Building Sustainable Societies: A Swedish Case Study on the Limits of Reflexive Modernization.

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American Ethnologist Volume 37 Number 3 August 2010

Environmental problems have inspired a wide range of responses from citizens and states alike. My research focuses on Swedish individuals’ attempts to minimize perceived environmental risks via consumption practice. The growth of “sustainable consumerism” is often explained by generalized theories of reflexive modernization, but the Swedish case illustrates that many citizen-consumers acting in the interest of sustainability are misunderstood by these popular explanations. Their perspectives and actions support the need for a more historically and locally grounded approach to sustainable consumerism in Sweden and elsewhere, one that not only recognizes individual choice but also takes into account considerations of power and history.

Stretching away from Sweden’s east coast into the Baltic Sea, the Stockholm archipelago is a national treasure. Swedes and tourists alike explore its islands during the long days of summer, when the sun casts a golden glow late into the evening. They picnic, sun, swim, and sauna among the archipelago’s sun-bleached and wind-swept rocks, dense forests, and rich bird life. The summer of 2008 was a great summer to sail its waters (see Figure 1). It was particularly warm and sunny, leading many to declare it the best they had seen in many years. Yet, despite the warmth, many Swedes hesitated to swim in what they described as the “pea-soup” water, made thick by yellowish green algal blooms. The winter of 2008 was also unusual, with the warmest weather on record in 250 years. Stockholm, normally majestic in a winter blanket of snow, was more often covered with a layer of gray slush. Harbors and inlets well known for ice-skating never fully froze. Without much snow to brighten the short winter days and with such a
brief season for winter sports, 2008 was a particularly strange year for the Swedes, a people well known for their love of nature and the outdoors (Gullestad 1989; Löfgren 1995).

**FIGURE 1**

With these strange events, conversations about climate change and carbon emissions grew louder, and discussions about these issues were easily overheard on Stockholm’s *tunnelbana* (subway) and among the tables at sidewalk cafés. Although many Swedes like to joke that a rise in global temperatures would be a nice antidote for their normally frigid winters, these strange events seemed to be leading some to think differently about the relationship between their lives, the environment, and human sustainability. Sweden has long been known as an environmentally progressive nation, and many citizens remain committed to solving environmental issues, ranging from resource depletion to pollution. However, recent discussions about the climate are building additional momentum for the environmental movement.

In response to environmental concerns, many citizens are trying to reduce their environmental impact. Over the past 40 years, an extraordinary expansion in more “sustainable” forms of consumption has occurred internationally,¹ from the growth of organic-foods markets and the slow-food movement to ecolabeled products, recycled goods, boycotts, buycotts, voluntary simplicity, and the rise of groups focused on consuming less, for example, compacters and freegans.² Although consumer activism and cooperation is certainly nothing new (Furlough and Stridwerka 1999; Hilton and Daunton 2001; Micheletti 2003), these recent forms are remarkable in both their depth and breadth.

Yet, despite a significant increase in alternative forms of consumption over the last few decades (Goodman 2004), very little is known about the people who are buying “green” products out of concern for the environment, who are buying fair-trade, or “red,” products out of concern for social and economic justice, or who are simply buying less (Anderson and Tobiasen 2004; Cohen and Murphy 2001). The most popular and internationally dominant theories of sustainable
consumerism generally regard the phenomenon as a response to globalization (Boström et al. 2004) or build loosely on the work of Anthony Giddens (1999) and Ulrich Beck (1992) to argue that alternative consumerism is linked to reflexivity and processes of ecological modernization (Spaargaren 1997) in late-modern society.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in Sweden, I focus here on the lived realities of people who are working to reduce their environmental impact and how their perspectives differ significantly from assumptions inspired by popular sustainability theory. My research suggests that theories of reflexive modernization, as they have been popularly interpreted and applied to sustainable consumption policy, are overly simplistic. Perhaps worse, by suggesting that sustainability hinges on improved knowledge and awareness, they imply inadequate policy solutions. Finally, these generalized theories of reflexive modernization do not shed any light on why citizens of some nations are more open to alternative consumerism than those of others. Instead, they gloss over important local and historical factors that inspire variability among ecologically concerned citizen-consumers around the globe.

**Researching green living in Sweden: Context and methods**

Ebba was 12 years old when the news stories broke about the die-off of gray seals on Sweden’s west coast. Twenty years later, she remembers the video footage and photographs being so sad that she cried in front of the family television. The images captivated her, and she remained interested in stories about animal welfare. She began asking questions about why the seals had died and soon took an interest in many environmental issues, including the effects of toxic chemicals, water pollution, acid rain, the depletion of the ozone layer, endangered fish in the Baltic, and, most recently, human-induced climate change. Yet Ebba did not take an active stance on any of these issues until recently. “For many years I felt that there was no point doing anything. I was hopeless and felt powerless because I am just one person and so many others don’t care,” she reflected. It was not until she attended a seminar on global climate change in
2006 that she became more active. “I learned there, if I don’t do something then I am also responsible for what is happening, and I don’t want to have any part in this, harming the earth and living things,” said Ebba.

After attending the seminar, Ebba decided to become a vegetarian. She uses public transport or her bike exclusively. She refuses to fly, and anything she needs for her apartment she borrows or buys secondhand in thrift stores or via Blocket.se, a popular online marketplace for secondhand goods. Signs of her environmental concerns and actions are apparent throughout her home. The landing outside her modest third-floor apartment is, for example, packed with sorted recyclables, composting supplies, and old crates from Ecolådan, a service that delivers fresh organic and local produce (see Figure 2).

