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Greening Capitalism: Opportunities for a Green Commodity

Andrea Prothero and James A. Fitchett

In this article, the authors argue that greater ecological enlightenment can be secured through capitalism by using the characteristics of commodity culture to further progress environmental goals. The authors reject both naive ecological romanticism and revolutionary idealism on the grounds that they fail to offer any pragmatic basis by which greater environmental responsibility can be achieved. Drawing on the now well-established theoretical tradition of post-Marxist cultural criticism, the authors offer a conceptual justification for the development and implementation of a green commodity discourse. For this to be achieved and implemented, prevailing paradigms regarding the structure, nature, and characteristics of capitalism must be revised. Marketing not only has the potential to contribute to the establishment of more sustainable forms of society but, as a principle agent in the operation and proliferation of commodity discourse, also has a considerable responsibility to do so.

Part of the problem one inevitably faces when addressing the relationship between contemporary capitalism and the environment is that all too often the two concerns are represented in irreconcilable opposition. Whether it is images of Greenpeace activists aboard Shell's *Brent Spar* platform protesting against the dumping of oil installations in the North Sea or reports of the "McLibel" case concerning McDonald's legal action against the claims of environmental activists, the popular media portrayal of environmental issues often tends to depict commercial interests and ecological interests in deep irreconcilable conflict. The discourse that has become characteristic of such tales contains all the elements of a good drama and bears more than a passing resemblance to Barthes's (1972) now-classic essay on the mythology of wrestling. The underdog, armed only with the weapon of her or his principles, takes on the role of the freedom fighter who stands alone against the all-powerful, all-corrupt organization. The David and Goliath joust that is acted out on the television screen, more often than not, has a predictable outcome that reinforces

both players' respective roles. The underdog either overcomes overwhelming odds to defeat the collective power of *Environmental Exploitation Corp.* or is crushed into submission, only to become reborn as a martyr to the cause. While this common mythology promotes newspaper sales and justifies hours of broadcasting, it rarely communicates the complex issues that structure these disputes or the full motives, intents, and agendas of both parties. Popular representations of ecological issues (a valuable media commodity in itself) often has the effect of polarizing and simplifying the ongoing debate concerning sustainability to such an extent that questions regarding the prospect of meeting environmental challenges through the established social paradigm of capitalism remain marginal. Not only does the furtherance of popular media stereotypes disable a more detailed analysis of the central issues, but it also prevents corporate programs that seek to promote ecological welfare from being publicized. The realm of popular culture and the media is a productive, persuasive, and communicative medium and can be used just as successfully by those seeking to achieve environmental enlightenment as it can for those who aspire to ecological martyrdom, irrespective of where the impetus for change originates. Marketing, together with the commodity culture in which it operates, has tended to use the media to successfully achieve a diverse range of objectives. One aim must therefore be to establish more fundamental changes to contemporary capitalism and commodity culture by employing the persuasive and communicative qualities of media and marketing practices.

This article is concerned with working toward a more critically substantial understanding of the complex relationship that exists between capitalism (of which the commodity is a principal agent) and the environment. We begin by consider-

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ing some of the prevailing mythologies and fallacies that have come to structure the ecological debate and some of the problems that are created as a consequence. This article proposes an alternative conceptualization in which the success of the ecological movement is dependent on the use and mobilization of commodity culture rather than its rejection. This is based on an examination of cultural theories of capitalism and requires the commodity to be redefined as a “discourse” or a mode of communication. The success of environmental objectives, it is proposed, is reliant on reproducing or representing these objectives in a form that is both consistent with and reliant on commodity culture. Both the hard-line supporters of free-market capitalism and those supportive of radical ecological action will no doubt greet the conceptual arguments in this article with skepticism. The aim here is not to legitimize either stance but rather to contribute to the development of attainable and realistic ecological and social targets. To conclude, this study considers how a green commodity discourse may be implemented and discusses which groups could contribute most to achieve success.

