

Consumer in the world-systems:

Understanding narratives on environmental and social impacts of consumption from
Melbourne, Australia

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Abstract:

This thesis sets to examine, through the lenses of world-systems and ecological unequal exchange theories, stories of how individuals relate to their consumption and its environmental and social impacts. The paper examines how people relate to these issues through a particular perspective of a consumer identity and places these stories within the context of the world-systems theory. Various statistical data indicate that the metropolises of Australia bear some characteristics of a core in terms of how and where from their inhabitants obtain goods and services. From this particular perspective I inquire how individuals, who live in Melbourne, Australia, see themselves connected, through the experience of consumption, to the environmental and social costs their consumption is inflicted in. With the use of qualitative interviews I confront stories of two groups of people for whom consumption has played an important role but for two different reasons: people who are part of the network of the Ethical Consumer Group and people who define themselves as shoppers. The research questions that underpin my investigation are: How does a person who lives in a big city of Australia and identifies her/himself as a consumer position him/herself against the environmental and social impacts consumption brings? How does one describe possible ways of enacting their agency as a consumer?

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Foreword

Before you proceed to the main part of the thesis, I would like to start with a short comment on its structure. The structure of the paper reflects the intellectual journey I went through with the Master's program in Human Ecology at Lund University. At the beginning of the course I was presented with grand theories about historical roots of global capitalism, unequal exchange and development of western environmental thought. Since Human Ecology analysis individuals interacting with their society and their environment I started asking myself a question: How do I relate my own experience to all these grand theories and global processes? How do I find a research topic which would reflect 'my own ecology' linked to the environmental problems we talked about? While strolling through the aisles of a local supermarket I came upon a self-realization that one of the ways of connecting me to the global processes was through a supermarket shelf. This is why I decided to look for the connection of what I consider to be 'my local' (as a customer of a supermarket) to grand narratives of the global processes. To reflect this thinking process, my paper starts with discussing 'grand' and then moving towards the 'particular'.

After I finished writing this paper I realized that analyzing consumer as an identity and localizing the analysis in a specific context of Melbourne - Australia takes a primary part in my discussion. It might seem more logical if I had started with presenting the part on a consumer at the beginning and then moved to the bigger narratives. But writing about the 'big picture' first reflects more adequately the thinking processes that lead me to conduct this research. I hope this way of structuring the paper will turn out helpful in guiding you through my thesis.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This thesis sets to examine, through the lenses of world-systems theory and ecological unequal exchange framework, stories of how individuals relate to their consumption and its environmental and social impacts. I will examine how people relate to these issues through a particular perspective of a consumer identity. According to the theories of world-systems and ecological unequal exchange there is a dis-balance in terms of how matter and human work are being exchanged. Consequentially, certain groups of people, who represent the cores, enjoy benefits of the exchange while others, located in the peripheries, have to bear ecological and social costs of the processes involved in the exchange (Hornborg, 2003). These theories can be examined from many levels by looking at the different scales of how the relation of core and periphery can be established. These scales can be intercontinental, cross-national, regional or within one city.

I could observe, from various statistical data¹, that the metropolises of Australia bear some characteristics of a core in terms of how and where from their inhabitants obtain goods and services. From this particular perspective I intend to inquire how specific individuals see themselves connected, through the experience of consumption, to the environmental and social costs their consumption is inflicted in. This is why I will confront stories of two groups of people for whom consumption has played an important role but for two different reasons. The first group are people to some extent engaged with the question of where things come from and how they are being produced, by being part of the network of the Ethical Consumer Group. The second group are people who define themselves as shoppers or impulsive buyers or claim that shopping takes a significant part of their lives.

The research questions that underpin my investigation are:

1. How does a person who lives in a big city of Australia and identifies her/himself as a consumer position him/herself against the environmental and social impacts consumption brings with itself?
2. How does one describe possible ways of enacting their agency as a consumer?

