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## From Frankenstein foods to Veggie box schemes: Sustainable consumption in cultural perspective

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TO VEGGIE BOX SCHEMES:  
SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION  
IN CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE**

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## Abstract

Sustainable consumption (SC) and sustainable lifestyles have become prominent areas of environmental discourse and decision-making in recent years, and have been adopted as policy objectives by international agencies, national governments, local authorities, NGOs and citizen's action groups. The tools proposed for SC include eco-labelling, environmental taxation, green consumerism, regulation, downshifting, localisation etc., and these tools reflect the very different values and beliefs which are held by different actors in society, about what SC might be and how to achieve it.

This paper examines the principal discourses of SC using a cultural theory analytical framework. It illustrates a range of perspectives of SC as being representative of underlying worldviews and beliefs about the environment and society. Using food as a case study, the issues and values surrounding SC are highlighted, referring to fair trade, local production and distribution (farmers markets, organic box schemes), GM foods and organics (local and imported). The analytical framework is used to explore the ways in which citizens' and community groups' efforts to enact SC at the local level and in everyday life, are shaped, helped or hindered by the embodied values of social institutions and higher levels of decision-making. The cultural theory framework itself is critically analysed, and found to be a useful heuristic tool for categorising different SC views and initiatives, but lacking in explanatory power when attention turns to structural power relations and the hegemony of individualistic market culture. The policy implications of this analysis are discussed: governments should intervene to create space for marginalised cultures and act to widen the real choices available to consumers and citizens.

**Key words:** Sustainable consumption, cultural theory, green consumerism, food, environmental governance

## 1. Introduction: Putting Sustainable Consumption on the Menu

Global consumption patterns are a topic of increasing concern for politicians, environmentalists and social activists concerned with sustainability. It has become a truism that consumption behaviour in developed countries must shift towards a more sustainable form, in order to address the enormous inequalities between rich and poor countries, while respecting environmental limits (UNCED, 1992; WCED, 1987; DETR, 1999). The 1998 Human Development Report describes the gross inequality of consumption patterns across the globe, and notes that the richest 20% of the world's population accounts for 86% of the world's consumption (measured as private expenditure), and 53% of carbon dioxide emissions, while for the poorest 20% the figures are only 1.3% and 3% respectively (UNDP, 1998).

Current patterns of consumption are, quite clearly, unsustainable, and need to be transformed. The social implications of this disparity – material affluence co-existing with dire poverty – threaten global security, as well as being patently unjust. However what precisely sustainable consumption means is a subject of fierce debate, and a range of different policy scenarios exist, from exhortations to generate 'cleaner' economic growth, through to the actions of anti-capitalist low-consumption lifestyle activists. How are we to make sense of the vast array of initiatives and policies that claim to promote 'sustainable consumption'? Is any model superior? What are the social and political implications of each perspective? Policymakers, corporations and citizens alike need to negotiate a way forward through these conflicting models, to find a means of producing simple, coherent and above all, successful strategies for sustainable consumption.

This paper considers a number of case study initiatives for sustainable food within developed countries, operating at different scales and locations, and examines them, alongside the policy frameworks within which they operate, using an analytical framework developed from Cultural Theory which categorises different worldviews and perspectives on sustainable consumption. By uncovering the objectives, values and motivations of institutions (policy regimes and initiatives), we can place them on a discourse map, to ascertain how resonant or dissonant they are with each other, and therefore how likely they are to support or block each other. These cultural forms are analysed using 'discourse analysis' which examines texts and the use of language within specific social, historical and cultural contexts, in order to understand the ways in which language is never neutral: it moulds reality, it legitimises certain social actors while excluding others, it sets agendas, and it embodies the values and worldview of the speaker at the deepest levels (Fairclough, 1993). In other words we can understand how sustainable consumption initiatives interact on a fundamental level with various tiers of policy decision-making at multiple levels of governance. Understanding the cultures represented, endorsed and

created by sustainable consumption initiatives is a vital element of policy analysis and prescription. What is even more important is an appreciation of the contextual and governance factors responsible for a given initiative's success or failure, of the extent to which it struggles to find a viable space or niche within social cultures and political regimes which are fundamentally opposed to its principles, and an acknowledgement that these are not random factors but are related to deep-rooted value conflicts.

For example, the UK government-mandated 'greener growth' perspective of sustainable consumption does little to challenge the status quo of continued economic growth within a capitalist framework, and represents an environmental 'technical fix' to the problem of unsustainable consumption. It stands in marked contrast to other, more radical critiques of current consumption patterns that incorporate social sustainability and equity, and favour a downscaling of material consumption (rather than continued growth). These views challenge existing conventional wisdom on wealth, wellbeing, and the very purpose of economic activity (Anderson, 1991; Douthwaite, 1992, Levett *et al.*, 2003), and find support in Agenda 21, the action plan for sustainable development adopted at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit (UNCED, 1992). Such perspectives are commonly found among grassroots community groups and activists, but their views are rarely translated into policy because they challenge existing policy regimes and values. *This tension is the focus of this paper.*

To begin to understand these tensions and value conflicts, the paper first sets out the analytical framework to typologise and categorise the range of perspectives on sustainable consumption which was discussed above. Using this, a 'sustainable consumption discourse map' is derived which comprises a tri-polar space representing three distinct worldviews, and which allows us to locate institutional bodies according to their embodied values for sustainable consumption. A wide range of sustainable consumption food initiatives are considered, and using discourse analysis, their underlying values are identified, allowing them to be placed onto the discourse map. Their 'fit' with existing policy regimes can be thus represented graphically, and the implications that Cultural Theory offers are considered. The analytical process used in this paper is itself critically examined, and the extent to which Cultural Theory can provide useful answers to questions of policy on sustainable consumption is probed. Cultural Theory calls for a pluralistic policy regime, allowing voice to a range of perspectives, and claiming that a socially beneficial balance will be struck between competing cultures. Thompson *et al.*, (1999) claim that the need for a strong policy balance is demonstrated by the failure of decision-making processes which exclude one or more of the cultural types or worldviews. The paper will ask to what extent does this pluralism happen in practice, and what should be done if it is not in evidence? Finally, the policy and analysis implications of this approach will be considered.

