



*Routledge-SCORAI Studies in Sustainable Consumption*

# **POWER AND POLITICS IN SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION RESEARCH AND PRACTICE**

Edited by  
Cindy Isenhour, Mari Martiskainen, and  
Lucie Middlemiss



# Power and Politics in Sustainable Consumption Research and Practice

With growing awareness of environmental deterioration, atmospheric pollution and resource depletion, the last several decades have brought increased attention and scrutiny to global consumption levels. However, there are significant and well-documented limitations associated with current efforts to encourage more sustainable consumption patterns, ranging from informational and time constraints to the highly individualizing effect of market-based participation.

This volume, featuring essays solicited from experts engaged in sustainable consumption research from around the world, presents empirical and theoretical illustrations of the various means through which politics and power influence (un)sustainable consumption practices, policies, and perspectives. With chapters on compelling topics including collective action, behaviour-change, and the transition movement, the authors discuss why current efforts have largely failed to meet environmental targets and explore promising directions for research, policy, and practice.

Featuring contributions that will help the reader open up politics and power in ways that are accessible and bridge the gaps with current approaches to sustainable consumption, this book will be of great interest to students and scholars of sustainable consumption and the politics of sustainability.

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# Power and Politics in Sustainable Consumption Research and Practice

Edited by Cindy Isenhour,  
Mari Martiskainen, and Lucie Middlemiss

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# Introduction: Power, politics, and (un)sustainable consumption

*Lucie Middlemiss, Cindy Isenhour,  
and Mari Martiskainen*

## **Addressing power and politics in sustainable consumption research**

In the context of pressing impacts of environmental deterioration, atmospheric pollution, resource depletion, and climate change, there is increased attention to and scrutiny of global consumption levels. Today there is widespread agreement that we must reduce global resource use and distribute resources more fairly to ensure that citizens of all nations and future generations are able to fulfil basic needs (Hoekstra & Wiedmann, 2014, Reichle et al., 2014). A contemporary emphasis on consumption brings welcome attention to the highly unsustainable nature of global demand for materials and carbon-based fuels. But, as the chapters in this book point out, there are significant and well-documented limitations associated with current efforts to encourage more sustainable consumption patterns across a range of scales, from informational constraints, to the demands of competition, and the highly individualising effect of market-based participation (Hobson, 2002, Isenhour, 2010).

The chapters in this collection draw attention to the role of power and politics in the construction and reproduction of contemporary consumption patterns, as well as the necessity to consider issues of equity and power at the very onset of sustainability policy and practice. By engaging in robust analyses of the role of politics and power, we explain why many initiatives have failed to bring about substantive changes in consumption patterns, and point towards more promising directions for research, policy, and practice. We argue that our work to date responds to a form of intellectual failure: the ideas dominating sustainable consumption policy and practice tend to be highly mechanistic (stemming from transitions management and systems theory) or highly individualistic (stemming from rational actor and risk theory). Both of these perspectives fail to properly account for the reality that individual consumption practices, the global distribution of resource use, and everything in between is fundamentally linked to political economic power and highly political processes of distribution on multiple scales, from the individual household to the global economy. As such, action inspired by these avowedly apolitical approaches has failed to stabilise or reverse environmental change (Bengtsson et al., 2018).

This collection, featuring chapters solicited from experts engaged in sustainable consumption research from around the world, aims to fill this gap with empirical and theoretical illustrations of the means through which power and politics influence (un)sustainable consumption. In this collection, we intend to help readers make stronger connections between systems of power and consumption. As a community of researchers and practitioners, we are increasingly mindful of the political barriers and power differentials that prevent more effective progress toward sustainability. A renewed focus on power and politics in sustainable consumption seeks to highlight and understand how power—throughout the production-consumption system, and across levels of scale—works to influence (un)sustainable consumption. The contributors to this collection draw attention to these power dynamics, as well as to the influence (and power) of deeply embedded social and economic institutions that make change so challenging.