**FIGURE 2 HERE**

Many other Swedes share Ebba’s concerns and are also acting to reduce their environmental impact. Movements intended to create more sustainable societies are growing internationally, but the Swedes have been particularly responsive to alternative forms of consumerism (Micheletti and Stolle 2004). Sixty percent of Swedes say they have boycotted or boycotted certain products or companies, compared with an average of 34 percent of people in the rest of western Europe (Ferrer and Fraile 2006). Swedish interest in ecolabeled and organic products is also high, in part, because of the efforts of the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation and the Nordic Council of Ministers (NCOM), who introduced ecolabeling schemes in the 1980s. Today, the Nordic Swan is among the most successful ecolabels in the world, with 97 percent recognition among Swedish citizens (NCOM 2009).

Sweden is also an international leader in sustainability research, legislation, and planning; commitment to the polluter-pays principle; and the development of financial supports for sustainability programs (Rowe and Fudge 2003). Many of the country’s efforts are paying off. The government’s attempts to “decouple” economic growth from environmental degradation by
focusing on service and information industries has prompted some Swedes to shift their consumption toward less energy- and resource-intensive services and experiences. Demographers noted a shift in Swedish consumption patterns away from durable goods and toward experiences, beginning as early as a decade ago (Wikström 1997), and in 2008 the Swedish Retail Institute declared that the Christmas present of the year (Årets Julklapp) was not a global positioning system or the latest mobile phone but, rather, an experience, like tickets to an opera or dinner out with friends (Handelns Utredningsinstitut 2009). Meanwhile, geographers have noted the growing popularity of secondhand consumption throughout Europe (Crewe and Gregson 1998), and anthropologist Rita J. Erikson (1997) observed in the late 1990s that only 23 percent of Swedes (compared with 71 percent of Americans) agreed that they should consume more to foster the economy.

This is not to say that Sweden is not a high-consuming country. Sweden has a highly competitive, export-oriented economy that has generated a high standard of living and provided its citizens with wide access to the world’s products and services. Consumer culture is strong, and sustained economic growth is a national priority. So, despite widespread ecological awareness, an environmentally proactive government, and the actions of many who try to consume less, on average, each Swedish citizen has an ecological footprint of more than six global hectares and emits 10 tons of carbon dioxide every year (Naturvårdsverket 2010). Although these levels do not compare with the footprint of the average U.S. citizen (9.6 global hectares and 20 tons of carbon dioxide annually), they are far above what is believed to be sustainable (Global Footprint Network 2010).

Many Swedes find it difficult to imagine alternatives to their consumer-based lifestyles, which are dependent on goods as symbols of cultural capital, relationships, social status, and personal values. Social scientists have long noted Scandinavia’s strong culture of conformity, tendency to valorize fashion and design, and significant emphasis on creating a fashionable and
comfortable home (Erickson 1997; Gullestad 1984; Löfgren 1995; O’Dell 1997). These factors work together to increase the pressure to consume. And, although Swedes like to say that they do not care what others think of them, their conformity to even the most informal rules and social norms (e.g., standing in queues, frequent utilization of the honor system, discomfort with confrontation) would suggest otherwise.

During 14 months of fieldwork between July 2007 and August 2008, I spoke with many Swedish citizen-consumers who, in response to perceived environmental risks, were trying to break away from the culture of high consumption. To understand their stories and actions, I first needed to explore the context of sustainability in Sweden. I began by interviewing 31 representatives of 24 governmental, nongovernmental, and research organizations working on issues related to sustainability. Traveling throughout Sweden, I conducted interviews and participated in meetings, seminars, and press conferences. Along the way, I gathered brochures, policy documents, studies, and educational materials. This research provided insight into the programs available for Sweden’s environmentally concerned citizens and the assumptions that underlie sustainability discourse and policy.

The next stage of the research focused on individuals and families who had made changes in their consumption behaviors in an effort to live more sustainably. Because the population of ecologically concerned consumers was unknown, I drew on Donna Haraway’s (1991) concept of “affinities” to identify groups with a common “affiliation and shared views or interest” (Rocheleau 1995), eventually selecting five from which to sample. These environmental groups were based in various Swedish cities, but each had an active group of members living within a two-hour radius of the Stockholm area where I was living. Together, the five groups represented a wide array of organizational structures, environmental philosophies, and primary activities. The groups ranged from a large, mainstream, nature-preservation organization to a small diffuse organization focused on rural self-sufficiency and a midsized, radical, activist-based group.
concerned with social and environmental justice. A call for participants sent to each group’s membership base resulted in 9 to 14 volunteers from each group. In total, 58 individuals took part in this segment of the research, completing a semistructured interview on topics ranging from views on nature and risk to environmental philosophies, thoughts on the economy, the importance of consumption to sociability, and barriers to sustainable living. I selected 12 individual participants and 14 of their family members to participate in more in-depth household research, which included discussions about their possessions, the completion of carbon calculators, consumption inventories, home tours, observation of shopping trips, and a series of iterative interviews.

Finally, the methodology also had a strong participatory component. While living in Stockholm to conduct this research about sustainable consumption policy and practice, my U.S. family and I agreed to follow Sweden’s most recent recommendations for green living. We therefore repaired our shoes, rode our bikes, ate our leftovers, learned the public transportation routes, and oriented ourselves using a Google Earth map we made of Stockholm’s secondhand stores. We focused on borrowing or buying secondhand goods (with a few exceptions for items impossible to purchase secondhand, including foods, personal-hygiene items like toothpastes and deodorants, and a few souvenirs). We turned off our lights and computers when not in use, monitored and sorted our trash, and limited our consumption of meat and out-of-season foods. This experience helped us to understand the infrastructure in place for more environmentally friendly living and how even environmentally aware, engaged, and interested people frequently run into barriers to their efforts to live sustainably. In thinking about these barriers as they arose in conversations or as they were observed in practice, I became increasingly aware of significant disconnections between popular assumptions about sustainable consumers and the real people trying to live more environmentally conscious lives.