## 2. Sustainable Consumption: A Taster

One approach to understanding sustainable consumption is to consider the role of cultural factors in shaping consumption patterns. Such a strategy is founded in sociological rather than economic theory, and assumes that consumption behaviour is significant not merely to satisfy material needs, but more importantly in affluent societies, to signify group solidarity, belonging, identification with particular social forces, etc. Here I use an analytical framework derived from Cultural Theory as my starting point. The framework is used as an heuristic tool, a method for categorising and unpicking the diverse range of views on sustainable consumption. It is not adopted here as an empirically robust conceptual framework, but rather as a starting point into the analysis of sustainable consumption – and in fact some of the tenets of Cultural Theory will be tested through application to the case studies below. This originally consists of a 'grid-group' matrix developed originally by Douglas and Wildawsky (1983) and Thompson *et al.*, (1990). It proposes a model of four worldviews associated with models of cultural solidarity and organisation which are based upon particular myths of nature, which in turn present differing diagnoses of environmental problems and prescriptions for their solution. These are: individualists (nature is robust and benign), egalitarians (nature is fragile), hierarchists (nature can be managed within limits) and fatalists (nature is unpredictable). A fifth category, autonomous hermits, is also described which is outside the matrix and is neither influenced by, nor seeks to influence others; this group is usually disregarded.

These forms of social solidarity are constantly in competition with each other, seeking to gain ground or influence with more people, institutions and transactions, at the expense of others. According to Cultural Theory, dominance by one way of life will prompt a reaction from an opposite cultural form, and the normative implications of this model favour political pluralism. Furthermore, proponents of cultural theory hold that the model is both universal in application and in scale – it represents the entirety of possible social organisational states and is equally valid for households as for nation states (Thompson *et al.*, 1990).

From this fourfold grid, a triangular policy discourse map can be derived, which incorporates the three policy pro-active cultural types (*i.e.* discarding fatalists and hermits) (Thompson and Rayner, 1998). Onto this map we can place real world policies and initiatives to see how closely they resonate and whether they conflict with each other on a fundamental level of values and beliefs<sup>1</sup>. By

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<sup>1</sup> Thompson *et al.*, (1999) state that in order to classify an institution as belonging to one culture or another, there must be coherence between their cultural bias, their behavioural

visualising their locations in these terms, it is possible to discern underlying conflicts or commonalities between policies at different scales and from different institutions, and hence to understand how and why certain initiatives are more successful or supported by policy frameworks than others. It allows us to discern that these disagreements represent more than imprecise scientific knowledge – they reflect deep-rooted political and cultural values about nature, science and society, and our policy strategies for sustainable consumption must acknowledge this and respond to it, rather than deferring to a scientific consensus which does not exist.

The aim of this tool is to allow for plural rationalities, values and objectives to be examined side by side, without recourse to untenable claims of objective superiority, rightness, or truth. Competing claims about environmental problems and solutions are based upon contrasting worldviews, or fundamental beliefs about the environment and society, and about human nature. The discourses and behaviours associated with each position are dynamically changing - adopted and discarded as appropriate by actors seeking influence and credibility in policy making arenas.

Cultural Theory is one of many social theories of consumption which seeks to understand patterns of behaviour using explanatory tools outside the conventional economic paradigm. Decisions made in the household and the supermarket about consumption cannot be viewed as technically neutral events – they are inextricably linked with values and social meaning, and are signifiers of cultural allegiance and social relationships. Preferences are formed, not within individuals or as endowments, but rather *between* people in a dynamic manner. Consumption is therefore a moral activity, one that supports and strengthens particular forms of social solidarity.

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strategy, and their social relationships. In this preliminary analysis however, the classification is made primarily according to cultural bias.

### 3. Three Flavours of Sustainable Consumption

Sustainable consumption comes in three flavours, one for each of these cultural types, and their distribution is shown graphically in Figure 1. It must be remembered that this map is a conceptual tool of ideal types, rather than a literal description of discrete individuals and institutions. In practice, people's values and organisations' objectives are a blurred picture, shifting between positions according to context and political economic factors such as maintaining power, being recognised as a legitimate voice, and competing with alternative viewpoints.

The term 'sustainable consumption' is relatively recent, and has been incorporated into international policy frameworks at the highest level, though its application and practice lags far behind. The groundbreaking Limits to Growth thesis (Meadows *et al.*, 1972) did not use the term, but used computerised models of population growth, rising consumption levels and depleting resource stocks to show dramatically how they would result in famine and eco-catastrophe. In this view, population was the critical factor, and consumption patterns were fixed according to levels of development. This view is consistent with the views of *Hierarchists* who see nature as tolerant within limits – equilibrium can be maintained by incorporating environmental principles into management techniques and accounting systems, in a social form of stratified collectivity and respect for authority, experts and tradition. Consumption is tightly bound with social status, with history and tradition, and can only be increased across the board to avoid disturbing the hierarchy. Sustainable consumption for hierarchists is therefore about consuming in a *responsible* manner, respecting traditions and limits, and accepting state regulation to protect these. Contemporary analysts such as Weizsäcker *et al.*, (1997) and members of the scientific elite such as the Royal Society (Heap and Kent, 2000) continue this theme.

The second group, *Egalitarians* do not see nature as being robust within limits, but rather as a fragile and precariously balanced system - therefore humans must minimise their impacts on the environment's limited and depleting resources, and be cautious in the face of uncertainty. They favour a scaling down of material consumption, or 'voluntary simplicity' - frugal and naturalistic consumption patterns based on local provisioning. Sustainable consumption for egalitarians is a matter of consuming *less*, and hence challenging the conventional wisdom that income and consumption equates with wellbeing – subjects touched upon by Agenda 21. Justice and equity are central concerns for this group, and the appropriate process for collective decision-making is participatory democracy. Prominent writers in this tradition are Daly (1992), Douthwaite (1992) and Trainer (1995). In 1987, the Brundtland Commission