THE COMMODITY-ENVIRONMENT FALLACY

For many writers and critics concerned with the world’s environmental welfare, commodity culture or, specifically, the capitalist system of which it is a central part is the most ecologically destructive of all modern ideologies (Shrivastava 1994, 1995; O’Connor 1994; Purser, Park, and Montuori 1995). Consumerism and the operation of markets have created the human subject as a desiring being whose craving for more commodities and the latest goods has consistently undermined the welfare of the environment (Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero 1997). Numerous cases could be drawn on from both academics and environmental critics alike to illustrate instances whereby the environment and environmental welfare have been shown to be compromised for the capitalist ideal of infinite economic growth (Miller 1993). The destruction and clearing of rainforests for land, the exploitation of natural resources needed to sustain modern industry and consumer lifestyles, and cost-effective manufacturing processes that release masses of ecologically harmful substances into the atmosphere represent but a few popular illustrations of the environmentalist’s contempt toward economic “progress.” In these instances, commercial or industrial consideration for the natural environment is, at worst, nonexistent and mere window dressing at best. It is well documented that many current environmental problems are a direct consequence of what most people regard as industrial progress (Beck 1992, 1995; Ponting 1993; Daly 1996; Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero 1997). The establishment and proliferation of consumer culture in industrialized

societies also create a source of conflict between individuals’ needs and desires as consumers, and their responsibilities as citizens to avoid long-term damage to the natural environment (Sagoff 1988).

As with many credible counterculture initiatives, the ecological movement has established its own “green” evangelism together with its own visions of heaven and hell (see, e.g., Devall and Sessions 1984; Bookchin 1980; Clarke 1990; Plumwood 1993; Cuomo 1994). From such manifestos and to varying degrees, we are at once dazzled by the vision of environmentally sustainable utopias, where the commodity and the project of capitalism are rejected in favor of an ecologically responsible way of life, or damned to an ever-pending climate of environmental disaster. Faced with the prospect of establishing yet another dualism in which the commodity and capitalism are cited as the root and cause of all evil, we might instead begin with Sagoff’s (1988, 54) comment: “Just as we can reject the dogma of the perfect market, we can reject the dogma of the perfect environment.” This enables the rejection of what is in effect a brand of green mythology and provides sufficient space to consider the opportunities within capitalism to exploit commodity culture in such a way that contributes to a more ecologically sound way of life. To achieve this objective, it is necessary to reappraise the structure and characteristics of capitalism itself, as well as its primary agent—the commodity.

TOWARD CULTURAL THEORIES OF CAPITALISM AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Capitalism has proved to be a more resilient social force than most of its critics ever predicted. Rather than witnessing the demise of national capitalism in favor of alternative social relations, during the twentieth century, capitalism has overcome and incorporated opposing ideologies as well as metamorphosing into a global system of social order (McMurty 1998). It is therefore no longer adequate to analyze capitalism from a purely economic or political-economic standpoint since its sphere of influence has become a defining characteristic of ethical, social, and cultural debates. Critical theorists argue that capitalism should be recognized as far more than a system of economic organization and be acknowledged as a cultural ideology or “code” that defines, regulates, and reifies social practice and social thought (Lukacs 1971). Capitalism can be principally understood as a social or cultural phenomenon that has a significant influence on the way in which we view and comprehend important social issues. Capitalist economic relations have been shown to be socially dynamic in that they are not only capable of developing and instigating seemingly opposing social ideologies (such as Soviet-style communism) but are equally capable of integrating and

embracing these antitheses. Bauman's (1991, 168) analysis illustrates this point well:

Let us recall that, well into the final stages of the communist experiment, the capitalist world watched its progress with bated breath, having little doubt that however wanting the emerging system might have been in other respects, it was a managerial and economic success. What counted for this overt or tacit admiration was that the productive capacity of that society quickly shortened the distance dividing it from the older wealthier economies of the west. Giant steel mills (the more gigantic the better) and grandiose irrigation schemes (the vaster the better) were still accepted as a credible index of a well-managed society on the way to fulfillment of its mission: the satisfaction of the needs of its members. The communist state, in its own admittedly unprepossessing way, seemed to serve the same ideals of modern era which even its capitalist haters readily recognised as their own.