To understand how people talk about the experience of consumption in relation to ecological unequal exchange I will use the following concepts: consumption, core/periphery dichotomy,

¹ Which I am going to present in detail in section 4: “How do Australia and Melbourne fit into the problem?”

ecological unequal exchange and consumer. This is a brief description of what I understand under each of the terms, which I am going to elaborate throughout my thesis:

- ⤴ **Consumption** - as a physical process of transforming matter and its qualities to sustain life functions of a an organism or structure of a society. As a result, consumption irreversibly dissipates certain qualities of matter and destroys its ability to rearrange itself (Daly 1996).
- ⤴ **Core/periphery** – Wallerstein's world-systems theory (2004) describes how distribution of power and specialized labor sustain unequal exchange throughout the world. The cores: centres of power and specialized labor – enjoy benefits of the exchange with the peripheries from which the natural resources and human labor are extracted.
- ⤴ **Ecological unequal exchange** – series of empirical research (Rice, 2007; Lawrence, 2009; Jorgenson, 2012) showed that the above mentioned 'unequal exchange' is happening at the expense of the local eco- and social-systems of the periphery-like places. By measuring the quantitative outflow of matter from certain periphery-like places, researchers noticed that increased consumption of core-like places suppresses the ability of periphery-like places to regenerate from the loss of biomass or to develop.
- ⤴ **Consumer** – in this study I understand consumer as an identity construct that arose in the Western world with the spread of industrialization, urbanization, mass production and specialization of labor (Smart, 2010). It is a person detached from means of production of her daily necessities which she has to obtain through the market exchange. Therefore, an individual in a consumer society is defined according to one's levels and patterns of spending or habits that evolved around culture of shopping (Schor, 1999).

Keeping these concepts in mind, I will contextualize the stories I gathered while conversing with participants from Melbourne, and put them in perspective of grand theory of world-systems. My aim is to place individuals against these global processes is to add a voice in the discussion on how, from a particular consumer's perspective, we can contribute to reshape the unequal distribution of environmental costs and benefits.

2. THERE SEEMS TO BE A PROBLEM

The reason why I wish to examine understandings of the impacts of one's consumption is because of a raised alarm that we – as a global community have started living beyond the regenerative capacity of this planet. There are voices saying that consuming world's resources is happening in a zero-sum world which means that well-being of the others, 'progress' and 'development' occur on the social and environmental expense of the others (Hornborg, 2003). I have set myself to examine how the problem of consumption is perceived by those who, according to the theories presented above, benefit from this game. First, I need to take a step back and present you with some general outline of the problems of consumptive processes.

2.1. INCREASED EXTRACTION, DISPLACEMENT AND CONSUMPTION

Since the onset of the industrial revolution, the global market economy is able to capture energy sources that weren't available for humanity ever before. Thanks to the knowledge of capturing energy stored in different forms, on an aggregated level, global population is able to transform and displace bigger and bigger chunks of the material world at a faster and faster pace. As Tim Ingold writes to use technology we need tools coupled with specific knowledge (Ingold, 1987), and production of knowledge results from values cultivated by the society (Suzuki, 2009). These specific energy-capturing tools were developed in the countries (Great Britain as a cradle of industrial technology but I refer here to the wider idea of Western thought) which at the same time cultivated specific approach towards subjugating the natural world. According to Bacon's spirit that: “the whole world works together in the service of man; and there is nothing from which he does not derive use and fruit” (Bacon, quoted in Marshall, 1994:184) the Westerners world view was shaped around the idea that the natural world is a servant to one's needs and wants.

When the technological potential developed since the industrial revolution is paired with the perception of the natural world as subjugated to human needs it makes sense that the over 5 times growth in the world trade we have witnessed between 1985 and 2005 (in monetary value, both in exports and in imports, refer to the Appendix) (WTO, 2012)² went hand in hand growth by half in global extraction of natural resources in volume. In 1980 the level of extraction stood at level of nearly 40 bn tons and in 2005 reached almost 60 bn tons (SERI, 2009). On the top of the 60 bn tons

² The data I am referring to was gathered from the official website of the World Trade Organization. Unfortunately the link I am referring to in the bibliography directs the reader to conduct their own calculation, not the final results of the time series. This is why I am including the downloaded results as an appendix.

