

On “Green” Consumerism

Environmental Privatization and “Family Values”

by *Catriona Sandilands*

La consommation verte fait partie d'une tendance vers la privatisation de l'environnement en ce que les politiques environnementales sont de plus en plus réduites aux activités de l'individu et de la sphère domestique. Non seulement cette tendance est-elle problématique pour les écologistes — les problèmes environnementaux requièrent des solutions plus complexes—mais elle est destructrice pour les féministes car elle encourage des valeurs très conservatrices sur la famille et les rôles sexuels.

If you've been to a supermarket recently, then you'll have noticed a distinct trend toward the “greening” of consumer products. Where once we may have been enticed to purchase ornately-packaged toilet bowl cleaners that foamed bright pink and left a lingering aroma supposedly reminiscent of roses, we now find rather austere, recyclable bottles of “cruelty free,” “all-purpose,” vinegar-based household cleaners. Where once paper towels came in a variety of different colour schemes to match any kitchen decor, there is now a distinct emphasis on brown (whether or not that brown actually means unbleached). And where once packaging highlighted words like “easy” or “extra-strength” or “deodorant” or “instant action,” there is now at least equal priority given to words like “natural” or “biodegradable” or, best of all, “environmentally friendly.”

The phenomenon of green consumerism certainly reflects some sort of awareness of environmental issues: people are increasingly less willing to purchase goods that have been developed at the expense of small animals' lives, that have been wrapped at the expense of old-growth

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forests, or that have been chlorine bleached at the expense of entire ecosystems; people are increasingly more willing to purchase organic, or energy-conserving, or recycled goods, to change what they buy in order to demonstrate and foster environmental responsibility. And certainly, the consumer has some power to change what gets produced: market research has suggested that consumers are, in some cases, willing to pay *more* for “ecologically safe” products, which means that corporations are considerably more likely to produce them.¹

But, as a whole, green consumerism masks more problems than it solves. Beyond the problem of regulation (meaning that the labels “green” or “natural” or “organic” should actually refer in some precise way to the contents of the package: at present, they do not), “green” consumerism is part of a process of environmental privatization. This process is problematic for both environmentalist and feminist politics: environmental privatization depoliticizes environmental problems, and does so in the company of a very conservative notion of gender.

There are, doubtless, many truly organic or biodegradable products avail-

able among the misrepresentations on the market. But what is being sold in green consumerism is not a product but a feeling. My favourite example is baking soda: where once it was marketed as a deodorizer for your refrigerator, kitchen drains or cat litter box, it is now being sold as “an alternative to harsh chemical products.” Better yet, the package says that, by buying this product, you are a person who “cares about the environment.” This is lifestyle advertising at its finest: where consumers once waged war on dirt, we can now buy peace with Mother Nature. When we buy “natural” or “chemical free” or “organic” products, we can now, it is implied, feel secure that we've done our part toward environmental cleanup.

Green consumerism is, actually, an oxymoron. If the adjective “green” has any meaning at all, it includes reference to the systemic problems of *over*-production and *over*-consumption; the point of a “green” politics should be to show how consumerism is, itself, part of the problem. The implications of this stance are potentially wide-ranging; at the very least, however, “green” means consuming *less* for the affluent, not just consuming differently.² Ironically, perhaps, the creation of these new green commodities may even exacerbate the problem; they represent an expanding market in a recession-torn economy, a space for the development of new products to keep overproduction and overconsumption alive.

Green consumerism masks its market-driven origins under a thick layer of morality-packaging: “if you buy this product, you can help to save the world.” Through this packaging, “green” products attempt to elevate the act of buying into some sort of moral or political act,

even though buying is actually part of the problem, and even though the act of consuming could hardly be said to be an act of salvation (although, "salvation through consumption" is certainly part of the package we are being sold). But the representation is very powerful in the context of a projected environmental crisis: the sup-

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position is that people feel the need to do something, and that green consumerism offers them an avenue of contribution.