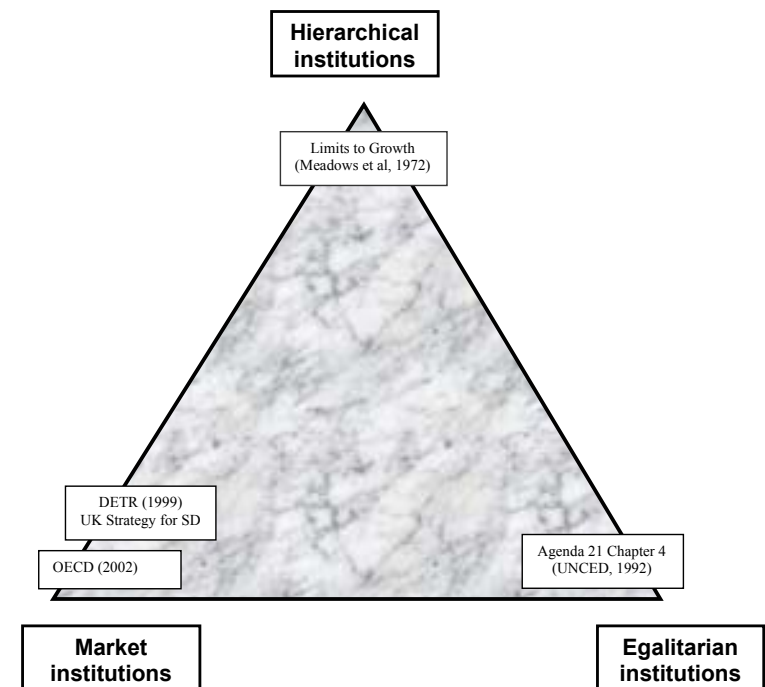
made an important step forward in highlighting increasing material consumption as an environmental issue, stating ‘Sustainable global development requires that those who are more affluent adopt lifestyles within the planet’s ecological means’ (WCED, 1987:9). Furthermore, there is a formal recognition that consumption levels are a social construct rather than an objective necessity. Building on this, the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development adopted Agenda 21, an action plan for sustainable development, which states that ‘the major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production, particularly in industrialised countries’ (UNCED, 1992: section 4.3) and the unequal distribution of resource use between the affluent nations and the poorer countries. For the first time in international environmental discourse, over-consumption in the North was identified as a prime cause of unsustainability (as opposed to more traditional perspectives which blamed overpopulation in the global South, abdicating responsibility in the North).

The third group, *Individualists* view nature as a cornucopian system, responding robustly to human intervention, and therefore justifying an experimental and opportunistic approach to environmental management. It is assumed that competitive markets will deliver efficient solutions to resource scarcity, and the consumption pattern seen here is opportunistic, conspicuous and cosmopolitan, while governance is individualistic and market-based. Sustainable consumption, in this view, is equated with the increased consumption of differently – sustainably – produced goods, and is promoted by, among others, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the UK government. The OECD does not have a direct policy-making function, but is influential in coordinating activities between, and articulating the interests of developed country nations, and benchmarks ‘best practice’ in a number of areas. Following UNCED, the OECD established a programme of research on sustainable production and consumption. The OECD’s conceptual framework has an explicit economic bias with a strong emphasis on *markets* and *economic instruments* - market failure is diagnosed as the cause of unsustainability. Governments are expected to correct prices and provide regulatory frameworks to influence producers to be more eco-efficient – so sustainable consumption in this view equates to the consumption of sustainably produced goods (or ‘greener’ economic growth), rather than any substantive shift in consumption patterns (OCED, 2002).

The UK government’s approach to sustainable development matches this cultural type. It is founded upon a belief that stable and continued economic growth is compatible with effective environmental protection and responsible use of natural resources (‘cleaner growth’) – mirroring the OECD view (DETR,

1999). Policies to promote sustainable consumption are referred to as ‘market transformation’ (para 6.43): making the polluter pay, eco-taxes, government purchasing initiatives, public awareness campaigns and instituting voluntary eco-labelling schemes and encouraging the individual consumer to take responsibility for sustainable consumption through their purchasing decisions (Maniates, 2003). In 2003, the UK Government announced its intention to draw up a strategy for sustainable consumption and production (DEFRA, 2003). This is part of its response to the European Union’s commitment to develop a 10-year plan for sustainable consumption, which was made at the 2002 World Summit for Sustainable Development. It will take the decoupling of economic growth from environmental degradation and resource use as the primary objective, to be achieved through a range of principally economic market-based instruments.

**Figure 1: Mapping Sustainable Consumption Discourses**



Thus we can see how some of the major institutions engaged with sustainable consumption have conflicting values, objectives and beliefs about the environment, society-nature relations and the impacts of consumption. How then can we expect policies to deliver coherent, consistent messages and outcomes? Cultural Theory has normative implications, favouring political pluralism, and taking the position that each cultural type needs the other two to be present – in other words, there is no judgment made about whether any of the positions is more correct than the others. Ney and Thompson (1999) assert that a functioning democratic society will benefit from allowing all three positions to have a voice in the policy making process, and enabling proponents of each discourse the social and political space to develop in relation to the others. Indeed, they claim that when one or more discourse is marginalised or silenced, the negative aspects of the dominant worldviews are not held in check, with repercussions for all. For example, the unrestrained free market (individualism) will lead to exploitation and environmental degradation, and these tendencies are held in check by government regulation (hierarchy) and environmentalists (egalitarianism). This perspective will be critically assessed in the discussions to follow.

#### **4. Consuming Issues for Sustainable Food**

The cases of sustainable food initiatives discussed below have been purposefully selected to demonstrate a wide range of perspectives on sustainable consumption. They include what might be termed ‘mainstream’ and ‘alternative’ approaches to ways in which consumption might be transformed, relating to actions by individual consumers, corporations and governments, and as such are illustrative of initiatives occupying all sectors of the discourse map.

##### **4.1 Case 1: Genetically modified food**

Food biotechnology – better known as genetically modified organisms (GMOs) – has become a global issue in recent years, though it was first developed in the 1970s. Major agricultural technology companies such as Monsanto promote the use of GMOs, proclaiming their environmental, economic and social credentials: GM crops are claimed to protect themselves from pests and diseases, reducing pesticide and fertiliser use; they boost productivity; and they bring taste and health benefits, such as added vitamins, to enhance human health on consumption (Monsanto, 2003b). So, even GMOs can be described as contributing to sustainable consumption: “We're excited about the potential for genetically modified food to contribute to a better environment and a sustainable, plentiful, and healthy food supply” as Monsanto (2003a) assert.

