

## I

## Standing Out, Fitting In, and the Consumption of the World

*Sustainable Consumption in a Status-Conscious World*

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### Status and the Consumption of the World

Readers of the Cambridge Sustainability Series will need little persuasion that global environments are under increasing anthropogenic threat. In April 2018, the planet reached something of a climate milestone: the four-hundredth month in a row that average global temperatures were warmer than the twentieth-century average (NOAA 2018). Anyone born after February 1985 “has never experienced a ‘cool’ month for Earth, let alone a normal one” (Fritz 2018). By 2020, the planet had registered the hottest September on record and likely the warmest since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution (Copernicus 2020). Other threats also darken the environmental horizon: researchers estimate that we are dumping the equivalent of a garbage truck of plastic into the world’s oceans every minute of every day (Worm et al. 2017:6). The results of this and other profligacy can be seen in escalating rates of species extinction, recently estimated at 1,000 to 10,000 times the background rate. Some 20–50 percent of species are headed toward oblivion, with around 1 million animal and plant species threatened within decades, the highest in human history (Chivian and Bernstein 2008; Díaz et al. 2019; Thomas et al. 2004; Urban 2015).

We imagine, too, that readers of the series are fully aware of the role material consumption plays in this threat. Multiple studies now confirm, for instance, that there is a high correlation between consumption levels, resource use, and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (Moser and Kleinhüeckelkotten 2018), and recent climate change modeling suggests that under any

high-consumption scenario (SSPs 3, 4, and 5), it will be difficult to limit global warming to the 1.5 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels approved under the Paris Agreement (Alfredsson et al. 2018; Rogelj et al. 2018). At the same time, substantial segments of the global population are not able to consume enough to meet even their most basic human needs – food, clothing, and shelter. Global differentials in economic and political power – many rooted in deep histories of colonial exploitation – structure access to resources and consumption opportunities. Thus, the links between material consumption, status competition, and environmental problems are also issues of social and environmental justice at the global scale. If we are to forge a sustainable response to these hazards, it is pivotal that we understand the processes that produced and reproduce high-consumption culture.

Some years ago, Richard Wilk (2009:268) posed what is perhaps the critical question: “What makes human wants and needs grow? How do things that were once distant luxuries – say hot water or air conditioning – become basic necessities that people expect on demand for civilized life?” A useful way to approach this question is by recognizing that some wants and needs can be satisfied more easily than others. In working toward a sustainable world, therefore, we would do well to focus particular attention on those that grow more rapidly and are less easily satisfied than others. Existential wants, such as food and water, for instance, and utilitarian desires for goods and services like hot water, clothing, and (in industrial society) transport to work have clearly increased over time (Shove 2003; Wilhite 2008). Nevertheless, they can be satisfied more easily than other wants and needs. One can consume only so much water before death by hydration, only so much food before throwing up. Only so many clothes are required to keep warm or meet the demands of modesty, and across time and space, there appears to be limits on how many commuting hours humans will tolerate (Marchetti 1994).

Other wants and needs, however, are far more elastic and harmful in their impacts on sustainability. One may be able to consume only so much water before death by hydration, but (at least until recently) one could demonstrate refinement by sipping it from a plastic bottle rather than drinking from the tap. One needs only the plainest rags to maintain bodily warmth and modesty, but one can fill closets with more haute couture garments than anyone could possibly wear in a lifetime. There may be limits on how far one is willing to commute by car, but one can still accoutre suites of garages with sleek, gas-guzzling

roadsters or dominate the highway in a Hummer or limousine instead of poodling meekly along in a gas-sipping Ford Ka or Toyota Yaris. All of which brings us to the subject of this volume: status – the urge of some to stand out and of others to fit in (as Simmel [1957] put it) – and its relationship to material consumption and sustainability. Status desires are positional or relational, defined not by the physical or subsistence exigencies of functioning in the world but by what others possess or have achieved. The imperatives to maintain status (“keep up with the Joneses”), to achieve superior status (“keep ahead of the Joneses”), or both, incite wants and needs that are intrinsically vulnerable to inflation and resistant to satiation. Even if the aim is simply to fit in – just to keep up with the Joneses rather than to outdo them – status competition guarantees its own intensification. As others catch up with them, the Joneses are motivated to ratchet up the stakes, priming the cycle to repeat and expanding the level of demand required to satisfy status aspirations. To complicate matters further, a fracturing (or liquid) modernity has generated a kaleidoscope of new, “niche” Joneses, while globalization and social media have vastly expanded the extent of many status reference communities.

