

# Alternative Hedonism: a theory and politics of consumption

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**This project explored some media indices and theoretical implications of an emerging disaffection with ‘consumerist’ consumption, a sense of its negative by-products for consumers themselves. This ambivalence was seen to function not just in alternative or marginal spaces but in a wide range of contexts. Our research conceptualised ‘alternative hedonist’ revisions of thinking about human fulfilment and the ‘good life’, and speculated on the possible role of these new forms of self-interest in promoting sustainable consumption.**



Organised by the Canadian journal *Adbusters*, Buy Nothing Day has become an annual world-wide event that critiques the rampant excesses of consumer capitalism

## KEY FINDINGS

- The concept of ‘alternative hedonism’ identifies self-interested motivations for less environmentally destructive practices, as well as the altruistic motives more commonly associated with green and ethical consumption.
- It encompasses two aspects of the critique of consumerism: the *displeasures* of the high-speed, work-dominated, car and air-flight dependent mode of existence; and the pleasures that consumerism denies or pre-empts, including many that are more sensual than ‘spiritual’.
- Representations in contemporary lifestyle television and magazines resonate with both of these aspects: in narratives of escape from city congestion to rural nostalgia and of quests for convivial and ‘authentic’ eating, or for spiritual values which question those of the market.
- News media, particularly radio and television, now contain significant coverage of concerns about the environment, work-life balance, health and quality of food, and global and national social inequalities. Press coverage of these issues is strongly differentiated according to the class cultures the newspaper addresses and its political orientation.
- Critiques of ‘consumerism’ cannot be effective or democratically sensitive if based on the idea of consumer manipulation and grounded in an essentialist distinction between ‘true’ and ‘false’ or more or less ‘natural’ needs.
- Appeal to the seductions of consuming sustainably is more likely to win adherents than threats and alarms about ill-health or environmental destruction. The point is not to advocate a restricted and reduced mode of living, but to emphasise the pleasures consumerism denies or conceals and the displeasures it generates.

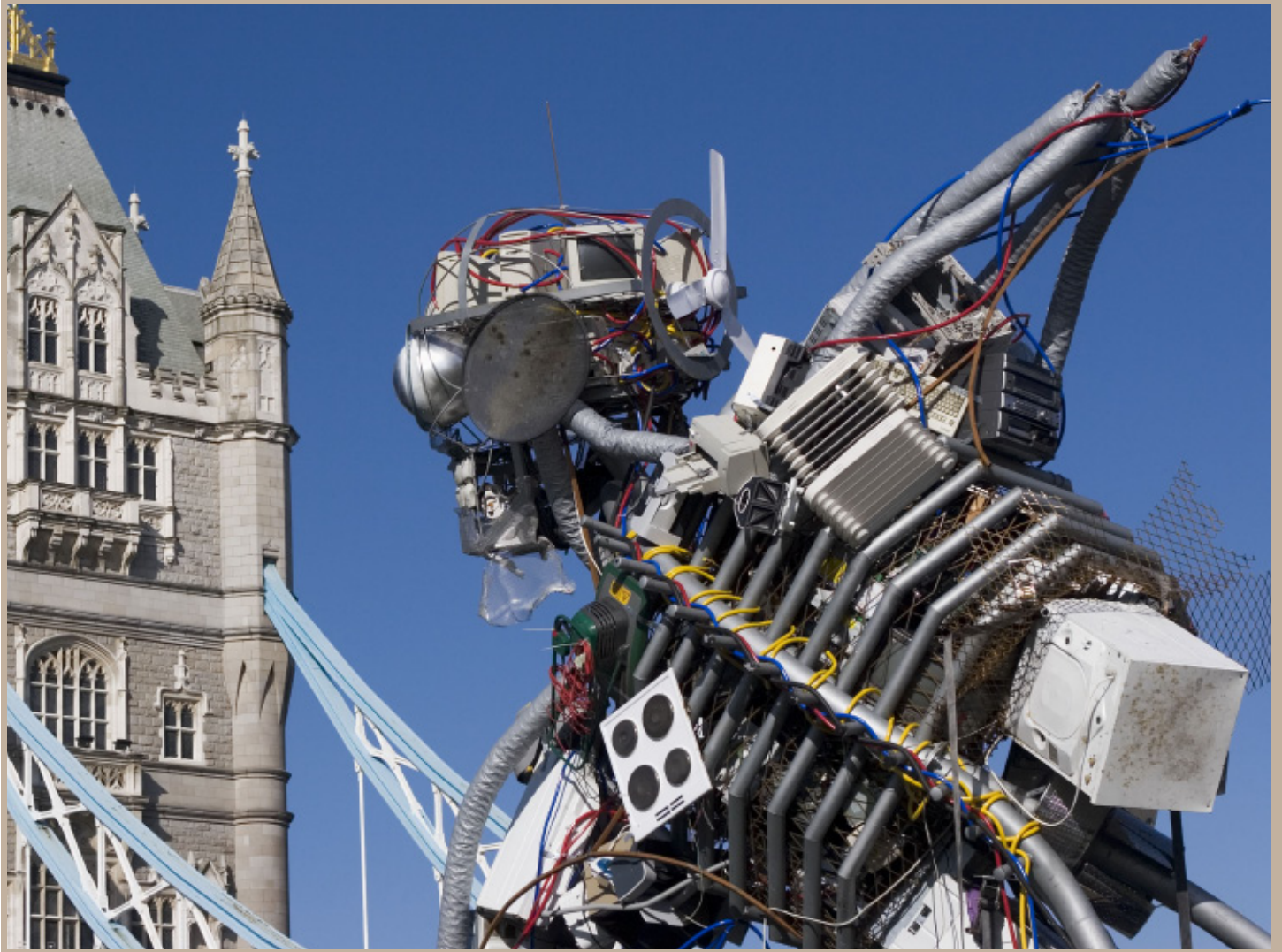
- Policies (such as congestion charging) that are initially relatively unpopular can win enhanced support as a consequence of the improved experiences they provide.

