Unravelling the threads: discourses of sustainability and consumption in an online forum

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This paper analyzes an online discussion that followed an article published by UK environmental activist and journalist George Monbiot (2007) in *The Guardian* online newspaper. The analysis addresses the ways in which participants in an online forum debate responded to the tensions and contradictions between lifestyle, consumption and sustainability highlighted in the original article. The discursive construction of class, green political orientations and identities, visions of “the good life”, and appeals to religion and science, are highlighted throughout the analysis – as are the discursive strategies for positioning self, other and audience in the debate. The argument emphasizes the heterogeneity of discursive positioning, and reflects on the role of social media in the politics of consumption and sustainability, especially given the inherent reflexivity of web forums as online communicative forms.

Keywords: lifestyle; sustainability; consumption; online forums; Web 2.0

Introduction

This paper analyzes an online discussion that followed an article published by prominent UK environmental activist and journalist George Monbiot in *The Guardian* online newspaper on 24 July 2007, under the title “Ethical shopping is just another way of showing how rich you are” (Monbiot, 2007). The discussion forum responses that followed Monbiot’s article are of particular analytic interest as they constitute a “naturally occurring” space of everyday discourse around issues of sustainable consumption and lifestyles. A key theme in Monbiot’s article (and the ensuing debate) concerns the relationship between sustainable/green consumption and the idea of somehow consuming less. This can be traced to the following passage in Monbiot’s analysis:

There is an inherent conflict between the aspirational lifestyle journalism that makes readers feel better about themselves and sells country kitchens, and the central demand of environmentalism – that we should consume less. “None of these changes represents a sacrifice,” Goldsmith tells us. “Being more conscientious isn’t about giving up things.” But it is if, like her, you own more than one home when others have none. Uncomfortable as this is for both the media and its advertisers, giving things up is an

essential component of going green. A section on ethical shopping in Goldsmith's book advises us to buy organic, buy seasonal, buy local, buy sustainable, buy recycled. But it says nothing about buying less. (Monbiot, 2007)

The meaning and possibility of sustainable consumption is an issue which has been debated from a multiplicity of perspectives. While economic and social psychological theories of consumption have prevailed (certainly in policy arenas – see Shove, 2010) there is also a wealth of social and cultural theory which can be brought to bear in unpacking the concept (see Evans & Jackson, 2008). An important initial observation is that consumption is not synonymous with consumerism, so while sustainable consumerism is an oxymoron, sustainable consumption is not necessarily (Jackson, 2006). Sustainable consumption is often positioned as simply consuming less (consumer goods/services, natural resources or both) and there is a popular literature which suggests that as increasing consumption does not seem to lead to increasing happiness (Layard, 2004; James, 2007), then people could “live better by consuming less” (Jackson, 2005). Simply focusing on reducing consumption can be problematic, however. While many analyses indicate negative social and personal consequences of consumerism (Bauman, 2002; Lasch, 1979), material consumption is understood to have important symbolic dimensions, particularly in terms of identity formation (Featherstone, 1991) and the reproduction of social hierarchies and distinctions (Bourdieu, 1984). Thus a central challenge for sustainable consumption is how to deal with the tension between the semiotic functions and material (environmental) impacts of consumerist consumption (Evans & Jackson, 2008).

One potential means of resolving this tension is to shift the focus onto sustainable lifestyles, rather than sustainable consumption *per se*. Lifestyles can be conceptualized as assemblages of social practices which represent a particular way of life and give substance to an individual's narrative self identity (Giddens, 1991).

Giddens emphasises that the concept of lifestyle encompasses life politics and ideas about the right way to live one's life. Thus, the concept of lifestyle can maintain the important symbolic dimension, engages with issues of ethics and politics and "allows for bundles of social practices that are not so reliant on such fervent engagement with the logic of consumerism" (Evans & Jackson 2008: 15). However, there are clearly questions about its analytical adequacy, not least because it may carry too many consumerist connotations to sit easily within an agenda that seeks to problematize and reduce consumption. The language of sustainable lifestyles has, nonetheless, been central to policy discourse on climate change within the UK and beyond (Department for Energy and Climate Change [DECC], 2009; Jackson, 2008); "Lifestyle" is thus an unavoidable term in this context.

Monbiot's article speaks to these tensions and paradoxes by castigating "green consumerism" as something indulged in by the middle classes which avoids restraints on behaviour and consumption, and contrasts this with the "hard political battles" that are part of any "serious" form of environmentalism. The discussion that follows is therefore of particular analytical interest in that the question of the problematic relation of consumption to sustainability becomes an explicit focus of concern and discussion for participants. Moreover, it is possible to see how they deal with, present, and articulate the politics of these issues in a particular kind of internet-embedded public and discursive space.