As the anthropologist Raymond Firth (1959:480) summarized the matter half a century ago, the status economy, in contrast to the subsistence economy, “is always an economy of scarcity” (see also Hayden, Chapter 2 in this volume). Applied to consumer society, of course, the phrase strikes an ironic chord: where status depends on conspicuous consumption, the status economy has become one of material overabundance. Whether the desire is simply to claim membership in a group or to stand out flamboyantly from others, it stimulates a demand for positional goods – material commodities that confer status, such as fashionable clothing, personal electronic devices, sport utility vehicles, large homes, jewelry, and entertainment – that is, in principle, infinitely elastic.

If we are to understand, then, why we in the consumerist world are “consuming ourselves to death” (Wilk 2009) – along with all the less culpable members of the planet – we need to look to the articulation of status competition and consumption for an important part of the answer. When we do, however, we stumble on a subject that is curiously neglected relative to its importance to our environmental futures. It is not that scholars have ignored the dynamics of consumption or those of status competition. Quite the reverse: where consumption was once confined to business and marketing fields, its study has exploded into

other social sciences since the 1980s, including anthropology, where it pursues distinctively cross-cultural themes. The last twenty years have also seen a resurgence of interest in status competition, mainly attracting evolutionary scientists to question its origins and role in human society. The problem is that research in these two fields is largely siloed – integrated infrequently and only tangentially, and articulated with sustainability more rarely yet.

Scholars of consumption, for instance, have long pondered why human wants, needs, and/or consumption tend to expand over time, and they have advanced a variety of trenchant answers. Nevertheless, the propensity is to focus on individual consumption behavior, all too often neglecting or oversimplifying the dynamics of status competition, treating them as grist to a reductive mill or as an unexamined, ahistorical “fact of life.” One approach, the evolutionary perspective, commonly ties growing levels of consumption to notions of progress and modernity, assuming that humans will “naturally” modernize their material aspirations with economic growth and societal development. Many who lament the ecological implications of a growing global consumer class (imagined as people who naturally aspire to consumption levels that match the United States and Western Europe) founded their ideas on this assumption (e.g., Myers and Kent 2003). This premise, in turn, is based on another assertion – of common human desires, restrained and rendered different only by underdevelopment and differential levels of “modernity” (see Isenhour, Chapter 12 in this volume). Yet, while extremely popular, these theories pay minimal attention to the sociality of consumption and its role in establishing social status, the influences of a capitalist market, or the impacts of a deeply unequal global economy. They are also called into question and complicated by empirical work in anthropology, which illustrates that definitions of success, need, and desire continue to be highly diverse, even in a rapidly globalizing world. Many contributors to Appadurai’s (1986) now classic *The Social Lives of Things* illustrated how increased market access and income do not necessarily translate into a replication of “Western” conceptualizations of need, desire, status, and progress (e.g., Gell 1988; Kopytoff 1986). Other anthropologists have demonstrated that globalization and the expansion of consumer ideologies often result in unique conceptualizations of “taste” that are much more locally rooted when formed in opposition to the “global” (Cleveland et al. 2017; Tsing 2015; Wilk 2013). More recently, cultural observers and scholars of consumption have noted significant alternative and anticonsumption

social movements taking root among younger generations and citizens concerned about ecological decline (Humphery 2010; Taylor 2018; see also Anantharaman, Chapter 11, and Isenhour, Chapter 12, in this volume).