Popular portrayals of the "green revolution" are often framed in exactly the same manner as Bauman (1991) characterizes communism. Inherent within the eco-revolutionary agenda is the belief that environmental goals (as with socialist principles in the case of communism) can only be accomplished by overturning capitalist structures and capitalist social relations. In this respect, the green vision of society postcapitalism does not differ conceptually to Marx's own notion of postcapitalist revolutionary practice. In place of the worker's mills and fields can be found an eco-Marxist utopia of vast solar plants and recycling centers (McMurty 1992). Gone are the insatiable demands of consumers and the exploitative practices of organizations, and in their place sustainable and responsible behaviors prevail. Such readings are thus predicated on the assumption that industrial capitalism, together with consumerism and the ever-proliferating commodity culture that it produces, is ultimately responsible for the exploitation and devastation of the natural environment (Durning 1992).

The demise of communist ideologies and the acceptance of free-market capitalism throughout Central and Eastern Europe would suggest that revolutions that seek to undermine the capitalist paradigm in favor of an ideologically conceived alternative (whether communist or "green") may in practice offer little scope for change. To progress beyond the limitations of the eco-Marxist agenda and incorporate more contemporary themes, it is necessary to turn to the well-established tradition of post-Marxist cultural theory. For Baudrillard, the main deficiency in Marx's communist manifesto is the failure to recognize the sociological and cultural role of capitalism. Baudrillard (1975, 1981) shows that contemporary understandings of the environment, nature, human need, and utility are just as much tied to the conditions of capitalism as are exchange and the circulation of commodities. Thus, any definition that uses contemporary understandings of nature and human needs to define the green society cannot be

differentiated or considered distinct from the capitalist mode of production since these terms (i.e., language) have emerged as part of the cultural conditions of capitalism. Baudrillard (1975, 59) states,

What [Marx] fails to recognise is that in his symbolic *exchanges primitive man does not gauge himself in relation to Nature*. He is not aware of necessity, a Law that takes effect only with the objectification of nature. The Law takes its definitive form in capitalist political economy; moreover, it is only an expression of scarcity. Scarcity, which itself arises in the market economy, it is not a given dimension of the economy. Hence it is an extremely serious problem that Marxist thought retains these key concepts which depend upon the metaphysics of the market economy in general and on modern capitalist ideology in particular. Not analysed or unmasked (but exported to primitive society where they do not apply) these concepts mortgage all further analysis.

Baudrillard's reasoning presents several difficulties with regard to defining ecologicalism in opposition to capitalism and commodity relations. It would seem that any revolutionary movement—whether its intention is the liberation of the environment or emancipation of the proletariat—is destined to take with it the seed of capitalism and, in doing so, only serve to further reify commodity relations in another guise.

If the overthrow of commodity culture is rejected as a viable strategy by which environmental concerns can be addressed, it would seem logical to try and establish a theoretical justification that embraces capitalist social relations to further the ecological cause. This approach provides the only constructive prospect for achieving ecological objectives since it seeks to incorporate and mobilize revolutionary forces within the existing social paradigm. The code of capitalism is destined to define the revolutionary means of change, and it would therefore seem logical to identify and locate the solutions to current ecological concerns within existing social frameworks and the broader code of capitalism. There has been much discussion on the greening of organizations (Shrivastava 1994, 1995; Purser, Park, and Montuori 1995; McCloskey and Smith 1995) and the managers within those organizations (Fineman 1997). At the same time, it is also acknowledged that to change the basic structure of organizations, one must consider the economy, polity, and society in which we live (O'Connor 1994) and question the dominant social paradigm (DSP) (Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero 1997), defined by Milbrath as "a society's belief structure that organises the way people perceive and interpret the functioning of the world around them" (quoted in Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero 1997, 4).

Various ways of achieving this have been proposed by ecological movements and also by some enlightened organization studies and marketing academics (see, e.g., the readings in McDonagh and Prothero 1997). The failure of institutions, which operate in accordance with capitalist practices to

embrace the ecological cause, is largely attributable to an inadequate conceptual basis from which to frame and understand capitalism beyond the stifling confines of economic and political paradigms.

