Workshop title: Environmental Social Movements and the New Politics of Consumption

Workshop directors:
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A) Abstract

The nature of environmental activism is in the midst of a major shift. While some groups remain focused on state or national policy battles, there is another realm to environmentalism growing in many countries, cities, and neighborhoods. People who would have previously supported lobbying or interest groups are increasingly becoming involved in practice-based movements and institutions – focusing on where and how they get their basic needs of life. Broadly stated, environmental activism is changing in focus, goals, and practice.

At the same time, we are seeing a growth in political consumerist and pressure groups that articulate social and environmental justice concerns – exerting pressure on local decision makers through where and how they shop. These groups move beyond individual boycotts or ‘buycotts’, and are instead grounded in mobilizing citizens to effect social and political change. These shifts are undoubtedly connected: environmental social movements are becoming consumption-based while political consumerism is becoming grounded in solidarity for environmental concerns.

This workshop will explore this nexus from a broad multi-field perspective, by addressing a series of research questions that link social and political theory with analyses of the practices, discourses and values of citizens, consumers and social movements. The workshop will deal with the following, intrinsically related questions:

1. How can we explain the emergence of these new practices, movements and institutions in environmental politics? While diverse, what is it that unites them? Contributors can address these questions from a case-based or comparative perspective.

2. Where, and in what form, are these new practices, movements and institutions emerging and engaging the public?
3. What do some of the recent developments in environmental action and practice add to our understanding of political participation? How can developments in political consumerism, and critiques thereof, inform the development of social movement and environmental political theories and vice versa?

B) Subject Area

Environmental Politics, Participation and Mobilisation

Keywords: Green Politics, Political Participation, Social Movements, Political Theory

The workshop is endorsed by the Environmental Politics Standing Group.

C) Outline of the topic

The core aim of the workshop is to interrogate the notion of a new politics of consumption in contemporary society and to shed light on some of the normative and empirical assumptions that are associated with the growth in individualized collective action. Moving beyond the often-siloed approach of environmental politics and political participation studies, the workshop aims to integrate these two bodies of scholarship – drawing upon the different practices, discourses and values of citizens, consumers and social movements.

We do not assume that the concept of social movement or collective action is one-dimensional or static. Indeed, recent years have seen the emergence of new environmental movement organizations (EMOs) that challenge formal conceptualizations of environmental collective action, such as those outlined by Dryzek et al. (2003). While some environmental movement organizations remain focused on national or supranational policy battles, there is another realm of environmentalism that is increasingly grounded in local communities and everyday life. Organizations that would have previously supported lobbying or interest groups are increasingly becoming involved in practice-based form of action that appear to bypass policy-oriented activism, focusing instead on a self-changing society as part of everyday politics (see, for example, Forno & Graziano 2014; Pratt & Luetchford 2013; Schlosberg & Coles 2011). Broadly stated, environmental activism is changing in focus, goals, and practice.

This shift is undoubtedly connected to the recent growth of individual forms of political action such as political consumerism – that often take the form of alternative production and consumption networks (see, for example, Stolle et al.
Examples of political consumerism include local exchange trade systems (LETS), Solidarity Purchasing Groups and Community Supported Agriculture, Transition Town Movements, Food Banks and Time Banks etc. (Hinrichs & Eshleman 2014; Graziano & Forno 2012). Within these initiatives, the act of shopping is not simply promoted individually, but socialized among different groups of people, organized either formally or informally. Increasingly, those involved in political consumerism are bound by collective action, are linked by dense informal networks, and share a distinct collective identity.

Responding to these real-world changes and engaging with a new and important research agenda, the aim of this workshop is to explore this dual trend from a broad multi-field perspective, by addressing a series of research questions that link social and political theory with analyses of the practices, discourses and values of citizens, consumers and social movements.

The workshop will deal with the following, intrinsically related questions:

1. How can we explain the emergence of these new practices, movements and institutions in environmental politics? While diverse, what is it that unites them? Contributors can address these questions from a case-based or comparative perspective.

2. Where, and in what form, are these new practices, movements and institutions emerging and engaging the public?

3. What do some of the recent developments in environmental action and practice add to our understanding of political participation? How can developments in political consumerism, and critiques thereof, inform the development of social movement and environmental political theories and vice versa?

These questions will help a workshop to advance the synthesis of recent developments in environmental politics and political participation. There are three goals here. First, and most clearly, we want to include the most recent approaches to the politics of sustainable and environmental consumption from three different parts of political science and studies. Second, the workshop is designed to have scholars in disparate parts of the discipline engage one another across subfields and specialties, in order to develop a broad, critical understanding of the evolving politics of consumption and its collectivity, from normative consideration through mobilization and into policy. Finally, and not coincidentally, this structure would also be a wonderful way to frame an edited volume on the new politics of consumption, which is one planned goal of the workshop.
D) Relation to existing research

The rise of the use of alternative forms of political action within social movement organizations is well documented. In the political consumerism literature, many authors have identified the rise of political consumerist practices across Europe and North America (see, for example, Koos 2012; Stolle & Micheletti 2013). Throughout the Western world, the overall market demand for food, energy, manufacturing and services from companies that adopt codes of conduct and respect workers rights and the environment has recorded a significant growth, indicating that political consumerism meets cultural, political and economic opportunities that favor its spread. However, the analytical connection between political consumerism and collective action remains contested, both empirically and normatively (see, in particular, Micheletti 2010). These actions have been called “individualized collective actions” by Micheletti and colleagues (2006; 2010), while Dubuisson-Quellier and Barrier (2007) refer to “neo-consumerist collective actions” (p. 210). The critical question is the extent to which these practices fit within our conventional understanding of social movements or whether they force us to reconsider what we mean by collective action.