In this introductory chapter we explore the diverse and diffuse ways that politics and power have been conceptualised in sustainable consumption research, particularly as a growing number of researchers and practitioners recognise the limits of traditionally dominant approaches to sustainable consumption (e.g., Hobson, 2013, Wilhite, 2017, Alfredsson et al., 2018). We begin by synthesising the ways in which sustainable consumption research, policy, and practice have engaged with ideas of power and politics to date, including a discussion of research that tended or tends to overlook these factors. We argue that both the study and the practice of sustainable consumption deserves greater critical scrutiny. This means challenging ideas that are taken for granted in this field but that may, without careful examination, work to reproduce or rationalise existing power relations and deeply embedded social structures that script for unsustainable consumption. We characterise the hallmarks of such an approach to understanding sustainable consumption in the section “towards a critical understanding...”. Here we identify three key trends in writing in this area: 1) an attention to political economy; 2) an interest in governmentality and the notion of the subject; and 3) an attention to the politics of identity and difference. We finish by reflecting on how these ideas can be applied in policy and practice.

### **The integration of “power and politics” in sustainable consumption research**

While consumer culture has long been contested (Horowitz, 1985), the study of sustainable consumption emerged from the application of ecological economics and the environmental social sciences to environmental and ethical problems. In response to a growing awareness of the negative impacts of environmental damage resulting from resource intensive economies and consumer societies, policy-makers and social scientists began to problematise the effects of these forms of social organisation as “unsustainable consumption” (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, 1992, Cohen and Murphy, 2001). Sustainable consumption first emerged as a political objective, in the context

of international negotiations between the global South and North on environmental reform: when we talk about sustainable consumption, we gesture towards the responsibilities of richer nations of the global North to reduce the negative impacts that their inhabitants' consumption has on poorer nations, particularly those of the global South. If nations in the global South are to find cleaner, greener paths to wealth and development, so must nations in the global North start by reducing their total consumption levels, which are currently highly unsustainable (based on per-capita or fair shares analyses; see for instance, Hubacek et al., 2017). Sustainable consumption therefore implies a state in which the negative impacts from consumption on the environment, or on other people, might be avoided, with an implicit recognition that these impacts are not evenly distributed. As such, this field was highly political from the start.

### ***The absence of politics and power as an explicit locus of concern***

Ironically, while research, policy, and practice are often driven by clear recognition of global inequalities, many of the solutions proposed have failed to address issues of power and politics comprehensively. For instance, the discipline of ecological economics has a dual interest in documenting environmental damage as well as the unequal distribution of these consequences in relation to personal and national wealth (Reisch and Röpke, 2004). Conceptions of the social in this work have principally been concerned with wealth inequality, however, as opposed to a broader account of the importance of power and social relations in shaping consumption.

More conservative visions abound, particularly in policy and practice. Proposed solutions to the problem of sustainable consumption typically focus on reducing the impact of consumption in affluent nations through technological improvements, market mechanisms to prevent the externalisation of environmental costs, and the encouragement of consumer choice towards more sustainable behaviours. These amount to intensely conservative responses to such a systemic problem, which tend to imagine that actors (individuals and states) would voluntarily and rationally respond as they learn about the risks of modernity (Giddens, 1990). While this way of thinking is outmoded in the research world (Middlemiss, 2018) it is alive and well in practice, as made clear by the continued emphasis on improved consumer education and awareness, “nudging”, technological improvements, and market-based mechanisms as forms of intervention.

Such conservative approaches have attracted a wealth of criticism in the sustainable consumption literature as it became clear that, despite decades of rationalisation campaigns focused on efficiency gains and the encouragement of pro-environmental behaviours, sustainable consumption patterns have failed to emerge (Lorek and Fuchs, 2013, Akenji, 2014, Geels et al., 2015, O'Rourke and Lollo, 2015). For example, researchers in multiple fields have empirically documented rebound effects associated with technical- and efficiency-based approaches (for instance, Druckman et al., 2011). Some documented increased spending and consumption as a result of efficiency improvements in the home.



