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Can We Shop Sustainably?

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You know that we are living in a material world

—Madonna, “Material Girl”

One of these mornings the chain is gonna break

But up until then, yeah, I’m gonna take all I can take

—Aretha Franklin, “Chain of Fools”

When we consume things, we use them up.¹ Whether the things we consume are grown, captured, mined or manufactured (or some combination of these) they come from somewhere; they use material resources and alter environments; and humans were involved in making them. Too often, the environmental and humanitarian conditions involved in these chains of relations are poorly regulated and harmful to ecosystems, human health, and human communities alike. As such, every purchase we make has moral, ethical, political, ecological, and human rights consequences. To ignore this fact is to act irresponsibly.

One response to these realities is to try to shop sustainably. While we may want to exercise our values in the marketplace and drive higher environmental standards or human rights protection through our purchases, we must avoid thinking that consumers are solely responsible for creating a more sustainable world. If we privatize responsibility for sustainability, we absolve governments, corporations, and small businesses and other organizations of responsibility. In short, consuming is not a substitute for citizenship and shopping sustainably is no substitute for political action and policymaking.

Everything we buy is the product of a set of human and environmental relations, often across great geographic and cultural distances. We consume things from across the globe and from communities (near and far) about which we know almost nothing. How many of us know a lot, for example, about how either a farm or a factory actually works?

The sets of social relations connecting production

and consumption are called commodity chains. The commodity chains of the early twenty-first century are exceedingly complex webs of relations that result in the distancing or obscuring of cost information from consumers at all stages of the chain. And the impediments to improving these feedback breakdowns are significant. If, for example, we assume that each of us reading this essay wants to be an informed, environmentally and socially conscious consumer, what would we need to know and do? First, we might want to find out where everything we consume comes from (the geographic dimension of consumption). For a start, we would need to determine the origins of every ingredient in the food and beverages we consume; every component of the clothing, books, and electronics we purchase; and every electron of electricity and transportation fuel we use (to say nothing of the where the energy used to make and transport the things we buy comes from). Probably none of us could accomplish this task. But, if we managed to find where most of these components originated, we would also need to know about the environmental and social conditions in which every component was made and assembled if we were to consider buying the environmentally and socially superior product.

An example of the challenges presented to the environmentally and socially concerned consumer can be found in a pair of blue jeans. A few years ago, the British newspaper, *The Guardian*, published a story about the writers’ attempts to trace a pair of jeans from their point of sale in a shop in the United Kingdom to the origins of the jeans and their components.² They found that cotton for the jeans was grown in Pakistan and Benin; the copper and zinc used for the rivets and buttons

came from Namibia and Australia, respectively; and the pumice for the stonewashing came from a volcano in Turkey. Furthermore, in terms of where the jeans were made, this answer included the synthetic indigo made in Germany, the thread made in Northern Ireland and dyed in Spain, polyester tapes and wires made in France and Japan, and the denim made in Italy. The jeans were sewn in Tunisia by Ejallah Dousab, who made less than \$1.00 an hour; and they were stonewashed there as well (not an environmentally benign process). What should a tag in these jeans say about where they were made?

How many geographic locations are involved in even a handful of the many hundreds of things each of us owns right now or the hundreds more we will purchase in the coming weeks or months? How many consumers know enough about dyes, pumice, copper mining, stonewashing, Tunisian garment factories, minimum wages, and labor unions to determine what the environmental and social costs of the jeans are? In addition, the jeans story outlined above did not look into the resources consumed by energy generation and transportation, marketing and retailing, and a host of other consumptive aspects associated with consumer items. Finally, how much more complex than a simple pair of jeans is the chain of relations behind a laptop, a cell phone, or an automobile likely to be?

Thus, if consumers are each individually responsible for the environmental and social information for every product they consume, ethical and sustainable consumption cannot be achieved. Privatizing responsibility will not make our economy or society sustainable. There are simply too many factors, too many products (and their components) and too much information to be gathered about all of the things we eat, drink, use, and buy. In short, more sustainable consumption requires collective political and social action. Laws, policies, and standards are required, on which we can rely to reduce the environmental and social damage induced by the things we buy and consume. In the United States, as in most parts of the developed world, most of us do not gather information about every faucet or drinking fountain from which we might drink. We rely on policies governing public and private institutions to provide clean drinking water. We will need similar institutions if we are to live and shop in a more environmentally and socially sustainable society.

Of course, there is no single magic bullet to govern global markets sustainably. Political action and policy making will likely be required from the local to the global level. The good news is that a host of options exist. Citizens, NGOs, and firms can push for more

stringent and more effective national regulations and for improved international laws. They can seek to reduce subsidies for activities that damage ecosystems and human health or to tax such activities. And policies need not only be enacted at the national or global level. States, local governments, firms, and universities can enact their own policies and push others to require more sustainable treatment of humans and the environment. Why not tax pollution and resource extraction of all types to help assess an economic cost to the existing ecological and human costs? If diamond traders and retailers are required to certify that the diamonds they sell have not funded terrorists and violent militias, why shouldn't we expect other products to demonstrate that their trade does not occur on the backs of violent oppression? Once exposed to public pressure and scandal, firms like Nike have worked hard to maintain some minimum standards in the factories in which their products are made. But shouldn't all companies be required to do so? Many more policy options exist, and they can be designed and experimented with in the public, private, and civil society sectors—and at various levels of government and social organization.

If we are to live—and shop—in a more sustainable world, we must have government that works for people and the environment and that seeks to move society and our communities toward sustainability at home and abroad. When we shop sustainably, we can reward more responsible companies and help to reduce some of the impacts of our consumption. But we cannot change the world while we shop, if we fail to change government and whole industries. We cannot shop our way out, because individual consumers are not solely responsible. They share responsibilities with their fellow citizens and with firms and governments. We must be active citizens of our state and local governments, our countries, and our globe if we are to shop and govern ourselves more sustainably.

Endnotes

1. This essay draws heavily from Stacy D. VanDeveer, "Consumption, Commodity Chains and the Global Environment" in Regina Axelrod, Stacy D. VanDeveer and David Downie, eds. *The Global Environment: Institutions, Law and Policy*, third edition (CQ Press, 2011). Many of its concepts draw on Thomas Princen, Michael Maniates and Ken Conca, eds. *Confronting Consumption* (MIT Press, 2002).
2. Fran Abrams and James Astill, "Story of the Blues," *The Guardian* (29 May, 2001).