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Market practices and over-consumption

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Three things are drawn together to form the basis for this article: the contemporary debates about excessive consumption, a theoretical interest in markets and consumption, and a set of sensivities concerning the study of social practices derived from the sociology of science and techniques. The purpose of the article is to elaborate on how current theorising about markets and consumption within interpretative consumer research and market studies may be furthered by insights from a practice approach. The challenges for marketing provided by the contemporary debates on rampant materialism and excessive consumption were chosen as a suitable site for this discussion. Specifically, the article addresses three issues that emerge at the intersection of market exchange and consumption in the face of uneconomic growth: 1) calculation – how do calculative practices, broadly defined, partake in generating over-consumption? 2) performativity – what is the role of marketing in fuelling over-consumption? 3) agency – how are "over-consumers" constituted in practice?

Keywords: market practices; consumption; calculation; performativity; agency

1. Introduction

> We must consume less. Go home and say to everyone: "We must consume less!" Tell your friends! And tell them that the less we consume, the more we *become* humans. (Carlo Petrini, founder of the "Slow food" movement; Petrini 2006)

There is a growing awareness (and fear) that it will become necessary for western societies to consume *less* in a not so distant future (see e.g. Bekele 1998; Sachs, Birdsall, and Fukuda-Parr 2003; Friends of Europe 2004; Petrini 2006). The global economy is growing rapidly as is global population and it is increasingly being suggested that earth's carrying capacity will be exceeded if current consumption patterns in the industrialised world are replicated by developing nations (see e.g. Heiskanen and Pantzar 1997). In addition, some commentators argue that our current economic growth actually is *un*economic, that is that on an aggregate level the marginal sacrifices (costs) made are greater than the increases in marginal utility (benefits) resulting from economic growth (Daly 1999; see also Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Usually, such claims bring attention to the various negative externalities of consumption, sometimes referred to as *commons problems* (Hardin 1968; Shultz and Holbrook 1999). These are costs that are not accounted for as part of the economic transactions connected to consumption (e.g. negative effects on the environment or on peoples' health).

Claims concerning uneconomic growth and excessive consumption are seldom left uncontested despite increasing empirical evidence brought forward by various civil and governmental organisations, such as the "State of the World" reports (Worldwatch 2004, 2006). Irrespective of how one values the evidence, however, it is difficult to deny that the continued

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spread of consumerist/materialist market society has been mobilised as one central component in this development. It has been brought into the debate as a possible cause and/or accelerator of an impending global crisis, and it is not likely to be easily dismissed despite any difficulties involved in scientifically establishing its role (Kilbourne 2004, 190). The contested character of these claims is partly due to the fact that it has proved difficult to arrive at clear, unambiguous and empirically applicable definitions of both lay terms such as over-consumption and more carefully constructed concepts such as *hyperconsumption* (Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero 1997) and *affluent consumption* (Schaefer and Crane 2005). Similarly, proposed terms for the alternative such as *responsible consumption* (Fisk 1973) and *sustainable consumption* (Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero 1997) have been criticised (as well as praised) for being fuzzy and multiple in character (Dolan 2002; Conolly and Prothero 2003). A central argument in this article is that the establishment of categories such as these cannot be treated as exogenous in relation to the various practices they refer to and which effectively constitute them.

In a continuation of a long tradition of critique against the spread of consumer society (for an overview, see Schor and Holt 2000), the marketing discipline has been implicated as one possible source of fault in the scenario sketched above. Recent charges have suggested that contemporary marketing activities contribute to create and maintain a market system encouraging an ever-growing consumption (see O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy 2002; Hamilton 2003; Kilbourne 2004; Hamilton and Denniss 2005; Abela 2006; Varey 2006). Given the long history of critique, it is not surprising that we now find a growing body of work engaging with the issues of over-, hyper-, affluent, and sustainable consumption within academic marketing (Heiskanen and Pantzar 1997; Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero 1997; Kilbourne 1998; Kilbourne and Beckmann 1998; Prothero and Fitchett 2000; Dolan 2002; Conolly and Prothero 2003; Kilbourne 2004; Schaefer and Crane 2005). Nonetheless, there is still a lack of inquiries into the practical role of marketing in fuelling (over-)consumption.

The work that has been carried out so far, has been inspired by various efforts over the past 20 years to improve our understanding of the social and phenomenological aspects of consumption and their implications for how and why consumers consume (see e.g. Mick 1986; Belk 1988; Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Sherry 1990; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991; Holt 1995; Kozinets 2002). To date, the influence from research seeking to develop our understanding of markets as on-going constructions has been less evident (but see Heiskanen and Pantzar 1997). This line of inquiry, which views markets and other economic orders as constituted by practice, has drawn extensively on the sociology of science and techniques (Callon 1998b; Barry and Slater 2002; Callon, Méadel, and Rabeharisoa 2002; Slater 2002; MacKenzie 2003, 2004; MacKenzie and Millo 2003; Callon and Muniesa 2005; Araujo and Spring 2006; Kjellberg and Helgesson 2006). Given a substantial intellectual overlap between the two traditions, a joining of ideas could benefit both. The purpose of this article is therefore to elaborate on how current theorising about markets and consumption may be furthered by insights from a practice approach, using the relations between the spread of the market, (over)consumption and (un)economic growth as a suitable site for elaboration.