The internet and environmental politics

Our analysis of this online forum was guided by a consideration of three issues: the political role of the forms of communication enabled by internet media in wider

environmental and sustainability contexts; the extent to which internet media lend themselves to the collective discursive construction of the politics of lifestyle, sustainability and consumption; and the themes to discursively emerge online from a wide-ranging discussion-in-practice related to the tensions and contradictions around lifestyle, consumption and sustainability.

The past ten years has seen burgeoning research into the role of ICTs and new media in the political sphere, not least in terms of environmental politics. Research has examined a number of issues including the role of the internet in mobilising social movements (Atton, 2004; Diani, 2001, 2003; Loader, 2008; Salter, 2004), and the role of the internet in political protest and activism as an ‘alternative public sphere’ more generally (Ayres, 1999; Dahlberg & Siapera, 2007; Langman, 2005; Pickard, 2004, 2008; van der Donk et. al., 2004). Particular attention has been paid to the ways in which those involved in environmental social movements use (both offline and online) media to frame their understandings and practices for publics (Anderson, 1997; Hansen, 1993; Hutchins & Lester, 2006; Kahn & Kellner, 2005; Lester & Hutchins, 2009). While there have been a number of studies on the intersections of the internet and environmental social movements, few have addressed the tensions and paradoxes of “sustainability” as a broadly deployed discourse with respect to consumption more generally, nor how the meanings of such a fraught discourse is constructed via forms of new media.

Alongside studies of the uses of the internet by environmental groups or movements, there are studies charting the evolution of internet media over time. Emerging communications such as the evolution of “Web 2.0” applications have received particular attention. Online practices in Web 2.0 encompass a wide and diverse range of communication channels, and refer also to changing economies of

information production and consumption that potentially challenge the power of traditional corporate news media (Couldry, 2000). Investigations of Web 2.0 media often emphasise the production, distribution, access to and re-use of media by users (denoted by hybrid terms such as ‘produsage’ (Bruns, 2008; Bruns and Jacobs, 2006) or ‘prosumption’ (Fuchs, 2011)), and include increased user autonomy and participation, as well as practices of information-sharing, collaboration and the potential for democratisation. As such they potentially impact on the traditional (mass print or broadcast) construction of mainstream news, and potentially transform it – particularly through the ways multiple media channels link together to inform and generate interactive discussion. One of the qualities of Web 2.0 media is that they are often “rhizomatic” – to the extent that any expression via one channel of communication (such as an article) is informed by, and thereafter generates, multiple, referential yet new forms of (diverse) articulation surrounding that expression. This rhizomatic quality is another reason for the analytic interest in this case study. Monbiot’s practice lies between journalism, blogging and activism¹, and the themes of the article (and debate around them) work through the tensions between sustainability and consumption in everyday reasoning; in this case, text, response and the potential proliferation of resulting discourses in discussion make it a productive communicative medium for analytic exploration.

Method and analytical approach

Our present analysis addresses itself to the online internet forum producing discussion in response to Monbiot’s (2007) published online opinion article on lifestyle, sustainability and consumption. This particular forum is located within the

output of a more traditional media organisation – *The Guardian* (UK) newspaper – which, when shifting its print content online, created the facilities to publish interactive and user-created content (www.guardian.co.uk). Those facilities include hosting a section of the newspaper’s website titled “Comment is Free” (CiF), in which opinion commentators post a series of articles to which readers can respond under anonymous and unique usernames (and to which opinion commentators may reply). Forum opinion pieces are recruited by the online editorial team, and in this sense the opinion agenda is set by the mainstream news organisation. Some commentators, such as Monbiot, are regular contributors with their own dedicated and regular columns – and as such, have significant discretion in determining the subjects addressed in the pieces published.

The analysis presented here focuses on the participant response and discussion forum on the basis that it constitutes a “naturally occurring” discursive space – based on everyday reasoning – about the relationship between sustainability and consumption. The sample constitutes the entire discussion of 236 comments (the discussion ran for 3 days, and ran to 150 pages of single-spaced text), in the specific sub-forum dealing with the article.

The Monbiot article and the following responses and discussion employ specific communicative frameworks related to both the structure of the opinion article and forum debate, as well as the language practices formulated within the community over time. In the discussion, the burdens of status and persona facilitated by regular, responsive yet anonymous posting can encourage both highly formal discussion and close personal relationships, depending on the tone given a forum by its moderators and heaviest users. The permanence of messages on many western-style forums can also encourage users to self-moderate. In these kinds of social media sites, claims or

warrants are quickly transitioned into generalizations because of the manner in which shared statements are posted and viewed by all. The speed of communication, its breadth and depth, and the ability to see how the words build a case, solicits the use of certain discursive rhetoric – and the analysis employs three main strategies to explore the qualities of this rhetoric and the relation they bear to the tensions and paradoxes between consumption and sustainability. These strategies are: to analyze statements in terms of their normative inflections and the wider sets of assumptions that these suggest; to analyze statements in terms of the connections that they attempt to establish and the translations they effect between diverse elements; and to analyze statements in terms of the subject positions from which they are made. All of these strategies imply not just an analysis of the rhetorical and performative aspects of the statements made, important though that is. They also entail locating the statements within some wider discursive configuration, or highlighting ways in which statements attempt to create such a configuration; and this sense of configuration is key to how we understand “discourse”. Thus, whilst we are dealing with naturally occurring online commentary rather than the “serious speech acts” with an institutional basis that formed the focus of Foucault’s analysis (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1986: p. 48), we seek to contextualize this commentary and its constructions in ways that have something in common with his approach: other relevant sources are noted below.