“Sustainable consumption”: The dominance of rationality
In popular usage, sustainable consumerism is often linked to theories loosely inspired by the work of Giddens (1990, 1999) and Beck (1992). Both argued that global ecological crises like climate change, pollution, and resource depletion are no longer imagined solely within the realm of the natural but are increasingly envisioned as part of a structural crisis in contemporary society (Adams 2001:285). Beck was writing about a macrophenomenon, a shift in the role of the state toward the mediation of these risks, but his ideas are often popularly misinterpreted and applied at the micro-, or individual, level. This microinterpretation envisions the existence of reflexive individuals who acknowledge the ecological risks associated with modernity then seek out knowledge that will aid them in risk avoidance.

It is not difficult to gather illustrations of reflexive modernization thought in Sweden, in the European Union, or internationally. While attending Karlstad University’s “Environment Workday” (Miljövetardag) in the winter of 2008, I sat in a large lecture hall among hundreds of Swedes: students, faculty, government employees, representatives of civil-society groups, activists, and interested citizens. Together, we listened and scribbled notes at our cramped desks as speaker after speaker talked about the need to provide more education to consumers, education that would encourage people to change their consumption behaviors, their lifestyles, and, one by one, the culture of consumption.

These ideas have their roots in rational-choice theory and neoclassical economics, which link economic behavior to rationality and utility maximization (Berglund and Matti 2006). They anticipate that, if given the right information about the environment, consumers will exercise their free will to alter behaviors and demand alternatives on the free market (Adams 2001; Hobson 2002; Matti 2009). Programs like Stockholm’s Consumera Smartare (Consume Smarter) and Karlstad’s Echo Action are built on these ideas—working to pool families interested in sustainable living to provide education and instruction on issues ranging from sorting waste to the selection and preparation of unprocessed foods. Certainly, these programs are successful on
their own terms, helping participating families to reduce carbon emissions, waste, and, often, overall consumption. But information and awareness campaigns like these currently dominate sustainability policy and programs just as they dominated the dialogue at Miljövetardag. Unfortunately, their dominance overshadows discussions of the social, political, and economic barriers that constrain individual choices. Perhaps this is because, unlike programs designed to alter political systems or regulate market structures, they are fairly easy to implement and are uncontroversial, given that they do not require structural changes or encroach on individual choice. Kirsty Hobson argues that the rationalization approach “makes perfect neo-classical sense. It does not threaten consumption but seeks to incorporate a new preference without impinging upon the individual’s … deeply entrenched lifestyles” (2002:107).

In today’s intellectual climate, free-market ideologies are idealized, and governments have increasingly removed state controls on production and consumption processes. This trend has further reinforced the idea that consumers should demand market change, moving responsibility for ecological sustainability away from the state and industry and placing it squarely on the shoulders of consumers. Bente Halkier observes that, around the world, “it has become increasingly common to call upon so-called ordinary consumers to solve a range of societal and political problems … environmental policies and food policies are no exception to this pattern” (2001:205). In Sweden, this focus on consumer responsibility has become more pronounced in the last two decades as policy makers realized that gains achieved through production efficiency and pollution reduction measures were being outstripped by increases in per capita consumption.

**Refuting assumptions: On risk**

Informational brochures, policy documents, and official speeches are heavily peppered with calls for consumer responsibility. Yet these calls are frequently based on several assumptions that contradict the perspectives of those who answer them. The first is a widespread
assumption that individuals will not act in the interest of sustainability until they see and feel environmental risks personally. Drawn from the frequent conflation of “utility” and self-interest, the assumption that risk is only relevant when it directly affects the individual has long been perpetuated within the discipline of economics. Nils, a leader at one of Sweden’s largest environmental organizations, answered my question about effective sustainability programs with a focus on informational campaigns. He remarked,

> Information campaigns have been successful. … We know that people make changes when they feel the effects of environmental problems closer to home. Then they will act … it becomes important to their welfare, to their family. But before people see those signs and feel damage, they won’t do anything. Information campaigns though, they can help people to become aware of how these questions are affecting them in, I think, a more personal way.

In another example, I overheard Monica, a communications specialist with Sweden’s consumer agency (Konsumentverket), telling a colleague that the agency’s brochures and posters about the importance of organic foods needed to tell people exactly how agricultural chemicals can affect their family’s health; otherwise, people would not be moved to buy organic. Her comments echo what Giddens (2009) has called the “Giddens’s paradox,” or the idea that individuals will not respond to a risk until they can personally see and experience its effects. This idea is common and has deep roots in the sustainability discourse.

Yet this assumption raises some interesting questions. Sweden was the first nation to establish an environmental protection agency and the first to pass environmental protection legislation. Its corporatist political culture has led to a high level of cooperation among the state, industry, and environmental organizations, often leading to progressive policies. Because of this history, Sweden enjoys a relatively clean environment. The nation still has its challenges, but the average citizen can enjoy clean air and water and is not exposed to some of the environmental
hazards that many other global citizens face. So, why then do so many Swedes continue to act progressively if they do not feel environmental risks “closer to home”?

Contrary to the globalized perspectives of reflexive modernization, risk perception is constructed, unstable, and contested (Caplan 2000). Mary Douglas (1985, 1992) and Roy Rappaport (1988) both pointed to the importance of understanding that perceptions of risk are rooted in society’s structures and value orientations. Similarly, the work of Willett Kempton and his colleagues (Kempton et al. 1995; Kempton et al. 2001 Kitchell et al. 2000a; Kitchell et al. 2000b) illustrate how culturally rooted understandings of nature significantly affect risk perception. Despite this recognition in many studies of risk, most sustainability policies continue to reflect the individualist assumption of the proverbial bubble, within which independent actors make decisions about risk on the basis of their own personal and immediate self-interest. And, although these assumptions are no longer supported in the economic literature without great qualification, they continue to hold strong intellectual weight in the popular imagination.

