

Book Review

Robert Crocker (2016) “Somebody Else’s Problem: Consumerism, Sustainability and Design”

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Consumerism is problematic. It makes us acquisitive, materialistic, inauthentic, social competitive, indebted, lazy and obese—and it’s destroying the planet. That much we know. At least that is the common view we see endlessly rehearsed in contemporary media—in magazine articles, documentaries, Hollywood blockbusters, and NGO campaigns—as well as in everyday discourse. But what is consumerism? Consumerism is problematic in this other sense. As Robert Crocker notes at the beginning of *Somebody Else’s Problem*, it has never attained much conceptual coherence. Is it simply the modern expression of innate human acquisitiveness and competitiveness—the Cro-Magnon in the mall thesis? Is it, as sociologists typically have it, a “material-cultural accompaniment of industrial mass consumption” (p.3). Does it denote the shared cultural anxieties of variegated global “cultures of consumption”, as some historians of consumption suggest? Is it the hegemonic imaginary of the regime of capital accumulation, as critical political economy has argued for 170 years? Or is it the psycho-social motor of our unsustainable industrial economy, as Robert Crocker would generally have it?

Sustainable consumption scholarship is largely divided between those employing a broad, non-normative conception of consumption, encompassing the appropriation of goods in social practices, and those who are untroubled by informing their understanding of consumption with their normative distaste for the values and mores of contemporary consumer society. This distinction is often replicated in an emphasis, on the one hand, on structural constraints (material and social)—such as norms, the habitual character of behaviour, infrastructural lock-in and the obduracy of incumbents—and, on the other, an emphasis on agency, collective action, and cultural values.

Robert Crocker falls squarely in neither camp—and this makes for an interesting read. Crocker, who teaches the history and theory of design and design for sustainability at the University of South Australia, begins this eminently readable and erudite book by noting how, in the context of

sustainability, 'consumerism' immediately invokes an individualised "blame game", operating as a "moral, judgemental, ideological term' (p.2). Such individualising of consumer responsibility, he notes, tends to obscure the structural aspects of environmentally unsustainable systems of provision. Most consumption, Crocker acknowledges, is made possible through various dominant systems of provision that tend to lock consumers in to practices and behaviours. But Crocker is more concerned with unearthing consumerism as "a state of mind and way of life—an effective ideology—justifying and supporting this regime of ever-increasing productivity" (p.207). For Crocker this ideology functions primarily through an individualism of escalatory perfectionism, social emulation and competition, "deception" (akin to commodity fetishism) and sunk-cost fallacies, with enormous psychic, social and environmental costs arising from the rapid cycle of economic and material throughput such an ideology demands, and its dependency on "post-cautionary production and design".

The book seeks to answer three questions: "firstly, what are the psychological, social and material origins of contemporary consumerism from a historical perspective? Secondly, what are the dynamics that make today's consumerism so escalatory, expansive and increasingly destructive? And thirdly, what are the main principles and strategies that might slow this seemingly unstoppable trajectory and return us to more sustainable forms of consumption?" (p. 206).

The first part of the book addresses the question of origins. It explores the historical process through which the "democratisation of luxury" has taken place. After some preliminaries, it takes as a starting point Hogarth's *Rake's Progress* (1735), the cautionary tale of a parvenu's seduction by luxury and social emulation, and his eventual sorry demise in debt, ill health and madness. Crocker notes: "Hogarth deftly weaves together the three dimensions of consumerism...its moral and psychological basis, in the consumer's emotive commitment to possession and ownership; its social and comparative drivers" and its negative social and mental consequences (p. 37). Hogarth was certainly an extraordinary prescient social observer. However, writing in the mid 18th-century, that he should appear to be in possession of a full account of the psychology of the consumer and the ethical malaise of consumerism should give us pause for thought. If the essential character of consumerism arrived so early and has remained fundamentally unchanged through the revolutions of mass production, mass enfranchisement and mass consumption, would it not challenge the close association of consumerism with the specific conditions of our contemporary, environmentally unsustainable, socio-economic arrangements? (Unless the claim is that current socio-material arrangements appeal to the worst aspects of a much more general

psychology of lack; a claim that does have many adherents). And if our contemporary anxieties concerning the pathologies of consumer society rehearse so closely the 18th-century's moral condemnation of luxury (see Hilton, 2004), despite such changed material and social circumstances, surely that suggests that no response to those anxieties will offer much critical purchase on our specific condition? Another side to this would be to challenge the periodisation that associates the rise of 'modern' consumer society with mass production. Glennie and Thrift (1992; cf. Trentmann, 2009) have argued that the characteristics of consumer society usually associated with the social dislocations of the later 19th and early 20th-centuries could be found in the artisanal urban setting of 18th-century Britain. Crocker does acknowledge such work, but it is unclear quite what the implications of such a re-periodisation would have for his account of the problems of consumerism. It would seem to be radically at odds with most normatively inflected understandings of consumerism as late modern consumer culture. Perhaps he does well not to tie himself to a definition of consumerism, allowing consumerism to stand unapologetically for what is problematic in that culture, whilst acknowledging more nuanced historical and sociological accounts than normative denunciations generally allow.

Crocker continues his history of the democratisation of luxury in the context of early modern global trade, through adaptive imitation in design and technical advances in production allowing substitution of cheaper processes and materials (Chapter 2). He explores the logic of imitation, substitution and authenticity in design and consumption. While this process widens and democratizes the market "in turn it intensifies and accelerates the cycle of manufacture, purchase, use and discard, and compounds its environmental effects" (p. 54). Crocker's thesis is that the fundamental role played by imitation in human behaviour (in the mode of Gabriel Tarde) is harnessed in consumerism in a circuit between design, consumption and production "as a continuous circle of adaptation and substitution based upon imitation, a 'directed practice' whose aim is to encourage more consumption" (p. 57).