The present exploitation of environmental themes by marketing practices, as seen in “green” products, ecologically sensitive packaging, and so on, often has been criticized for selling the signs of environmentalism while making no long-term contribution to core green issues (Goldman and Papsen 1996). This evidence may do little to reassure ecologists critical of capitalism, although it does conclusively demonstrate that green themes can be successfully communicated and implemented via commodity culture. The approach in this article therefore focuses on opportunities for redefining this commodity culture so that green issues are not exploited superficially. The “code” of capitalism can be adapted to champion green issues just as products and services offered in the market can be modified to be more environmentally sensitive, although the proposed changes are much more fundamental than modifying product features or changing distribution policies. Alternative conceptualizations of commodity capitalism must be addressed and taken into account to realize their potential for achieving long-term ecological goals. Central to an alternative view are the ideas and theories concerning discourse and commodity discourse in particular.

REDEFINING THE COMMODITY AS DISCOURSE

Conceptual issues such as those discussed above, while providing a general framework, do not enable the issue of implementation to be addressed. Although there is a theoretically defensible argument that ecological issues can be achieved within the existing dominant social paradigm of capitalism, it is also necessary to offer some justification as to how this might be achieved and what changes are required to ensure success. For this reason, we will now focus on what is perhaps the most singular and primary cultural category of capitalism—the commodity. It is our belief, along with Marx and the tradition of scholars that have developed and revised his ideas, that any analysis of capitalism—if it is to have any relation to everyday practice and social conditions—must account for the operation and dynamics of the commodity. Indeed, Marx himself opened his *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* ([1859] 1976, 27) with such a request:

The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as “an immense accumulation of commodities,” its unit being a single commodity. Our investigation must therefore begin with the analysis of the commodity.

The dominant definition of the term *commodity* can be broadly described as materialist; that is, the commodity is defined as a physical product/good or intangible service offering that has value in terms of utility and exchange. Potentially, any material substance or specified action, in the case of service provision, can become a commodity if it satisfies these two aspects: namely, someone or some group considers it to have a utility or function and is prepared to enter into an exchange (typically for money) to acquire it and exploit its use. From a green perspective, materialist definitions of the commodity suggest that progress can be made by seeking and implementing methods to ensure greener packaging, greener channels of distribution, greener source materials, and greener communication strategies. These proposals inevitably draw attention away from macromarketing considerations and refocus on micromarketing principles with a strong managerialist flavor (Tamilia 1992). They also fail to acknowledge the real meaning, purpose, and operation of commodities (Kilbourne 1995).

The tradition of semiotics and linguistics, when integrated into a theory of consumption, provides an alternative to materialist definitions of the commodity. Commodities are not defined by their material or utilitarian qualities but by the very act of representing this material in a manner consistent with a commodity discourse. The concept of discourse is central to the poststructuralist tradition in critical theory, which states that language plays a definitive role in constructing our view of society. It is possible to discuss any given object in several different ways, and the meaning and value of that object will vary depending on the manner in which it is discussed. These different ways of talking about objects can be referred to as discourses or “modes of speaking”:

Consequently, consumption is neither a material practice, nor a phenomenology of “affluence.” It is not defined by the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the car we drive, nor the visual and oral substance of images and messages, but by the organization of all this signifying substance. Consumption is *the virtual totality of all objects and messages presently constituted in a more or less coherent discourse*. Consumption, in so far as it is meaningful, is a systematic act of the manipulation of signs. (Baudrillard 1996, 197)

A concise example of how discourses affect the meaning and definition of objects can be found if one considers gift-giving behavior. When the gift giver first acquires the object (e.g., a silk scarf), its exchange value (its price) and its utility (how useful it is as a gift) will probably determine its significance and value. The gift giver needs to consider whether the price is acceptable and whether the object is appropriate for the intended recipient. This situation can be considered consistent with a commodity discourse since the object is being evaluated in terms of commodity characteristics. When it comes to presenting the object to the intended recipient, the object is no longer considered in terms of a

commodity discourse. The significance of the object will gain its meaning from alternative discourses (i.e., as a gesture of goodwill, friendship, or love). Not only is the value of the object reliant on whichever discourse is being employed, but so is its actual definition (as a gift or a consumer good). If, after receiving the gift, the recipient subsequently offers the object for sale, then a commodity discourse, rather than one predicated on the gift, would provide a source of meaning for its valuation.

