Book Review/Compte rendu

Andrew Szasz, *Shopping Our Way to Safety: How We Changed from Protecting the Environment to Protecting Ourselves*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, 320 pp., $US 24.95 hardcover (978-0-8166-3508-5).

In *Agriculture and Human Values* (2007, 24:261–264), noted American food scholar Julie Guthman recently published a column entitled, "Why I am fed up with Michael Pollan et al." As most *CJS* readers probably know, Michael Pollan is North American's most popular writer on food issues, and author of the bestselling *Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006), as well as *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto* (2008). To criticize Pollan seems nothing short of sacrilege. However, Guthman makes a powerful point: Pollan's individualized focus on what to eat and how to connect with local growers has the effect of drawing public attention away from the structural causes and collective solutions required to fix the industrial food system. Guthman charges that the new wave of food writing has become "a progenitor of a neoliberal anti-politics that devolves regulatory responsibility to consumers via their dietary choices" (p. 264).

Critiquing the individualism of today's "conscientious consumer" is not just a concern for food scholars; it raises questions for sociologists interested in inequality, sustainability, and consumer culture. *Shopping our Way to Safety*, written by Andrew Szasz, the chair of Sociology at the University of California Santa Cruz, is an important contribution to this debate. Szasz makes a powerful and politically astute argument about the wrong-headedness of individualized solutions to collective environmental problems, and takes the reader through the promises and pitfalls of consuming our way out of environmental crises.

Szasz begins the book with some fascinating history, particularly a chapter about the fallout shelter panic of 1961. As the prospect of nuclear war loomed, American families were urged to protect themselves by building a family fallout shelter. State-sponsored bunkers never materialized, but individual families were encouraged to take self-protective action. Advice ranged from washing off radioactive particles in the shower (assuming of course, that nuclear Armageddon would leave public water systems intact), to "fall flat and cover your head," to purchase a $700 do-it-yourself fallout shelter featured in *Life* magazine. When faced with more information about the scale and severity of nuclear war, most

Americans realized that a basement bunker wasn't going to offer meaningful protection. A state solution — negotiation and eventual détente with the Soviet Union — was realized and only a few hundred thousand Americans ever built private fallout shelters.

The fallout shelter solution is relevant today because it has been translated into myriad consumer culture commodities. A sign in my local grocery store reads, "We have found the solution to pollution!" The solution is to buy a canvas shopping bag to tote home groceries. Today we can laugh about the naivety of building a basement fallout shelter to protect against nuclear Armageddon, but is our faith in the canvas shopping bag solution less laughable? Does a shopping bag really seem an adequate response to the bevy of environmental threats facing humanity — global climate change, rising sea-levels, the depletion of the earth's fish stocks, toxic nitrogen run-off from industrial agriculture, species extinction?

Szasz develops a term for these kinds of individualized consumer solutions — "inverted quarantine," which means to assemble "a personal commodity bubble for one's body" (p. 97). While the term is somewhat bulky, it captures an important idea. Like a conventional quarantine, the goal of inverted quarantine is to provide protection from pathology. Unlike a traditional quarantine which confines threats to an isolated area (e.g., a tuberculosis sanitarium), the inverted quarantine sees threats anywhere and everywhere. The inverted quarantine objective is to build small safe zones within a larger polluted industrial landscape. One's home and body become a sanitarium where you seek protection from contaminated food, water, and air. You sleep on an organic mattress, your child eats only organic baby food, and you drink water imported from a pure spring in Fiji. Szasz emphasizes that these commodified solutions inevitably have a class dimension, since consumer-based solutions require a substantial outlay of capital that only a small section of society can consistently afford. The middle class picks and chooses a few ways of protecting themselves, like buying a smattering of organic food products, while the working class and working poor are confined to a life outside of inverted quarantine strategies.

Szasz's book breaks down the inverted quarantine solution into three primary parts — *drinking* uncontaminated (bottled) water, *eating* uncontaminated (organic) food, and *breathing* "pure" air. He emphasizes that it is not irrational to worry about the purity of air, water, and food, but effectively demonstrates that individual commodities cannot provide sufficient protection, even if consumers can afford to use all these products consistently. In the case of water, Szasz exposes the partiality of contaminant protection from bottled water, as well as the mountain of

waste produced when everybody turns to plastic bottled water for protection. Compared to the *billions* of plastic water bottles produced (p. 196), the turn to organic food has been less devastating for the environment, but it is still a partial solution — available only to a minority population, and offering incomplete protection from contaminants. Biomonitoring studies find that even infants — with a wholesome diet of breast milk! — have an average of 200 toxic chemicals like PCBs, pesticides, and dioxins in their bodies (p. 101). Finally, Szasz points out the unfeasibility of individualized commodity strategies for clean air. Even if one were to religiously avoid known contaminants, like Teflon and furniture treated with flame retardants, we are all exposed to toxicity through the very act of living and breathing. Short of building ourselves a literal glass bubble, air contamination and the existence of a global air shed which freely mixes toxins across national boundaries, demonstrates the absolute limits of the inverted quarantine approach.

Szasz's issue with the inverted quarantine solution is not simply that these products don't work and/or degrade the environment, but that the availability of consumer commodities reduces the urgency the public feels about environmental issues and thus reduces government action. Szasz argues that "political anesthesia is *the* important unintended consequence of mass practice of inverted quarantine" (p. 195). To use a more concrete example: "tap water is suspect; people switch to bottled water and stop worrying about tap water; political support for spending on infrastructure weakens; money is not spent" (p. 199). This political process is even more troublesome when you factor in the class implications: why would a government act to protect public infrastructure if its most affluent and influential members have the disposable income to purchase inverted quarantine commodities — like organic food and bottled water? The focus on individualized consumer solutions not only legitimizes consumer delusions of "escaping" pollution by protecting their individual bodies, but denies the ecological reality of complexity and interdependence (p. 222). When PCBs show up in the breast milk of Inuit women, and air pollution from China's industrial cities pollutes the air over California, it seems clear that strategies for individual self-care are costing us time in dealing with critical environmental issues (p. 192).

This well-written and accessible book nicely summarizes the key problems with individualized consumer approaches to environmental regulation. While scholarly, the book is a fine piece of public sociology that can be enjoyed by an interested lay public and undergraduate audience. Urban sociologists and theorists of space/place will enjoy Szasz's discussion of suburbanization (as well as the more recent flight to the

exurbs and gated communities) as a trend that strengthens the "inverted quarantine" impulse; environmental sociologists and social movement scholars will appreciate Szasz's contribution to our understanding of mobilization on environmental issues (and the disheartening lack thereof).

While some scholars are optimistic about a future of politicized consumers "voting with their dollars," Szasz predicts a future of consumer delusion that reduces the likelihood of structural reform and state regulation of production processes. Though not all will agree with this pessimistic conclusion, the argument is timely and raises important questions. For myself, I was left wondering about the fluidity of the boundaries between individual-consumer and collective-citizen projects. Can some consumer-based strategies for change become politically meaningful, as when a consumer food co-op lobbies the federal government for better regulation of genetically engineered foods? In addition, feminist scholarship, as well as the literature on reflexivity, has taught us the importance of connecting individual change with collective imaginings. Isn't individual reflexivity a critical part of the collective politicization process and social movement formation? These questions do not take away from the scholarly contribution of this book, but suggest the importance of following Szasz's lead, and more seriously debating the sanity of our collective strategy of individually shopping for environmental protection.

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