Others outlined how, in a highly unequal global economy, efficiency gains at the domestic level can result in total consumption growth globally as consumers drive demand for carbon intensive imports (Isenhour and Feng, 2016, Afonis et al., 2017). Similarly, research from a range of academic viewpoints has critiqued the focus on individual responsibility, pointing out that these approaches failed to recognise that not all consumers are able to choose pro-environmental options (Maniates, 2001, Hobson, 2002, Shove, 2010, Middlemiss, 2014). In short, these approaches fail to engage with a more complex politics which recognises social change as occurring due to forces beyond the economic or technological (Shove, 2010, Akenji, 2014, O'Rourke and Lollo, 2015). They also have tended to present policy recommendations as apolitical: implying both that the recommendations they put forward are logical consequences of the need for action, and that politics is somehow separate, and less important, than policy.

***Beyond the individual: Situating actors and institutions in socio-political context***

Following these critiques, more recent research in sustainable production and consumption has increasingly integrated discussions of power and politics as part of a broader project to advocate an understanding of consumption patterns as the product of more than aggregate individual choice. In response to calls for rational consumers to take responsibility for environmental welfare, a diverse body of scholars pointed out the limitations of such calls (see for instance, Shove, 2010, Isenhour, 2010, Akenji, 2014). Those motivated to discuss politics and social difference have tended to point out how even well-intentioned sustainable consumption programming could reproduce inequalities by failing to recognise that not all consumers are equal in their ability to “vote with their wallets” (see for instance, Martiskainen, [Chapter 7](#) of this volume), or indeed to ignore the fact that sustainable consumption is made possible by privilege and inequality (Anantharaman, 2018). This project has therefore included a political challenge to the idea of the all-knowing, influential choosing consumer-citizen (Maniates, 2001, Hobson, 2002, Middlemiss, 2014), putting this citizen firmly back into the political and social context that they inhabit.

More systemic understandings of sustainable consumption, which typically understand consumption as embedded in complex configurations of infrastructure, social norms and conventions, material objects, and practices are also a response to the individualisation in mainstream perspectives (Geels et al., 2015). Yet both practice (Shove et al., 2012) and transition approaches come into this category, neither of which engages consistently with ideas of power or politics (see Sayer, 2013, and Soron, [Chapter 2](#) of this volume). These approaches, which attempt to understand how social structures produce and reproduce practices, and the potential for shifts in practices and structures over time, often explain the world in rather material terms, neglecting the importance of symbolism, narratives, and discourse. Practice approaches also tend to distance themselves from explaining change in relation to individuals, which makes it challenging to link

the characteristics of individual bodies (holding gender, disability, ethnicity, etc.) to the politics of consumption.

### ***Inequality on multiple scales***

There is also an emerging literature that represents both a broadening and tightening of focus, to consider consumption as both the product of deeply rooted global socio-economic structures and as inextricably bound to a wide array of everyday social complexities (Seyfang and Paavola, 2008). Sustainable consumption scholars with an interest in political economy and ecologically unequal exchange have begun to more explicitly link discussions about sustainable consumption to environmental justice, arguing that colonially rooted disparities and relations of exchange are at the root of unsustainable levels of production and consumption (see Isenhour in [Chapter 1](#) of this volume, Hornborg, 1998, Rice, 2007, Anantharaman, 2018). These inequalities enable the costs of unsustainability to be externalised to societies with little capacity to resist. For these scholars, voluntary behavioural changes, efficiency gains, and market-based tweaks all address symptoms of a larger underlying problem. This is not to deprive individuals of agency or meaning or to propose a return to structural economic determinism, but rather to acknowledge that durable solutions will require social pressure and cooperation, if not social transformation. Unsustainable levels of production and consumption are fundamentally linked to inequality, implying that solutions need to tackle inequality head on (Anantharaman, 2018). While the environmental damage wreaked by contemporary societies and economies is still at the heart of this work, we also uncover a more complex set of social politics which broadens debates about social impacts beyond the relatively straightforward association of environmental damage with wealth, to include forms of marginalisation linked to identity and difference (Anantharaman, 2016; also see Hammond and Huddart Kennedy, [Chapter 8](#) of this volume).