In the remainder of the article I discuss how a practice approach that combines insights from interpretative consumer research and market studies with sensitivities from the sociology of science and techniques may be used to address three research issues that emerge at the intersection of market exchange and consumption in the face of uneconomic growth: 1) the issue of calculation: how do calculative practices, broadly defined, partake in generating over-consumption? 2) the issue of performativity: what is the role of marketing in fuelling over-consumption? 3) the issue of agency: how are "over-consumers" constituted in practice?

2. The costs and benefits of consumption: calculative practices of consumers, marketers and economists

"Are we consuming too much?" was the title of a recent article co-authored by 11 prominent economists and ecologists including one Nobel laureate (Arrow et al. 2004). The central issue dealt with in the article is by what criterion we should judge whether consumption is or is not excessive. At stake in such discussions are our conceptions of value, costs and benefits of consumption, as well as the methods we use to monitor consumption, the standards by which we determine what constitutes *over*-consumption and the ways by which we assess whether a particular instance of consumption meets that standard or not. That is to say, the issue of over-consumption revolves centrally around the various consequences that we ascribe to consumption.[1]

However, it has been argued that ordinary consumers may have little knowledge about the consequences of their consumption (Heiskanen and Pantzar 1997, 409). This is reflected in the notion of *hyperconsumption* defined as consumption where certain consequences have been obscured, specifically where there is a "total separation of the object of consumption from nature" (Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero 1997, 8).[2] The import of this faltering link between consumption and the consequences ascribed to it is central among other things to proposals aiming to further sustainable consumption through education (e.g. Shultz and Holbrook 1999, 221). It is also central to a number of theoretical developments within economics over the past decades that have focused precisely on expanding the frame for evaluating economic exchanges (Callon 1998a), for instance, transaction cost economics (e.g. Carroll and Teece 1999) and health economics (e.g. Drummond et al. 2005).

More directly related to the issue of over-consumption, the emergence of environmental economics as a sub-discipline within economics during the past 25 years has revolved largely around efforts to account for "nonuse values" (Castle 1999; Mazzotta and Kline 1995). By employing concepts such as revealed preferences and survey techniques such as contingent valuation (e.g. in the valuation of public goods [Kahneman and Knetsch 1992]), these efforts seek to internalise – translate into market values – what have previously been considered externalities in economic models (cf. Callon 1998a, 256). This expansion of economics has of course accompanied the wider social development of consumer society with its "relentless commodification of all areas of social life" (Schor and Holt 2000, viii). Surprisingly, though, the marketing discipline has paid relatively scant attention to these and other commons problems (Shultz and Holbrook 1999, 219).

The expansion of environmental economics referred to above has been successful insofar as its application, and particularly the use of cost-benefit analysis (e.g. Arrow et al. 1996), now seems to have become a required basis for policy decisions that include evaluations of the consequences of current consumption patterns. As an example, consider the following statement from the European Union:

> **Why do we use economics in environmental policy?**
>
> The main reason is that in our society the environment has become a scarce resource. Since economics is about how to tackle scarce resources, it can often be useful when dealing with environmental problems.
>
> One way of using economics is to ensure that the costs and the benefits of environmental measures are well balanced. Although it is difficult to estimate costs and benefits, there is an increasing demand that this is done before new environmental policy is decided on a European level. (European Union website)

As is explicitly recognised in the excerpt, environmental cost-benefit analysis is not without its problems. One argument raised against attempts by economists to assign market values to non-market goods revolves around the idea that "individual preferences cannot be fully expressed in the narrow realm of market exchange" (Gowdy 1997, 31). Individuals are not only consumers but also (for instance) citizens. Consequently, what is good for the individual as indicated by market signals may be an inadequate reflection of individual choice in a more universal context.[3]

But the problems involved in re-framing economic exchange tend to go beyond the "technical issues" of estimating costs and benefits. What is arguably the most fundamental critique of environmental economics has been levelled from an environmental philosophy perspective. According to these critics, the very idea of trying to convert (*reduce* would perhaps be a word more consistent with the critique) environmental values to market values is faulty (Mazzotta and Kline 1995). To convey the fundamental character of the critique, Booth (1992, 59) likens the objection to that against slavery: if the natural world is held to be morally considerable, then it is as wrong to place nature in the stream of commerce as it is to place human beings there.

Another source of controversy has been the conceptualisation of consumption. Several scholars addressing the issues of green marketing and sustainable consumption have argued for the need for a better, different, more encompassing theory of consumption than that which portrays consumption simply as a consequence of information processing and choice (Dolan 2002; Conolly and Prothero 2003; Schaefer and Crane 2005). In this respect, the inclusion of hedonistic, symbolic and communicative aspects of consumption has been suggested (Schaefer and Crane 2005). Thus, not only the costs, but also the benefits of consumption are at stake.