The analysis of statements in terms of wider sets of normative assumptions is well established in the analysis of discourse, and in the field of environmental social science has often taken the form of an analysis of framing (see for example Alexander, 2009; Hajer, 1995). However our interest in, and analysis of, normativity and related issues focuses more simply on the kinds of constructions that contributors make, be they critical or utopian. One construction that we will argue is of particular

significance in the discussion is the often polemical construction of social and political identities, and the connotations with which these are inscribed: Sacks' (1995) notion of categorization and category work informs our analysis in this respect. The second strategy, to focus upon the connections made between diverse elements, is in some respects closely related to the first. Laclau & Mouffe's definition of articulation as a practice which establishes "a relation among elements such that their identity is modified" (1985: 105) clearly indicates that drawing connections in discourse is central to the identity work that we have already discussed. We do not attempt to convey the full diversity of articulations here, but concentrate on some key occurrences that are deployed throughout. We also note the way in which issues are frequently displaced and translated (Latour, 1993) into discussions about (inferred) categories of actors and associated forms of practice – contributors taking their cue from Monbiot – and that, as already noted, these categorisations are normatively inflected, sometimes in ethical or even overtly religious terms.

The third strategy, which is a correlate of the first two, is to consider the position from which a statement is made as itself worthy of analysis, and central to the effect that such a statement might have. In other words, we follow Foucault in including these "subject-positions" within the analysis, insofar as they are part of discourse and its effects: as he puts it "discoursing subjects form a part of the discursive field" and discourse itself "is a space of differentiated subject-positions and subject-functions" (Foucault, in Hajer, 1995: 48). Moreover, as we will show, the subject-positions adopted or attributed within this forum serve both as resources for argumentation and objects of contestation in their own right.

As is implied in parts of this brief outline of our approach, one important strand of interest in the analysis that follows is the connections, attributions and

contextualisations that participants themselves make. The online forum contains a very significant degree of reflexivity in this respect. For example, whilst much of it is dominated by a certain form of category work, sometimes in the form of relatively crude ad hominem arguments, the problematic nature of this category work can itself become an explicit focus of discussion and contestation. In this respect the forum is auto-analytic (c.f. Pollner, 2002), and our analysis seeks to respect this dimension – not only tracing the direction and significance of translations, articulations, categorisations and other devices, but also showing the way in which the online discussion folds upon itself such that contributors may be held accountable for the discursive moves that they make.

Class

In general terms, a characteristic feature of much of the discussion is the articulation of issues with political and social categories. The sub-heading to Monbiot's article reads "The middle classes congratulate themselves on going green, then carry on buying and flying as much as before". Following Monbiot's lead, class is therefore the dominant social category that is invoked throughout the discussion. However, the variety of ways in which this category is used, and the range of objects that it evokes – wealth, complacency, consumerism, individualism, tokenism – suggests that it might be functioning as an empty signifier (Laclau, 1996). It is used to characterize (often by denigrating) forms of behaviour and arguments put forward within the forum.

For example, environmentalism itself is cast as a form of middle-class ideology, a set of values and practices that are shaped by and derived from middle-class interests:

I fully agree George, I've thought for a long time that environmentalism is the new crusade of the feckless middle classes. It obviously fits into their lives quite easily. The effects of global warming are not immediate, they can "buy" a green lifestyle, its trendy to be green and most important of all they can still live their middle class lives and feel good about it.

auspom, 24 July 2007, 12:51 AM

Or, the class-based arguments of (in this case) Monbiot are themselves accounted for with reference to his social location:

Rich father. Bullied at school. Join the dots. Monbiot hates the middle classes because he sees himself as their superior, but they still won't give him the respect his massive intellect deserves.

xyzzzy, 24 July 2007, 6.33 AM

Invocations of class can themselves then become a topic for critical (meta) comment:

You can smell a whiff of class envy in the article. Woe betide anyone who uses their money for "horsiculture" and chooses to stable some horses. Surely this is far superior than turning the paddock or stables into office space? What's wrong with making butter in Surrey? Harmless stuff...

Koolio, 24 July 2007, 8:45 AM

Or again ... "Why is it that someone who is passionate about his concerns is decried as ignorant/classist/communist/profiteer." (SeanD, 24 July 2007, 12:44 PM)

Elsewhere, class is more explicitly articulated with wealth. For example:

WHAT GARBAGE! I didn't think I'd ever say this about one of Mr Monbiot's columns. Well, of course the middle class is going to be at the forefront of driving change – the poor can't afford to, and the rich need more than a hard prod to get them to think of such issues.