Objects and actions can therefore be understood as having social lives (Appadurai 1986) in which they are bestowed with several meanings at various times depending on the discourses through which they are represented. Any "thing" has the potential to take on commodity characteristics as well as to lose them (Ostergaard, Fitchett, and Jantzen 1999).

The extent to which the commodity discourse is employed in society is open to a great deal of debate. Increasingly, some would argue, more and more of our everyday experience is mediated via a commodity discourse. For example, the use of high-profile advertising, carefully staged public relations, and selection of photogenic politicians by political parties indicates that the social practice of politics is itself being subsumed to a commodity discourse where the electorate is transformed into a consumer group (Ewen 1992; Kavanagh 1995; Newman 1999).

If the commodity is thought of as a discursive practice or language, then marketing is a principal agent in the use and promotion of this discourse. The mobilization of capitalist systems to accomplish ecological objectives can only be achieved once the commodity is perceived as an active discourse, defined not by material exchange but by the potential to represent all manner of creations and reproductions (including ideas, ideologies, myths, etc.) in an exchangeable and substantial form. Baudrillard and several other contemporary social commentators (e.g., Douglas and Isherwood 1996; Appadurai 1986; Gottdiener 1995) have consistently argued that it is necessary to focus more on the institutions and structures within culture that enable commodity relations to assume decisive importance in systems of meaning rather than the objects of commodity exchange. Consequently, the act of consumption need not depend on notions of acquisition, destruction, or materialism (Belk and Ger 1995) but rather on communication and the exchange of meaning. Although the relations of commodity exchange cannot themselves be rejected, this does not prevent alternative forms of commodity consumption that do not involve the excessive exploitation of the environment but instead prioritize ecological welfare.

Marketing efforts and advertisers have effectively employed the commodity discourse to stimulate increased consumption and, as a consequence, also have established the understanding that greater consumption will lead to greater happiness and fulfillment. However, considerable evidence questions this "living to consume" mentality

(Wolf 1990; Alvesson 1994; Gabriel and Lang 1995; Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero 1997; Woodruffe 1997), showing that greater consumption may not only endanger environmental welfare but also might lower quality of life. A green commodity discourse could therefore be employed to communicate an alternative set of meanings that promotes less consumption-oriented lifestyles on the premise that quality of life would increase. This alternative "consuming to live" message is just as appropriate to a commodity discourse in that it would be appealing to consumer groups if communicated effectively and would achieve ecological benefits as a consequence.

PROSPECTS FOR A GREEN COMMODITY

The arguments put forth so far have led us to consider the strategies that can be adopted that will enable environmental concerns to be effectively tackled by using existing cultural structures that promote and reify a commodity discourse. The commodity discourse is a dynamic, multifaceted entity that can be applied to any task or sociological project, and it need not only serve the short-term interests of those groups that sanction, either directly or indirectly, environmentally damaging activities. Marketing activities have for many years successfully signified green issues through a large number of consumer goods and services. Green symbols, designs, and advertising campaigns regularly depict images of nature, clean living, and environmental harmony to differentiate and add sign value to consumer goods (Goldman and Papsion 1996). Although many of the cases in which such strategies are adopted can be criticized for selling the sign of environmentalism while continuing to engage in ecologically damaging practices (Athanasidou 1996), it nevertheless illustrates that green issues can be commodified (i.e., represented and communicated via a commodity discourse) and are of concern to certain consumer segments. The various environmental labels of governments, industry bodies, and individual companies, such as The Green Seal (Weissman 1997) and the European Ecolabel, clearly illustrate this point. While these criticisms of marketing activities were noted in the 1970s (Fisk 1974), they have been primarily ignored by academic research in the environmental marketing arena in the interim period, and it is only recently that such concerns have reappeared (Kilbourne and Beckmann 1998).