These inequalities can be found on multiple scales and often become painfully apparent when tracing the effects of sustainable consumption programming built on the assumption of a singular and homogenous rational actor. Differences in socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, race, or disability shape both access to resources and the ability of individuals and groups to access more sustainable alternatives. Critical scholars have outlined how, despite the best intentions, many of the proposed solutions to unsustainable levels of consumption can reproduce or exacerbate social inequalities (Anantharaman, 2014, Kenis and Mathijs, 2014; see Anantharaman et al., [Chapter 9](#) of this volume). Without explicit planning, even the most well-intentioned policies can unintentionally reproduce disadvantage. For example, the recent attention to degrowth represents an attempt to achieve “strong” sustainability, which, when articulated in relation to social goals, hopes to ensure less environmental damage and a more equal distribution of wealth (Lorek and Fuchs, 2013). However, many iterations of degrowth are

presented as the solution to environmental (and social ills) without any critical attention to how policy might differentially affect disadvantaged and disenfranchised segments of the population (see also Cohen, 2016). A similar zeal characterises responses to a range of popular solutions in the environmental community: including, for instance, localisation and voluntary simplicity. In reality, there is limited evidence to suggest that, for instance, degrowth will result in more equal distribution of resources (Hobson, 2013), that wellbeing will result from less consumption (see Middlemiss et al., [Chapter 6](#) of this volume), or that localisation will be a positive force for social good (Quilley, 2013, Taylor Aiken et al., 2017). The presentation of these politics as if they represent the logical solution to environmental problems, and as if they are likely to have only positive outcomes, marks a failure to engage with the complex politics of such proposed change. We argue that this engagement is necessary to ensure that sustainable consumption programming not only reduces environmental pressures, but also results in positive and fair social outcomes.

### **Toward a critical understanding: Themes and organisation**

We were inspired to bring this collection together to highlight the need for a shift in the literature on sustainable consumption, toward a more critical consideration of politics and power (see also Anantharaman, 2018). Many of the chapters collected here emerged from a special session on politics, power, and sustainable consumption at a Sustainable Consumption Research and Action Initiative (SCORAI) conference in Maine in June of 2016, which was designed to stimulate a broader project on politics and power. This collection, featuring chapters solicited from experts engaged in sustainable consumption research from around the world, aims to mark out recent engagement with the politics of sustainable consumption. We are delighted to offer a series of empirical and theoretical illustrations of the various means by which politics and power influence (un)sustainable consumption practices, policies, and perspectives. Increasingly, we, as a community of researchers, have come to recognise the political barriers and power differentials that prevent more effective progress toward both ecological and social sustainability. We feature chapters that help us to open up politics and power in ways that are accessible and productive, which identify entry points into these seemingly impenetrable issues, and bridge the gaps with current approaches to sustainable consumption.

In characterising this body of work, we find a varied engagement with ideas of politics and power. Given that these studies are led by scholars from a range of nations and disciplines, and that they frequently start with an empirical problem which is unpacked in relation to concepts of politics and power, a variable engagement with these concepts is not altogether surprising. Some engage directly and explicitly while others position discussion about power more obliquely in relation to the object of analysis. Some also draw directly on theorists including Sara Ahmed, Jean Baudrillard, Karl Marx, Pierre Bourdieu,

Mitchell Dean, Bent Flyvberg, Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, Ian Hacking, Martha Nussbaum, Nikolas Rose, and Amartya Sen; while others more loosely engage with concepts associated with such theorists, such as governmentality, needs, hegemony, alienation, distinction, and wellbeing. We encourage readers to think more critically about the theoretical grounding of research on sustainable consumption that engages concepts of politics and power, and to continue to build collective approaches for engaging with these concepts. For now, in this book, we present a wide range of approaches and perspectives to begin what we hope will be a stronger collective process focused on power and politics and their role in (un)sustainable consumption.

The chapters in this book also tackle the concepts of power and politics at a range of scales and levels of analysis. This spans from the everyday politics of social position that shape people's access to sustainable alternatives, to the macro-level structures of the global political economy that enable unsustainable levels of consumption in some geographies and environmental destruction in others. We also find that, at times, differences in the level of analysis and theoretical engagements with power put the implications of our arguments at odds (see for instance, the contradictions between [Chapters 3](#) and [6](#) in this volume). Of course, as a community of researchers, sustainable consumption scholars are not immune to politics and power, and thus the research questions we ask and the approaches we take must be reflexively and critically considered.