The model of society and the environment which food biotechnology companies like Monsanto implicitly or explicitly refer to is one where technology provides solutions to environmental and social problems, and the environment is robust enough to withstand some genetic experimentation and human interference – within a strict regulatory environment. Furthermore, it is one where scientific experts make decisions and are somewhat dismayed if the public are ungrateful for the decisions made on their behalf – witness the belated public debate on GM crops in the UK ([www.gmnation.org.uk](http://www.gmnation.org.uk)), which comes several years after secret GM farm trials began and public opinion first made itself known on the issue. This displays the hierarchists faith in a scientific elite and top-down policymaking, and a certain bemusement at a populace that places more weight on equity, justice and empowerment – a freedom to choose GMOs or not - than on scientific rationality.

Indeed, the main criticisms of GMOs come from perspectives we can describe as egalitarian: that food biotechnology companies are pursuing commercial profit rather than social benefit, that farmers growing patented crops will become much more dependent on external companies, being prohibited from saving seed in traditional ways, that the consuming public have not chosen this food technology, and that we do not know the implications for either public health or nature of genetic modifications, and therefore should be far more

cautious of this ‘unnatural’ technology (Greenpeace, 2000) – or more emotively, ‘frankenfood’ (FoE, 1998). Finally, the claims that GMOs can feed the world’s hungry are rejected, with counter-claims that existing techniques can also increase productivity, and that food poverty is a social rather than a technical problem (Christian Aid, 1999). Of course, another criticism is that the experts and the government may not be deemed credible, independent, trustworthy or legitimate, and those with an egalitarian bias will certainly favour open and accountable public debate rather than top-down decision-making, whatever the outcome (ESRC Global Environmental Change Programme, 1999). This highlights the fact that while GM companies try to focus the debate on the safety of GM food to consumers, concerns about the wider social and environmental issues are deflected.

While the UK government, following a traditional allegiance with the scientific elite through organisations such as the Royal Society (the scientific body charged with evaluating the UK’s GM trials), has so far been pro-GM, allowing trials to go ahead, it has been perceived as being aligned with the corporate interests. The recent GM public debate is a welcome step back to democracy, and a demonstration that pursuing a hierarchical path alone is unsustainable socially – the egalitarians’ concerns for democracy and justice will be heard in the end. But how real is this consultation? It will be instructive to see how far the response – which has been overwhelmingly sceptical and ‘cautionary’ (DTI, 2003) will influence policy. Environment Secretary Margaret Beckett promised to listen to the responses but not necessarily be bound to follow their recommendations (McCarthy, 2003).

#### **4.2 Case 2: Organic food – three aspects**

Organically grown food is produce which is grown without the use of artificial chemical fertilisers and pesticides, and where animals are raised in more natural conditions, without the routine use of drugs, antibiotics and wormers common in intensive livestock farming. The Soil Association is the largest UK organisation which certifies growers which adhere to these standards, providing a robust and recognisable consumer label (Soil Association, 2003).

The market for organically grown food has expanded enormously over the last ten years, moving from a minority interest for fringe environmentalists, to a mainstream healthy-eating option adopted by many household-name food brands. The most commonly cited reasons for consuming organic food are: food safety, the environment, animal welfare, and taste (Soil Association, 2003). With such a spread of motivations for consuming organic food, clearly organic food is not a one-dimensional commodity, it comes in different forms and through various channels. It can be locally grown or imported from overseas (65% of organic produce eaten in the UK is imported), it can be grown on

small-scale labour-intensive farms, or mass-produced in industrialised agricultural landscapes, and it can be delivered in boxes with soil attached, or bought in local wholefood shops, or in sanitised supermarkets, which are increasing their domination of the market, with 82% of sales (Soil Association, 2002). The environmental, social and economic implications of each of these modes of consumption are quite different, embodying a range of values and desires. By unpicking these, we can see that organic food consumption is appetising to each of the three cultural types.

Egalitarians favour organic food that represents a return to small-scale agriculture which is more respectful of the environment, strengthening local economies and building links between consumers and producers. The social aspects of local food production are important here, including beliefs that local people should have greater control over how their food is grown, challenging the industrialised and chemical-dependent nature of mass-produced agriculture, and favouring localised food chains. Hence, in this view, local organic box schemes (where local growers deliver boxes of mixed produce to households on a weekly basis) or organic farmers markets are a good solution to the problem of sustainable food.

In contrast, individualists are attracted to organic food because of the supposed health benefits of eating such produce, especially for children. For these consumers, claims of superior flavour and nutrition (or enhanced food safety) are most relevant, and the environmental benefits of organic production are generally neglected. Large scale industrialised organic farms supplying global markets are seen as an efficient industry response to consumer demand, and the cosmetically-appealing organic produce available in supermarkets is preferred to the dirty and inconsistent locally grown alternatives. Hence consumption patterns remain the same, with the difference that ingredients are organic – for example Heinz organic baked beans, etc. Organic food consumption for individualists is about consuming differently-produced food, rather than changing consumption patterns.

The third perspective on organics is that of the hierarchists, who see organic food as a status symbol – or ‘yuppie chow’, signifying that the consumer has the good sense and discrimination (and wealth) to choose high quality food with a premium price tag. These consumers favour organic produce because of the status it conveys, the association with elite cultures of gastronomy, the conservative values it embodies, and the preservation of local traditions and distinctiveness this brings when food is grown in a traditional way rather than mass-produced and industrialised. Guthman (2003) suggests that organic food’s entry into mainstream culture was associated with this gentrification, and class differentiation.



So, arguably, organic food can be seen as sustainable from any cultural position. But how does it fit with current policy regimes? Government policy on food and farming calls for a sustainable approach, founded on dismantling the Common Agricultural Policy subsidy system across Europe and ‘reconnecting with the market’ (Defra, 2002:15) – clearly marking a shift from top-down hierarchical policymaking to market-oriented institutions. Among a raft of measures for promoting sustainable farming and food, the government has pledged to support organic farming by promoting organic food in schools and hospitals, providing cash for organic farmers to help them transfer to the new farming system, recognising and valuing the social and economic benefits of organic farming, as well as environmental gains, and promoting local food and for supermarkets to source more organic food from the UK (Defra, 2002). Production and consumption of organic food, within a context of global trade, is supported by government policy within the market area of the map, but the more local-oriented, small scale production favoured by the egalitarians may be sidelined in this mainstreaming of organics.