The green movement must develop strategies that will effectively commodify the idea that desiring fewer goods and services (no matter how green they appear to be) is a valuable commodity to acquire and be associated with. If conventional marketing efforts can employ a commodity discourse to furnish individuals with the idea that two cars are better than one (or three better than two), then the very same commodity

discourse can be used by the green movement to encourage people to buy less.

Commodity discourse can be used to seek an alternative, more sustainable relationship between capitalism and the environment. The concept of the *green commodity* thus has a threefold aspect. In one sense, the term refers to goods that are designed, produced, and exchanged while causing minimal detriment to the environment. Companies, such as those in the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), are already beginning to address these issues. This first level focuses on the commodity at the materialist level, and while goods and services produced need to be as ecologically sound as possible, one must also question the production of frivolous products (Kilbourne 1995) and the issue of sustainable consumption. These two areas represent the second and third levels of the green commodity concept proposed here.

From an assessment of the sustainable consumption literature (examples of definitions can be found in Hansen and Schrader 1997; Heiskanen and Pantzer 1997; Salzman 1997; Reisch 1998), it is fair to say, as Reisch (1998) suggests, that *sustainable consumption* is a "fuzzy concept" because the term is ill defined, and existing definitions are very vague, as is the case with other environmental concepts such as sustainable development (Tolba 1987; Pearce, Markandya, and Barbier 1989; O'Connor 1994) and green marketing (McDonagh and Prothero 1997). Despite this, the challenges of sustainable consumption have been recognized globally by governments and were discussed at the historic international conferences on the environment, such as the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and the subsequent Agenda 21 documentation.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the definitions surrounding sustainable consumption in great detail; nonetheless, by using Reisch's (1998) work, we can explore some aspects of the issue that are particularly pertinent to our discussion of the green commodity. Reisch argues that three questions need to be asked regarding the issue of sustainable consumption:

1. Should consumption be sustainable?
2. Are consumers willing to follow rules for sustainable consumption?
3. Can they consume in a sustainable manner?

Reisch (1998) illustrates that in both European and North American research, it has been shown that the message of how consumers could achieve sustainable consumption should be provided in a manner that engages consumers rather than puts them off the whole idea of sustainable consumption practices. This is where one begins to move forward and engage in action that focuses on communication and the exchange of meaning to implement a green commodity discourse. Consequently, the third level of a green commodity discourse is to consider the systems within society that can be

used to commodify the environment in such a way that enables the green message to be communicated to the wider public through the mechanism of the market itself. It is only in this way that one can begin to break down the problems implicit in the existing DSP and its dependence on consumption and materialism. A green commodity discourse needs to be developed that employs positive, persuasive, and communicative characteristics in such a manner that enables ecological objectives to be prioritized and achieved.

Green movements and the organizations that maintain their ideologies must acquire the necessary marketing skills and resources to compete against those organizations that have a vested interest in maintaining current levels of environmental exploitation. Environmental movements cannot continue to operate on the assumption that capitalism has an implicit bias that favors further ecological destruction because the commodity discourse has no such ideological bent. Capitalism need not be forever allied to the cause of eternal environmental exploitation, if those who believe in the merits of ecological responsibility can use its discourses to first popularize and then communicate their message to the wider public. This does mean that green movements must cease to position themselves in opposition to the everyday practice of organizations and consumers. They must redefine themselves as being integral to the mainstream economy rather than hanker after subversive ideals and the romanticism of the revolutionary.

Critics may argue that this is a naive proposal, in which for self-interested reasons, institutions will never willingly instigate changes such as these. However, research at the University of Wales has shown that traditional media techniques can be used to encourage children to consume more fruits and vegetables instead of chocolate, confectionery, and other junk food. Ger (1999) has also shown that it is possible to encourage sustainable consumer behavior by incorporating ecologically sensitive goods and services into existing trends, tastes, and fashions. It has been argued, for example, that green issues need to be glamorous to be successful. There also would seem to be sufficient economic justification to suggest that ecological objectives can be met by changing the types of commodities that we as a society produce and consume and the manner in which we conduct these practices (Cogoy 1995; Young and Sachs 1995). The importance placed on consumption and the acquisition of material possessions does, of course, continue to play an active role in measures of status and the construction of personal and social identity (Ditmar 1992; Ditmar and Pepper 1994). The conceptual basis for a green commodity discourse outlined here does not necessarily require these systems to be abandoned but rather modified. It does not automatically follow that these cultural or social registers cannot be sustained by adopting different types of consumption patterns that use social indicators other than those based primarily on the maximization of quantities of material possessions. Although under the current DSP,

