

Preface

A joint statement issued in 1992 by the Royal Society of London and the National Academy of Sciences of the United States asserted that '[u]nrestrained resource consumption for energy production and other uses, especially if the developing world strives to achieve living standards based on the same levels of consumption as the developed world, could lead to catastrophic outcomes for the global environment.' Agenda 21, the action plan adopted at the Rio Earth Summit, conveyed this concern to a wider audience later that same year. The report specifically noted that 'the major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production, particularly in industrialized countries, which is a matter of grave concern, aggravating poverty and imbalances.'

Sustainable consumption was again a key focus of attention in 2002 at the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in South Africa. The key outcome of this event, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, stated that '[f]undamental changes in the way societies produce and consume are indispensable for achieving global sustainable development. All countries should promote sustainable consumption and production patterns, with the developed countries taking the lead and with all countries benefiting from the process.' As we complete this book, thousands of representatives from both governments and civil society organizations have recently convened in Rio on the twentieth anniversary of the first Earth Summit to again tackle the challenges of sustainable development and have adopted a Ten-Year Framework of Programs on Sustainable Consumption and Production.

It has not just been international mega-events that have sought to engage with the deeply problematic ways in which our material and financial economies fuse together to constitute current systems of consumption. The issue of sustainable consumption has over the past 20 years occupied the attention of prominent institutions such as the United Nations Environment Programme, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the World Economic Forum, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development and numerous others. National scientific councils have amply funded extensive research programs and

several countries have even formulated their own sustainable consumption plans. We have moreover seen the deployment of countless eco-labeling schemes, energy-efficiency programs and educational campaigns encouraging ordinary consumers to 'green' their shopping practices.

Common to all of these familiar strategies is a hopeful emphasis on technology. There is though growing recognition that such approaches will not bring about the required drastic reductions in consumption by the wealthy countries of the global North and, increasingly, the rapidly growing economies of the South. In addition to technological changes, fundamental shifts will have to take place in how people satisfy their needs and wants through the heedless appropriation of scarce materials, sources of energy and assimilative biophysical capacity.

Over the course of the past two decades, European policy makers have tended to demonstrate greater interest in engaging with the concept of sustainable consumption than their counterparts in the United States, but political progress has been minimal everywhere. In many domains of consumer activity (and in some notable countries) resource volumes flowing through global supply chains have continued to increase without pause, in certain cases markedly so.

Part of the problem is the emotionally loaded nature of the idea of sustainable consumption, which for many people conjures images of retreat and loss in terms of wealth, freedom of choice, aspirations for intergenerational progress and overall well-being. In addition, consumption in everyday life is a complex phenomenon, tied to cultural norms, prevalent technologies and infrastructure, established habits, formal and informal institutions and market forces. Furthermore, the prevailing economic system seems to be profoundly dependent on ever-larger amounts of material and energy throughput that neither policy makers nor proponents of political change have a vision of how to decouple without triggering an economic disaster. Devising interventions that can address such systemic complexity is an unprecedented, and possibly unachievable, goal. Indeed, the experience so far with government efforts to encourage citizen-consumers to 'downshift' their consumption has been unsuccessful; it has become evident that traditional policy approaches predicated on regulations, financial incentives, subsidies and information disclosures are ill-suited to the problem at hand.

It is equally clear that a deeper understanding of the multidimensional nature of consumption is required. This observation has two implications from the standpoint of the social sciences. First, more research is needed, drawing on a wide range of disciplines, from science and technology studies to economics, sociology, anthropology and many others. Second, new platforms must emerge for bringing together in novel and insightful

ways the knowledge that is developing from these diverse areas of scholarship. The Sustainable Consumption Research and Action Initiative (SCORAI) is an effort to create such an institutional form. Its history is both short and telling.