### 4.3 Case 3: Local food

Local food has become more widely recognised and consumed in recent years, for a variety of reasons which we can unpick using the Cultural Theory analytical model. Of course scale and what is termed ‘local’ is socially constructed – it may mean from a local country, sub-national region, county, or village, and it is over-simplistic to suppose a binary polarisation between ‘global’ and ‘local’ food (Hinrichs, 2003). There are a variety of distribution channels for localized food which have grown rapidly over the last 5-10 years: farmers markets (where goods must be produced within a given radius of the market, and sold by the farmer) are a recent innovation in the UK, and local farm shops are the most visible outlets for these goods. In this sector, sellers are marketing not only the local distinctiveness of their goods, but also a connection with their provenance and an engagement between consumers and producers which is wholly lacking in the global mass-market. It is a quality consumers want. A recent poll found that 52% of respondents with a preference want to purchase locally-grown food, and another 46% would prefer it grown in the UK (NEF, 2003). Boyle calls this a desire for ‘authenticity’, for real life and claims there is a growing demand for what is authentic, local and trustworthy (Boyle, 2003).

For environmentalists, localising food is a way of reducing ‘food miles’ – the distance food travels between being produced and being consumed –and so cutting the energy and pollution associated with transporting food around the world. For example, in one calculation, the ingredients of a traditional British Sunday meal were found to have travelled 81,000km (or twice around the Earth) and their transport was responsible for emitting at least 37kg of carbon

dioxide. If the same produce had been grown and eaten within a 45km radius, the carbon dioxide emissions related to their transport would be just 0.2% of the globally-transported meal (Jones, 2001). So long as these environmental costs are externalised, such practices will continue to be economically profitable, despite their negative social impacts on local growers. So, we can see that local food initiatives seek to internalise the full costs of production, thereby correcting market failures. However, there is more to the local food movement than market institutions.

Egalitarians favour local food because of the social bonds it forges between consumers and local growers, and because it seeks to embed social networks like these into economic relationships. It therefore carries a strong social and ethical community-building function, re-educating people about where their food comes from, encouraging a rejection of the faceless supermarket, and so offering a high degree of feedback (both economic, social and environmental) between producers and consumers (Norberg-Hodge *et al.*, 2000). There are a range of local food initiatives which seek to achieve these goals. They are generally grassroots initiatives, springing up in locally distinct forms to respond to local conditions. They include ‘grow your own’ schemes promoting allotments and garden growing, particularly in urban environments; farm gate shops; farmers markets; Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) which is ‘a partnership between farmers and consumers where the responsibilities and rewards of farming are shared’ (Soil Association, 2001:6) in various forms of mutual support, from local veggie box schemes (where a consumer pays a subscription to the farmer, who delivers a box of mixed seasonal vegetables every week) to volunteers working on the farms themselves; etc. Participation in the mutually-supportive CSA initiatives are motivated more by the values it embodies and the lifestyle it permits – practising egalitarian values - than for the economic benefits (Soil Association, 2001).

But in a different cultural form, supporting local food systems can be a symbolic action towards ‘defensive localism’, representing parochial conservative values, and seeking to exclude ‘others’ (Winter, 2003). Holloway and Kneafsey (2000) find that the farmer’s market is a space for enabling simultaneously ‘alternative’ and ‘reactionary’ consumption, with organic and animal welfare-friendly produce selling alongside conventionally-farmed goods and battery-farmed eggs. Another example of a local food initiative is the Slow Food movement, founded in 1986 and based in the Piedmont region of Italy. Its objective is to protect and promote good food, eaten in the traditional Italian family-style – *i.e.* home-cooking, good quality ingredients, valuing taste and social experience above convenience (hence the title ‘slow’ food as opposed to ‘fast’ food), and to this end has spread across the industrialised countries with 77,000 members organised into 700 local ‘convivias’ in 48 countries. This

initiative is deeply rooted in local cultures and in many ways is very conservative, wishing to preserve local agricultural diversity, specialities, and traditions, and resist the global uniformity of mass food consumption. This emphasis on history and tradition suggests that the Slow Food movement is representative of the Hierarchical culture which values the status, rank and social positioning afforded by those who can afford – the costs are high in terms of (usually unpaid female labour) time and money – slow food. Interestingly the Slow Food movement is indeed a very hierarchical organisation, with an international headquarters and regional subgroups, within a very formal and rigid structure: ‘The head of the ... convivium is the **fiduciary** or **convivium leader**, who, through the members and the central office, ... In short, he educates in matters of taste.’ (Slow Food, 2003)

Thus local food is not simplistically aligned with a counter-cultural cuisine movement – it can be both a radical alternative to conventional food supply chains (egalitarian), a more efficient response to internalisation of full production costs (market) or a conservative nationalistic / parochial defensive strategy (hierarchical). So, as with organic food, local food can be seen as desirable from any of the cultural forms and policy discourses we have mapped in Figure 1. How do these initiatives fare with national and local policy? A recent major policy report on the future of food and farming sets out a strategy for strengthening all links in the food chain, but fails to address localized food networks (Defra, 2002), thus remaining strictly within the bounds of conventional (market) institutions and not taking on board the values of either the egalitarians or the hierarchists in their interpretations of what makes a sustainable food system.

#### 4.4 Case 4: Fair trade

Fair trade refers to trading arrangements which guarantee to pay farmers a better price for their produce than the market would normally provide. In many cases farmers form cooperatives to increase their access to, power and voice in the market. Fair trading organisations buy directly from producers and market to consumers, and so are able to pay farmers a higher price for their goods. They form an alternative trading mechanism and enable small, marginal producers to gain access to developed country markets when larger buyers would not accept their produce. Fair Trading firms are frequently value-based organisations with a social mission, to provide a better deal in international trade for marginalised developing country producers, by campaigning and raising consumer awareness.