materialism and affluence appear to be aligned almost to the point of positive correlation, this should not be taken as either an unnegotiable or “natural” condition (Belk and Ger 1995). Anthropological work would indicate that under different cultural conditions, status, solidarity, identity, and affluence are just as often based on systems in which individuals seek to limit and minimize overt ownership of material possessions (Gell 1986; Mauss 1966). Studies such as these would suggest that the prospects for achieving ecological goals through the green commodity discourse are at least conceptually possible and maybe even supported by observations of existing consumption practices. However, to achieve long-term and wide-ranging environmental changes, it is necessary for the green commodity discourse to be adopted by many more organizations and by mainstream society generally.

IMPLEMENTING A GREEN COMMODITY DISCOURSE

At present, commodity discourse is organized and operated almost solely in accordance with corporate objectives, which have a vested short-term interest in applying it to the stimulation of ever-greater levels of consumption. The motivations of those who control commodity discourse to modify its application to one that prioritizes greater sensitivity to ecological concerns, sustainable consumption, and the long-term restructuring of capitalist social relations would therefore seem limited. A major challenge facing the development of a theoretical position such as that presented here is therefore to provide feasible mechanisms by which it can be put into practice—that is, to find some level of connection between macroconceptual issues and possible plans of implementation.

It is clear that awareness of green issues does not seem to be a main problem (Dunlap 1991) but rather motivating individuals and institutions to act on this awareness. So while further education and information about ecological issues are undoubtedly valuable, it would seem more constructive to concentrate on the instigation of existing knowledge at the level of everyday behavior and beliefs. There is a role for government, organizations, and individuals in the use of commodity discourse to achieve ecological objectives and interests and thus change our value systems.

The main effort must be directed toward making the green commodity a viable and attractive prospect to all institutions (e.g., government, commerce, nongovernmental organizations [NGOs]) as well as consumers. The key research question to consider is, how can the green commodity become a viable and attractive prospect to a greater number of institutions and consumers? The answer to this difficult question will depend on a pragmatic conceptual basis such as that offered here, rather than an idealistic or ideological preconception regarding the relationship between the development of capitalist culture and the pursuit of ecological goals.

At this juncture, it is important to emphasize examples in which environmental groups are currently working within the current DSP to instigate ecological change. There are numerous examples of green alliances between companies and also between companies and environmental groups (Brown 1997; Hartman and Stafford 1997; Crane 1998). Groups such as Greenpeace, renowned for its famous “attacks” on business, have begun to work together with business, although notes of caution have been made by some as to the sensibility of such moves (Ghazi 1996). At the same time, environmental groups have come under continuing criticism from various quarters that cite “environmental scaremongering” as not being reality (Rowell 1997), on one hand, and organizations that take away people’s rights, such as the Wise Use Movement, on the other (Tokar 1995). The actions of environmental groups working with business are to be commended because working within the system to instigate change appears to be better than the alternative. At the time of writing this article, a Carnival Against Capitalism march was organized in London, England. What was meant to be a peaceful demonstration turned into riotous behavior by some marchers and led to numerous police arrests and financial damage within the city. More recently, similar scenes were witnessed in Seattle, Washington, by numerous groups campaigning against the World Trade Organization. Such actions allow organizations such as the Wise Use Movement and businesses themselves to categorize environmentalists as unreliable lunatics. The chances of altering business behavior as a result of such actions appear minimal.