## HIGHLIGHTS

Affluent patterns of consumption are now widely regarded as both compromised by their negative by-products (congestion, pollution, noise, ill-health, excessive waste) and as destroying or preventing other forms of happiness and pleasure. The project explores the other ways of thinking about the ‘good life’ implicit in these forms of ambivalence or disquiet and presents these as highly significant for the political and ecological conditions and demands of our time. Whereas predictions of environmental collapse can often lead to a *carpe diem* fatalism, the ‘alternative hedonist’ argument, by contrast, is premised on the idea that even if consumerism were indefinitely sustainable it would not enhance human happiness and well-being. The chances of shifting to less rapacious ways of consuming, and hence of reducing social and environmental exploitation, are thus presented as dependent on the emergence and embrace of new views of human pleasure and self-realisation, especially, in the first instance, on the part of the affluent global elites.

‘Alternative hedonism’ is here theorised as an immanent critique of ‘consumerism’, and the impulse behind a new ‘political imaginary’ or vision of the ‘good life’ that might influence (along with other developments) the move to a more socially just and environmentally sustainable and enjoyable future.

In line with this approach, the research provides an analysis around its core concept of ‘alternative hedonism’ that is critical of both neo-liberal and Marxist understandings of consumer formation, identity and agency.



It departs both politically and theoretically from much earlier opposition to commodification in refusing to ground its critique of 'consumerism' in an essentialist distinction between 'true' and 'false' or more or less 'natural' needs. It thus rejects the presumption that the 'excesses' of modern consumption can be corrected through a return to a simpler and supposedly more 'natural' way of life. So far from calling for a more cyclical or reduced existence, it fully recognises that diversity, change and self-development are indispensable features of human fulfilment. It also differs from many studies of mundane consumption in recognising how problematic even the most ordinary forms of consumption (of food, transport, leisure etc) are now becoming. Indeed the main focus is neither on consumption as a bid for personal distinction or individualisation, nor on consumption as a relatively unconscious 'form of life', but on the ways in which a whole range of contemporary consumerist practices are being brought into question by reason of their environmental consequences, their impact on health, and their restraints on both sensual enjoyment and more spiritual forms of well being.

This focus is reflected in our media study which explored ambivalent responses to the pleasures of 'consumerism' in 'mainstream' media. In lifestyle

television we identified four sub-genres where the representation of the joys of consumption is tempered by anxieties about quality of life, and desires for other pleasures: narratives of 'relocation' from urban noise and pollution to rural community and natural beauty; cookery programmes focusing on quests for authentic, wild or local food; programmes focusing on spiritual journeys motivated by disillusionment with material success; and finally, 'ecoreality' programmes, where the protagonists are challenged to adopt a new and 'greener' lifestyle. In our analysis of lifestyle magazines we explored the politics of 'eco chic', which attempts to merge style and 'green' credentials.