The UK’s Fairtrade Foundation is part of an international Fair Labelling Organisation (FLO) which certifies suppliers who meet minimum standards with a Fairtrade mark (Fairtrade Foundation, 2003a,b). Well-known examples

of products carrying the Fairtrade mark include Café Direct coffee, Divine chocolate and Twin Trading tea, and there are more than 100 other certified brands (mainly in coffee, tea, sugar, honey, cocoa, chocolate, juice and bananas). Fair trade is a voluntary market-based instrument for sustainable consumption. As such, it relies upon consumer willingness to purchase fairly traded items rather than conventional produce – which in turn is dependent upon awareness and knowledge of current trading practices, not to mention concern which is translatable into action, or accessibility and affordability of the fairly traded alternatives. Williams and Doane (2002) refer to the ‘30:3’ syndrome of fair and ethical trade, whereby 30% of consumers express concern about corporations’ records on social responsibility, while only 3% of the market share is held by ethically produced and fairly traded goods<sup>2</sup>. There is therefore a demonstrable ‘gap’ (of motivation, affordability, capability, etc) between beliefs and behaviour, which indicates that a voluntary initiative relying upon market-based consumer demand for its momentum is contingent upon filling that gap.

How do fair trade initiatives sit within current trade policy regimes? In the Sustainable Consumption Framework set out in Figure 2, fair trade is located between the apexes of ‘market’ and ‘egalitarian’ institutions, as it is a clear embodiment of an individualistic and voluntary strategy (market-based) which aims to create alternative trading channels and infuse the mainstream with equitable values based upon solidarity links and stakeholder dialogue (egalitarianism) (Renard, 2003). Oxfam states that ‘Trade is a powerful engine of economic growth. However, it can also fuel massive inequalities’ (Oxfam, 2003). The principal policy frameworks which fair trade interacts with is the World Trading Organisations (WTO) rules on international trade. This institution promotes ‘free trade’ and market competition among all states, and claims to be creating a level playing field for all – thus placing it firmly within the ‘market institutions’ region of the map. For fair trade organisations, this strong market-orientation of the principal policy frameworks is somewhat dissonant with fair trade’s concern with social justice and equity (represented by being situated midway between market and egalitarian institutions in Figure 3). Fair trade sits comfortably with the market-based individualism, liberal policies and pro-international trade agendas of most developed countries, and uses the current system to grow into a niche position in the market, and co-exists alongside more conventionally traded goods, but its relationship with the dominant individualistic culture is problematic, as the unrestrained market undermines the egalitarian, cooperative standards on which fair trade is based.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, these figures do not capture the consumer actions which are not expressed in the marketplace – particularly boycotting, or reducing consumption altogether, and so it is likely they underestimate the extent and nature of ethical consumerism.

However, Oxfam's 'Make Trade Fair' campaign argues that existing trading arrangements are not 'free', rather they are heavily regulated, but in favour of developed countries, and these rules need to be changed. Existing trade rules force developing countries to open their economies (removing tariffs and quotas) while allowing indirect protection in developed countries through subsidies, for example the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy. In relation to specifically fair-traded goods, current trade rules prohibit the discrimination of imported goods on the grounds of their methods of production (this also relates to ethical trade below). Even in the fair trade sector, tariffs effectively block access to developing country goods. Thailand's 'polished' rice exports are certified with a fair trade mark, but because they are 'higher value' goods, they attract punitive tariffs in the European market (Islam, 2002). One source of this unfairness is the disparity of power relations between developed and developing nations in the WTO – while all countries have an equal voice, the agendas are set in advance by a small group of industrialised countries (Oxfam, 2003). So we can see that current policy regimes inhibit the growth of fair trade, thus blocking efforts for sustainable consumption to be enacted by consumers in the supermarket.

#### 4.5 Case 5: Ethical trade

While fair trade seeks to alter the terms of trade for poor producers, *ethical* trade, in comparison, refers to items which have been produced according to minimum standards, especially relating to working conditions and wages, and also environmental concerns. It therefore assumes that present consumption patterns can be made sustainable simply by improving the standards under which they are produced, and conflates sustainable production and consumption. The ethical trade sector has grown up in the context of increasingly deregulated labour and capital markets, and growing publicity during the 1990s of abuses of human rights in consumer goods manufacturing processes such as 'sweatshop factories' producing for well-known brands such as Gap, Nike, Disney etc. (Jenkins, 2001). Firms responded by adopting self-regulation through voluntary standards, known as 'codes of conduct' to protect workers' rights in their supplier's factories, in part to deflect state attention from a regulatory strategy which would threaten to limit their operations further.

Ethical trade is another market-based strategy which uses consumer choice as a tool to effect change in corporate behaviour and improve production standards, rather than legislation. It seeks to correct market failures which have allowed environmental and social costs to be externalised and aims to send the right market signals to industry and consumer alike. It is also motivated by a desire to address the exploitative practices which occur in the name of global free trade, and forge solidarity links between consumers and producers – items which are on the egalitarian's agenda. It is reliant upon social marketing - consumer

awareness and motivation to act for change – as well as practical issues such as the availability, price and convenience of ethically traded items.

The growth of 'multi-stakeholder' codes and coalitions of workers groups with NGOs and businesses has been a positive step forward, resulting in more comprehensive and standardised codes than the initial wave of diverse codes developed by corporations themselves (Pearson and Seyfang, 2001; 2002). The UK's Ethical Trading Initiative is a government-supported coalition of NGOs, industry and trade unions who seek to introduce an 'ethical trading label' to allow consumers to identify goods which meet the minimum standards set out in its 'base code'. This code is built upon the ILO's fundamental labour standards, which comprises eight conventions covering forced labour, child labour, freedom of association and discrimination (ETI, 2003; ILO 1998). Monitoring and verification of codes of conduct is an area attracting growing attention at present, to ensure accountability and transparency (Clean Clothes Campaign, 1999).