In 2008, a small group of researchers began to meet in Boston on a monthly basis under the auspices of the Tellus Institute, initially with a vague idea of forging in the United States (and soon afterward in Canada as well) a community of scholarship and policy practice focused on sustainable consumption. Over the course of half a year or so, the meetings expanded to encompass a widening circle of interested participants. Several of us involved in this effort were personally familiar with a prior project called SCORE! that played an important role in building a robust network of European academics and policy makers engaged in work on sustainable consumption. Our aim was to draw inspiration from this project while at the same time taking advantage of the distinct circumstances in North America. A tangible outcome of these deliberations was establishment of SCORAI and the first step of the founders group was to convene a workshop in October 2009 at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts.

This event ultimately brought together three-dozen participants from the United States and Canada around the theme of 'Individual Consumption and Systemic Societal Transformation.' Attendees included sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, geographers, ecological economists, environmental social scientists, industrial ecologists, urban planners, marketing and management specialists and scholars in science and technology studies. The outcome of the workshop was broad recognition that consumption in a technological society is not an individual act performed by rational 'sovereign' consumers, but rather a set of practices embedded in dominant socio-technical systems and, as such, heavily entrenched in culture and habituated routines. Accordingly, it is futile to think that households might be able to significantly advance sustainable consumption on their own. They are themselves deeply entrained in the dominant socio-technical systems that provision goods and services, the structure of daily life and the economics of work-and-leisure time. It was also generally observed that the evolution of new, more sustainable lifestyles will require harmonized changes in several domains including civil society, political and economic institutions, culture and government policies.

To further explore these issues, SCORAI organized a second workshop in Princeton, New Jersey in April 2011 and it was at this meeting that most of the chapters in this volume were first presented. This event was conceived around three promising theoretical perspectives: new economics, socio-technical transitions and social practice theories. Each of these

approaches seeks to address different issues and to date there has been limited cross-fertilization across the relevant scholarship communities. Work in ‘new economics’ (a composite of ecological macroeconomics and environmental political economy with consumption positioned as a key organizational focus) interrogates the privileged position of economic growth in contemporary policy making. The ‘socio-technical transitions’ approach asks how it might be possible to transform seemingly stable and obdurate large-scale systems such as agrofood, energy, housing and transportation. ‘Social practice theories’ examine the routine patterns that develop around consumer goods and services. By highlighting advances to bridge these three perspectives, this book seeks to identify viable new pathways toward a more sustainable future.

At the time this book is going to press the SCORAI network encompasses nearly 500 researchers and other professionals working at the locus of material consumption, human fulfillment, lifestyle satisfaction, and macroeconomic and technological change. In addition to the North American group, a sister network – SCORAI-Europe – was launched following the first SCORAI-sponsored trans-Atlantic workshop in Austria in May 2012. One month later, with the support of SCORAI, approximately 85 people convened in Rio to establish the Global Research Forum on Sustainable Production and Consumption (GRF-SPC).

The success of SCORAI to date is largely attributable to the enthusiastic scholars and policy practitioners who have attended its workshops or evinced support in various other ways. We are particularly grateful for the collegiality of Jeffrey Barber and John Stutz with whom we have worked in close partnership on the SCORAI Executive Committee. In addition to the authors whose work is represented in the following pages, we express our appreciation to all of the participants in the Princeton workshop: Nicholas Ashford, Erik Assadourian, Bruce Biewald, Karla Cook, Jaime Ewalt, Joshua Farley, Jim Freund, Ethan Goffman, James Goldstein, Jonathan Harris, Alex Haxeltine, Anders Hayden, Debbie Kasper, Gabriela Kütting, Benjamin Linder, Janet Lorenzen, Christa McDermott, Diana Mincyte, Robert Rattle, Lucia Reisch, Vicky Salazar, Juliet Schor, Rachael Shwom, Eleni Sotos, Sarah Van Gelder, Ashwani Vasishth, Josefin Wangel, Michael Weinstein and Edward Woodhouse. Special thanks also to Tom Hargreaves, Marlyne Sahakian, Adrian Smith and Peter Victor for input at critical stages of this project and to Alan Sturmer at Edward Elgar for his patience during the book’s overly long gestation. We also take this opportunity to acknowledge the financial support of the Tellus Institute, the New Jersey Institute of Technology (Provost’s Office), the Netherland-America Foundation, ProQuest, LLC and an anonymous donor.