Another problem raised by Dolan (2002, 172) is that there is no simple relation between the development of ever more sophisticated methods of evaluation and their actual employment in concrete exchange situations. Indeed, concrete attempts to take more (or less) consequences than before into account in connection to some economic exchange often meet with resistance since the re-drawing of such boundaries tends to have negative consequences for some involved party. On the production side of economic exchange, we may for instance think of the reactions of a chemical manufacturer being required to take future environmental consequences into account in an investment calculation for a new production plant. On the consumption side, we may think of the reactions of persons living in rural areas facing environmentally motivated taxes on petrol (e.g. taxation of CO2-emissions). In both cases, the changes are likely to trigger resistance from certain constituencies based on the interests that the prevailing exchange practices have endowed them with; it would thus seem appropriate to characterise the (re-)framing of economic exchange as a political process (cf. Fligstein 1996).

Despite considerable disagreement both concerning fundamental assumptions[4] and specific solutions, most scholars seem to agree that the accounting of costs and benefits are somehow intimately connected to the issue of over-consumption. This has also been put forward as an important challenge for consumer research in relation to the currently dominant economic order – the market system – and its consequences for consumption levels. Thus it has been suggested that there is a need to better account for how consumption meets both existential and experiential needs and to establish a "clear accounting of the real costs of consumer choices" (Csikszentmihalyi 2000, 271). As indicated above, interpretive consumer research has added an additional challenge by proposing that any effort to address the issue of over-consumption needs to account also for emotional aspects. This challenge was recently highlighted in the work of Belk, Ger, and Askegaard on passionate consumption: "This dialectical tension [between the positive and negative effects of desire] cannot be resolved by reason, rationality, calculation, planning, and intention formation, at least not without killing desire in the process" (2003, 334).

Based on these various contributions it is possible to sketch the problem complex surrounding the issue of calculating the existence and effects of over-consumption. This includes the framing of individual instances of consumption so that calculations reasonably account for their consequences, an issue which is likely to meet with resistance from at least some of the parties involved. At the same time, there is a need to account for the calculations that these parties actually perform since they contribute to the observed instances of consumption. Further, some means of aggregating the individual instances of consumption are needed to generate a wider pattern of consumption. As if this was not difficult enough, such calculations face the dual challenge of accounting for the intrinsic values of nature – raised by deep ecology – and accounting for the elusive values of desire – raised by interpretative consumer research. In the following section I will draw on sensitivities that have emerged from efforts to study practices mainly within science and technology studies to sketch how a practice approach to markets may assist us in dealing with these challenges.

2.1 Inquiring into the calculative practices of consumption

So far I have provided no definition of consumption, or of over-consumption, for that matter. This is deliberate. Following a radical tradition developed within the social studies of science and technology, one of the basic assumptions informing this article is that the make-up and character of nature is essentially indeterminate (cf. Grint and Woolgar 1992, 367; Latour 2004). There is thus no outside perspective or in-principle-view to be had on earth's carrying capacity, nor any objectively correct definition of sustainability. Rather than engaging in the construction of such distinctions – which would be a perfectly legitimate approach, albeit one for which I am less suited – my modest claim is that we may learn other and potentially practically useful things by not excluding the construction of categories from inquiry (e.g. over-consumption, sustainability, carrying capacity, etc.). As Grint and Woolgar (1992, 368) put it: "we can aim for a systematic understanding of which kinds of version win the day, in what circumstances, and why."

Charges concerning over-consumption and suggestions on how to achieve sustainable consumption usually focus on a particular type of consumption – that which literally uses up some thing or some quality in a thing. That is, they are not generally concerned with consumption as a system of signs (Baudrillard [1970] 1998) nor with the kind of creative acts that some authors link to consumption (de Certeau 1984). As we saw above, some authors argue that this is an important flaw in how these issues are currently being constructed. In addition, there is no consensus on the instances of consumption that meet the criterion of depletion. In practice, this means that the very definition of consumption is likely to be part of that which is being constructed, contested and performed through *calculative practices of consumption* (i.e. the various operations made to distinguish, order, align and associate particular objects of consumption with specific consuming subjects [Callon and Muniesa 2005]). The paragraphs above provided some examples of this. In addition, such efforts require the stabilisation of accounting units – subjects – that can be isolated from an environment, for example nations, regions, industries, corporations, consumers, and so forth (de Certeau 1984).

Rather than privileging anything or anyone at the outset of inquiry, then, an important objective of the practice approach proposed here is to provide a *symmetrical* account of the production of over-consumption (Law 1994). Thus we should employ the same register to account for the construction and spread of claims irrespective of whether these claims subsequently come to be regarded as true or false (Bloor 1976), or whether they refer to relations that are labelled social, natural, technical or cultural (Callon 1986). It is by following actors who engage in controversial issues and using their discourses to reflect on their practice, that we can assess the construction of consumption and its associations to various entities such as consumers and nature (Latour 1987; Grint and Woolgar 1992). Below, I draw on these sensitivities derived from the sociology of science and techniques to outline three steps that will be beneficial for inquiring into the calculative practices of over-consumption.

