Constructing and mobilizing ‘the consumer’: responsible consumption and the politics of food waste reduction in the UK

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Background
Sustainability and Consumption

- Rio Earth Summit, 1992: attention drawn to the environmental impacts of consumption patterns in industrialized countries
- Oslo Symposium, 1994:
  
  *The use of services and related products which respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials as well as emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle of the service or product so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations*

- UNEP launches sustainable consumption programme, 1998
- World Summit on Sustainable Development, 2002: establishes Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP) as 1 of 3 key overarching objectives for Sustainable Development
- Marrakesh process launched in 2003
- Rio + 20, 2012: 10 Year Framework of Programmes (10YFP) (action on SCP) adopted
Background
Sustainable Consumption and ‘Consumers’

• c.2002: the decoupling of ‘production’ and ‘consumption’
  - Reduced pollution, waste and GHG from industrial sectors…
  - …yet CO₂ emissions, energy use and material throughput continued to rise
  - Attribution to personal consumption and private households (Michaelis 2003)

• 10 YFP and Marrakech process: notions of behavior change becoming a ‘holy grail’ (Jackson 2005)

• Individualizing responsibilities and responsibilizing consumers
• Reduction of systemic challenges to the behaviors and choices of individual citizen-consumers (Barr and Prillwitz 2014)
• Constraining political and ethical possibilities (Rumpala 2011)
• Neo-liberal environmentalism (cf. McCarthy and Prudham 2004, Swaffield 2016)
• A problematic model of moral agency (Young 2003)
State of the art
And now it’s all practice?

- Misunderstanding **processes of consumption** (Southerton et al. 2004, Shove 2010)
- Critical accounts of sustainable consumption are highly influenced by **theories of practice** in their various guises (following Spaargaren 2002 2011, Shove 2003 2013)
  - Objection to the individualizing of responsibilities
  - Moving beyond a focus on ‘behavior’ in favor of the ‘social’ **organization of practices**
  - Empirical and substantive focus on the dynamics of **everyday life**

- Concerning **mobilization** specifically, neglects fundamental questions related to:
  1) Variation across substantive domains
  2) Changes over time
  3) **The processes through which sustainable consumption has been framed as a problem and possibility of consumer behavior and individual responsibilities**
Bringing the consumer back in
Who, and where, is ‘the consumer’?

- The vocabulary of ‘the consumer’ is powerful and pervasive: how is it constructed and to what uses is it put?

*This bogey of a deluded, superficial person who has become the mere mannequin to commodity culture is always someone other than ourselves* (Miller, 2001: 229)

*Which processes helped and which discouraged the formation of this new political and social category? What has been the relative role of civil society, state and commercial interests in different contexts? What groups and agencies have spoken as consumers or on their behalf, for what reasons and with what implications?* (Trentmann 2006:2)

- Governmentality perspectives (Foucault 1978):
  - Stock critique versus analytic insights
  - ‘The consumer’ as a site through which individual subjectivities are assembled (Miller and Rose 1997)
Constructing and mobilizing the consumer
Beyond state of the art

- Clive Barnett and colleagues (e.g. Barnett et al. 2011, Clarke 2007)
- Approaches consumption as a field of political mobilization
- Ethical consumption: from the agency of individual consumers, to the strategies and tactics of organizations and intermediaries
- Engaging consumers/processes of consumption in political projects (resistance and appropriation)
- Making ‘consumers’ knowable and representing them in the public/political realm

[how one set of collective actors (campaigns, NGOs, charities) engage with other collective actors (retailers, suppliers, corporations) through the real and discursive figure of ‘the ethical consumer’. (Clarke et al. 2007).]