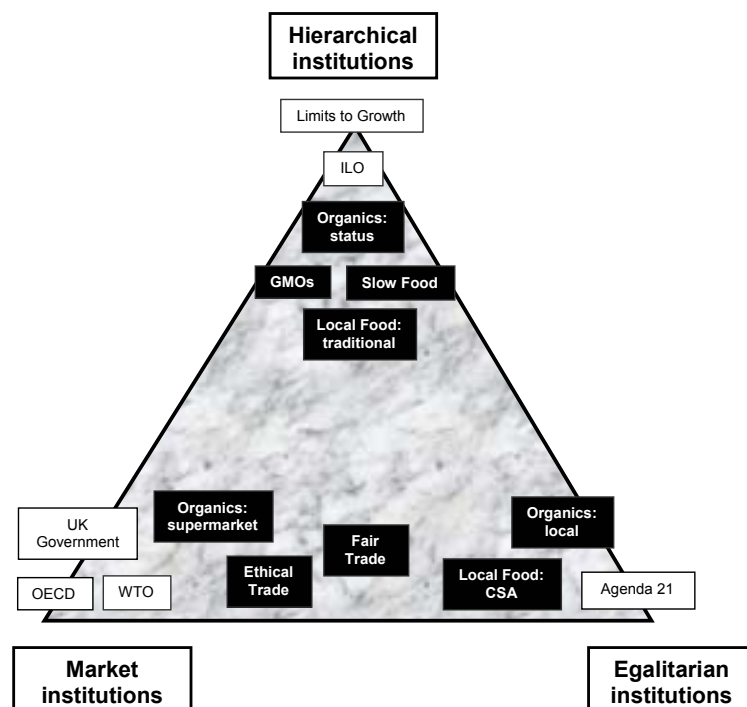
In the food sector, ethical trade has become more prominent through the participation of all the UK's major supermarkets in the ETI, meaning that supermarkets are working towards ensuring that their fresh produce suppliers comply with the base code. However, the application of voluntary codes can be haphazard and can exacerbate existing divisions in labour markets, because it is still the case that the ILO core conventions are aimed at a particular model of worker – namely the male, full-time permanent employee (Pearson and Seyfang, 2001, 2002). The ILO is therefore shown near the apex of the Hierarchist region in Figure 2, because it embodies a managed development goal, taking a somewhat paternalistic and traditionalist approach.

Ethical trade faces some of the same obstacles as fair trade in the arena of international trading regimes – that the WTO disallows any discrimination according to the method of production. In addition, the WTO states clearly that 'labour standards [are] not on the agenda' (WTO, 2001: 51) and defers issues of labour conditions to the ILO. Ethical trade initiatives and eco-labelling schemes are voluntary market instruments, and operate at the level of the NGO or firm rather than the state, and so are permitted by the WTO, though eco-labels and ethical labels are viewed as potential 'technical barriers to trade' to developing countries (WTO, 2001). By claiming that the WTO should not intervene on social and environmental issues, this rule makes a mockery of attempts to improve working conditions in developing countries and encouraging consumers to actively choose those goods over others, and by disregarding the social and environmental costs of production, the WTO is distorting the market.

At the national level, and as a market-based self-regulatory instrument, ethical trade finds political favour within liberal democracies such as the UK and the

US, where the social regulation of business is considered an inappropriate intervention in the market. The UK government's strategy for sustainable development, as outlined above, prefers individualistic, market-oriented tools of corporate self-governance, within a context of an educated and ethically motivated consumer market (DETR, 1999). Ethical trade therefore is well supported by national governments, represented by their proximity within the 'market' region of the sustainable consumption framework in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Sustainable Consumption discourse map showing sustainable food initiatives**



## 5. Discussion: Resonant and Dissonant Cultures

We have seen from the discussions above that some of the food initiatives for sustainable consumption we have considered correspond to current policy regimes, and others are in conflict with national and international regulatory frameworks. Furthermore, local, national and international policy frameworks may not be consistent, allowing initiatives to find support within one arena, only to be blocked in another. By placing the various sustainable consumption initiatives and relevant policy regimes on the sustainable consumption discourse map, this can be seen graphically. In addition, it also enables us to visualise the different values and objectives of the diverse initiatives, and to begin to comprehend what they have in common and what is at stake when they clash.

What does all this mean for policy? Cultural Theory's normative prescription is for a pluralistic democracy, which gives voice to the three pro-active cultures (claiming that they balance each other for the greater overall good) and seeks to minimise fatalism. Cultural Theory claims that for a healthy society, there should be a policy balance between the three competing pro-active cultural types, and fatalism should be minimised. Each of the three active types exists in relation to the other two, and in this pluralistic model, relies upon the others to maximise the positive aspects of its culture and avoid the shortcomings. The cases discussed present some evidence for this position: for example, firms adopting corporate environmental responsibility systems (individualists and heirarchists) need to be prompted for transparency and disclosure by the social justice agenda of egalitarians. This proposition is supported by experiences with, for example, ethical trade, which stumbles because the top-down regulatory framework of the state is all too often absent, and the market reigns, undermining democratic efforts to inject social justice into trade – a trend which is discussed further below.

The Cultural Theory framework has therefore served as a useful starting point for policy analysis. It enables us to understand existing and historical conflicts between policy regimes and institutions which have hampered sustainable consumption initiatives. We can see that disagreements and conflicts over policy discourses are at a deeper level than one of technical disagreement. They represent fundamental conflicts of values and understandings of nature, and there will never be a consensus. Such an understanding allows the possibility of forging a solution – in other words, of conceiving of a manner in which dissonant cultures can present their sustainable consumption solutions in a manner more appealing to policy makers – in other words adopting the language of the other cultures, and identifying and then working around the points of fundamental conflict.

However, Cultural Theory's claim that a natural balance will develop between the competing cultural perspectives is not well supported by the evidence; the most influential and significant policy regimes are dominated by individualistic cultures, and egalitarian cultures in particular are systematically excluded from decision-making arenas, and undermined in social and economic practice. There is no evidence of a strong counter-cultural response emerging from the excluded cultures, as the theory would claim. The analysis therefore falls short of answering critical questions, and encourages us to extend the analysis to include tools from political science to examine which culture is dominant and to consider the ways in which it preserves its hegemony – departing from Cultural Theory in beginning to address questions of power and dominance in political systems. For example Individualist cultures can maintain their dominance of modern society through eroding non-market distribution channels and marketising previously non-marketed goods and services, to undermine the scope and potential for alternatives (the social economy, for instance). In such a way, they systematically squeeze out alternatives and restrict the choices available to consumers – ironically, while championing consumer choice, these institutions collude to prevent access to choices outside the model of a market-led consumer solution to environmental problems (Levett *et al.*, 2003; Maniates, 2003).

