy is never going to be cheap and abundant again, and food is going to become more expensive as well. So far we have been telling people that they can be happier with less, but in reality, some people are going to be very unhappy at the prospect.

The concept of “sustainable consumption” has been a bit of jargon that allows science to say one thing and the public to hear another. Scientists have often said that overall energy use must level off or go down, while consumers think this can be achieved by replacing light bulbs or building some windmills. As we have seen with the example of former President Jimmy Carter’s famous “sweater” speech to the nation during the 1979 energy crisis, Americans take their freedom to consume very seriously and they do not like it when people suggest that they are going to have to give up some comforts and luxuries. During the recent debate about increasing automotive fuel economy standards in the United States Senate, Senator Tom Coburn (R-Oklahoma) asked, “What if you want to drive a gas hog? You don’t have the right any longer in this country to spend your money to drive a gas hog?” (Mirsy, 2009). The same week, I overheard an angry couple at a sushi bar complaining that “soon the federal government is going to be telling us what we can and cannot order in a restaurant!” Lakoff gives us good advice when he suggests that instead of challenging these deeply held dogmas, we are better off understanding their metaphorical basis, and then reframing the issues so they appeal to other powerful values like justice and fairness.

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