However, Swedes who are trying to live more sustainably tell quite a different story. During interviews, I asked research participants a series of questions about the risks associated with contemporary consumption and production patterns. Their answers illustrated significant variety, ranging from specific environmental concerns, for instance, about the depletion of fishing stocks and chemical preservatives in food, to more generalized issues like resource depletion, peak oil, and the unknown consequences of global climate change. What is perhaps most interesting, given my discussion here, is that when I asked these people whether they felt personally affected by these issues, the majority of the respondents answered that they did not. Only 21 percent of the sample felt they were being directly affected, speaking most often of the health risks of chemicals in foods, poor air quality on busy thoroughfares, or stress associated with a never-ending cycle of working and spending. In contrast, 76 percent were most concerned
about the effects of environmental problems on those living in the Third World or on members of future generations.

Felicia sat over a cup of coffee in a trendy café, contemplating my question about risk for a long time. She made several circles in the foam of the fair-trade, shade-grown, organic latte she had just ordered before finally saying,

[ex]I’m not at all worried about me, and I don’t think that I’m worried about the future … more that we are sitting here and consuming a lot and destroying while people in other parts of the world can’t get enough to eat. We are taking their resources and we are making them grow crops that we need instead of food for them. I think that is my biggest concern, but I don’t feel any risk to myself.

In contrast to those like Felicia and Ebba, who feel no personal risk but do a lot to live more sustainably (and express frustration that they are powerless to do much more), those research participants who did perceive personal risk were often the least progressive in their behaviors.

During interviews, I asked each person to free list all the actions that one could take to live more sustainably. Then I asked the person to indicate how good he or she was at doing each of the items listed. Although the lists shared many commonalities, they also revealed considerable diversity (see Table 1). Some people focus on energy-efficient actions around the home, for example, taking shorter showers and turning off lights not in use. Others focus on buying chemical-free products. Still others are more civic minded, focusing on participating in environmental organizations, political parties, and public demonstrations.

In many cases, the actions individuals engage in are inconsistent and sometimes contradictory. Gustav and his wife Erika, for example, were concerned about energy. They replaced all their lightbulbs, put lights on motion sensors, and had recently purchased a fuel-efficient car. Despite these efforts, they had apparently not considered the resources and energy
embedded in the toys they buy for their children. During a consumption inventory in Gustav’s home, I discovered the children’s toys were so plentiful that they no longer fit in their rooms. They were comically falling out of closets, peeking out from underneath beds, and mixed among piles of clothing scattered on the floor. To house the toys, the family had recently purchased some IKEA shelves to line their basement hallway. I asked Gustav if any of the toys were secondhand. He did not seem to think twice before he answered, “No, I don’t think so.” Many other participants are more clearly aware of their inconsistencies, practicing what Richard Wilk (2009) refers to as “moral calculus,” weighing their actions as environmentally good or bad.

**TABLE 1 HERE**

The relationships between the actions people listed and their perceptions of risk reveal an interesting pattern. Those who perceived risk primarily to others, future or present, listed sustainable actions in nine different categories, on average. In contrast, those who felt immediate risk to self and family listed fewer absolute actions, associated with six categories. Thus, the domain of sustainable living appears to be more restricted for those who have responded to perceptions of personal risk. These people tend to focus their efforts on buying organic foods and chemical-free products. In contrast, 55 percent of those who felt that risk was concentrated elsewhere listed actions in the citizenship category, including voting, joining activist groups, contacting politicians, or demonstrating (compared with 25 percent of those who felt personal risk). Finally, they were also much more likely to list actions associated not only with buying green but also with buying less (91 percent compared with 50 percent of those who perceived personal risk). These people clearly do not discount the future or illustrate Giddens’s paradox.

Granted, for every person who has made changes in response to environmental risk, many more have not. While living in Sweden, my family and I made many friends independent of my formal research and observed that, although environmental awareness and concern were widespread among them, most found it difficult to allocate time to modify their routines or
search out alternative products. However, the research participants and our friends illustrate that it is not necessary for an individual to see the signs of environmental damage firsthand to accept that they exist. It is possible to understand them from afar, and many Swedes do, regardless of whether they have acted in response to them. The paradox is not that people fail to act because they do not understand the issues or cannot see their effects personally. The paradox is that it is extremely difficult for individuals, even the most environmentally committed, to react without leadership, without strong social support, and without market infrastructures that make alternative living more convenient.

Another disconnection between Swedish sustainable consumers and popular sustainability discourse occurs in the assumption that individuals have accepted responsibility for ensuring environmental health in their roles as consumers. Although many Swedes see it as their duty and responsibility to reduce their environmental impact, many of them do not confine their actions to the market, nor do they agree that consumer actions alone are sufficient.

Significant evidence in my study suggests that the majority of the citizen-consumers who participated do not accept the neoliberal idea that they, in their imagined roles as rational consumers, can take sole responsibility for moving the market toward sustainability or that they have the power to dismantle the social hierarchies that perpetuate consumption. Back in the café during our *fika* (coffee break), Felicia expressed frustration about this pressure, saying, “I think that today the politicians are trying to put too much on the consumer that we have to make all these choices but still we are so affected by everyone else around us.” She hints at the social pressure to communicate one’s identity and social position with possessions. Few people are able to surmount this pressure in Sweden, where consumption is a key marker of social status and where most are not willing to sacrifice their social memberships in a highly conformist culture.

All of the research participants work within the market, both resisting and leveraging it, to reconcile this pressure by purchasing “green” products. However, most of them do not confine
their opposition to the market. Many participate in civic organizations, take active roles in their political parties, and attempt to create dialogues with policy makers, because they do not feel that they have the power to significantly alter this social structure without leadership and widespread social support.