- Extending this approach to the project of sustainable consumption
Food Waste

- Roughly one third of global food production goes to waste, 1.3 billion tonnes each year:
  - If food waste was a country, it would be the world’s 3rd largest GHG emitter (after USA and China)
  - Direct economic consequences: $750 billion (USD) annually
  - 1 in 4 calories is wasted and yet 842 million do not have access to sufficient calories on a daily basis

- Food waste in the UK:
  - 15 million tonnes every year
  - Over 50% arises at the level of the household/final consumer

- The evolution of responses to this issue: **two distinct ‘waves’** marked by their differences in the configuration of relationships between relevant constituencies, and by the ways in which they construct and mobilize ‘the consumer’.
Initial responses (c.2007 – 2013): responsibilizing the consumer
WRAP’s *The Food We Waste* report (2008): **households and consumers**

- Measurement and management (Gregson and Crang 2010)
- Why was this the focus?
- A **pivotal moment** in framing food waste as an ‘**end of pipe**’ (Alexander et al. 2013) issue
- Buttressed by figures and estimates from international studies and reports, e.g. FAO (2011), IMechE (2013)

A range of **governmental and non-governmental actors** became active in the debate

- Formal political institutions (e.g. European Commission)
- International bodies (e.g. World Resources Institute)
- High profile activists (e.g. Tristram Stuart)
- Cultural figures (e.g. celebrity chefs)
- Media outlets (including new social media)

‘**Ordinary**’ **consumers not the agents** of food waste reduction activities (cf. Barnett et al. 2011)
• Consensus that consumption is the problem and the figure of ‘the consumer’ is invoked frequently

• A number of inferences and unsubstantiated assumptions about ‘the consumer’, e.g. lack of awareness, lack of shopping planning, confusion about ‘best before’ and ‘use by’ date labels, lack of knowledge on how to cook with leftovers (households) [European Commission, n.d.]

• An increasing proportion of the world’s population is removed from involvement in and knowledge of the food supply system, merely becoming food consumers at the end of a supply chain. This creates a culture with little understanding of the source and value of food [I MechE 2013]

• Rhetorical and moralistic tropes, e.g. ‘throwaway society’.

• WRAP: more systematic efforts to understand ‘consumer behavior’ and develop the evidence base
  - ‘ways of knowing’ the consumer (Miller and Rose 1997) informed by paradigms of individual decision making.
  - Assumption that consumption is ‘a field of intervention that can be subjected to corrective actions’ (Rumpala 2011)

• Campaigning activity nevertheless continued to focus ‘consumers’ with the ambition of enrolling them into the project of food waste reduction
1) Deploying narrative resources of ethical responsibility
Problematising existing patterns of consumption

• Circulating anxieties (Jackson 2015)
  - Figures concerning the environmental and social impacts of food waste
  - Waste’s negative connotations are long standing (Hawkins 2006)
  - Food as necessity for life itself (Evans et al. 2013)

• Calculative practices
  - Rendering abstract figures intelligible (e.g. from GHG eq. emissions to ‘cars on UK roads’)
  - Contextualizing impacts ‘per household’

• Emphasizing the financial costs of wasted food: an appeal to economic rationality or working through existing ethical dispositions in household consumption?
• Campaigning involves moral instruction and consequentialist ethics (Newholm et al. 2005)
2) Practical instruction
Making new forms of individual (ethical) conduct possible

• Guidance on how to (Clarke et al. 2007) do things differently offered by a range of authorities and agencies
• Genre produced by firms, environmental charities, local governments, food bloggers, journalists and authors
• Generic advice on household management: ‘top tips’, ‘did you know?’
• Interactive web tools, e.g.

http://www.lovefoodhatewaste.com/content/planning-your-meals-love-food-hate-waste-way

• Provision of devices, e.g. meal planners, weighing and measuring utensils for portion control

Consistent with analysis of ethical consumption campaigning offered by Barnett et al. (2011)
Changing dynamics (2013 onwards): distributed responsibility
Major retailers become much more active in responding to the challenge of food waste reduction
- 2013: Tesco food waste audit
- 87% grocery market agreeing to follow suit and publish findings (BRC 2014)
- 92% sector as signatories to WRAP’s Courtauld Commitment

Retailers directly responsible for just 5% of total food waste (House of Lords, 2014)

Supermarkets as focal actors in food systems with ‘upstream’ and ‘downstream’ influences (e.g. Burch and Lawrence 2007)

Assuming responsibilities for waste that arises elsewhere in the food system
- Guaranteeing minimum orders
- Packaging innovations
- Changes to promotional strategy
- Online tools

Is this inevitable?