The lifestyle study was complemented by analysis of news media, focusing on the representation of anxieties about health, food, the environment, work-life balance and social inequality. The research suggests that television and radio news broadcasts have engaged more with this significant area of public debate than all but the centre-left press. The press coverage indicates a socially stratified difference in the level and type of concern. For example, most of the relevant coverage in *The Sun* and *The Mirror*—read predominantly by social classes c2, d and e—is responding to the much greater incidence of health problems (often caused by excessive



## Findings: Alternative Hedonism: a theory and politics of consumption

Left: the RSA WEEE Man. A huge robotic figure made of scrap electrical and electronic equipment, it weighs 3.3 tonnes, stands seven meters tall and represents the average amount of e-products every single one of us throws away during a lifetime. Designed by Paul Bonomini  
Photo: David Ramkalawon

Below: The pleasures of going slow: the Solway Firth on Hadrian's Cycleway (route 72 of the Sustrans National Cycle Network running for 174 miles across northern England)  
Photo: David Martin/Sustrans

Right: Consumerism, disquiet and desire in the press  
Collage: Lyn Thomas



consumption of poor quality food and alcohol) in this population than in the middle classes. In the *Telegraph* sample, by contrast, 60 per cent of the relevant coverage is devoted to the environment. But the paper carried the lowest percentage of articles on poverty, whether global or national. This conjuncture arguably reflects the paper's centre-right orientation and its predominantly middle and upper middle class readership. Concerns about the effects of consumerist lifestyles are thus revealed as emerging across class cultures, but as differing in focus and quality of response.

These media findings tally with our general theoretical approach to the understanding of contemporary consumer responses to 'consumerist' provision and its social impact. We reject the idea that these can be adequately accounted for by reference to the narrow self-interests of an insular and 'sovereign' consumer. But we are also critical of theories of consumer manipulation on the grounds that they fail to take account of the reflexive and contradictory structure of contemporary consumer responses. We have explored the policy and social welfare implications of the adoption of an 'alternative hedonist' perspective and have related it to current thinking on the 'citizen-consumption' debate.

### MESSAGES FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The research suggests that a sense of pleasures and rewards is important in campaigns aiming to redirect consumption towards more sustainable practices. It proposes a new conceptualisation of 'the good life' that policy makers and politicians can draw on. This exposes the more backward, puritan and dystopian aspects of a work-driven, high-speed and materially encumbered existence and questions many of the gains of the age of 'speed', 'comfort' and 'convenience'. It dwells on the joys of travelling and eating more slowly (and more locally) and of a life less dominated by car-use, airflight and computer screen. Consumption in the future, it argues, should be built around less damaging methods of farming and commodity production, the recycling of all waste, the shortening of the working week, and the promotion of cultural and aesthetic modes of self-realization rather than the expansion of shopping. The media study demonstrates that this vision is acquiring a broad cultural resonance, beyond marginal and alternative sites. This 'mainstreaming' of concern about the quality of the 'good life' provides a democratic grounding for those seeking to implement more sustainable policies on consumption.

**BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

*Alternative Hedonism: a theory and politics of consumption* was funded by the ESRC/AHRC Cultures of Consumption research programme and ran from October 2004 to September 2006 (grant number: RES-154-25-005). The project team, Professor Kate Soper and Dr Lyn Thomas, was based in the Institute for the Study of European Transformations (ISET) at London Metropolitan University. The project was interdisciplinary, combining environmental philosophy, political and social theory, cultural analysis and media studies. The news study was carried out over a five week period in July and September 2005. Lifestyle magazines were sampled over the same period, and lifestyle television throughout 2005.

**PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE**

- Soper K. 'Re-thinking the "Good Life": The Citizenship Dimension of Consumer Disaffection with Consumerism', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 7(2) (forthcoming, 2007).
- Soper K. 'Alternative Hedonism, Cultural Theory and the Role of Aesthetic Revisioning', *Cultural Studies* (forthcoming, 2008).

Soper K., and Trentmann F. (eds.) *Citizenship and Consumption* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, forthcoming, 2007).

Soper K., Thomas L., and Ryle M. (eds.) *Counter-Consumerism and its Pleasures* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, forthcoming, 2008).

Thomas L. 'Alternative Realities: Downshifting Narratives in Contemporary Lifestyle Television', *Cultural Studies* (forthcoming, 2008).

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## CULTURES OF CONSUMPTION RESEARCH PROGRAMME

The Cultures of Consumption Programme funds research on the changing nature of consumption in a global context. The Programme investigates the different forms, development and consequences of consumption, past and present. Research projects cover a wide range of subjects, from UK public services to drugs in east Africa, London's fashionable West End to global consumer politics. The £5 million Cultures of Consumption Programme is the first to bring together experts from the social sciences and the arts and humanities. It is co-funded by the ESRC and the AHRC.

The aims of the Cultures of Consumption Programme are:

- to understand the practice, ethics and knowledge of consumption
- to assess the changing relationship between consumption and citizenship
- to explain the shifting local, metropolitan and transnational boundaries of cultures of consumption
- to explore consumption in the domestic sphere
- to investigate alternative and sustainable consumption
- to develop an interface between cutting edge academic research and public debate.

For further details take a look at our website [www.consume.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.consume.bbk.ac.uk)

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