The chapters contained here do indeed start from a shared political position: consensus that action on sustainable consumption to date has tended to reproduce the status quo, failing to challenge or transform either from environmental or social perspectives. Critical scholars and thinkers often want to know how a problem is being defined or “problematized” (Rose, 1999). In sustainable consumption research, this emerging focus on power and politics arises from a disaffection with the rather conservative problematisations that currently dominate policy and practice: what Lorek and Fuchs would call “weak sustainability” (2013). We also share a conviction that ideas associated with the status quo (e.g., aiming for economic growth, changing marginal individual behaviours, individualising responsibility, economisation of society) have a tendency to be left unchallenged or unquestioned, and as a result to show up persistently and in unexpected places. This body of work looks for more durable, effective, and just solutions by recognising the political and distributive roots of the problems associated with unsustainable consumption levels and by tackling the politics of sustainable consumption ideology, programming, policy, and practice head on.

In addition to this shared recognition that the status quo is not sufficient, we argue that there are three additional characteristics that mark a new, more politically aware, approach to sustainable consumption research: 1) an attention to political economy; 2) an interest in governmentality and the notion of the subject; and 3) an attention to the politics of identity and difference.

We have organised the chapters in this collection to illustrate these three overlapping themes. We introduce them in turn, along with the chapters included to illustrate each:

### **Section I: Attention to political economy**

The emerging critical approach to sustainable consumption research takes a renewed interest in political economy. Having witnessed the failure of efforts focused on individual consumer behaviours and programs designed to rationalise both production processes and consumer choice, recent scholarship explores the links between capitalist logics, inequality on multiple scales, and consumption levels. This often takes the form of an interest in the political rationalities behind governance of the status quo (economic growth, consumer spending, liberal visions of the consumer) as well as the material dimensions that reflect and structure (un)sustainable production-consumption systems (burden shifting, ecologically unequal exchange, environmental justice). By broadening the frame and scale of analysis, these approaches encourage political actors to move beyond the realm of consumer activism to advocate for structural changes. They also encourage us to consider subjects beyond the household consumer, complementing the macro-level research that has characterised the field to think about actors and consumers in production–consumption and chains of policy consequence. Taken together, the three chapters to follow draw attention to the broadest scales—to macro-level processes—to consider the role of political economy, capitalist markets, international inequality, global finance, and state policies in shaping contemporary consumption patterns. Without recognition of these factors and the powerful interests that have a stake in their reproduction, we have very little chance but to reproduce the individualist frames that have failed practitioners and have already been heavily critiqued by the sustainable consumption research community. Lorek and Spangenberg encourage a bold approach, arguing that discussions about structural changes are necessary to draw attention to “precisely those institutions that contribute most to shaping patterns of consumption” (2014:39).

In [Chapter 1](#), Cindy ISENHOUR opens the collection with a case study designed to illustrate how power operates on the broadest of scales to influence (un)sustainable production and consumption systems at the international level. Her analysis of the United Nations climate negotiations illustrates how affluent, powerful nations have resisted proposals which recognise the negative effects of a highly uneven global political economy—one which concentrates the costs of overconsumption (pollution, emissions, mitigation expense) in less powerful developing economies while the benefits (products, income, profit) are funnelled into powerful economic cores. This colonially embedded structure helps to underwrite unsustainable levels of production–consumption-disposal. Powerful nations have resisted persistent calls for structural change, rejecting proposals for alternative emissions accounting that would require wealthy nations to take

partial responsibility for the emissions embedded in global trade. Proponents have argued that alternative accounting would encourage high-consuming nations to address total consumption levels and perhaps even implement domestic policies to reduce consumption as part of their mitigation strategy. Despite significant advocacy, these policies have been superseded by the recent emphasis on the apolitical, politically acceptable logics of circular economy.