DavidG1302, 24 July 2007, 7:44 AM

The issue of wealth is sometimes given a moral inflection in terms of who speaks to whom:

I think this touches on a related issue, which is that for many people, even buying 'green' is not an option. Many are in the situation that they simply have to buy the cheapest option, or go without. It's all very well to say 'well then go without' but there are many things you simply can't go without – food, clothes, transport etc. It's also rather galling for someone on a low income to be told by middle class environmentalists who are making a virtue out of going without that they should not aspire to the trappings of the affluent society – 'Oh, we've had our fill of consumerism, it's bad for the planet you know'.

KateinNZ, 24 July 2007, 5:38 AM

Class can also be used in a more positive sense to connote forms of collective action.

One participant asks "Is it time for a new Diggers movement?" (Biskieboo, 25 July 2007, 10:15 AM) before posting a poem celebrating their action in 1649. Another sees collective social action ("class" for itself?) as a way of overcoming the consumerism and individualism that is seen to be the heart of the problem:

As George Monbiot points out, we need collective social movements not only to make politicians and corporations take notice of us, but to reconfigure the individualist, privatised consumer identities into networks of mutual aid and social security. Only then can we move beyond green consumerism.

CantUseMyOwnName, 24 July 2007, 2:52 AM

One discursive dilemma that the invocation of class creates is the footing of statements – from what position does the speaker speak? As we note below, different strategies are used to deal with this.

Shades of Green: Environmental Political Identities

As the last extract demonstrates, a key strand running through the debate concerns what it means to be "green". Conflicts between the ideological underpinnings and

prescriptions for change offered by “dark” and “light” green politics are rehearsed, with as much attention paid to denigrating the politics and practices of others, as outlining preferred approaches for moving towards a more sustainable society. The reader has the sense that known positions and oppositions are being re-articulated, sometimes, apparently, with known allies and adversaries.

Monbiot’s assessment of green consumerism as the middle class “merely playing at being green” (Monbiot, 2007) is taken up by many discussants who deride “shallow” or “pseudo-greens”. The inauthenticity of such “middle class environmentalism” – political beliefs often being articulated in class terms, where the identification of class performs a clearly normative function – is suggested by reference to the idea that it is influenced by fashion or a feel-good factor (presumably rather than any deeply held belief). In addition, the fact that such environmentalism rests on “shopping” – “they can “buy” a green lifestyle, it’s trendy to be green and most important of all they can still live their middle class lives” (auspom, 24 July 2007, 12: 51 AM) – serves to trivialize it further.

Such inauthentic “light green” environmentalism is often contrasted with “real” green alternatives which require more fundamental changes. Of course exactly what kind of change is required is the subject of some argument. Participants here pick up many of the debates within Green politics: is personal transformation or political activism the most effective way to bring about change? Is it ethical/acceptable to talk of the need to reduce population? Is vegetarianism an essential component of a green identity? Is nuclear power defensible, and so on. Where there is some consensus is in the sense that “real” environmentalism requires more fundamental social changes than can be effected by alternative consumerism:

There is some common agreement here, that something has to be done and it has to be done now. It is no good tinkering around the edges, producing long term targets and politically acceptable policies. Yet, the problem is getting the message across that 'this is the number one priority in your life and everything else pales into insignificance' to enough people to create the critical mass that will produce the quantum leap into a new green social order.

englishhermit, 24 July 2007, 5:49 AM

Many of the key elements of “dark green” political ideas are evident here: limits to growth, finite resources, the limited carrying capacity of earth (the need to limit population), the interconnectedness of all life, and concern for other species, beyond anthropocentric motivations for taking action:

if you really want to be green and control your ongoing carbon footprint then the only valid action is to desist from procreation, it is that simple or difficult depending on your preference.

Malchemy, 24 July 2007, 6:19 AM

Dark Greens come in for their fair share of criticism too. This seems to come largely from participants intent on belittling green arguments and proposals for change *per se*, rather than from those who favour more modest reformist strategies. Old caricatures of greens as seeking to return to a primitive past surface here – and the contrast between primitive past and scientific modernity has a significant presence in the discussion:

Ah, George, the penny is dropping. The reason there is no mass social movement in favour of “sustainability” is because the rest of us (i.e.; the great unwashed) would rather not turn the clock back 200 years and pull on the hair shirts...we actually like consumerism and the benefits it brings.

Pretendingtocare, 24 July 2007, 10:44 AM

So too do arguments that green politics are too gloomy and “hair-shirty” to be attractive or practicable:

As far as consumerism goes, I'm all for it, and am glad this is the Achilles Heel in environmentalism. Everyone pays lip service to green thinking but, when push comes to shove, very few beyond one or two hairshirt-wearing fundamentalists are prepared to make big sacrifices to their way of life, which is why environmentalism is just a reactionary and Romantic 'back to nature' fantasy, and not a realistic way of adapting to a changing climate. It's irritating that the well-off flaunt the green credentials through conspicuous consumption, but the thrust of this gloomy article is that everyone should be worse off, because the end of the world is nigh and we have to repent before it's too late.