At the same time, developments in environmental politics scholarship force us to consider these same questions. Scholars of environmental political theory have been becoming increasingly interested in the practice-based nature of collective responses to environmental concerns (see, in particular, Meyer 2015; Schlosberg & Coles 2011). A core example of these phenomena is the transition movement. As Barry (2012, p. 27) argues, the transition town movement illustrates a ‘creative adaptive management’ approach to building more resilient communities. They are based on the ‘basic belief that communities of people can shape the conditions (socio-ecological and social) for their own flourishing’ (p. 115). The response to flawed and failing everyday practices, embedded in steady flows of contemporary power relations, is to take direct responsibility for interrupting and replacing such flows, and to re-localize much of what has been taken away from communities. The goal is not simply resilience against current flows, but a transition away from them. Other environmental social movements ground themselves exclusively in practices relating to the production and consumption of food (see, for example, Counihan & Siniscalchi 2014; Grasseni 2013; Pratt & Luetchford 2013), a broad field of social action that can be seen as challenging the status quo of the now-prevailing agrifood system.

Moving from these two traditions of study, we propose a workshop at the emerging nexus of Environmental Social Movements and the New Politics of Consumption in line with recent work from Forno and Graziano (2014). This critical examination is long overdue and forms the cornerstone of the proposed
workshop. As part of an exciting and emerging research agenda, the core workshop theme seeks to engage with and extend other recent symposia on consumption and environmentalism, including ‘Greening Everyday Life’ at the Rachel Carson Centre (Ludwig Maximilians University) and ‘The New Politics of Lifestyle’ at the University of Siegen. While this work is a step in the right direction, it remains largely case study based, with limited theoretical treatment of the groups, and, until recently, work on political participation / consumerism has occurred in isolation from work on environmental social movements.

Here, it is crucial to recognise that analysing the politics of consumption is not the same thing as analysing its collectivity (see, for example, Bossy 2014; Della Porta & Diani 2006). The work to date on the politics of consumption has tended treated its collectivity only as the aggregate of individual acts, while work on social movements tends to leave aside the ideology and content of social movements. The underlying question in this debate is whether political consumerism can be seen as a social movement or could be better interpreted as an extension of social movement repertoire of action or as a form of post-ecologism / post-politics (Wilson & Swyngedouw 2014; Blühdorn 1997, 2000). We believe that this workshop will speak to the core of these debates – drawing in scholarship that ranges from theoretical arguments about the emergence of consumptive politics to empirical analyses of new practices, movements and institutions.

D) Potential participants

The likely participants are scholars – those doing empirical work and those more theoretically-focused – who research environmental activism, social movements, political consumerism and new forms of political participation, public policy, grassroots innovation and policy analysis.

1. Environmental social movement and political theory scholars
   a. Alison Alkon, Pacific University (Confirmed)
   b. John Barry, Queens University, Belfast
   c. Ingolfur Bluhdorn, University of Bath
   d. Luke Craven, University of Sydney (Confirmed)
   e. Brian Doherty, Keele University (Confirmed)
   f. Clare Hinrichs, Penn State University (Confirmed)
   g. John Mayer, Humboldt State University
   h. Tom Princen, University of Michigan
   i. Christopher Rootes, University of Kent
   j. Clare Saunders, University of Exeter
k. David Schlosberg, University of Sydney (Confirmed)
l. Graham Smith, University of Westminster
m. Kate Soper, University of Brighton

2. Social movements, political consumerism and new forms of political participation
   a. Sigrid Baringhorst, Siegen University
   b. Magnus Boström, Linnaeus University
   c. Romand Coles, Northern Arizona University
   d. Joost de Moor, Leuven University (Confirmed)
   e. Francesca Forno, Bergamo University (Confirmed)
   f. Paolo Roberto Graziano, Bocconi University (Confirmed)
   g. Michele Micheletti, Stockholm University
   h. Dietlind Stolle, McGill University

3. Public policy, grassroots innovation and policy analysis
   a. Peter Andrée, Carlton University
   b. Julian Agyeman, Tufts University
   c. Tom Hargreaves, University of East Anglia
   d. Gil Seyfang, University of East Anglia
   e. Gert Spaargaren, Wageningen University

E) Types of papers

We welcome both theoretical and empirical papers that consider the emerging nexus between environmental politics and political participation. Both case study and cross-focus and cross-country comparative research is welcomed. Emerging as well as established researchers are encouraged to apply. Those working in the fields of environmental politics and political participation are especially targeted, but we also welcome paper submissions from scholars working in related fields (political sociology, political communication, and political theory). To reflect the integrative nature of the new politics of consumption, we plan for the workshop to maximally interactive – moving beyond the traditional format of presentations / questions.

F) Funding

If the workshop is accepted, we will pursue funding advice from our respective universities.
Biographical notes


Sherilyn MacGregor is senior lecturer in environmental politics in the School of Politics, Philosophy, International Relations and Environment at Keele University UK. She is joint editor of Environmental Politics journal and co-convenor of the ECPR Environmental Politics Standing Group. In 2014 she was a Fellow at the Rachel Carson Center, LMU-Munich. Her research focuses on the connections and disconnections between feminist and green political theory; current work looks at gender justice dimensions of climate mitigation and the gendered politics of energy consumption in affluent societies.

Bibliography