Dennis SORON further emphasises the political economic approach in critical sustainable consumption theory, arguing in [Chapter 2](#) that while recent practice-theoretical approaches in sustainable consumption research have made great strides toward balancing concern with individual agency (consumer behaviour, purchasing decisions, energy use) against the social and political structures that shape choice (social position, political power, economic organisation), they have also unintentionally worked to reproduce individualist frames and “weak” sustainable consumption policy. Through a focus on routinised everyday social practices and their meaning, practice theory all too often limits its unit of analysis and object of intervention to the private sphere. Critical questions that are necessary to address, on different levels of scale—about hierarchy and relative influence and impact, about the structure of our political economy and the vested interests of states, governments, financial institutions, and trade conglomerates—are left unasked and unanswered. Soron’s theoretical intervention thus urges sustainable production and consumption scholars to engage across scales, leaving the confines of the household, and to complement practice theoretical approaches with consideration of power as it operates in macro-level processes to reproduce unsustainable levels of production consumption and shape individual practice.

In [Chapter 3](#), the final contribution in Section 1, Doris FUCHS, Sylvia LOREK, Antonietta DI GIULIO, and Rico DEFILA discuss some of the structural barriers that prevent the emergence of more sustainable patterns of production and consumption. Outlining the institutional lock in of capitalist models of production and growth, the authors illustrate how these existing structures constrain and limit the efficacy of individual consumption choices. An economic model built on the logic of mass production and consumption is dominant and vigorously defended by business interests with investments to protect. Outlining the complex politics of influence enacted through instrumental power (e.g., lobbying, campaign finance) and material power (e.g., industrial investments, jobs) the authors document how influence operates to protect growth in production-consumption systems. But Fuchs and colleagues also identify potential sources of counter-power including recent efforts to reduce the influence of money and business interests in politics. Through a combination of public pressure, the efforts of NGOs and some regulatory advances, the authors remind us that movement toward more sustainable consumption will likely need to engage actors (in a wide range of social, political, and economic positions), in more than their roles as consumers if we hope to create policies and practices with the power to generate new forms of structural power.

**Section II: Interest in governmentality and the notion of the subject**

The second characteristic of this body of critical research emerging in sustainable consumption is focused at the intersection of the larger political-economic forces described in the first section and ongoing efforts to encourage more sustainable individual choice. This section draws attention to governance strategies that have been used to encourage more pro-environmental consumption behaviour. Making legible the ideologies that underlie these programs as well as the various disjunctures and forms of resistance they inspire, these chapters address pro-environmental behaviour change as social control and thus ultimately, as a political process.

Thinking critically about who the intended target of sustainable consumption practice and policy is (“the subject”) can be productive. Typically, this involves asking further questions such as “what does this intervention anticipate people are motivated by?” or “how does this intervention expect people to behave?” Further, and as Rose might put it “how are people in turn shaped by these expectations?” (1999). It is also fruitful to consider what kinds of solutions are possible given the way that the subject is understood, and what is beyond the boundaries of possibility as a result of the specific subject definition.

The chapters in this section focus on unpacking the subjects of a particular type of intervention. Tom HARGREAVES, for instance, explores in [Chapter 4](#) the subject in the context of an initiative to shape employee behaviour. The campaign “Environmental Champions” was designed to improve environmental performance in the headquarters of a UK construction company. It draws heavily, Hargreaves argues, upon dominant “ABC” logics, which attempt to modify individual behaviours by changing: attitudes (A), behaviour (B), and choice (C) (Shove, 2010). Engaging with Foucauldian insights on the creation of environmental subjects, Hargreaves illustrates the deeply political nature of these efforts, ultimately about disciplining and governing the behaviour of employees and citizens. And yet, despite these efforts, premised on surveillance, normalising judgements, and evaluation of progress, Hargreaves finds examples of counter-conduct and the incomplete disciplining of environmental subjects.

Complementing Hargreaves’s contribution, in [Chapter 5](#) Tobias GUMBERT draws on governmentality scholarship to critically examine contemporary strategies of choice editing as a modern exercise of political power. His analysis points to the responsabilisation of environmental subjects in an era of neoliberal reforms aimed at devolving responsibility for environmental welfare—away from the state and toward market actors. Gumbert points out that states are not governing less, but rather differently through novel techniques designed to create responsible subjects who internalise the interests of the state. Drawing on EU efforts to reduce food waste, Gumbert illustrates how these efforts, by drawing on an “ethnopolitics” seek to govern behaviour on ethical terms. Appealing to the self-evident rationality of reducing waste, these efforts operate indirectly, not through mandates or restrictions but rather through behavioural-economic and