

Without Consumer Culture, There is No Environmental Crisis

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Introduction

This is a good time to reevaluate the relationship between human culture and the environment. Social sciences have gone far beyond the kinds of arguments we heard 50 years ago about some religions being "proenvironmental," while others motivated a callous and exploitative relationship with nature. We have also come to recognize that the phenomena we call "religion" are anything but uniform, and not all religions are bounded organizations to which people belong. The world's largest country is mostly devoid of any particular organized religion

As an ecological anthropologist, I have been studying the relationship between culture and the environment for more than 40 years. Views have changed dramatically during that time, and there are still fundamental disagreements among my colleagues. In this short briefing paper I can do no more than summarize some of our main conclusions, and highlight the area where fundamental research is still needed. A reading list on ecological and environmental anthropology would be far too large, but there are good resources available in textbooks and recent readers including Haenn, Harnish and & Wilk 2016. Everything here can be found in my other publications, with full citations and more thorough explication.

The Natural Savage

At one time it was common for anthropologists to assume that all precapitalist cultures lived in harmony and equilibrium with their natural environment. Any instability was seen as the result of Western impact and modernity. In the 1990s the question of the "ecological Indian" prompted more research, concluding that all past human societies had been unstable and human civilizations developed during the rapid climate change at the end of the Pleistocene. We have always lived in unstable environments, and have responded through migration and conflict, which in turn makes any kind of "natural" equilibrium impossible. In addition, human beings have always changed their environments in ways that undercut the meaning of "natural". Even the primeval Amazonian rain forest is the result of thousands of years of human intervention and intention.

Greater understanding of human/environmental interaction through time has led environmental and social scientists to recognize that there is no clear boundary between nature and culture as they are conventionally understood. Human belief systems, including beliefs about the supernatural world are both cause and consequence of relationships with a physical environment. But that relationship is anything but direct.

The Limited Power of Belief

Human behavior cannot be reduced to rational choice, individual personality, ideology or a quest for social position (Wilk and Cligget 2006). Instead, ideology, beliefs, language and cultural habits have a variable effect on behavior in historically contingent and complex ways. In other words, humans can be dramatically motivated by religion or other belief systems, but they can also be quite unaffected. An ideology can be powerful enough to make people sacrifice their lives, but it can also be a vague rationalization for innovative or customary behavior. For example, most of the major world religions have emphasized humility, and ascetic poverty, condemning materialism, greed and wealth for thousands of years, yet consumer culture and the pursuit of wealth still flourish. Sometimes people accommodate their beliefs to their behavior rather than vice versa. To illustrate; I recently visited Malaysia, a devoutly Muslim society that has enthusiastically embraced modernity and the secular pursuit of material pleasures, in conflict with the austere teachings of their religion. Ramadan has become, in many places, a commercialized consumption event. In the same setting, others take vows of poverty and devote themselves to public service and religious piety. Which one is being affected by their belief system?

We can conclude that the relationship between religious beliefs and actual behavior is indirect and complex. So is the relationship between environmental attitudes and behavior. For example, a survey in the 1990s found that a vast majority of North Americans considered themselves to be strong environmentalists, but these attitudes did not usually lead to pro – environmental behaviors and choices, including voting. Even the small minority of committed environmentalists were not consistent in applying their values to their everyday behavior (nor are they today). One could also point to the example of Japan, where a nature – worshiping religion has not prevented the widespread destruction and obliteration of landscape and the ocean.

In practice this brand of cultural determinism has had a regrettable history. In the 19th century German geographers argued that the physical environment had a strong effect on human culture, which explained why people in the tropics were lazy and indolent, while Nordic people were hard-working and thrifty. Much more recently, political scientists have claimed that Catholic countries in Latin America are lagging in economic development because they have too many children, waste money and cannot accumulate wealth.

Consumerism

A major issue is the mechanism of the causal arrow between religion and environmental behavior. In most cases the relationship is likely to be indirect. An example would be common property theory as developed by Eleanor Ostrom. She showed that one way to get around the tragedy of the commons and overexploitation of natural resources is for a community to work together and develop rules that manage and distribute resources in a fair and sustainable way. This requires trust and solidarity, and a willingness to monitor and punish rule breaking, which are in turn reinforced by membership in a community of shared beliefs and values, sometimes a characteristic of religious organizations. Regardless of belief systems, however, these communities can be undercut and destroyed by political and economic pressure or external threats to their communal rights of ownership.

An equally urgent issue is to understand the role of religion and belief systems in the growth of mass consumer culture. For several decades historians and social scientists have sought to understand the

origins of consumer culture, and the underlying ideology that makes it such an all-consuming and expansive system. Consumer cultures vary from place to place but they share this quality of inequality, instability and growth, in a way that often overcomes or conceals other kinds of human priorities like education, health and quality of life. In the process, the concept of need has been bent and twisted into a form of entertainment. All of the things that make us human and humane are co-opted and turned into devices for buying and acquiring goods. Even something as basic as gender is naturalized through diet, cosmetics, fashion and a whole lifetime of learned consumption habits. But in this we are neither deluded victims nor masters of our own fate.

Freud argued that the driver of consumer culture was a frustrated search for wholeness, that the price of civilization was alienation and existential discomfort. This is the genesis of a moral argument that consumerism is a form of mental illness, a communicable disease, a meme. By reducing consumerism to an individual impulse, these arguments can draw us away from seeing that there is a political economy that also makes consumerism work and grow, and that as George Bataille said, waste and destruction are the ultimate product of capitalist consumerism. Marx said that consumer culture is device that keeps us all engaged in a massive shell game through which it takes the products of our labor, and substitutes money as a reward for work, leading to alienation. This is how the consumer economy drains our wealth into the pockets of a small minority. The miracle of capitalism, said Marx, is that it is largely invisible. Under the guise of providing things that we need, that make us comfortable and happy, we become enmeshed in a system that gradually drains our humanity. If any of this is true, we need to understand how we have been made into consumers. How did we become the willing victims of our own emotions and impulses? Is it possible to change a mass consumer culture into something that is more sustainable?

The environmental Dilemma Restated

Let me restate the most serious dilemma we face, the biggest challenge to the sustainability of all human cultures. About 20% of the human population is using more than 80% of the available resources, while producing a similar proportion of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. No matter what this charmed one fifth does to reduce its emissions, the problem is that the other 80% of the world wants to join their ranks. If we continue to have such inequality in the distribution of consumer culture, the world may be torn apart by conflict or divided by permanent barriers between the haves and have-nots. Most of us do not want to live in a world that is constantly riven by warfare, or one that rests upon permanent injustice. If on the other hand, those billions can join the ranks of the high consumers, living with the conveniences and comforts we have come to expect in rich countries, we will have an ecological catastrophe of much greater dimensions than just a rising sea level and change in the weather. If we were to add a meat based diet, personal transportation, temperature regulation (air conditioning and heating), single-family dwellings with modern utilities, tourism, and recreation, for another six or 7 billion people, even with renewable energy and much greater efficiency, we would still have an ecological catastrophe (even greater than the one we are now experiencing).

Therefore, I would argue that regardless of religion or political ideology, the culture of consumerism is the most dangerous thing on our planet. Hidden behind our everyday assumptions about comfort and convenience, wealth and poverty, growth and decline, lies an unquestioned set of beliefs that are destroying the future.

References

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