A second common approach to consumption, the political-economic perspective, ties shifting conceptualizations of need and desire to economic form. While variable and at times conflicting, these materialist perspectives focus on how the structure of the economy influences consumption ideology and practice. They see institutional structures like the division of labor, the unit of labor, the level of social hierarchy, and access to or alienation from resources as helping to script social systems of exchange, accumulation, and material manifestations of culture. They tend to attribute the relatively rapid and recent growth of consumption to the Industrial Revolution, the expansion of capitalist logics, and the creation of an increasingly urban, class-based society. Marxist-inspired theorists, for example, have argued that the very logic of capitalist society, dependent on growth to appropriate surplus value and build profit, relies on increases in consumption. The Frankfurt School theorists Adorno and Horkheimer wrote of the “absolute power of capitalism” to structure consumer behavior and culture. Drawing on Marx’s theory of alienation, they argued that capital needs unquestioning consumers, people who find they have no other choice but to sell their labor to support socially sanctioned levels of consumption. To ensure an abundance of such consumers, the “culture industry” produces, controls, and disciplines consumer needs (Adorno and Horkheimer 2000:15). Political-economic frames thus explore how class-based hierarchies can drive consumption. Appadurai (1986), Bryant and Goodman (2004), Carrier and Heyman (1997), and Bourdieu (1984) are only a sampling of authors who suggest that rising levels of consumption are intricately related to social status, relations of privilege, and social control in hierarchical, class-based, and capitalist societies. From this perspective, rising levels of consumption can be explained, in part, by a societal desire for the democratization of consumption and equal opportunity in hierarchical societies (Edsforth 1987; Veblen 1994).

Culturalist critiques of overly structuralist political-economic perspectives, however, emphasize that people are more than just automata, acting in the interests of the system; they also have agency (Jackson 2004) and demonstrate logic and rationality in their consumer behaviors (Schudson 2007). Mary Douglas, perhaps the staunchest

supporter of this perspective, wrote, “Instead of starting from the individual confronting his own basic needs, cultural theory starts from a system in which a consumer knows that he is expected to play some part or he will not get any income. Everything that he chooses to do or to buy is part of a project to choose other people. ... The forms of consumption which he prefers are those that maintain the kind of collectivity he likes to be in” (Douglas 2004:145). Several scholars invoke status in extending this position to explain growing levels of consumption, casting consumption as a strategy not only for “standing out” but also for “fitting in,” particularly as societies became more complex and mobile. Historians Bushman (1992) and Carson (1994), for example, argue that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the widespread possession and use of fashion-bearing, status-giving artifacts gave increasingly mobile and urban populations the ability to identify themselves to like-minded people. Today, many argue, consumption serves as a powerful means to communicate not only social belonging but also care for others in complex societies (Miller 2001, 2008).

Political-economic and culturalist approaches have, to some extent, been reconciled by theories of practice in consumption research (Halkier et al. 2011; Warde 2014), recognizing that growing levels of consumption reflect not only individual expressions of identity and sociality in a complex and global society but also the deeply structural influences of class-based social organization and capitalist economies dependent on maintaining trajectories of consumer growth. What existing work in consumption does not explain well, however, are the dynamics of the relationship between status and materiality – nor how these dynamics might be bent in the interest of sustainability.

When we turn from the consumption literature to research on status and status competition, we learn a lot about status competition but hardly more to enlighten its relationships to consumption and sustainability. Research in behavioral economics and social psychology, for example, focuses largely on the implications of status hierarchies for human well-being and social relations in Western nations and tells us little about why people consume or overconsume. To the extent this work implicates consumption at all, it does so tangentially – in relation, for instance, to the effects of status-inflected inequality on nutrition, health, and other consumption-related indexes (e.g., Payne 2018:119–133).