Green products sell a lifestyle that is described by such words as "responsibility," and that includes such activities as reducing, reusing, and recycling. Although these latter actions might at least make people think about the legacy of overconsumption (landfills, leaching, air and water pollution, etc.), they are individual changes, personal decisions, activities that tend to be incorporated fairly unproblematically into daily household routines without other significant changes, and without planting the seeds of broader social or environmental transformation. In this process by which "the environment" becomes a question of lifestyle, it becomes depoliticized; it becomes a private matter, something that people feel they are helping in their daily lives, even though their daily lives have changed little, and even though social and economic relations destructive to the environment remain fundamentally intact.

Environmentalism is not simply a question of personal change; reducing, reusing, recycling, and buying "green" products are not, in our current context, political activities. At best, such isolated actions forestall the inevitability of radical change to social/environmental relations; at worst, these actions, however well-intentioned, are part of the problem. The privatization of environmental change

shifts the burden of responsibility onto individuals and households, and away from states, corporations, and global political arrangements. The privatization of environmental change undermines both collective and individual resistance; it turns politics into actions such as squashing tin cans, morality into not buying

overpackaged muffins, and environmentalism into taking your own cloth bag to the grocery store. None of these actions challenges capitalist economic growth; none of these actions makes public or collective or co-operative the

process of ecological restoration; none of these actions provokes a serious examination of the social relations and structures that have brought about our current crisis. Rather, the idea that these actions are part of "saving the earth" would seem to turn attention away from subversive, collective, or public solutions.

In short, environmental politics are not, and cannot be, simply a question of lifestyle. Yet they are fast becoming entrenched in the private sphere; indeed, they are taking the shape of a progressively more intrusive moral code at the expense of sustained political critique. I could give you numerous examples: the person who took up half an hour at the meeting of a radical environmental organization to berate a participant for not using recycled paper; the all-candidates' "environment" meeting for the 1992 Toronto mayoral race, at which the most heavily weighted question surrounded the candidates' personal use of water-saving showerheads, public transit, and insulation, and *not* their proposed policies on water quality, air pollution, or energy conservation. No matter how much one might speak about setting an example, or about the interrelationships between personal and public life, there is no question that environmental politics is, in many ways, being subtly *reduced* to activity in the private sphere.

But how is any of this a feminist concern? Let's go back to green products, for

a moment. Look at the language: "kinder to nature," "environmentally friendly," even "safe." These are images aimed at women, at motherhood, at the "family." Green consumerism in particular, and environmental privatization in general, have a particular impact on women: it is women's "traditional" terrain that gets elevated as the apex of environmental behaviour. On the surface, this may seem a positive step: a revalorization of women's work, of "maternal" behaviour. But there is also a downside: if environmentalism is increasingly seen as household behaviour, then it is women's lives that come under the most intense scrutiny as the new private ecological morality comes into focus. And it is also a very particular conception of "women" and "the family" that gets invoked.

Let me give you an example. In a recent advertisement "selling" nuclear power (of all things), a kindly grandfather (mother-substitute) explains to his concerned granddaughter (well-informed for a four-year-old) how nuclear power does not cause acid rain or global warming (presumably, granddaughter can't yet pronounce "uranium tailings"), how the fragile tree they have planted together in an orgy of familial bonding *requires* this "clean" energy in order to survive. Subtitle: nuclear power for nuclear families.

It is no accident that "family values" are invoked to sell continued capitalist growth in an environmental context that cannot stand such growth, and in a social context in which the nuclear family is subject to intense critique by feminists. Both "the environment" and "the family" are hot political items: they are contested terrains, subject to ideological appropriation by both the left and the right. And where it is possible to see what an emancipatory project that deals with both issues might look like (as pictured in some good "ecofeminist" analysis), environmental privatization and green consumerism are steps in the wrong direction.

The whole project of environmental privatization—from "green" products to blue boxes—relies heavily on a privileging of the household, especially in these recession-ridden, supposedly "homeward-looking" times. It is in the household, the private sphere, traditionally women's terrain, that individual change is seen to occur; unfortunately, what is offered as

change is only minor alteration, well within the parameters of the market, and well within the confines of patriarchal constructions of women.