Step one: deny nature and culture. As illustrated by the controversy between environmental economics and deep ecology discussed above, any inquiry into the calculative practices of over-consumption will be handicapped at the outset if it starts out by assuming a clear division between nature, culture and the economy. The whole issue of enacting, from the processes that constitute reality, an economic realm as distinct from both a cultural and a natural one is part of the outcome of calculative practices. In this sense, inquiring into the calculative practices of over-consumption is about unveiling how the economy is made "visible and measurable qua economy" (Miller 2001, 379). How distinctions such as these are created and maintained through calculative practices and how they are drawn upon in accounting for costs and benefits are parts of the object of inquiry.[5]

From a practice perspective culture is not a collection of things but a process in which every-day practices are enacted; the things are residua of that process (Hutchins 1995). A similar claim has been made concerning nature, that is that what is referred to when people speak about nature are in fact countless and changing, materially heterogeneous collectives made up of both humans and non-humans (Latour 2004). Empirical work conducted within science studies have illustrated that by dissolving nature and culture as à priori categories, we may inquire into their constitution (Callon 1986; Latour 1987). To this end, nature, culture and the economy may be fruitfully regarded as entities that are being enacted through metrological systems, allowing inquiries that go beyond the face value of distinctions between an original nature worth preserving and the (mostly detrimental) effects of human interference (Latour 2004).

Step two: discard human desire and rationality. As with the nature-culture-economy distinction, inquiries into the calculative practices that accompany consumption will be handicapped by employing a model of individual cognition. From a practice perspective "intelligence is inseparable from the everyday struggles and pleasures that it articulates" (de Certeau 1984, xx). A focus on practice implies privileging *performance* over *competence*; *making do* over *planning*; *ontology* over *epistemology*, and so forth. Carried out in such a tradition, the work on distributed cognition by Hutchins (1995) has sensitised us to the wider ramifications of cognitive processes. Hutchins suggests that by committing at the outset of inquiry to the idea that all intelligence lies inside the inside/outside distinction so successfully defended by cognitive psychology, we may easily attribute properties to the wrong system. These insights suggest that the study of calculative practices requires tools for understanding action-reaction sequences without resorting to models based on the cognitive capacities of individual actors (elaborated on in the fourth section of this article).

As a consequence of such a move, the distinction between emotionality and rationality is also dissolved. In response to the cognitive hegemony in social scientific accounts of human action, some scholars have called for increased attention to passion and desire (e.g. Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003); others have emphasised the need to study the interplay between rationality and emotionality (e.g. Massey 2001). More radically, it has been suggested that the very distinction is false and that it needs to be abandoned along with the favouring of the cognitive over the emotional in social science (Mumby and Putnam 1992).[6] A practice approach to consumption calculation allows us to inquire into the possible construction/perpetuation of a distinction between emotionality and rationality as part of the politics of explaining over-consumption.

Step three: study calculative practices. Compared to the first two steps this one will probably be easier to accept in principle. In practice, however, it is likely to be the most difficult by far. Today, it is becoming increasingly difficult not to stumble over the concept of practice also in various sub-disciplines of business administration. However, as observed by Bloch (1998) with respect to the growing interest in "practice" within anthropology, there is still a relative paucity of thorough empirical accounts.

Influenced by efforts to empirically investigate calculative and representational practices within science studies (Porter 1995; Latour 1999, particularly chap. 2), market studies have started to investigate "the calculative practices that make the economy visible and measurable qua economy" (Miller 2001, 379) as well as the practical realisation of calculative agencies and devices (Callon and Muniesa 2005). In selecting sites for such inquiries, the sociology of science and techniques has highlighted the importance of arriving before the facts (Latour 1987), that is, of locating *hot* areas, where the constitution of the world is still being debated (Callon 1998a). This development towards an "anthropology of calculation" (Callon, Millo, and Muniesa 2007) has carefully avoided a formal, quantitative conception of calculation as opposed to judgement. Instead, these efforts have emphasised the importance of establishing "a continuum between qualitative judgement and quantitative (or numeric) calculation" (Callon and Muniesa 2005, 1232; see also Cochoy 2002).

What, then, would the empirical study of calculative practices of (over-) consumption entail? Playing with the terms used by de Certeau (1984), it would amount to studying the tactics of crafting strategies. A practice approach would seek to trace in detail how some things are practically isolated, measured and subsequently brought from one place to another to be ordered and/or ranked (Callon and Muniesa 2005). This could include observing how entities are extracted/isolated from a network of associations; how properties are subsequently ascribed to such entities; how such entities are grouped together, ordered and/or ranked according to some logic; how such logics are constructed through the establishment of values; how certain actors seek to perform and attach pre-calculations to entities to be drawn upon by others when interacting with those entities; how value conflicts are practically resolved as part of the performance of calculations.

All in all, the systematic inquiry into the calculative practices of consumption represents a major empirical challenge. The potential rewards, however, are appealing. First, the focus on calculative practices makes it possible to study the economy in the making. Given the expansion of market society and the associated growth of consumption based on commodity exchange, this is an important line of inquiry. Second, by emphasising "doing", a practice approach offers a radically different take on the subject of rationality and emotionality. Finally, as demonstrated by Mol's (2002) work on multiplicity (see also Kjellberg and Helgesson 2006), seemingly inconsistent versions of reality may well be practically compatible. Thus, empirical inquiries into calculative practices may provide insights into the practical resolution of value conflicts such as those implied above in relation to over-consumption.