A good part of recent work in the evolutionary sciences and anthropology targets the origins of status. Costly signaling perspectives, for

instance, cast status competition as a means of advertising in visible form personal qualities, such as physical vigor, fine-motor control, cognitive ability, skill levels, prosocial dispositions, and altruism, that are valued in a community but intrinsically invisible (e.g., Bliege Bird and Smith 2005; Boone 1998; Hardy and Van Vugt 2006; Macfarlan et al. 2012; Smith and Bliege Bird 2000; Zahavi 1975). The information goods approach contends that status is a flattery that ensures the transmission of socially useful cultural traits: social learners afford status to individuals whose knowledge and behaviors they value in order to get close to and learn from them (Henrich and Gil-White 2001; Henrich et al. 2015). Other work portrays status as an emergent solution to the collective action dilemma associated with free riders. In these arguments – variants include indirect reciprocity and status-for-service approaches – status motivates people to bear the individual costs of collective action by serving as either an endogenous reward sufficient in itself to motivate prosocial action or a token that has exogenous payoffs in the form of allies, mating opportunities, or some other return (e.g., Alexander 1987; Nowak and Sigmund 2005; Panchanathan and Boyd 2004; Price and Van Vugt 2014; Willer 2009).

Evolutionary approaches connect status hierarchies to fitness benefits: status competition plays beneficial social roles that are stabilized by the reproductive payoffs of high status. These payoffs can include the material wherewithal to support mates and offspring, and to this extent, these approaches implicate consumption. Some extensions of this perspective, for instance, cast extravagant, status-chasing expenditures of resources (e.g., in feasting or meat distribution) as costly signals of male resource-holding (or resource-earning) potential that serves to enhance reproductive success (e.g., Saad 2011; Sturman et al. 2016; Workman and Reader 2014; Zahavi 1975). Beyond these rather tenuous connections, however, there is little in this work to illuminate status consumption and its implications for sustainability.

In sum, the influence of status competition on consumption merits considerably more scholarly attention than it has received. It is a deficiency that many disciplines can help remedy, but anthropology and archaeology are particularly well positioned because, as Wilk (2009:269) observes, both disciplines have amassed “magnificent cross-cultural and long-term data on human societies” that can be used “to think synthetically about the problem of growth and consumption.” More than data, the two fields also have long track records in investigating a range of relevant subjects, including the origins of status, status

competition, material culture, the dynamics that propel the drivers and developmental trajectories of social-political complexity, and the agentic and structural construction of consumption patterns in multiple international contexts.

This volume presents the results of discussions among a collaborating group of archaeologists, cultural anthropologists, economic anthropologists, and environmental anthropologists who sought to grapple with the intersections of status competition, material consumption, and sustainability during a five-day workshop at the University of Maine, “Status Pursuits across Human Systems,” funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. It was quickly apparent during these conversations that the subject has numerous dimensions. This volume focuses on a subset of those facets that seemed particularly useful points of departure for future research. They include the following: What is meant by consumption, status, and status competition? Why do humans pursue status? Why is it that, in some places, times, and social strata, status competition has taken the form of conspicuous consumption and accumulation of material and carbon-intensive goods rather than some other pursuit? What are the global and intersectional refractions of status consumption? And how might we bend the curve, leveraging status competition into more sustainable trajectories?

### **Status and Consumption: Some Defining Issues**

For terms so widely used in public and academic settings, *consumption* and *status* turn out under scrutiny to be complicated, confounding, and even controversial (Graeber 2011; Henrich and Gil-White 2001; Wilk 2004, 2016). *Consumption* may have entered the English language as early as the mid- to late 1300s, derived from the Latin *consumption* (“a using up, or wasting,” from *consumere*, “to use up, eat, waste, take wholly or completely”) to describe diseases that waste the body. Hence, TB’s old name: consumption (Graeber 2011:492).

In Graeber’s (2011) reading, its acceptance began to change with the rise of industrialism, morphing in the hands of late eighteenth-century political economists from a process of destruction or wasting to a logical necessity of capitalism. An economic system grounded in endless production in the workplace depended on a consumption that “used – ultimately, used up, destroyed” (Graeber 2011:492) this production in the household. The meaning largely structures academic and public usage today. In academic work, the term goes notoriously undefined



(Graeber 2011:491; Wilk 2004:17), but generally it refers to “any activity that involves the purchase, use or enjoyment of any manufactured or agricultural product for any purpose other than the production or exchange of new commodities” (Graeber 2011:491).