During my stay in Sweden, there were several rallies and marches centered on environmental issues (see Figure 3). One cold winter evening close to the winter solstice, I convinced my family to bundle up and join me for a climate march in downtown Stockholm. We chose our spot within the moving sea of people just ahead of two faux polar bears carrying a banner that read, “rädda mig” (save me). We had only marched a few blocks before I ran into Martin, whom I had interviewed the day before. Then, as we approached Kungstragården, I spotted Olaf. Finally, as we gathered at Mynttorget to listen to the rally speakers, I ran into three other research participants among the thousands of people in the crowd. My call for research participants had originally defined my study in terms of sustainable consumerism, but the people who answered my call clearly did not differentiate between their actions as consumers and citizens.

FIGURE 3

The people who participated in the research are engaged, aware, and interested. Yet they realize that their consumption behaviors are not solely the product of their rationality; if that were the case, they argue, they would be doing a lot more. Instead, these committed consumers face significant barriers when trying to consume in a more sustainable way. Issues surrounding pricing structures, the availability of alternatives on the market, social pressures in a highly conformist and consumer-based culture, imperfect information, and the amount of time it takes to research and find more environmentally friendly alternatives are only a few of these barriers.

The removal of barriers, many research participants argue, will require more than the actions of citizen-consumers. It will require governmental leadership, intervention, and
regulation. These barriers are intricately linked to existing social institutions and market structures, limiting the ability of individuals to influence change. Jon Goss encourages research in this area, arguing that scholars must come to understand not only individual consumption motivation but also the pull that all humans in capitalist systems feel to consume. He argues that this pull “is neither simply the product of the pleas for patriotism by political leaders nor exhortation by the representatives of the consciousness industries, but has its origins in the general alienation of labor and the complex phenomenon of the fetishism of commodities under contemporary capitalism” (Goss 2004:386).

Certainly, in today’s context, when more than half of the world’s citizens are living in cities far removed from direct connections to productive resources or decisions about their use, many people have little choice but to act on their concerns in their roles as consumers. But many of the people participating in this study argue that their actions alone are insufficient. They need help with more than information. They want dangerous products off the market, they want the government to invest more in alternative transportation, they want industry to be required to take more responsibility for reducing waste and packaging, and they want more regulation.

Wilk writes, “Giving consumers more information and trusting them to make good choices is another wishful strategy with limited practical utility” (2004:27). It is important to recognize that even the best informational and awareness campaigns cannot take the place of policies designed to help more people, not just the interested, engaged, and committed, to confront and break down these barriers.

[Refuting assumptions: On nature]

Until recently, many sustainability programs focused on implementing large infrastructural and technological projects. This trend was strong in Sweden, where impressive efficiency gains and pollution reduction measures resulted from such projects (Feichtinger and Pregernig 2005). Many research participants recognize the contributions of these programs and
believe that technologies should continually be improved. Nonetheless, the overwhelming majority doubt that technological advances can sustain continued growth in per capita consumption. More than three-quarters (76 percent) of the participants disagreed with the statement that “Swedes can continue to consume at current levels if production technologies are improved.” In fact, many of them argued that technological solutions more often lead to unintended and disastrous consequences. Take, for instance, this statement from Lars, who was clearly frustrated by the government’s continued focus on technological fixes:

   There is one thing that disturbs me and that is the choices of technology that we make. ...

   Take these things about ethanol. We think we’re doing something for the environment but in reality it doesn’t mean a thing because it is not a sustainable solution. Yes, there is slightly less carbon dioxide going off from the cars—but on the other hand if you look at the total equation we destroy things in the rainforest. But if we are going that way, we have to waste 10, 15, 20 years. But, I understand why it happens. All these farmers in the US they see dollar signs in their eyes. It may not be good for the environment but it is good business and it will give people a good conscience for a short while. The net effect will be that we lose time. It is sort of like, if I may say so, like peeing in your pants. It’s warm and cozy for the moment but in an hour it gets very cold and uncomfortable.

   Others echo Lars’s sentiments (although not in such colorful language), arguing that people’s attempts to control nature are part of the problem rather than the solution. They cite historical technological advances, like the invention of pesticides or coal technology, as the roots of many contemporary problems. Others echo Raymond L. Bryant and Michael K. Goodman (2004), who point to the inherent irony in trying to solve problems of overconsumption with more consumption. The contrast between those who advocate and those who dismiss technological solutions is, in part, tied to alternative visions of nature. Dominant sustainable production and consumption narratives are centered on the belief that the use of natural resources
can become more efficient and that nature can be further controlled with human innovation and technology, driven by consumer demand. These thoughts, dating back to the Enlightenment, have developed in parallel with more romantic views of nature prevalent among Sweden’s middle class.

The overwhelming majority of the people participating in my study certainly acknowledge the use values of nature and its importance as a support system for human life. In fact, 50 percent of them expressed clearly anthropocentric views on the value of nature. Yet many were also extremely romantic, connecting nature to human needs for reflection, reconnection, and spiritual fulfillment. Löfgren (1990, 1995) and Jonas Frykman and Löfgren (1987) date the emergence of these romantic views in Sweden to the 18th century, when those in the rising bourgeoisie began to view nature from a perspective that was radically different from that of either the peasant or elite classes to which they opposed themselves. Rather than thinking of nature in a utilitarian and production-oriented way, as the peasantry did, or as something chaotic that must be controlled, as the elite had, the rising middle class came to think of nature as something valuable in and of itself. During this period, mountains and waterfalls came to be viewed with new appreciation, and Swedish walking, birding, and mountaineering clubs gained incredible popularity among the middle class. Over time, these views have certainly been perpetuated by urbanization, low population densities, the transition to an information- and service-based economy, and other factors that remove most Swedes from direct dependence on the land. Today, romantic reflections on nature continue to characterize the Swedish middle class. It is, thus, telling that my research sample was composed exclusively of middle-class Swedes.