3. The role of marketing: performativity and multiplicity in market(ing) practices

The second issue raised by the current debate about the consequences of an expanding market society concerns the role of marketing. An important part of the critique raised against the market economy has been levelled against "the marketing system" for directly fuelling over-consumption (see O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy 2002; Abela 2006; Varey 2006). This line of critique has a long history and can be found in the works of authors such as Adorno and Horkheimer, Galbraith, Packard and others (Schor and Holt 2000; Witkowski 2005). Does marketing produce over-consumption? In the current debate we find two stances that are remarkably similar to those found in the American gun debate. Either marketing is put forward as a neutral tool, simply serving to better market society, or it is held to be a prime mover in driving excessive consumption. Consider the following two excerpts illustrating the stances:

> Whatever role marketing has had on the creation of a consumerism tied to the narrowest form of hedonism, it has been in the role more of facilitator than of manufacturer. […] Consumers […] really do want to feel unrestrained … (O'Shaugnessy and O'Shaugnessy 2002, 544)

> The advertising industry is the primary agent of this massive deception [that something is missing … yet to sustain hope that more of what has so far failed will ultimately succeed]. To protect itself it hides behind an elaborate façade. The official story is that advertising helps discerning consumers make informed choices about how best to spend their money. This ideology of consumer sovereignty is used to establish and maintain a taboo. (Hamilton 2003, 89)

The excerpts are examples of discourses that seek to constitute marketing in radically different ways. The neutral tool construction relies on a principle of consumer sovereignty to establish that it is wrong to make moral judgements about consumer preferences. From such a standpoint, marketers are only doing what is required of them, which is to seek to fulfil pre-existing demand (cf. Witkowski 2005). The prime mover construction, on the other hand, rests on the establishment of some more encompassing whole (e.g. a system, a dominant paradigm, an ideology) to which specific goals are attributed (cf. Kilbourne 2004). Marketing is then positioned as an obedient servant in the hands of either the producers, portrayed as captains of consciousness (Ewen 1976), or some more anonymous *dominant group* who use it to legitimate and support their interests (Kilbourne 2004).

In terms of empirical studies addressing the issue, some attention has been given to how societies learn to consume (Tse, Belk, and Zhou 1989), to concrete efforts made to escape market society (Kozinets 2002) and to various social movements advocating such changes (Kozinets and Handelman 2004). Despite this, calls for further research on the many and complex issues involved have been common (Mick 2003; Abela 2006). Indeed, remarkably little effort has been put into empirically examining the relationship between marketing theories and current consumption patterns.

There are two related theoretical ideas within mainstream marketing that can account for this lack of empirical work among those who construct the neutral tool version of marketing. First, the relation between marketing theory and marketing practice has been conceived largely in terms of managerial relevance. This has been – and still is – dealt with from a very academy-centric perspective where the issue of relevance is discussed epistemologically rather than ontologically. Indeed, it has been suggested that the marketing academy perpetuates the Cartesian idea of a gap between the world of ideas (marketing theory) and the world out there (marketing practice) out of its own interests (Brownlie and Saren 1997). As a result, managerial relevance is conceived of as perceived fit between concepts/models and re-presentations of marketing. The consequence of this has been a systematic neglect of the theoretical – or more generally, *ideo*logical – influences that *do* inform marketing practices. Second, this academy-centrism has been coupled with a fairly simplistic or even naive view of how theories spread. Theories are implicitly regarded as being immutably mobile (Latour 1987), that is they are assumed to travel and spread without changing. This has implied that low impact is a sign of unsuccessful research. The ones to blame are the researchers who either have been unable to formulate any useful theories, or have failed in transferring them to practitioners (Brennan and Turnbull 2002).

Among those constructing the prime mover version of marketing, one might expect some interest in empirically examining this relationship. However, as Kilbourne (2004, 190) argues, the scientific requirements to be expected from the other side in the debate may have acted as a drag on efforts to empirically establish the relation. "At each phase of the process [through which advertising produces environmental problems], the link must be established to the satisfaction of the marketing academy if it is to be motivated to engage in self-examination" (Kilbourne 2004, 191). It is perfectly possible that some have taken this difficulty as an excuse for remaining in the trenches. If nothing else, such a stance would lend support to the self-image of a radical and outsider. By doing so, however, popular presentations that polarise and deepen the animosity rather than bring constructive solutions to the table, are left to carry their message (cf. Prothero and Fitchett 2000, 46).

Here, market studies have introduced the notion of performativity to highlight the import of theories (or ideas more generally) on the realisation of economic orders (MacKenzie 2003, 2004; MacKenzie and Millo 2003; Law and Urry 2004; Kjellberg and Helgesson 2006). These efforts suggest that marketing (appearing both in the guise of theory and as concrete activities) is neither as innocent nor as potent as protagonists in such debates have us believe (cf. O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy 2002; Abela 2006). Social studies of scientific practices have suggested that the spread of any thing – whether an idea, a text, a token, or a good – without changing represents an exception that requires a special explanation (Latour 1986). This calls for careful empirical investigations of the particular arrangements of practices through which market and marketing theories are enacted and through which they thus spread. It is somewhat ironic, then, that this line of inquiry recently was enrolled in support of the prime mover/"hand-in-glove" view of marketing (cf. Shankar, Whittaker, and Fitchett 2006, 488). Some theory or other influences marketers – including formalised models and know-how constructed "on the job" – and their actions contribute in important ways to the realisation of markets. However, they do so non-exclusively, suggesting that the practical co-ordination of multiple efforts to shape markets, including those of marketers, regulators and consumers are important to study.