For the earth-conscious woman, "protecting the children" means giving up some of the supposedly labour-saving devices purchased in the greedy 1980s and buying new ones (composters and earthworm farms, perhaps, in addition to biodegradable cleaners and recycled paper towels). But household labour also becomes intensified in the environment-friendly household: it takes work to flatten the tin cans, sort the garbage, forsake the clothes dryer, and scrub with baking soda rather than let the "tiny scrubbers" do it for you. This labour is, of course, unpaid.

Failure to comply with these green rules puts women in particular danger of transgressing the new eco-moral code of "responsible" household behaviour. To be "environmentally friendly," to be "kinder to nature," requires the use of "green" products, requires recycling, requires the intensification of household labour. In mainstream "environmental friendliness" campaigns, none of these requirements are located in a process of rethinking household labour, or rethinking the relationship between the family and other social relations (even if it's men who do the recycling). Instead, there is only a catharsis, a feeling that living by this new "kinder to nature" code means something significant to saving the world for the children, something that springs "naturally" from women's supposedly traditional behaviours.

It's not simply that the "environment-friendly household" gives women a false sense of security while at the same time stimulating consumerism and unpaid household labour. Instead, the ways in which traditional "mothering" roles are invoked work to the detriment of much feminist politics. The image of the protective mother, buying "kinder" products for the health of her family (a haven in a heartless world), is entirely consistent with a neo-conservative agenda of gender and the family. It is not just that women care more about the family, or that they are, somehow, more likely to notice its health problems. Indeed, it is also women's responsibility to care, to increase activity in the household in order to protect the fam-

ily, the children, the future. Here, we see the valorization of women's activities in a single sphere of human existence, the family, as separate from, but equal to, the activities of men in the public sphere of paid work and politics. By valorizing the household as the primary locus of change, the trend toward environmental privatization ends up reifying a very conservative (not to mention white and middle-class) notion of womanhood, as if this concept of woman were an ideal toward which all environmentally-concerned women should aspire.

It is clearly the case that "traditional" women's activities may, in some instances, act as a basis for politicization: one need only think of Love Canal, and the struggles of women like Lois Gibbs, who found her concerns as a mother transformed into critical environmental activism, and eventually feminism, through the crisis caused by toxic waste disposal. It is not the case that environmental privatization, or emphasis on individual or household change, or green consumerism, somehow foster such politics. Instead, the progressive atomization of environmental awareness, combined with a forceful use of strongly conservative representations of gender, would seem to work against both environmentalist and feminist politics. In the case of Love Canal, women took their "maternal" concerns from the household to the state (and, in doing so, clearly transcended the boundaries of their "traditional" activities); environmental privatization suggests that you can "save the earth" without ever leaving the limited realm of the private sphere.

Good intentions notwithstanding, the label "green" has become a marketing tool, a word to sell continued capitalist growth, a label for the status quo. Green consumerism is part of a process by which environmentalism is being reduced to a question of lifestyle, by which it is becoming privatized and depoliticized. Even worse: this environmental privatization plays into a whole series of rather con-

servative assumptions about women and the family; the idea of green consumerism as, somehow, a responsible everyday practice for women subtly reinforces the idea that women's political place is in the home. Thus, green consumerism, and the environmental privatization of which it is a part, is a process that feminists and

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environmentalists should be challenging; although its face may seem environmentally friendly and woman-positive, its implications are anything but.

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¹Which clearly demonstrates the class bias of "green consumerism," a problem that this article will not address, but a significant problem indeed for both environmentalist and feminist politics.

²It is worth noting, here, that "consuming less" is still inadequate as a political strategy; not only does it remain strongly private and highly individualized, but it fails to address problems of distribution. Try telling a woman on welfare with three children to "consume less," let alone to "buy green." The fact of any individual's consumption is not the problem; the problem is an economic system that is dependent on the expansion of consumer markets.