Although many are hopeful that technological improvements can help, few believe that they can replace a more fundamental need to reconfigure how humans relate to the environment and each other. One December evening just before Christmas, I attended the meeting of a
subgroup of the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation. I nibbled my ginger cookie as Katrin spoke about an article she had read detailing the promises of tidal energy production. Sara, clearly annoyed, interrupted,

But that’s the problem, they keep on telling us that we can live as we do because technique will save us. But we can’t keep taking this much. What technology saves should go to help people who can’t even get enough to eat. But that’s the problem, as soon as they produce more we will eat it up. We will continue to grow and grow, so we still take too much from nature, too much from other people and we don’t know what we do to the sea.

Sara eventually engaged the whole group in a discussion about the unintended yet often dangerous consequences of technological innovations. They discussed everything from the invention of agricultural chemicals to the implications of using margarine instead of butter. Sara concluded, “Nature is complex and we can only push it this far …or it will no longer forgive us, we need to respect it. We have to change instead of trying to change nature.”

Scandinavians can be described as having a highly emotional connection to the land, one that is both highly personal and spiritual (Gullestad 1989). Many Swedes felt so strongly about nature and their hopes for sustainability that they were moved to tears during our interviews. I was taken aback several times as middle-aged, professional men became choked up and had to pause when describing their feelings about the complexity and wonder of the earth system. For many, their actions signify much more than a rational response to their concerns. They are deeply tied to a sense of morality, rights, responsibilities, fairness, equality, and justice so common among Sweden’s middle class.

Rethinking sustainable consumerism in Sweden

Given these contrasts between rationalization theories and real people concerned about and acting in the interests of sustainability, it is important to explore alternative theories that go
beyond these globalized and general theories of reflexive modernization. Theorists have
variously linked consumption behavior to the moral economy (e.g., Barnett et al. 2005), political
economy (e.g., Appadurai 1986; Bourdieu 1984; Carrier and Heyman 1997; Veblen 1994), and
social economy (e.g., Crew 2003; Douglas 2004; Douglas and Isherwood 1996; Shove 2004).
Yet, despite some valuable survey data on sustainable consumers (e.g., Anderson and Tobiasen
2004; Stolle and Micheletti 2005) and a significant amount of speculation, in-depth ethnographic
analyses of consumers who demand, buy, and organize sustainable alternatives are still relatively
scarce. As a result, theories inspired by reflexive modernization largely go unquestioned. But
these ideas link a global class of sustainable consumers to global phenomena. I argue, however,
that it is important to explore historical factors that have contributed to the relative successes of
the movement in different locales. In this section, I explore the Swedish case.

Michele Micheletti (2003) notes that Swedes are particularly responsive to ecolabels and
boycotts. Further, she notes that, typically, citizens turn to market-based solutions when
traditional political arenas are inaccessible or unresponsive to their concerns. Sweden is typified
by a collectivist and corporatist political culture and has acted progressively in regard to
environmental concerns, frequently expressing the desire to lead the world in the movement
toward sustainability. Although Micheletti relies heavily on the theories of reflexive and
ecological modernization as she writes about the emergence of ethics-based consumerism
globally, in the Swedish case she suggests that a corporatist culture has created fertile grounds
for cooperation between industry, government, and the environmental movement. This
cooperation, she argues, has led to the acceptance of tools designed to work within the confines
of the market.

Erikson (1997) has also explored the culture of consumerism in Sweden. Her
comparative study illustrates that Swedes, relative to Americans, tend to be more concerned
about sustainability. She links this concern to the highly personal connections Swedes feel with
nature as well as to the core cultural concept of “lagom” (just right or appropriate), which works to moderate consumption. My research affirms Erikson’s argument that a sense of morality pervades Swedish culture, inspired by the values and lessons of the Lutheran Church and the humanitarian ideals of the welfare state.

I was overwhelmed when conducting interviews by how many people expressed the need for solidarity and global equality as part of any program designed to ensure sustainability. These people clearly saw their actions as part of an agenda to consume less so that people in low-income economies would have the ability to consume more. These positions suggest a clear emphasis on equality within the sample. I am not sure if this emphasis on sustainability is unique to Sweden, and Scandinavia more generally, but it makes sense given the region’s political history.

Although many nations have instituted social-welfare programs, the Swedish variant is arguably one of the most comprehensive and successful in the world. In 1932, after the Social Democratic Party won its first election, the government implemented *folkhem* (the people’s home) policies designed to improve democracy and serve the entire Swedish public. Scholars have theorized that the rise of social democracy in the region is tied to a history of ethnic homogeneity which fostered support for ideologies of equality, fairness, corporatism, and class-based politics (Gallagher et al. 2006). On the basis of these ideologies, the state instituted aggressive redistributive and social-welfare policies (Bihagen 2000; Erikson 1997; Tilton 1992). While things have recently changed, a point to which I will return momentarily, Gösta Esping-Anderson argued in the early 1990s that, since the institutionalization of strong social-welfare policies, “poverty and economic insecurity have been largely eradicated and Sweden is the indisputable leader in the equal distribution of incomes” (1992:36).

Erickson (1997) has argued that, at least in rhetoric, such progressive policies have worked to advocate the worth and dignity of every human being and foster a sense of
compassionate solidarity. This longtime emphasis on equality and solidarity has helped to encourage more environmentally friendly behavior in Sweden, creating a moral economy of sorts. However, it seems this humanitarian orientation also extends into the global community, fostering concerns for global equity. My research suggests that factors like Sweden’s environmentally progressive state, mainstream environmental concern, corporatist culture, and pervading sense of morality have all articulated to increase interest in sustainable living.

Consumption and class

However, my research also suggests that the contemporary strength of the sustainability movement is also linked to class-based politics. In thinking about the relationship between class structure and sustainability in Sweden, it is important to note the demographic make up of the study participants. Those participating in this research are highly educated, with over 90 percent holding some sort of postsecondary degree. They are also fairly homogenous in ancestry and ethnic identification, with very few members of minority social groups included in the sample. But perhaps the most interesting point here is, once again, that the sample is composed exclusively of representatives of Sweden’s professional and well-educated middle class.