To this end, it has been proposed that we need to discard the modern and radical assumption that there is a gap between ideas and reality (Kjellberg and Helgesson 2006). A practice approach starts out in flatland. Then it attends to the practices through which certain *packages of associations* (a convenient shorthand for ideas and theories, which allows for variation in form) are *translated* (transported and transformed) to create and maintain differences and distinctions. The emphasis is on the need for detailed empirical studies of how marketing ideas, and the practices informed by them, take part in performing consumer society. Similar to how sociologists of science and technology have proposed to address the guns versus people issue (Grint and Woolgar 1992; Latour 1999), we should study how marketers and marketing devices are combined and how such combinations partake in the production of consumption. Such inquiries are likely to provide both a more nuanced and a more practically useful account of the role of marketing than those provided from either side of the ideological trenches (cf. Prothero and Fitchett 2000).

4. The constitution of actors: identity and agency of over-consumers

Growing concerns about the consequences of western consumption patterns with individuals routinely behaving in environmentally irresponsible ways, often despite express self-identification as environmentalists (Conolly and Prothero 2003, 282), have sparked efforts to outline an environmental virtue ethics (see e.g. Wensveen 1999; Sandler and Cafaro 2005). These efforts assert that certain character traits (e.g. gluttony, greed, arrogance and apathy) are at the base of environmentally harmful behaviour (Cafaro 2005), and that these traits are worth reforming. Similar suggestions are often made by the growing number of organisations devoted to curbing over-consumption, for instance, the affluenza-movement:

> Never before have our emerging environmental crises been laid out so clearly before us. Rather than shouting from the fringes, respected economists, scientists, and politicians are sounding the warnings in high-profile journals and the halls of government – warnings that our oceans are dying, that the ice shelves are melting, and that we are setting ourselves up for the most massive and devastating market failure humanity has ever seen.
>
> So we recycle our garbage. We vote greener. We buy sleek, new hybrid cars and fill our houses with energy-efficient light bulbs. And we put our money and faith in the brave and ingenious technologies that will rescue us from the whirlwind.

> But it won't be enough. Because this is not, fundamentally, a technological problem. Nor is it, fundamentally, a political problem. This is a problem of appetites, and of narcissism, and of self-deceit. The planet is breaking, and it is breaking under the weight of our hunger for more. *To reform the world, we must first reform ourselves.* (Affluenza website; italics added)

These critiques often emphasise a measure of personal responsibility at the level of individual consumers, or as Cafaro (2005, 154) puts it, they locate "evil squarely within people". In this connection it has been argued that opponents of consumerism fail to recognise the pervasiveness of desire as a motive for consumption in modern society, and that they would "do better by attempting to envision equally compelling sources of desire and hope" (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003, 348; see also Prothero and Fitchett 2000). Instead, ideas on how to achieve the necessary reformation of character typically fall into one of three categories: i) *temperance*, the (self-)moderation of our supposedly natural appetite for pleasures of the senses; ii) *regulation*, the setting up of a system of rules and sanctions against specific behaviours; and iii) *protection*, the ordering of everyday situations so as to keep temptations at a minimum. On closer inspection, none of these solutions is really concerned with reforming human character. Rather, they represent ways in which to prevent this character from revealing itself. The cause of this, I suggest, is to be found in the reliance on an essentialist view of human character.

4.1 An anti-essential approach to (over-)consumers

I suggest that an anti-essentialist conceptualisation of (over-)consumers combining insights from interpretive consumer research and market studies may offer additional insights here. First, assuming that consumer identities are plastic offers a better starting point for inquiring into the diverse motives that may fuel consumption than does an essentially static view based on preferences or character traits (for a similar argument, see Schaefer and Crane 2005). Second, turning our attention to *how actors become* rather than to *what they are* allows us to better understand the process through which over-consumers are created and appreciate how they may (be) change(d). To this end, I combine the notions of the *extended self* (Belk 1988) and *consumption practices* (Holt 1995) – or more generally, *market practices* (Kjellberg and Helgesson 2007) – with the anti-essentialist stance that actors are results (Callon and Latour 1981; Latour 1986).

The extended self (Belk 1988) offers a good starting point for exploring possible motives for consumption, focusing primarily on the symbolic contribution of possessions to our sense of self. However, the concept has been criticised for being imprecise about when to speak of an object as being incorporated in a person's sense of self rather than simply being important (Cohen 1989). Indeed, Belk notes that "some possessions are more central to self than others" (1988, 152). Since this formulation lacks both temporality and spatiality it implies the existence of a universal sense of self that is valid across every situation encountered. As elaborated by Andersson, Aspenberg, and Kjellberg (2008), actors often appear in varying guises across situations, suggesting that any "total self" would consist of a number of versions of self subsumed under a common label. Thus, there are two facets to the relation that Belk suggests (and Cohen criticises). First, some possessions are more central to *a specific version of* self than others. Second, some possessions *are included in* more such versions of self than others.