Leland123, 24 July 2007, 7:17 AM

A few self-identified as part of the green consumption industry and defended their activities. The relationship between dark and light green approaches is interesting here. These discussants often accepted some of the critique of green consumption, while also arguing for its value as a pragmatic or practical response to environmental problems (dark green politics provides some inspiration for actions, even if it doesn't provide many palatable ways forward). Green consumption was also defended as being a step in the right direction, possibly leading to more fundamental changes. There is also an anger apparent in these accounts, as the writers describe themselves as "under siege" and being criticized for trying to make a difference – given ironic expression in the following:

I reckon I'm one of those guys George is describing - green in lots of ways - I recycle, go to farmer's markets, take the bus, buy organic socks etc yet, to my shame, I'm prone to the odd cheap flight. There's no doubt, I am the problem and if I change my ways, everything will be alright.

ragworm, 24 July 2007 12:06 PM

Despite sometimes explicit agreement with elements of Monbiot's analysis, critiques of dark green approaches are implicit in many of these accounts. For instance, practical steps in the right direction were often, at least implicitly, contrasted with gloomy catastrophic assessments that it is not worth doing anything:

Yes, doing our 'little bit' might not make an iota of difference compared to the atrocities of Government and Big Business but we have to start somewhere.

sawdustanddiamonds, 24 July 2007, 12:08 PM

Some clearly felt that they were under attack (“under siege”, “beleaguered”) from what should be “their own” side, and argued that such criticism could well be counter-productive for the green movement; drawing parallels between Monbiot’s criticisms and those of anti-greens:

While I like this article and agree with its general thrust, it’s hard not to think that George and his ilk (e.g. Lucy Siegle in the Observer) just aren’t helping.....
Leaving the conspicuous consumers out of it, a lot of ordinary people want to do something to change their ways. Bashing and belittling people who are well-meaning but ignorant is not the way forward, because that just drives them further into the comforting bosom of the green retailers.

Lazycake, 24 July 2007, 11:16 AM

Visions of the Good Life

Cutting across discussions of class, and intertwined within the complex of green and not-so-green identities, lie competing visions of and claims upon “the good life”. References to the good life play across a number of distinct narrative tensions. One involves a tension about the nature of the good life itself, which is seen on the one hand as being characterized by enjoyment, pleasure, reward and desire, and on the other by restraint, morality and the care and concern for others. The second involves competing claims for rights of access to “the good life” and plays out largely through issues of class and class access to the good life (see above). A third tension involves conflicting social signals, and in particular the conflict between a “dominant social paradigm” based around consumption growth, and the emerging normative messages from Government and elsewhere about lifestyle and behavioural change as the appropriate response to climate change.

Many of the posts in this forum are built around an assumption that the good life – at least in one conception – is based on consumer aspiration and desire. The following response exemplifies this articulation of elements:

George – consuming less is an unrealistic request. You must accept that overwhelmingly people do not want to consume less (evidenced by their choices). The tv, the car, the laptop, the new iPod, the powered lawn mower, the coffee machine, the washing machine and the million and one other things you can buy that mechanise/automate our life. We want them. We pursue them. The poor in across the world aspire to them. Climate change/global catastrophe isn't remotely likely to stop that desire.
NY156uk, 26 July 2007, 11.36 AM

The same respondent also argues that ecological “imperatives” aren't likely to change this foundation. Consumer desire is seen as an immutable feature of human society. However, notwithstanding this particular articulation, the same comment also alludes to the conflict between this vision of the good life, and one which requires restraint and care for the future. This conflict between desire and restraint is witnessed in several other responses. For example:

I had a debate with someone once who said that a bigger economy would mean that people had more money, so they could afford to buy organic food, and hand-made local goods. I said that they would also buy second homes, second cars, plasma screens in every room, more foreign holidays, and well, where's the limit, holidays in space? He said that doesn't have to be the case. But it IS the case, unless he's thinking about some parallel universe.
Yakaboo, 25 July 2007, 11.16 AM

This post again suggests the immutability of a desire-based conception of the good life. Indeed, Yakaboo goes further than NY156uk. Not only is this immutable, desire-driven conception of the good life in conflict with the idea of consumer restraint; it is also so powerful that it will sweep away marginal “green consumer” improvements like organic food and local goods.