of resources, which were actually transformed in the production process there was additional 40 bn of matter, which was extracted and displaced during the production process but not absorbed by the market, the phenomenon commonly known as 'overburden' (Schor, 2010:87). It is estimated that with the transition from an agrarian to an industrial society there is a 4 fold increase in resource consumption (SERI, 2009). This relation can only partially explain the fact that during the twentieth century the world population increased by a factor of four and the industrial output increased by a factor of 40 (Arrow et al, 2004:1). According to many natural scientists this increased extraction and use of the world's natural capital is reaching its limits and threatens the existence of the live as we know it (Wackernagel et al. 2002, Simms 2005, Lovelock 2009). According to these authors we are running out of the capacity to absorb produced waste (such as CO₂ pollution), we are wiping out soil and degenerating ever scarcer fresh water sources for production purposes, undermining forests capacity to regenerate and driving fisheries to collapse.

2.2. INCREASING ENTROPY

The problem with transforming and moving around matter lies in the fact that the all these rapidly growing interlinked production and consumption processes destroy some of matter's qualities. And the ecosystems depend not only on the matter itself (which obviously is important like building parts) but also on the qualities this matter can provide the ecosystem with (for example when tree is chopped down it is not so much about the loss of the cellulose per se but also about the tree's ability provide for the nests, the capability of keeping water in the soil with its roots, etc.) And the faster these dismantling processes take place, the more difficult it gets for an ecosystem to regenerate itself – because it starts lacking important qualities it was robbed of. The matter still persists in the world (after Parmenides' phrasing that nothing comes from nothing: *ex nihilo nihil fit*) but doesn't have the characteristics anymore which made it a functioning part of a certain ecosystem.

Production processes consist of stages, during which one adds energy and human labor to alter matter's previous characteristics. From a perspective of the law of conservation of matter “production of material products is nothing but rearrangement which gives new utilities” (like producing a chair requires chopping down a tree, which transforms trees' utilities: shelter for animals, capturing carbon, locking moisture in the soil to the utility of a furniture) whereas “consumption is disarrangement of matter which destroys its utilities” (consuming a chair, i.e. by sitting on it eventually wears it down, once the chair breaks down and its utility as a furniture disappears) (Marshall quoted in Daly, 1996:62).

According to the law of thermodynamics, what defines the act of consumption is the decrease in “the capacity to rearrange matter/energy” (Daly, 1996:65). At every stage of the production process, which requires transforming bits and pieces of nature, processes of production and consumption occur simultaneously. Because when something is being created (produced), some of the qualities of matter used in the process are irreversibly lost (consumed). During the production process that delivers products to us “on each cycle some of the material building blocks are dissipated beyond recall” (ibid.) (example: burnt coal used to smelter aluminum).

Furthermore, the second law of thermodynamics indicates that with growing amount of energy put into consuming/disassembling the matter, the level of entropy (dissipation) increases. It means that to bring back previous qualities of the matter will require higher energy inputs than it was used to disassemble them. Simply put it: break a glass and then try to put it back together.

In the course of the unprecedented transformation of this planet instead of focusing on what we produce we can eventually ask: how much do we use up? This way of framing the analysis of how the economies interact with the eco-systems is named consumption angle, suggested by Thomas Princen (2002). It is a critique against the obsession with calculating the GDP growth, which in great detail tracks how much is being produced without asking a question what is irreversibly lost in this calculation. Doing the reality check that examines our use of natural capital some scientists started consequently asking the following question: 'Are we consuming too much'? Related to this concern was publication of the famous “Limits to growth” by the Club of Rome in 1972 (Meadows, Club of Rome, 1972). In the same year the voices were raised during Stockholm UN summit that:

“A point has been reached in history when we must shape our actions throughout the world with a more prudent care for their environmental consequences. Through ignorance or indifference we can do massive and irreversible harm to the earthly environment on which our life and well being depend”. (UN, 1972: point 6)