Several studies have revealed that sustainable consumer movements in locations as diverse as Austria, Japan, and the United States are largely middle class (Anderson and Tobiasen 2004; Center for the New American Dream 2004; Micheletti and Stolle 2004). This, of course, raises interesting questions about whether sustainable consumerism can be viewed as a means of social distinction and a middle-class attempt to assert perceived moral superiority. Indeed, Daniel Miller (2001) has urged scholars to investigate the class-based moral imperatives and ethnocentric assumptions that underlie many sustainability movements. And, certainly, the current movement toward more sustainable lifestyles would not mark the first time that the environment has become entangled with class politics.
Löfgren outlines the tensions that arose in the 18th century, when Sweden’s newly formed middle class constructed a new set of views on nature. He writes,

On the one hand, the love of nature was naturalized—it was argued that it was a traditional and inbred trait in the Swedish national mentality. On the other hand, peasants and workers could be accused of lack of reverence or sophistication in their ways of using or experiencing nature. They showed the wrong love or not enough love for this national heritage, which meant that the masses had to be educated through everything from school excursions to the use of urban parks. [Löfgren 1995:267]

Theorists have long argued that consumption can serve as a key location of class conflict, one in which the middle and upper classes consistently condemn the consumption practices, style, and taste of others (e.g., Bourdieu 1984; Veblen 1994). Frykman & Löfgren argue that this is particularly true in Sweden, where an egalitarian ethos has rendered discussions of class difference taboo. It is in this context that consumption becomes a key source of “muted class conflict” ([Who is the author in the citation? If Löfgren, we need to add a reference]1987:81).

To explore this idea in the context of Swedish sustainable consumerism, I asked research participants questions about why they thought others failed to live more sustainably. In addition to listening for a discussion of barriers to green living, I also listened for assumptions about the segments of society that are perceived to be acting unsustainably. I listened for descriptions of the unsustainable, immoral Other. Contrary to the works of Thorstein Veblen and Pierre Bourdieu, which argue that the working class is typically the subject of scrutiny, very few negative commentaries on Sweden’s less powerful groups emerged from these discussions. The most damning critiques of others were, instead, directed at Sweden’s upper class. Although a significant portion of the participants did not list class factors in their discussions of others, focusing instead on issues connected to gender (Isenhour and Ardenfors 2009) or age, nearly half of the sample (48 percent) condemned Sweden’s wealthiest citizens for their “overconsumption.”
Over lunch, for instance, Leif grew red in the face, visibly angry, as he asserted that the people who are not living sustainably are wealthy and egotistical. He explained, “Yes they are egoistic, they have a really good income but that is because that is what they value, they make money because that is all they care about. They are destroying the earth but they don’t care about others, they have very low solidarity with other people or groups of other people. And they are consuming at the costs of other people’s lives.” Leif’s comments were echoed by other research participants, who scoffed at people in expensive sport utility vehicles as they drove by the cafés where we spoke and who alluded to the idea that the consumption behaviors of Sweden’s elite classes demonstrated selfishness and a lack of concern for collective issues. Helena, for instance, said, “These people buy and buy and buy. They are not concerned about anything outside themselves and they are very scared of collective common issues.”

Jacob, a health care executive in his midfifties and the father of three, described the worst environmental offenders as “careerists” and “jetsetters.” With a smirk, he noted, “In that world they have their own jet planes and they don’t really care about things like [sustainability] … they just want their plasma TVs and they don’t think about the energy and what they consume.” He went on to explain that, if people are not aware of the problems or do not have the resources to address them, then they are not acting immorally. He said, “One way of looking at it is that if people don’t really know anything and they haven’t grasped the question yet … then if you’re living according to your own moral standards, you’re not immoral even if your standards are bad because you can’t realize a better way of living.” I later gathered, in the context of the interview, that this was Jacob’s way of excusing the uneducated working class for its consumption of inexpensive but poor-quality goods imported from China or the United States. I asked him if he believed that some people were unaware of the issues, given that newspaper readership in Sweden is among the highest in the world (World Association of Newspapers 2009), stories about sustainability are prevalent, and education levels are high. He agreed that most well-
educated Swedes are aware of the issues and conceded, “If you do understand the problems and you go on living the old way and you realize that this is not right and you still don’t change, then of course it is a moral question.”

Since the 1980s and 1990s, Sweden has seen significant changes in its class structure. With rising unemployment in the last few decades of the 20th century, support for deregulation, market- and trade-based policies, and a reduced tax burden has grown. During the same time period, Sweden has experienced a significant increase in wealth differentials, with many of its wealthiest citizens moving quickly away from the rest of society in terms of both income and consumption. According to the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (Landsorganisationen i Sverige [LO]), Sweden’s wealthiest 10 percent experienced an 88 percent increase in their spending power between 1991 and 2007. Meanwhile, the least wealthy 10 percent of the population only saw their purchasing power increase by 15 percent. And the pace of this change seems to be quickening. Between 2002 and 2007 alone, the income distribution gap increased by nearly 20 percent (LO 2009).

Sustainable consumerism in Sweden can thus be explained not only as a process of reflexive modernization and a middle-class movement to assert the continued relevance of equality and solidarity but also as a class-based attempt to rein in what many middle-class Swedes see as immoral, irresponsible, and rampant materialism among the world’s wealthiest citizens, including the Swedish elite. This explanation points to Sweden’s interesting juxtaposition of an egalitarian ethos and an increasingly hierarchical social structure.

Conclusion

Many humans, all over the world, are no doubt thinking more reflexively about the relationship between their actions and global ecological health as the risks associated with modernity become more apparent. However, it is important to recognize that, alone, reflexive modernization–inspired sustainability theories gloss over important local and historical factors
that shape the construction and relative success of sustainability movements in different locales. Perhaps worse, by implying that sustainability hinges on improved awareness and education, they imply inadequate policy solutions.