Yakaboo also hints at a wider, societal level conflict. The elephant in the room, in all discussions of consumer restraint (according to some of the respondents), is that we live in a growth-based economy. Higher incomes lead to higher spending. In the presence of desire-based aspirations for the good life this leads inevitably to higher impacts. This narrative is played out in a number of online contributions. It is quite explicit for instance in the following example:

Firstly, the economy relies upon growth. Without it, we either feel poorer, (in the case of economic decline), or stagnation. Not just the middle classes, pretty much everyone... But growth is based upon real effort of individuals, the machines, products and businesses they invent, and because it reflects work achieved, growth reflects itself in more available money to acquire more material possessions, all those LCD TV's, Blu-Ray DVD players, gadgets gizmos and things that go bleep. In amongst all those are the f**king useless solar powered garden lights, but also wind turbines, solar panels, and soon to be (believe it or not) fashionable British holidays ... weather permitting. If we really want to TRY and have a positive impact upon the climate, we should be investing some of those later items, we should be buying local produce, and doing the other things to reduce our fossil burning capabilities... But humming away in the background is the wealth which is funding this. Economic growth, and until we come up with a different model, economic growth will always mean consumption, by someone, somewhere. China, Cambridshire, Chingford.

CaptCrash, 24 July 2007, 1.26 PM

The point here is in part about system dynamics: that the social and economic system is entirely predicated on growing people's incomes and expanding their consumption (Jackson, 2009). Exercising restraint in these circumstances is seen as quixotic at best, and at worst nonsensical, leading – as another commentator suggests – to a sense of apathy and despair:

I must consume less. But what do I eat? I shouldn't bother with faddy and showy solar panels, but need to consume less somehow. Can I stop driving? But I need to get to work. I am left with nothing really to do. I am waiting for the real actors (big business and government) to take action, but I have become aware that carbon offsetting and carbon trading are scams. Do I protest? But I can't afford to protest as I am working very long hours to pay aforesaid property costs. There is nothing at all for me to do. I feel a bit depressed.

Kyoto, 24 July 2007, 10.06 PM

In others, the sense that conflicting social signals are being played out in the climate debate overflows into a sense of anger – directed mainly at those who proselytize about restraint:

I've decided to stuff them all. Thinking about climate change has just made me depressed as I can't do anything about it. So I put two fingers up to Zac Goldsmith and his lazy green consumerist ilk. I also tell the little old ladies at the fair trade group to 'fuck off and get a life'. I feel much better. Jamie Oliver can go to hell in a handcart too as I am living on bags of chips.

Kyoto, 24 July 2007, 10.06 PM

Celebrities and politicians come in for particular ire, largely because they are seen to personify the conflicting positions – arguing on the one hand for restraint and on the other either praising or exemplifying a concept of the good life based on social and material success:

Now, green consumerism – it's s***e, yes. And we had jackie ashley yesterday proudly extolling her hypocrisy. Polly's the same - with her little holiday homes. I read the five of the eight democratic candidates for president flew to last night's debate on private jets - these "caring" people care only for themselves, when the chips are down. Fine, I'm exactly the same. I just wish they'd shut the fuck up about what *I* should do, and perhaps lead by example, if they're so damn committed. Otherwise every politicians and rockstar who tells me to go green, just makes me more inclined to go out and strangle a bunny.

MrPikeBishop, 24 July 2007, 12.37 PM

For the most part, the responses to the Monbiot piece show a high awareness of inherent conflicts between different conceptions of the good life, and in particular between desire and restraint. They are particularly sensitive to, and intolerant of, the inconsistent social signals that emerge from Government and celebrity-based messaging.

A key aspect here is the strong individual and structural imperative to have more:

SO the real question is “Do you want less next year than you have this year?” In essence ... we are all b*ggared unless we say yes.. “I am happy not to have the latest technology, I am happy to have less electricity, less gas, less of a job”, and less of a future.
CaptCrash, 24 July 2007, 1.26 PM

More surprisingly, perhaps, there is a thread of reasoning, quite thinly represented in the forum as a whole, which points to both prudential and moral benefits related to consumption restraint. The need to consume less is seen, in some accounts, as a form of sacrifice which is to be welcomed. Consuming less in this view is good for both personal and moral well-being: “Consuming less isn’t just good for the environment, it’s good for the soul :)” (annakaffuffle, 24 July 2007 1:44 PM)

This reference to the soul, and the suggestion that sacrifice may in one sense be “good for us”, leads us on to the theological dimensions of some of the contributions.

Sacrifice, Religion, Science

Competing claims about the good life tend to align themselves with two competing claims about the appropriate response to ecological limits such as climate change. One of these responses calls on technology as the means to achieve reductions in energy consumption and carbon emissions. This appeal to “innovation” and “efficiency” acknowledges the need to consume differently, but rejects any suggestions of consuming less. By contrast, there is a view of social change which calls explicitly on notions of restraint and sacrifice, and even argues – as we saw above – that these are not only essential but may even be good for us.

