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Green Consumption: The Global Rise of the Eco-Chic

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BOOK REVIEW

Green Consumption: The Global Rise of the Eco-Chic

Bart Barendregt & Rivke Jaffe (Eds)

Bloomsbury, 2014, 204 pp., £70.00 (hardback), £20.69 (paperback), ISBN 978 0 85785 501 5

Green consumption has received an increasing amount of attention over the past decade. Increasingly, it is seen as a lifestyle choice and key to the formation of new identities. Barendregt and Jaffe pose three questions: Why is it now that eco-chic has become so popular in the formation of new identities? To what extent do eco-chic's various forms and appearances rely on specific local contexts? And, in what ways can eco-chic make a genuine contribution to solving the main problems of our time and contribute to debates on sustainable development? (p. 2). The answers to these questions provide an insight not just into this lifestyle choice, but into the historical context through an exploration of time and space, materiality and consumption, identity and branding.

Barendregt and Jaffe define eco-chic as 'a combination of lifestyle politics, environmentalism, spirituality, beauty, health and simple living'. It is also seen as the domain of a wealthy middle and upper class. Engagement with eco-chic occurs only where consumer lifestyles are sufficiently removed from the necessity of engaging with sustainable practices within a poverty-ridden setting. What is born of necessity for some, takes on the glamour of eco-chic for a wealthy few. Value adding transformations within the supply chain occur as eco-branded solutions to the world's wrongs. Thus, a peasant stew of home-grown organic food becomes eco-chic when sold in upmarket restaurants and coded with food-mile information. This presents a multitude of consumption dilemmas for green consumers. The authors delve into the local and global specificities of the production and consumption of food, jewellery, fashion, housing, travel and a multitude of other products. Eco-chic consumers question the provenance of all their purchases while engaging in consumerist activities. For some, the conversion to eco-chic is about cultural identity, reinforcing distance from the middle-class. For others, this distancing is genuinely combined with how much 'good' they are able to achieve. The newly rich and traditional elites trade in moral values and cultural identity with or without deep felt ideological convictions.

Green Consumption: The Global Rise of the Eco-chic broad scope details the different cultural overlays within the North American, European, Asian and Pacific contexts, exploring adaptation through class and cultural identity. We are taken on a journey from Singapore's green high rise to Jamaica's Ital chic. In this way, nuances seen in one region but not another are drawn together into a cohesive whole. Whereas once excess consumption was seen as the cause of global problems in the form of poverty and environmental degradation, green consumption sees consumption as the solution to many problems. Spending on green

products is seen as acceptable. This book highlights the many partnerships formed between multi-national companies and non-government organisations (NGOs). The benefits to both parties are explored through the concept of branding and rebranding. For multi-nationals, such partnerships do more than green-wash their company. They increase brand trust. Partnering with NGOs allows production to resume in an uninterrupted way, guaranteeing supply chain. The authors provide a detailed exploration of branding and the value of brand within this context to the benefit of both parties. The brand power of both parties is enhanced, adding value for the shareholders of multi-national companies, while increasing market share and credibility for NGOs. This surprising partnering of former antagonists is explored in terms of lost impartiality and the failure of watchdogs, green product certification practices and industry accountability. The focus constantly shifts from one part of the supply chain to another, without necessarily seeing it as a whole. It is in this space that the politics of denial are able to take hold (Milburn & Conrad 1998). In probing this post-political view of political consumerism, sustainable consumption and corporate social responsibility, the global north to south supply chains are highlighted within a post-colonial setting.

Do Barendregt and Rivke present a coherent answer to the three initial questions posed? Yes and no is the answer. The division of the 10 chapters into three parts would seem suitable for answering the three questions posed. However, it is not along these lines that the book is organized. Instead we are presented with headings along the lines of *production and consumption; spatiality and temporalities, bodies and beauty*. While individual authors have sought to explore the three initial questions, there are times when the connection is less than clear. This is particularly so when addressing the contribution that exploration of eco-chic makes to solving the main problems of our time. It is not until the final chapter that focus shifts to this perplexing issue. Green consumerism allows the growth of ecofriendly, transnational companies. The authors purport that the need for ecofriendly products and travel encourages the takeover of smaller, local entities by these and other companies, creating new assaults upon the poorest communities. Where niche markets and brands are challenged, newer, vaguer terms are invented to lull the eco-chic into believing that all is well. It is not until the final page that Zukin offers advice on how to address and curb the issues associated with brandization.

The strength of this book is the sound academic research, extensive literature review and grounding in sociology, anthropology, geography and political science. Through engagement with these disciplines, a thorough discussion of time and place, materiality and consumption, identity and branding is gained. It highlights the way in which class distinction recreates itself across different cultures, reinforcing boundaries between rich and poor. Eco-chic explores the territories between cynicism and tokenism. Through this exploration, we learn more about how the marketplace works—what we do as a token to save the world and how much it actually achieves in reducing environmental harm. It is in this lacuna that cynicism normally has its home. However, the depth of research and the determination to write in a ‘post cynical’ manner shown by the authors about everyday practices makes this book essential reading for those who seek to engage with green consumption. Green is, after all, the new black. The engaging style adopted by the authors makes this an engrossing and thought-provoking

read not just for academics interested in green consumption, but for the politically astute layperson.

Reference

Milburn, M. A., & Conrad, A. D. (1998). *Politics of Denial*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

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