The Swedish case illustrates that many assumptions associated with reflexive modernization theories are inconsistent with the lived realities of those who have modified their lives in the interest of global sustainability. They also fail to account for the relative strength of the sustainability movement in Sweden. Swedish citizen-consumers who are trying to live in a more environmentally friendly way are inspired by a range of motivations that go far beyond what might be thought of as reflexive rationality. Whereas rationality is often conflated with the pursuit of individual self-interest, particularly in popular thought, many of the people who participated in my study argued that it was rational to take a long-term view, one based on social and generational equity, for the health of humans and the planet, regardless of personal cost. These Swedes thus extend core Swedish values into the global realm, tying their actions to the need for morality, equality, and solidarity. Sweden’s cultural emphasis on these humanitarian values has in many ways helped to build interest in and lay the foundation for sustainable living.

Although this case study is intended to illustrate the limits of reflexive modernization theories, pointing to localized historical factors that shape the relative strength of the Swedish sustainability movement, perhaps there is also something to be learned from this particular case. As this research illustrates, concern for others in the face of perceived environmental risks has motivated sustainable behavior in the Swedish context, behavior that is often much more progressive and activist than that practiced by those primarily concerned about their own welfare (who tend to confine their activities to their market participation). Perhaps sustainability movements in other locales might also be improved by the ability to encourage an empathetic and international perspective, framing global and long-term risks in terms of morality and justice rather than pure self-interest.
Yet, as Wilk points out, moral appeals can help to attract people in the short run, convincing them to try a new product or practice, but in the long run, that innovation must save them time and money, provide comfort or “confer some kind of valued social status or recognition” if it is to become habit (2004:25). Wilk, thus, points to the barriers that prevent more sustainable behavior. There are economic barriers associated with price, limits to availability, the amount of time it takes to research and locate alternative products, and significant social pressures, just to name a few. An understanding of these barriers and the limits they present to rationality must also include consideration of class-based social structures that drive aspirations and market-based mechanisms that lead citizen-consumers to consume more and more. Providing consumers with additional information is not adequate when they are relatively powerless to remove so many of these barriers. Sustainability policies must work to partner with citizen-consumers to support alternatives, remove dangerous products from the marketplace, and ensure access to adequate resources and environmental rights.

On the surface, many signs would seem to suggest that programs built on reflexive modernization theories are working. Alternative forms of consumerism are growing, as is awareness of the environmental problems associated with current production and consumption practices. This is true in many international contexts, and perhaps particularly so in Sweden, where the government has taken a progressive stance on educating the populace about environmental issues. Yet, despite repeated efforts to spread information and awareness in many different contexts throughout Europe, significant changes in consumption behavior have failed to emerge (Hobson 2002). And those individuals who have attempted to support alternative systems of producing and provisioning goods are often characterized by ambivalence and inconsistencies as the realities of everyday life interact with their own values and rationality (Halkier 2001). In the long run, neither moral nor rational appeals can take the place of policies designed to help
more people, not just the interested, engaged, and committed, to break down and confront these barriers.

Sustainability policy and discourse must recognize that consumers display complex consumption imperatives based on values that both contradict and reflect conformity to social structures and the expression of their own agency (Crewe 2000). This realization leads to the understanding that the most interesting questions do not center on the determination of a single globalized factor to explain sustainable consumers, like reflexive rationality, but, rather, on the social, economic, political, and cultural patterns that influence consumer decision-making processes, perhaps making moral rather than egoistic considerations, for example, stronger in particular contexts (see Godelier 1977).

Notes

Acknowledgments. This research was supported by the J. William Fulbright Program, the American-Scandinavian Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, and the University of Kentucky Graduate School. Sincere thanks also go to AAA’s Anthropology and Environment section for including this article as a finalist in the 2008 Rappaport Student Paper competition. Lisa Cligget, Thomas Håkansson, and Katja Neves provided helpful comments on earlier drafts. Ms. Matilda Ardenfors provided invaluable research assistance.

1. The term consumption is both ambiguous and problematic. Unfortunately, space does not allow for its full discussion here. Wilk 2004 and De Vries 1993 do an excellent job exploring the intricacies of the term.

2. For more information on compacters, see http://sfcompact.blogspot.com/; for more information on freegans, see http://www.freegan.info/.

3. I have given all research participants pseudonyms and modified details of their lives to ensure confidentiality.
4. Interviews ranged between 45 minutes and four hours, averaging one hour and 20 minutes.

5. Fifty-seven of the 58 individual participants volunteered to also take part in the in-depth household research. I selected 12 households using quota sampling to ensure representation from each sample organization, income group, and age category.

6. *Rational* is a difficult word to define, in part because of its situational dependency (see Sen 1979; Prattis 1987). I use it here to refer to the theoretical assumption that independent, free, and informed consumers weigh costs and benefits, act on preferences, and maximize utility.

7. Many examples of economic scholarship have moved beyond neoclassical economics and rational choice. However, because reflexive modernization as it has been adopted in sustainability policy relies heavily on the assumptions of rational choice, I outline the foundational assumptions of these theoretical perspectives.

8. This should not give the impression that participants were radical back-to-the-earthers. To the contrary, Swedish culture is highly conformist, and most make great efforts to stay comfortably within the mainstream.


10. Sweden’s welfare state has recently been challenged by declining support among some citizens who view immigration as a strain on the system, and a more conservative government coalition, yet it remains exemplary.

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accepted January 18, 2010

final version submitted January 2010

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Figure captions

Figure 1. Sailboats docked in the natural harbors of Stockholm’s archipelago. Photo by B. Isenhour.

Figure 2. The landing outside Ebba’s apartment is filled with recycling, composting supplies, and boxes for the delivery of organic produce. Photo by C. Isenhour.

Figure 3. During a climate demonstration in central Stockholm, people held signs that read, “Kids for the climate. Adults do something now!” “Make love, not CO2,” and “No Coal Power, Save the Climate.” Photo by B. Isenhour.