This second view introduces another explicitly normative dimension to the debate which gets played out, in part at least, in relation to the parallel and overarching discussions surrounding social class. But it also extends beyond the

discussions of class and introduces a distinctly religious narrative in which the morality of sacrifice comes to the fore. This theme is exemplified by the following observation on the religious resonances of the theme of sacrifice: “There was a time when you could purchase an “indulgence” to offset sin. Green consumerism is the same concept. And this will do for the environment what indulgences did for sin (or piety).” (Jiri, 24 July 2007, 4:25 AM)

But this explicit religious turn is rejected by others. In particular it comes into conflict with a set of discourses grounded in scientific pragmatism which seeks to avoid normative appeals and emphasize scientific and practical agendas and solutions. Interestingly, debates concerning the scientific and practical versus the religious and normative spill over into more general issues surrounding the nature of environmental crises and the role of humankind in causing (or trying to mitigate) them. Some, for instance, see the possibility of religious articulation as a threat to progressive (secular) green politics. Here “human nature” (which itself plays a significant role in this debate, largely as something which is inherently selfish, and as such a threat to progress) opens up the possibility of malign religious influence:

It is human nature to turn to God when faced with the imminent prospect of death from which there is no perceivable escape. The nature of climate change is such that it too, is a series of quantum leaps – into scarier and more dramatic events. Imagine, if you will, an ecological disaster of such magnitude that a large number of people turn to God in abject fear. That is the day the Green movement must plan and be ready for. For, if the religious leaders gain control, we are lost, because that way leads to conflict, war and the dark ages.

englishhermit, 24 July 2007, 5:49 AM

Assertions that try to make this kind of link can be fiercely resisted in the name of science:

@Fridah: “But because global warming/climate change now stirs religious feelings, to question it is heretical incurring the wrath of the faithful.”

No it bl**dy well doesn't! I don't feel the least bit "religious" about it, you presumptuous nana, and neither do thousands of actual, practising scientists who find more and more *real concrete evidence* of GW, and it's a[n]thropogenic nature, every day.
realclimate.org, read it and weep.

Dave69, 24 July 2007, 1.50 PM

This kind of defiantly secular rationalism is given even more explicit expression in the following, which suggests that the hard scientific evidence and the policies that it implies may turn out to be in conflict with the assumptions (and presumed "lifestyle") of many who are sincere (but misguided) about the problem of climate change:

Of perhaps greater concern to George may be the fact that if science is expected to provide the answer to climate change, it may not be one that he likes. For a start, a massive short term transfer to nuclear power and genetically-engineered crops and animals would undoubtedly reduce carbon emissions in the developing world and minimise the starvation due to precipitation variance. If an international scientific (or simply rationalist) symposium is faced between the benefits of such an agenda or the benefits of a Guardian-led call to global collective but rights-respecting action, its answer is predictable with mathematical levels of certainty. The green movement of a scientific small is beautiful lentil-chompers is in its death throes.

TC1369, 24 July 2007, 10:22 AM

Positioning self, other and audience

Thus far we have focused mainly on the narrative content of the online discussions. But the formal properties of the discussion are also of interest, both to us as analysts, and to participants themselves. Indeed a distinction between form and content is problematic here, since attention to the way in which comments are made gives some insight into the ways in which different entities are brought into the forum.

For example, we have already noted the frequency with which class and other categories are invoked, often to discredit or at least position comments made by others. However, this positioning also implicates the writer, who may use one of a number of strategies in order to attempt to construct a credible subject position for him or herself.

In some cases, the legitimacy of the writer's position is based on an unambiguously moral foundation. In others, credentials are displayed in the form of a personal history: the following example is of interest (not least because it inverts some of the usual connotations of "dropping out" through an invocation of the dignity of labour):

In the early seventies when I, along with many others, 'dropped out' to form an alternative society, we claimed social security, didn't go to work, yet worked very hard [...] I doubt if the current batch of green middle class trendies with their green logos and green mission statements would know one end of a hoe from another.
englishhermit, 24 July 2007, 1:59 AM

But more often, an attempt is made to speak from a neutral position from which, for example, one can berate "Guardian Readers" without (somehow?) being one, or the middle classes from an unspecified class location. Again Monbiot provides the lead here, with an anecdote about a fellow train passenger – whose identity or social location are unspecified – and who, after glancing through Sheherazade Goldsmith's book "A Slice of Organic Life" comments "This is for people who don't work" (Monbiot, 2007). This kind of footing is also ironicized in places, or made the subject of critical comment such as the following (which, in turn, articulates it in line with a certain kind of politics):

So what everyone one is saying is that it's the middle class's fault, i.e., 'their' fault, not 'mine' since I'm staunchly un-middle class (despite my uni education & centrist leanings)
marcs013, 24 July 2007, 2:05 PM

A further point of interest is the construction of audience via a mode of address. Direct address is sometimes made to a participant or, in the following example, George Monbiot, in order to castigate others: "George, you really pulled them out of their little lives these nutters who follow your every word" (GerryM, 24 July 2007,

3:55 PM). The mode of address however is not always direct: that is, the implicit addressee or audience for these comments may be different from the person or position being criticized. Indeed one strategy is to invoke a community of readers in order to designate particular contributors as “other”: ““I couldn’t follow the logic.” Of course not, these people are unable to think.” (englishhermit, 24 July 2007, 2:36 AM).