A related issue, raised by Holt's attention to *consumption practices* – "what people do when they consume" (1995, 1) – concerns what Belk refers to as the literal extension of self, as opposed to the symbolic (Belk 1988, 145). As Holt shows, we may enrich our understanding of consumers and consumption by detailing particular actions related to how people use their possessions (Holt 1995, 12–13).[7] This is further underscored by recent contributions in market studies, which suggest that markets (and other economic orders) are constituted by practices that simultaneously shape the involved agents (Callon and Muniesa 2005; Kjellberg and Helgesson 2007).

Here, increased conceptual precision is offered by the distinction between primary and secondary processes emphasised in the sociology of translation (Akrich and Latour 1992) and which similes de Certeau's (1984) distinction between tactics and strategies. Whether or not something takes part in performing an acting entity in interaction with others – this is the primary process – can be conceived as determined by those others with which it interacts (Latour 1994). Agency is situational. As far as the literal extension of self is concerned, then, we should empirically examine practical interactions where others come to treat a collective of heterogeneous elements as one. In focus here are "the ways of operating", *metis*; the ways in which associations are forged between entities in specific situations. Conceiving this process as one of interdefinition, consisting of prescriptions and subscriptions (Akrich and Latour 1992), may be a useful guide for such inquiries.

Whether or not something takes part in constituting the symbolic identity of an actor, on the other hand, can be conceived as the result of a secondary process through which actions are ascribed to some entity (Akrich and Latour 1992). In de Certeau's words, such an operation "becomes possible when a subject of will and power […] can be isolated from an 'environment'" (de Certeau 1984, xix). This process of ascription involves reflection or self-reflection (cf. Giddens 1991); the creation of a "reflexive loop" requiring re-presentations of both actions and acting entities (Andersson, Aspenberg, and Kjellberg 2008). Concerning the symbolic extension of self, then, we should examine the re-presentational practices employed by actors, including both internal and distributed cognitive processes (cf. Hutchins 1995). Only by examining literal and symbolic extension in combination can we inquire into the specific action-reaction sequences that produce environmentally irresponsible behaviour.

To avoid conceptual confusion, we may introduce a conceptual distinction here between *actors*, defined as entities to which actions are attributed, and *actants*, defined as whatever acts in a practical situation (Latour 1987, 1994). Actants may be thought of as materially heterogeneous collectives that have been temporarily punctualised as part of the primary process (i.e. which others treat as one in some specific situation). Since some entities (e.g. human individuals) may be involved in performing several such actants, they may come to work as common labels under which several actants are subsumed as part of the secondary process. We can thus think of an actor as an aggregation of actants subsumed under a common label to which certain actions are ascribed (Andersson, Aspenberg, and Kjellberg 2008).

To illustrate: I recently flew back and forth to Manchester, out on Tuesday, back on Thursday. The day after my return home I bought a Toyota Prius. Both actions were and continue to be ascribed to the self-proclaimed environmentalist Hans Kjellberg by several others, both formally in passenger lists and car registration documents, and informally by friends, colleagues and family members. This ascription is possible since the actants involved in the two situations shared at least one important component – me. At the same time, the make-up of the two actants also differed considerably, providing them with quite different capacities.

How can the proposed conceptualisation contribute to our understanding of issues related to over-consumption? Let us first consider resolutions to the so-called commons dilemmas, that is situations where selfish/individualistic decisions produce undesirable consequences for a group as a whole (Shultz and Holbrook 1999). As suggested by Belk, the recognition that we (and others) may perceive ourselves to share part of our extended selves with others – that certain elements may be non-exclusively associated to specific selves – provides a potential explanation to civic responsibility, patriotism and charity (Belk 1988, 154). In the context of the current paper, it seems appropriate to add efforts to improve the environment to this list. If Belk is correct, then the decreasing tendency to act "for the greater good" which affluenza and other movements claim characterises consumer capitalist societies, implies that we are becoming less and less willing to share parts of our extended selves with others. Given that an increased spread of market exchange turns more and more objects into commodities, which by definition are associated with property rights, extended actors will increasingly come to be constituted by an owner and its exclusively associated properties.

Market proponents commonly argue that by expanding market governance to more and more spheres of society, we are simply giving people a choice. But the dual conception of extended actors and actants proposed above offers an alternative reading of this argument for an ever-increasing expansion of market society. A reading, however, which does not depend on the construction of some insidious puppeteer. If actants are constituted in context, then a proliferation of market contexts will also lead to a proliferation of consumer actants. This will result in more and more instantiations of self-centred, choosing individuals. The partial, symbolic selves that accompany such instantiations will also become increasingly important for our sense of self. Pinocchio's visit to the Land of Toys and subsequent transformation to a donkey springs to mind (Collodi 1986). Allowed to spread to more and more areas of society, capitalist markets will gradually turn every social encounter into one performing a buyer/consumer and a seller/supplier. Thus we may complement Cochoy's (2002) imagery of the consumer as the donkey caught between two haystacks with a story of whence the donkey came.