Issue of consumption as major environmental threat was incorporated in the $I = PAT$ formula developed by Paul R. Ehrlich and John Holgren, in which the environmental impact equals the the population size, affluence (this is where the issue of consumption is framed) and the applied technology (1971). The development of the tool of Ecological Footprint in the 1980' by William Rees and Mathis Wackernagel which “measures the the amount of land and shallow sea areas used to produce the food, fuel, plastics, metals, wood, fibres and other resources consumed by a household, business, city, area or nation” (Schor, 2010:59) clearly indicated that we are consuming more than the regenerative capacity of this planet. Inspired by the observed increase in throughput

of the matter, Alain Durning published a title asking *How much is enough?* (1992). World Watch Institute issued a report on the State of the World titled *Transition from Consumer Culture to Sustainability* (2010), Sustainable Europe Institute published a report *Overconsumption? Our use of the world's natural resources* (2009). The latest report of the Royal Society *People and the Planet* had a whole chapter devoted to the problem of consumption. One of the recommendations regarding this issue stated that “The most developed and the emerging economies must stabilize and then reduce material consumption levels” (Royal Society Science Policy Centre, 2012:102) The alarm has been raised.

2.3. GRAVITATION CENTRE

The network of how goods circulate around the world looks nothing like an evenly spread fisherman net. The transactions don't follow the Ricardo's idea of comparative advantage, when the countries specialize in production of goods they are the most efficient in and then they exchange them between each other so that on the global scale everybody can enjoy higher output (Wallestein, 2004). In fact, in the reality, goods, and the energy and resources that are embedded in them, are not equally exchanged. The quantitatively measured physical trade imbalances between the different countries indicate that 25 European Union countries are the biggest net importers of natural resources and developing countries the biggest net exporters (SERI, 2009). That would confirm Wallerstein's World System Theory, according to which, due to profit-driven specialization of labor around the world, as a result of the spread of capitalism and colonialism, there are places in the world – the 'cores' that depend on extraction of the resources from different parts of the world – the 'peripheries' (2004).

“Those of us who live in the privileged, affluent core would be amiss to use our green forests and fertile fields as evidence that worries about global ecology are unfounded, because the liberation and recovery of previously impoverished landscapes to a large extent has been made feasible by the import of resources from peripheral areas both within and between nations”. (Hornborg, 2003:15)

Because of set, imbalanced relations between core and periphery the exchange is conducted at the expense of the periphery. The cores, Wallerstein argues, appropriate the surplus from the peripheries, which in turn become impoverished. He calls this situation a system: because it is a self-reproducing setting in which the peripheries are locked in. He argues this is one of the underlying dichotomies that enable capitalism to establish itself as a self-reproducing system:

“The other basic dichotomy was spatial hierarchy of economic specialization, core versus periphery, in which there was an appropriation of surplus from the producers of low-wage (but high supervision), low-profit, low-capital intensive goods by the producers of high-wage (but low supervision), high-profit, high-capital intensive, so-called ‘unequal exchange’”.

(Wallerstein, 2010:174-5)

This theory was developed by the researchers who aimed to empirically prove ecological unequal exchange taking place between cores and peripheries (traditionally between the North and the Global South, or developed and underdeveloped countries; restricting this analysis only to this framing, though, would take away its depth and dismiss its acknowledgment of multiscale and dynamic relations between cores and peripheries). James Rice, by investigating the world timber production and consumption, showed that core countries enjoy a rise in both: wood consumption (per capita) and reforestation levels, while periphery countries suffer from decline in consumption in wood (per capita) and from deforestation (2007). Christopher, Austin and Jorgenson, argued ecological unequal exchange on the example of beef and coffee production (2009)³.

Looking from a world-system theory perspective we can understand that the destructive processes, which as the empirical studies on unequal ecological exchange indicate, can be attributed to more than just inherited human greed or what my microeconomics course book tried to convince me that “consumer needs are obviously unlimited” (Czarny, 2006:20 own translation). There is a link between increased demand for processed, industrially produced goods and the increased throughput and unequal distribution of world's matter. But there is much more to than just a simple explanation of insatiable human wants. The spending spree sweeping across the industrialized countries from the mid of the 20th century, as Juliet Schor argues based on the American example, has a much deeper structural causes (Schor, 1999). The rise of a shopping culture is linked to the rise of the mega shopping malls, supermarkets (with, as Schor argues, floods of artificially cheap goods (2010)) which changed the way people relate to provision for their daily needs. Booming advertising and marketing industries redefined the class of people that the consumers should 'keep up with' to ascertain their social status. From the 1970' they would no longer be one's neighbors but rich and beautiful from the TV screens (Schor, 1999). This is what Schor argues was crucial for the syndrome of an 'overspent American' which consequently is reflected in higher turnover of goods and services. From a sociological point of view these phenomena are sign of transition into consumer society. From the core-periphery perspective expansion of the consumer society can be seen as that the mouth top, which eats up natural capital of the world, is getting bigger and hungrier.