The first section of the book continues with a welcome joining together of the stories of the development of design and of mass consumption (Chapter 3). Here William Morris as an exemplar of how "[v]ision and ideology in design is transformative because it reveals what might exist, and this can be influential in shaping beliefs and evoking intrinsic values in others" (p.71). Beyond the celebration of artisanal values, however, there is a perhaps more ambivalent role for the designer, where, for Crocker, the designer's vision or ideology and the consumer's understanding of "the good life promised by consumption itself" collide as "two imagined worlds of desire"(p.75). The section concludes (Chapter 4) with an acknowledgement that most consumption is made possible

through various dominant systems of provision, which tend to lock in consumers, and where ‘sunk costs’ often calcify socio-technical change, except to the benefit of incumbents, in a societal ‘sunk-cost fallacy’. Here he explores the development of the car as quintessential of such systems.

The second section explores the “dynamics that make today’s consumerism so escalatory, expansive and increasingly destructive”. Here we arrive at the “more mobile, technocratic consumer democracy” of post-war affluent society, where consumerism became seen not only as the key to economic prosperity but also to peace and democracy (p. 98). But while he acknowledges the post war generations’ positive sense of consumerism as prosperity for all—access to goods as a corollary of the social democratic and Keynesian compromise—ultimately for Crocker the “consumer as citizen” is a myth. This is the world of consumerism proper, the period of “dynamic nexus between cheap energy, industrial expansion and rising levels of consumption” (p.12), where “continuous choice, of self-evaluation and social comparison” dominate, and through which “design and marketing must continuously ‘cue’ consumerism” (p. 102). Here we find an escalatory logic of comparison and competition carefully managed by designers and marketers—heirs to Wedgewood’s “engine of emulation”.

While Crocker notes the role played by other dynamics his account does tend to be dominated by a focus on social comparison—‘invidious comparison’ as Veblen had it—as the primary dynamic of unsustainable consumption. There has of course been much work in consumption scholarship seeking to counter the tendency to give to social comparison and conspicuous consumption centre stage in understandings of consumption. As Trentmann (2009) notes, even when foregrounding the communicative aspects of consumption over the utilitarian or hedonic we should be cautious not to reduce communication to a logic of emulation and competition. Furthermore, sustainable consumption scholarship has sought to develop accounts that acknowledge other escalatory dynamics, such as the development of standards (some of which Crocker acknowledges).

The book’s third section seeks to address the main principles and strategies that counter the escalatory logic of consumerism. Crocker argues that Jevon’s Paradox is alive and well (Chapter 8). The demonstrable links between greater efficiency, lower prices and increases in consumption mean that ‘eco-efficient’ or ‘low-carbon’ products and systems will in no way be adequate for sustainable consumption: practices and values must change too. Here he draws on Sen’s definition of needs in terms of the realization of our capabilities, and lauds the “custodial consumption” of his father’s generation—thrifty and frugal, displaying “stewardship” towards possessions—whilst acknowledging a turning back of the clock is anything but simple. In Chapter 9 he deals with

credit and debt, and the increasingly dominant subjective experience of harriedness, and goes on to discuss the role of values in consumption. I have some suspicion of accounts of “extrinsic” and “intrinsic” values, as deployed here. I wonder if the terms “nasty” and “nice” values would serve as well. However, my suspicion is most pointedly directed towards the assumption that often comes with such accounts, that values as the primary drivers of action can operate as a general model of behaviour. Crocker does not fall into this trap, noting that “[h]owever important such norms, beliefs and their associated values might seem, the social and material contexts of our lives...tend to determine what we do in practice” (p. 173). The final chapter of this section examines what Crocker calls “post-cautionary” design and product development—“an established system of innovation, design and development, mass-production and distribution that treats the environment as ‘somebody else’s problem’” (p. 185)—in contrast to the precautionary principle as a model for sustainable design.

Somebody Else’s Problem is erudite but amenable to the general reader. While well informed by consumption scholarship, Crocker’s style is often anecdotal and impressionistic, weaving together, for example, for an excursion through “Technology and Acceleration” (Chapter 6), the Whole Earth Catalogue, Star Wars, Apple’s famous ‘1984’ ad for the Macintosh and IKEA bookcases. While this makes the book very readable, it occasionally somewhat detracts from cogency. And there is little room for ambivalence. *Deception* plays a key role in his account, operating much as commodity fetishism: concealing the psychic, social and environmental effects of our consumption. But don’t we also live in a time when our consumption is problematised as never before?

Crocker concludes with laudatory “Principles to live by and design by” which I have much sympathy with. But it is unclear to me how these principles scale up to address systemic socio-technical transformation. For Crocker consumerism drives the engine of demand that in turn drives the market. But while I concur that “the individual consumer’s goals and values have been progressively reset to the terms, rhythms and needs of the market” (p.14), I would argue that that it is not consumerism itself that is the problem but the underlying system of capital accumulation, which for now finds consumerism suitable to its needs.

References

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For Citation

Welch, D. (2017). Robert Crocker (2016) “Somebody Else’s Problem: Consumerism, Sustainability and Design”. Reviewed in: *Journal of Consumer Ethics*. 1(1), pp. 48-53.