There are also more positive merits of the anti-essentialist view of economic actors sketched here. If the acquisition of objects can extend our selves, both in action and symbolically, some such objects are likely to extend us also in our capacities as buyers and consumers. By offering a tool for investigating the link between over-consumption and particular agential configurations, this approach may thus produce concrete advice on how to alter the capacities and identities of (over-)consumers by associating and disassociating entities from the heterogeneous collectives that perform them. This provides a useful extension of the pragmatic efforts of Prothero and Fitchett (2000) who suggest ways in which commodity discourse can be employed in furthering less resource intensive consumption. Increased understanding of successful agential configurations is likely to provide proponents of alternatives to the present version of consumer society with a much-needed set of construction tools.

5. Concluding remarks

In this article I have discussed how interpretative consumer research and market studies may fruitfully exploit sensitivities from the sociology of science and techniques when addressing three issues in relation to current debates about the merits and drawbacks of the market system. My choice of issues has been biased towards those that I have found to be particularly important from a marketing perspective.

To summarise, I have argued that a practice approach to markets and marketing can assist us in dealing constructively with the issues of calculation, performativity and agency in relation to over-consumption. In short, I have suggested the following. 1) By studying how calculative practices perform the economy, rather than inferring calculations or their absence to cognitive and emotional predispositions in actors within a pre-existing socioeconomic context, we may gain new insights into the growth of consumer society and into the practical resolution of the value conflicts that accompany this growth. 2) By inquiring into how diverse packages of associations are translated into marketing activities, rather than treating relevance as an issue of epistemological fit inferred from the diffusion of marketing theories, we may better understand the shifting role of marketing (performed both as theory and practice) in fuelling over-consumption. 3) By assuming an anti-essentialist view of agency that attends to both the primary configuration of actants and the secondary ascription of qualities to actors, we may inquire into how over-consumers are being constituted and generate new insights into how they (can be) change(d). As I have tried to show throughout the paper, inquiries along these lines may contribute in important ways to research in the field of interpretative consumer research, particularly by offering additional resources/novel takes on issues that have been subject to considerable attention already.

There is also an important implication of this article for two other groups, namely environmental moralists and morally lax marketers: Shape up! If environmental moralists are serious about their quest, then they need to reconsider how they have been going about it so far. The suggestion that they need to become more seductive (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003) is only the tip of the iceberg. The devices at work in performing consumer society operate at multiple levels and with considerable cunning; they need to be appropriated in the construction of alternative compelling narratives (cf. Simakova and Neyland, 2008). Similarly, marketers need to recognise that their increasingly sophisticated practices have consequences on value scales beyond sales figures. The *give-them-what-they-want* school of marketing theory and practice (Shankar, Whittaker, and Fitchett 2006) will not continue to provide absolution for evermore-invasive procedures. Seriously engaging with and appropriating values from relevant constituencies may be one source of navigation equipment for the future.

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Notes

1. A clarification is in place concerning the term consumption. Most standard definitions emphasise the literal meaning of the term, that is the using up of some entity. Given this, it is disappointing that the article by Arrow et al. (2004) contains no discussion of central concepts such as utility and the social costs of consumption. In addition, a growing body of empirical studies of consumption practices have emphasised the creative aspects of consumption, for example “The ‘making’ in question is a production, a *poiesis* […] it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its *ways of using* the products imposed by a dominant economic order” (de Certeau 1984, xii–xiii). There is thus scope for a much wider set of considerations when discussing over-consumption.
2. For an empirical illustration of how consumers acknowledge the need to take the environment into account in order for it to affect their actions, see the study of how Irish consumers view the issue of consumption and the environment by Conolly and Prothero (2003, specifically page 283).
3. Another source of critique has been the failure of environmental economists to present convincing arguments for their choices of discount rates for calculating “the present value” of future consequences of policy decisions (Castle 1999).
4. The conflict between environmental economics and deep ecology derives from an ontological divide. The economics approach relies on individual preferences expressed through consumer choice as the only “real” indication of value, resting squarely in a subjective, anthropocentric tradition. Radical environmental philosophy, on the other hand, rests on an ontological assumption that “there is a real world outside the human mind” (Gowdy 1997, 34). Moreover, this world is held to have intrinsic value so that “natural assets should be preserved for reasons independent of their values as expressed by people [in market or induced market contexts]” (Mazzotta and Kline 1995, 247).
5. This is also the primary reason why I find it impossible to draw extensively on the work of Kilbourne and colleagues on the Dominant Social Paradigm (Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero 1997; Kilbourne 1998; Kilbourne and Beckmann 1998; Kilbourne 2004). This approach doubtlessly has many merits to it. By constructing economic, political and technological structures and by linking those

to system-wide effects it can be used to shift the blame for the current situation from individuals to certain dominant groups. Due to the many components of the world under study it puts in place already at the outset of inquiry, I find it less useful for studying the practical shaping of consumption, however.

6. Writing in organisation studies, Mumby and Putnam focus on the overt and covert emotional management of organisational members, suggesting that recruitment, selection, socialisation and performance requirements in organisations transform feelings into a form of alienated, abstract labour; a commodity that may be exchanged for organisational ends. Operating less explicitly, they suggest that efforts to manage organisational culture, for example through rituals and ceremonies, may be a way of controlling our emotional experience and thus aligning a member's emotions with a particular organisational rationality (Mumby and Putnam 1992).
7. For a similar argument specifically related to research on sustainable consumption, see Dolan (2002, 177).

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