

Environment and consumption

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- Our consumption is obviously damaging the environment
 - air pollution
 - water pollution
 - toxics, carcinogens, pseudo-hormones in the food web
 - forests cut down and other ecologies disrupted
 - global warming
 - plant and animal extinctions
 - ocean fisheries depleted, etc.
- Most environmental issues are tied to global processes
 - extraction and processing of resources for sale elsewhere
 - competition in the cash economy, rather than subsistence
 - activities selected and funded by foreign investment
 - government regulation (or lack of it) influenced by the need to attract and retain foreign investment
 - government regulation (or lack of it) influenced by multilateral institutions (WTO, World Bank, IMF)
 - population growth conditioned by global economy
 - consumption promoted by corporations
 - ultimately: consumption and profit in the global culture of capitalism
- Damage to the environment is determined by
 - technology used (includes social and organizational tech)
 - determines damage per unit of consumption
 - population (number of consumers)
 - consumption per capita
- We can cut down on environmental damage by
 - using less damaging technology
 - possible but probably limited
 - reducing population
 - not likely
 - might involve serious costs, as we saw earlier
 - reducing consumption per capita
 - sustainable levels would require very drastic cuts
 - could be difficult!
- Annual consumption of energy per capita in different countries
 - Bangladesh: very little
 - US superceded only by Canada (due to heating in cold winters?)
 - Germany about half of US
 - Mexico less than one fifth US

- Annual carbon emissions per capita in different countries
 - similar, but US leads even Canada
- Why is our consumption so high?
 - Corporations seek to sell more to increase profit
 - Competition encourages cutting costs per unit
 - which often means more can be produced
 - The increased capacity must be used to make a profit
 - If one market is saturated, find one that isn't
 - China, India, other “emerging markets”
 - Robbins emphasizes “overproduction” that must be sold
 - but demand rises when price falls, as with sugar
 - things like sugar, cars, gas are wanted even without advertising
 - is making wanted goods more affordable really bad?
 - Active opposition to reducing consumption:
 - Corporations will fight any resistance to increasing consumption
 - studies discrediting pollution, global warming fears
 - Governments may do the same
 - Media will seek “balance” and controversy in stories
 - giving credibility to opposing views even when expert opinion is virtually unanimous, as in global warming
- Example: sugar
 - Sugar production causes environmental damage
 - forest clearing for cane plantations
 - (less so for sugar beets, grown on existing European farms)
 - fuel burned to
 - evaporate water in extraction process
 - heat liquids again in refining process
 - transport cane, sugar, etc.
 - contaminated waste water
 - Sugar production fosters other investment opportunities, so many want to increase production
 - slave trade
 - equipment and supplies for plantations and mills
 - shipping
 - storage
 - wholesaling and retailing
 - production and sale of other goods it is used for or with
 - tea
 - coffee
 - cocoa (chocolate)
 - preserves (jam)
 - sugar drinks (now mostly high-fructose corn syrup)

- many other foods
- It works: sugar consumption took off, starting in late 1800s
 - and not only due to population growth: per-capita consumption has been going up, too
- Why did sugar consumption soar?
 - possible biological tendency to crave it - it tastes good
 - dropping price over long term
 - although prices have gone up and down radically, too
 - initial reputation and later promotion as healthful
 - needed to sweeten three addictive substances that were also taking off
 - tea
 - coffee
 - cocoa
 - initially bitter drinks, limited to the rich
 - made more accessible by sweetening, as prices dropped
- reputation as status symbol, since it had been expensive
 - It fit well into the new urban wage laborer lifestyle
 - rural laborer diet involved perishable items costly in the city:
 - fresh milk and vegetables
 - fuel to prepare porridge (= oatmeal) and bake bread
 - replaced by urban diet of
 - purchased bread
 - jam, which is largely sugar and lasts well
 - tea with sugar (hmm... tea also requires fuel; less?)
 - deadens hunger and provides energy
- Sugar consumption suits investors, producers, and consumers
 - everyone wants it to continue, will resist cutting down
 - bad side effects are easy to ignore
 - it will be hard to change this consumption preference!
- Example: beef
 - Beef causes even more environmental harm than sugar
 - beef takes 135 acres to produce as many calories as sugar cane does on one
 - 80% of all US grain is fed to livestock
 - ½ of all US water use is for grain to feed to cattle!
 - forest clearing for range land
 - often by burning, adding carbon to the atmosphere
 - rangeland is often overgrazed, degraded to desert
 - grazing threatens more plant species in the US than any other single threat
 - produces manure, methane
 - transportation, refrigeration, etc. use a gallon of gas for every pound of beef: global warming, particulates, etc.
 - Robbins gives a similar discussion as for sugar
 - historical process of developing beef consumption
 - commercial and government interests support it

- multilateral institutions (World Bank, etc.) support it
- beef fits into modern two-worker family routines
 - well... are you convinced?
- With the same point:
 - it will be hard to change this consumption preference!
 - Robbins says that refusing beef takes real effort
 - ... not really
 - but avoiding all meat would be harder
- Robbins suggests agroecological beef production
 - based on 1995 work by Ronald Nigh
 - he is still involved in agroecological projects
 - but now mostly coffee, other specialty “organic” crops
 - I suspect that beef just can’t be produced this way in enough quantity to meet current demand
- From a neoclassical economic perspective, it makes sense for rich nations to dump waste on poor ones
 - harm is done to people who are “worth less” in earnings
 - poor countries are often not as polluted yet, so they can still accommodate more pollution
 - a clean environment is a luxury
 - rich countries can afford it
 - poor nations need the income for other, more pressing things
 - Examples:
 - Uranium mining and radioactive waste disposal in Navajo territory
 - “ship breaking” in India, Pakistan
 - e-waste to Ghana, Nigeria, Pakistan, India, China
- Robbins concludes that
 - our consumption practices are culturally constructed
 - and serve capitalist interests
 - consumption is at the foundation of our culture
 - so it will be very difficult to change
 - can we even imagine an alternative to, say, buying desired foods if we can afford them?