In some areas, the actions of business are to be commended. The WBCSD—led by two chairs of the large multinationals, the Dow Chemical Company and 3M—has been promoting the concept of eco-efficiency (DeSimone and Popoff 1997). Although written by company executives, it is recognized that environmental processes are not an add-on to business activities but a practice that requires significant change to existing company actions that must be integrated throughout the organization. Eco-efficiency is described as the following:

Eco-efficiency is reached by the delivery of competitively-priced goods and services that satisfy human needs and bring quality of life, while progressively reducing environmental impacts and resource intensity throughout the life cycle, to a level at least in line with the earth’s estimated carrying capacity. (DeSimone and Popoff 1997, 47)

In this sense, the bottom line for companies does not rely solely on profit making. Such actions also correlate to what has been referred to as the “triple bottom line” (Elkington 1998; Brown 1998). In this instance, organizations are judged not only on economic criteria but also for their environmental and social performances. However, organizations such as the WBCSD do not question the existing DSP and how this in

turn leads to increased consumption. It must be recognized that the eco-efficiency of organizations and the triple bottom-line principle also must consider the issue of consuming less, something with which many businesses may not be happy. It is important to further question consumer needs, who creates them, and how to change the materialistic values of consumers in the future.

While the activities of environmental groups and businesses are to be commended, it must still be recognized that current actions do not go far enough in changing the DSP. What is needed is action by businesses that alters the reliance on capitalist goals, such as profit making. While these actions go some way toward achieving the first two aspects of a green commodity, they do not consider the implementation of a green commodity discourse that communicates the alternative set of meanings discussed earlier.

The way forward for implementing a green commodity discourse may be found by abandoning the distinction between commercial interest and social/ecological interest in favor of one based on environmental awareness. It would be a mistake to hold all commercial interests responsible for resistance toward changes to the DSP since, as highlighted above, some organizations are actively involved with ecological initiatives. One objective must be to develop strategies that enable access to commodity discourse by a broader set of social institutions. Organizations that are likely to be most receptive to adapting commodity discourse in accordance with ecological interests can be grouped together as "culture industries." The mass media and the film industry, for example, have shown that they are more than capable of using commodity discourse to capture support, viewers, and subscribers. They are also more receptive to developing goods and services (e.g., films, communication) that mirror issues such as ecology and environmental welfare. A number of local and regional theater companies in the United States, for instance, have been exploring environmental topics (Cless 1996). Other groups, including green pressure groups, governments and international organizations, and an increasing number of commercially orientated companies, can all make a valuable contribution to the repossession of commodity discourse from organizations that undermine ecological concerns. Another area to consider rests on further highlighting the imperfections in the current system, by focusing on issues such as addictive and compensatory consumption and to further emphasize that increased possession of goods does not necessarily lead to an improved quality of life. Similarly, he or she who "dies with the most toys" may not necessarily have led a happier life than a less well-off individual.

CONCLUSION

It would be naive and somewhat arrogant to suggest that we have the answers as to how a green commodity could be

achieved. Conceptually, however, the argument has been made that it is possible to use the commodity discourse to help achieve ecological enlightenment. The DSP and the belief structure of our economy, polity, and society must be changed. The big question, as raised in the previous section, is how? We do not profess to have the answers to this question. This is where further research is needed. We believe the big picture is to change values within the existing DSP. The difficult part is, how do we do this? First, we must recognize that the DSP will not change overnight, and change must be gradual. The activities of groups such as the WBCSD and other organizations attempting to instigate social and environmental change (Drumwright 1994) are welcomed, as is collaboration between companies and environmental groups. There is still a role for pressure groups to lobby business and other environmental groups to attempt to instigate change, as at the Globe conferences in Vancouver, for example. All of this action is not enough. Even with eco-efficient and triple bottom-line companies, a major emphasis is still on the capitalist goal of profit making. We need to change the reliance on this capitalistic goal. How, then, can we move the actions of business forward so that the commodity discourse changes to one of a green commodity discourse? Some suggestions made in the previous section require further research.

The major issue to address is obviously that of power and the prevailing political economy in which we exist. While one may attempt to put the message across via films, for example, we have to recognize the power of the film industry itself. The big Hollywood companies may refuse to support films that promote a green commodity discourse. Similarly, the systemic strategies of companies may force them to implement environmental policies up to a point, as long as this does not take away from the furtherance of capitalist goals. While recognizing these issues to be of primary importance, we still contend that the way forward is to work to alter the existing commodity discourse so that it reflects greater priority for green concerns and environmental issues.

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