A different sense of community derives from the fact that not only are familiar positions rehearsed (in relation to green politics for example), but that known allies and adversaries are recognized: for example, “Haha! Mr P.B. has made an entrance” (Easyduzit, 24 July 1:29 PM).

Conclusions

One of the most striking features of this forum, and our key finding, is the sheer heterogeneity of elements that are brought to bear by participants: while we have concentrated in detail on only a few of these, we have tried to convey something of the forum’s discursive richness. Echoing, in some respects, Latour’s observations about the “imbroglios of science, politics, economy, law, religion, technology, fiction” to be found in one daily newspaper (1993: 2), we have found participants using a range of elements and resources to make arguments about sustainability and consumption: established political positions, categorisations of social identities (especially class), utopian visions of a good life, technological fixes, and theological notions of sin and sacrifice. Given space we could also have noted other themes, including discussions of the epistemological immaturity of the social sciences, the negative role of postmodern thought, and the problematic tendency towards sensationalism within the media and the stories produced for them.

We have also highlighted the way in which social and moral themes are woven through these constructions and articulations. On the one hand issues of sustainable living are often translated into issues of social identity for polemical purposes, where the negative connotations of the constructed identity provide a key critical resource; on the other hand, there is frequent recourse to overtly moral judgements of behaviour, whether in the construction of visions of a better life or designations of problematic ways of living. Even those participants who position themselves as attempting to live sustainably, however, do not see individual change as sufficient, but point to the importance of connecting individual responses to wider ‘structural’ initiatives (Evans & Abrahamse, 2009: 501). These interwoven themes all suggest the complexity of the task of bringing about changes of attitude, should that be seen as the relevant policy objective (c.f. Shove, 2010).

These complex mobilisations of discursive resources and deployment of arguments emerge from the tensions embedded in discussions-in-practice, enabled by internet media, which construct an everyday politics of lifestyle from the contradictions between consumption and sustainability. It is, of course, important to consider the specificity of the forum itself as a discursive space. While the framework of the forum bears similarities to some qualities of mediated environmental discourse discussed elsewhere – in the agenda-setting of the mainstream news organisation, or alternatively the new media dissemination of activist arguments – the forum further enables a “naturally occurring” discursive space in which wide-ranging subject positions and extensively diverse arguments about sustainability and consumption are articulated. It would, however, be inadequate to think of the forum as simply a neutral vehicle for the expression of public opinion or some such, and we have noted some characteristics of the postings that may be of interest: the rehearsal of (familiar?)

arguments, the footing and enunciation of statements, and the sense that there is some variation in the implied audience for particular statements. Whether it supports claims made for Web 2.0 technologies (open, participatory, mutual maximization of collective intelligence etc.) is a moot point. One contributor certainly would contest such a positive gloss: “I think I preferred the Guardian when there were no blog comments – at least then the general stupidity of the readers was concealed.” (SeanD, 24 July 2007, 12:44 PM).

One particularly interesting feature of the forum is the degree to which this everyday argumentation about sustainable consumption echoes themes and debates within the academic literature. Clearly what is meant by sustainable consumption and the possibility of sustainable lifestyles is not only problematic for social and cultural theorists! We might assume that participants in this forum are likely to have a particular interest in the topic under discussion (with many of them attempting in some way to adopt a sustainable lifestyle) and what is perhaps most evident is the lack of agreement (indeed fierce disagreement) about what sustainable consumption and lifestyles might imply. While this level of disagreement can seem problematic in terms of attempts to motivate the uptake of more sustainable ways of living, we might take heart, as Evans and Abrahamse (2009) do, from the extent to which sustainability is caught up with any number of other agendas. They suggest that such disagreement

... is good news for those seeking to motivate pro-environmental behaviour on a wider scale as it suggests that, rather than relying on appeals to the agendas of sustainability or notions of a green identity, there are multiple entry points through which to mobilise the uptake of sustainable lifestyles (2009: 500).

This brings us to our final comment, which is both substantive and analytical. We have noted this discussion's highly reflexive character, in that argumentative strategies themselves become topics for comment and analysis, and that many participants display an ironic awareness of the positions from which they speak. The forum discussion exhibits the tendency of Web 2.0 towards self-moderation and self-regulation in this respect, and it may be that the general injunction to take seriously, in any critical analysis, the critical capacities of actors themselves (Boltanski, 2011) takes on particular pertinence in this domain.

¹ Monbiot's article is also potentially of analytic interest in itself because it provides a case study of environmental communication that extends and revises Singer's (2005) discussion of the political 'j-blogger' – the professional political journalist who simultaneously maintains a personal weblog (Robinson, 2006; Singer, 2005). Monbiot's additional role as a prominent UK environmental organiser and activist arguably sits uneasily amongst the tensions here between traditional professional journalistic values, and the online dissemination of personal perspectives (via the weblog) in public discursive space.

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