Wilk (2004, 2016) demonstrates that contemporary folk constructions of consumption are grounded in two powerful metaphors: the action of fire and the act of eating. The former is long standing – the 1382 Wyclif Bible refers to a sacrifice that “with fier shall be consumyd” (Leviticus 6:32) – and the latter may be of similar antiquity. This folk model, Wilk contends, powerfully shapes popular, academic, and policy discussions about resource use. We envision resources as being eaten up; consumption as burning out of control; and overconsumption, like gluttony, as bad. More problematic, the model burdens *consumption* with a host of moral overtones. The eating image, for instance, suggests that consumption responds to a kind of appetite, which we can – or should be able to – control. Failure to behave sustainably then becomes a form of individual weakness, something about which to be ashamed. And yet much of what we consume – electricity, cars, and hot water, for instance – is determined by economic, environmental, or social forces over which the individual has little control: the need to keep warm in cold climates; in industrial society, to get to work in order to put food on the table; and so on. The metaphor’s perverse consequence is to shift moral responsibility for sustainable action away from systemic forces, such as unregulated emissions, political corruption, regulatory capture, and unfettered capitalism, onto the individual’s glutinous use of resources. Individuals who are in some measure victims of social forces are insidiously invited nonetheless to blame themselves or, quite often, others perceived to be the “real” source of unsustainable consumption patterns (Wilk 2016).

A further problem with the folk model of consumption is that it sucks into its purview many activities that have little logical connection to one another or that fit poorly into the generally accepted meaning of being “used up; worn out; destroyed in substance; or annihilated.” “Why is it,” Graeber asks, “that when we see someone buying refrigerator magnets and someone else putting on eyeliner or cooking dinner or singing at a karaoke bar or just sitting around watching television, we assume that they are on some level doing the same thing, that it can be described as ‘consumption’ or ‘consumer behavior?’” (Graeber 2011:489). More than a few academic efforts to address this question have ended up tangled in conundrums, but from a sustainability

perspective, the problematic outcome of representing disparate activities as the same thing is to make it seem that all forms of consumption are equally damaging to the environment when they are not. Where the status economy is concerned, for instance, the consumption of jewelry or fine art is considerably less harmful than taking a private jet across country or consuming thirty-one liters of fuel per kilometer to run the WallyPower 118 luxury yacht at sixty knots (Monbiot 2009).

Scholars have been wrestling with the definition of consumption for some years now without reaching a consensus, and it is neither our purpose nor within our expertise to advance the issue here. Instead, contributors to this volume effectively reverse-engineer the term, delineating consumption in relation to its impact on environmental resources. We consider consumption as the using up or (in deference to durable commodities like jewelry and services like theater) the using of resources, where the resources at issue are those consumed in the act itself along with those they embody (i.e., those involved in their production and disposal).

When we turn to the definition and meaning of *status*, we encounter another term deployed far more often than defined, one that may also have deep, folk model roots (Roscoe, Chapter 3 in this volume). Even in its minimalist sense as “position or rank in relation to others” (Merriam-Webster 1984:1152), *status* enshrines a polysemy ready to cause trouble. On the one hand, it refers to “position ... in relation to others” – the status, for instance, of “mother,” “clansperson,” or “accused” in a court of law. In this guise, the term derives from the Latin *status* (root *stare*, “to stand”) as a doublet of *estate* and *state* (*state* here meaning “condition,” not “nation”). Its root is found in a variety of Indo-European languages (Wiessner 1996:2), and it had entered the English language by 1820 (OED 1981:3029) and almost certainly much earlier, if we are to judge from Google’s Ngram Viewer, which finds the Latin word used as early as the first half of the 1500s.

But *status* is also “a rank in relation to others,” the sense commonly intended in the social sciences by the term *social status*. This is where the ambiguities, far from ending, start to run rife, for social scientists differ strikingly over just what, in fact, *status* does rank. In line with dictionary definitions (Merriam-Webster 1984:1152), many scholars identify the ranking at issue as “prestige” or synonyms such as “honor,” “social esteem,” “prominence,” “respect,” and/or “perceived value as a group member” (e.g., Pettit et al. 2010:396; Ridgeway 2014:2; von Rueden et al. 2011:2223–2224; Washington and Zajac 2005:284;