• The **food waste discourse coalition** (following Hajer 1995)
• Relationships between supermarkets and other stakeholders stands in stark contrast to the configurations typically observed in relation to other contentious social, environmental and ethical issues
  - Coercive pressures
  - Rival problem framings
  - Multi-stage dialectical processes (Geels and Penna 2015)
  - Antagonist relationships
• Co-production, Consensus and Cohesion (Evans et al. 2016)
• Dense interrelated **network of stakeholders** who have **aligned around a shared set of understandings** concerning the challenge of food waste reduction (Welch, Evans and Swaffield 2016)
• Emergent sense of **distributed responsibility**, recognition and consensus that:
  - Food waste is a **systemic** issue,
  - There is a need to distinguish between the **cause and location** of waste, and
  - That successful responses require **collaboration** between actors across the chain
“I think we have to accept that **we all have some responsibility**… where there are problems is when there’s a break between one part of the food chain and another.” (Retailer 3)

“I think we would definitely see it as a **system-wide issue**…if there is a focus for our interest, it’s more around what’s the **interaction between those different stages in the system**.” (Policy maker 1)

“**it’s not the consumer’s fault** that there’s **food waste** and it’s **not the retailer’s fault**. It’s a bit of both, and looking at it through one lens is unhelpful. It’s **absolutely a multi stakeholder issue**.” (Interview 15, NGO)

“When you look at what are the causes of waste on farms, some of the things, it will be very little to do with [our] operations…But in other cases it can be down to, for example, forecasting ordering. Now, that is clearly a **shared responsibility**…Taking the whole value chain perspective of the issue is very, very important to **ensure that we’re not passing the waste problem down the value chain**.” (Retailer 2)
• Consumers not deleted from **campaigning activity**, but they have assumed a very different status
• No longer the primary or sole target, e.g.

http://stoptherot.org.uk

• Where consumers *are* the focus of campaigning activity, **different ways of knowing the consumer** are beginning to take hold
  - Explicit recognition of ‘everyday ethics’ and **multiple moralities of households consumption**
  - Acceptance that ‘consumer behavior’ is **not something that can be rationally guided**, and that interventions are not guaranteed to have the intended outcome
  - Greater awareness of ‘**social context**’: recognizing that households ≠ individuals, taking family dynamics far more seriously (Shiftdesign 2013)
  - Acknowledging the **processes** that lie behind the act of wasting food (WRAP 2014)
  - Citing theories of practice!

• The responsibilized consumer is **no longer the dominant framing of the issue**.
The rhetorical figure of ‘the consumer’ is invoked in ways that do not individualize responsibilities. Supermarkets suggest that food waste is something that their customers care about, and are candid about the risks of not taking action.

*If you go to a shop and you spend £50 and every week you’re throwing away a fiver’s worth of £5 of food because it’s in the wrong packaging, went off or didn’t taste as good, you’re going to stop going to that retailer* (Retailer 5)

How do they know their customers and their concerns about food waste?

- Their own market/consumer research techniques
- The unintended consequences of the first wave of campaigning

Supermarkets now using the vocabulary of ‘the consumer’ to engage with other collective/strategic actors.

*We’ve got all these different initiatives and you all those to hit all the different types of people. Driving it [persuading suppliers to develop split packaging innovations to better manage portion control] through the customer and what the customer wants just gives it a stronger voice* (Retailer 5)
Conclusion
Beyond behavior change?

- Sustainable consumption: an exemplar of contemporary political rationalities
- Responsibilization: **specific mechanisms** underpinning the ‘initial responses’ to food waste
- Tracing the **evolution of the issue** and the **changing role of ‘the consumer’**
- Going ‘beyond behavior change’:
  - From ‘we must move’ to ‘we have moved’
  - Critical perspectives risk throwing the baby out with the bathwater
  - Did the initial responses **enable the emergent sense of distributed responsibility**— e.g. pushing the issue, enrolling industry, establishing the food waste discourse coalition?
  - ‘The consumer’ as a **tactical** and **rhetorical** device
- Remains to be seen if the current situation is **durable** or if these findings are **transferable**

Greater attention should be paid to the ways in which ‘the consumer’ is mobilized alongside its changing role in the politics of sustainable consumption
Thank you

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