From such a perspective, it is possible to conceive of ways in which marginalised cultures and institutions may fight back and develop in opposition to the mainstream. Social innovation for sustainable consumption which comes from the egalitarian perspective challenges the dominant cultures of market and hierarchical institutions seen in the scientific community, conventional problem-framing, and government policy. Smith (2002) argues that social and economic niches for alternative technologies and consumption patterns can be carved out, and provide valuable pioneering examples which the mainstream may learn from and potentially adopt in the future. But they are hampered by higher levels of decision-making, in terms of funding and practical support, but also in terms of the general social acceptability of such projects. Michaelis (2000) observes that while governments generally assume that a shift to sustainable consumption will involve coercion and punitive measures from a government which the public distrusts, in fact this overlooks the fact that many people are keen to experiment with alternative (egalitarian) low-consumption lifestyles. They find little support within social institutions or social norms, and require an immediate community of people sharing their values, in order to consolidate and reproduce a practical lifestyle, and to provide status and recognition according to different values to the mainstream.

Indeed, many consumers are prevented from making the consumption choices they would prefer to make by the lack of *real* choice (Levett *et al.*, 2003). For

example, while consumers can choose from a range of more-or-less energy efficient cars using several different fuels, there is very little option for choosing to use public transport instead of the car. Taking this view, governments would achieve more significant shifts towards sustainable consumption by supporting and making space for enthusiastic grassroots community groups, rather than through a top-down approach – and need to intervene to actively create alternative structures for provisioning which do not accept the individualised market system as the only option (Jackson and Michaelis, 2003; Levett *et al.*, 2003).

While Cultural Theory's prescription for pluralism justifies an emphasis on non-market institutions and values, it cannot make judgements about which vision of sustainable consumption is the best – it merely argues for a balance between all three views. More critical analyses argue that the values espoused by egalitarians and the social institutions they favour are threatened by the long-standing domination of the individualistic market culture, which dismisses environmental concern with the status quo. This threat can be seen in the ways that the dominant individualist culture appropriates initiatives which initially arise as challenges, whether from hierarchist or egalitarian cultures. The shifting place of organic food from eco-crank's hobby horse (or heirarchist's status symbol of good taste) to wide scale public acceptability reflects an interesting metamorphosis from organic food being seen as good for the environment and society (bypassing global production, conventional growing techniques and pesticide use), to being good for individuals (where the health benefits are emphasised). Using the cultural theory map we can see that this represents a move from the egalitarian to the individualist paradigm, from challenging existing consumption patterns to merely changing some of the technical details thereof, and from a radical critique of modern food production to a mainstream marketing technique.

The Cultural Theory map allows us to identify these shifts, but what do they mean? I argue that they illustrate the mainstream's adoption and taming of alternatives to conventional consumption patterns, denaturing them in the process, while still claiming that they embody key elements of 'sustainability' and hence allowing 'green marketing' efforts to promote them, at the expense of marginal initiatives. Alternatives to the mainstream are threatened by the market paradigm which absorb them and discard the essence of their approach. Smith (2002) talks of the possibilities of 'niche technologies' for sustainable consumption (representing egalitarian values) transforming the mainstream through co-existence and infiltrating the mainstream with egalitarian values. However in this case we can see that the mainstream has superficially adopted the niche consumption market for organic food, but has done so in a way which keeps the technical point (not using pesticides or fertilisers in growing) but

discards the essence of the project – namely to promote a different relationship between people and food and land. Is this a pattern we will find in other niches? What does it mean when Starbucks proclaims its use of (a small percentage of) Fair Trade coffee? Or would McDonalds be forgiven by environmentalists if it sold organically grown, free-range beef in its hamburgers? There is a sense that while the technical point may be correct, it has been co-opted and the *social critique* which accompanied the egalitarian sustainable consumption initiative has been lost. Marginalised cultures need to be empowered and protected from this type of appropriation in order to maintain a vibrant and energetic critique and the demonstration of alternative lifestyles and consumption patterns.

## 6 Conclusions

This paper has investigated a number of initiatives, working at a range of scales, for sustainable food consumption. It has found them to represent a wide range of objectives and values, and these have been mapped onto a policy discourse map for sustainable consumption derived from Cultural Theory. This type of categorisation has been useful in uncovering and representing underlying values and the ways in which they complement or compete with each other, resulting in inconsistent policies for sustainable consumption, and situations where sustainable consumption strategies are supported by some policy regimes and blocked by others. The value of such an analytical approach is its transparency, and the normative political prescriptions associated with Cultural Theory are for pluralism – and indeed many of these initiatives would benefit from a more equal distribution of political power between the three pro-active cultures considered, rather than the currently hegemonic market institutions.

However, there are remaining questions which Cultural Theory cannot answer, and for these to be understood more fully, we need to take the analytical lens further afield and consider the cases of sustainable consumption from another angle. Inequalities of power abound in the institutions we have looked at here, and Cultural Theory is unable to satisfactorily explain how one culture (individualists) becomes dominant, without prompting a response from another quadrant of the Cultural Theory framework to balance it out. Market institutions have become dominant over the long term, but the power this culture wields has enabled it to prevent any encroachment from competing cultural types. This is because power is structural, rather than individualistic (O’Riordan and Jordan, 1999). Within the WTO, for example, in an institution which proclaims the benefits of free trade and market competition for all, there are enormous disparities of power between developed and developing countries, resulting in unfair trade rules. Why has there not been a counter-cultural response? The answers to these questions are outside the scope of this paper, but can be found using political economic analyses: in other words, examining the systematic links between economic, social and political processes: asking whose interests are represented in which arenas, who holds power and how they maintain dominance, and how those structures are created through the actions of individuals operating within constrained choice sets (Levett *et al.*, 2003; Spaargaren, 2003). Secondly, Cultural Theory cannot adequately explain how individual people adopt one culture or another, other than to say that they shift their allegiance according to their environment. Therefore we must also extend the analysis to consider other social, psychological and economic factors which motivate consumption decisions (Jackson and Michaelis, 2003).

Finally, the Cultural Theory lens has allowed us to visualise just how dominated the policy arena is by the individualistic culture and market-led approach to sustainable consumption – and how this is not the only option. This should prompt us to think the unthinkable and explore opportunities for genuine collective endeavours which challenge the institutions and structures the market has delivered. Nowhere is the need for social acceptability and credibility, participation and democracy more evident than in the arena of sustainable consumption, where policymakers and activists discuss plans to change all our lifestyles.

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