

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Gill Seyfang, *The New Economics of Sustainable Consumption: The Seeds of Change*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, 240 pp. \$US 74.95 hardcover (978-0-230-52533-7)

Since the economic downturn in late 2008, more individuals are reducing their work hours (forced or by choice), flying less and recreating locally instead, engaging in do-it-yourself projects, and growing their own food. In Gill Seyfang's book, *The New Economics of Sustainable Consumption*, sustainable alternatives to mainstream eating, housing, and currency transactions are reviewed for their potential to facilitate a shift to sustainable consumption. This book is much needed: academics and policy makers concerned with the environment must explore whether any "downshifting" adopted in this economic climate could also improve quality of life and the vitality of our communities. In this, and other respects, Gill Seyfang makes a valuable contribution to the theory and policy of sustainable consumption.

Seyfang points to three research questions: What drives current consumption patterns? What links environmental concern with action? And how can the "New Economics" vision be practised within a mainstream policy landscape? Much of the book is dedicated to the latter question. The book provides a clear picture of what is wrong with current policy approaches to sustainable consumption, demonstrates how social theory can be best utilized to address consumption issues, and describes an innovative method of addressing overconsumption — the New Economics approach.

A New Economics approach, Seyfang explains, "proposes nothing less than a paradigm shift for the economy ... rather than making incremental changes, this model entails a widespread regime change for the economy and society, altering the rules of the game and the objective of economic development" (p. 23). While our current approach calls for "green consumers" to "do their part in the marketplace; the New Economics instead addresses 'Ecological Citizens' who act ethically in public and in private to reconfigure the patterns of their lives to reduce environmental and social impacts on others" (p. 23). Seyfang provides compelling evidence that the mainstream approach to sustainable consumption — relying on individuals to do their part — will only result in the consumption of more "green" products. Ecological Citizenship is

thus a useful concept to visualize bridging the divide between individual and collective action, a crucial difference between mainstream and New Economics approaches.

The framework to assess sustainable consumption is one of the most important theoretical contributions of the book. Five indicators comprise the framework: localization, reducing ecological footprints, community-building, collective action, and building new infrastructures of provision. The issue of localization is perhaps more complex than Seyfang suggests. The potential for decreases in North American demand for imports from developing nations reduces these countries' ability to generate revenue. Before the wealthy adopt broad policies to buy local, it might be prudent to promote such policies in the global South. The social ethic of the New Economics is local — there does not seem to be a place for a broader concern.

The New Economics is built on a theoretical foundation similar to Giddens' structuration theory, acknowledging the reciprocal influence of agents and structures. Seyfang emphasizes the importance of infrastructure provision as fundamental to the adoption (or rejection) of environmentally supportive lifestyle changes. The focus on systems of provision is vital: if one can choose between different models of hybrid car, but does not have access to reliable, affordable public transport, one's ability to act in an environmentally responsible manner is constrained.

Much of the book is a critique of the market economy. Seyfang provides a useful discussion of the differences between the market economy and the social economy, which fosters grassroots innovations. As Seyfang describes, grassroots innovations

... represent collective efforts to transform not simply the market choices available, but sometimes the entire market system itself. They help overcome the principal problem with an individual approach to greening the market, namely that acting individually, consumers are powerless to change the rules of the game, they are stuck within current socio-technological regimes" (p. 77).

This book contributes to existing literature that rejects the idea that environmental sustainability can be achieved in a constant growth economy. The author provides a compelling argument that the market economy will be unable to provide the systems of provision individuals need to create sustainable lifestyles. Surprisingly, Seyfang provides little commentary on the social and cultural barriers to sustainable consumption. Such barriers might include work hours, customs of gift giving, and a preference for cheap, poorly made products over alternatives that would last longer. Seyfang could also be criticized for the relative absence of

any discussion of power relations. Power imbalances must surely present an obstacle to any small-scale ventures looking to “go mainstream” yet such a discussion rarely enters the text.

The chapters on sustainable food, housing, and currencies include discussion of the potential of each project to transform from a niche position to the mainstream regime. Seyfang introduces literature from sociotechnical innovation to explore how niche markets could “scale up” — an intriguing addition to the study of sustainable consumption. She is largely unsuccessful in seeking examples of grassroots innovations that influenced the mainstream market. In her inability to present successful models of scaling up, Seyfang alludes to a fundamental challenge: “as techniques are appropriated by the mainstream, devoid of their social contexts and unique processes, the factors which made them sustainable — and function — are removed, resulting in low take-up of the new technologies” (p. 179). Indeed, this is a crucial problem: if “sustainable” is always associated with small-scale ventures, there is little likelihood that sustainable approaches will be adopted broadly. This book offers no solutions in that regard but does present the discussed framework to assess sustainable initiatives.

The central argument of this book is that to foster the shift to a sustainable society, we must look to institutions that function outside mainstream economics’ need for constant growth. Seyfang is doubtful that individual actions can ever amount to broad, long-term change but explains that if individuals work together, forming communities of action, positive change can result. The primary theoretical contributions of the book include the five indicators of sustainable consumption, the connection of Ecological Citizenship to the New Economics, the inclusion of community measures in assessing sustainable consumption, and the introduction of literature on sociotechnical innovations to explore scaling up. Overall this book provides a powerful example of how theory can influence policy.

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