3 For a more detailed list of researches empirically investigating ecological unequal exchange, refer to Rice (2009)

3. THE CONSUMER IN WORLD-SYSTEMS

No matter how far away we can step back in describing ecological unequal exchange as a sum of processes of deep historical roots that now encompass the whole globe, let's not forget about individuals who are to different extent engaged in the whole process. In the discussion of the interplay of structure (as the set of predetermined conditions) versus agency (capability of an individual to make her own decisions) (Giddens, 1979) I acknowledge that no matter how big or small these processes are, there are always individuals linked to them.

And I choose to cast light on the big problem of over-consumption, environmental degradation and ecological unequal exchange from a perspective of an individual who is labeled as a consumer. And not in a sense of looking for the culpable, in a spirit of a discussion 'How much consumers, how much producers or how much the governments are to blame for the current ecological crisis'. It is rather acknowledging the fact that there are people who build their lives around objects that come from other parts of the world thanks to specific, inherently unequal relations that enable these things to be shipped to them. These objects become material reality for the consumers and part of their immediate environment which is a basis for their social interactions and culture.

3.1. THE CONSUMER AND OBJECTS

I wish to look at the consumer from a close, local perspective of experiencing and interacting with her immediate environment based “on practical, perceptual engagement with components of a world that is inhabited or dwelt-in, rather than on the detached, disinterested observation of a world that is merely occupied” (Ingold, 2000:216). Keeping in mind the framework of ecological unequal exchange, it is transformed nature that becomes part of consumers' material reality. This materiality in turn becomes their immediate environment, understood as “the world as it exists and takes on meaning in relation to me, and in that sense it came into existence and undergoes development with me and around me” (Ingold, 2000:20).

The way Miller understands the interplay of culture and material reality, which in a specific consumer case is produced through acquiring commodities, is that “it is human labor that transforms nature into objects, creating this mirror in which we can come to understand who we are.

So labor produces culture in the form of stuff” (Miller 2009:59). Expanding this view with the insights from an ecological unequal exchange perspective I would add to the last sentence of the quote that labor and *displaced and transformed nature* produce culture in form of stuff. And because this stuff is outcome of social and physical relations that happen all the way across the production chain before the consumer can grasp the object in their hands, it takes away the notion of an object being neutral as such. And these objects, which embed social and environment relations help consumers build their understanding of who they are.

In contradiction to what I just stated there are some voices that portray objects as neutral in themselves. It is happening through placing market as an impersonal intermediary of the exchange. This is what Marx described as commodity fetishism and David Graeber explains that: “it is a peculiar effect of the market to erase the memory of previous transactions and create, effectively, a veil of ignorance between sellers and buyers, producers and consumers” (Graeber, 2006:77). In our current state local economies are merging into what is called a global economy, which Wallerstein defines as “a single division of labor within which are located multiple cultures (...) but which has no overarching political structure” (2009:172). This is why the rules of how things are being exchanged through the impersonal institution of a market according to the neoclassical theory of economics are believed to be based upon the interplay of supply and demand. The first: the supply is explained as a result of voluntary agreements between various producers and suppliers, the latter: the demand is a consequence of consumers' needs or desires and willingness to pay for the product. In a sense how Milton Friedman puts it in one of his interviews explaining why somebody in the West can buy a cheap pen:

“Literally thousands of people cooperated to make this pencil, people who don't speak the same language, who practice different religions, who might hate one another if they ever met. When you go down to the store and buy this pencil, you are in effect trading few minutes of your time, for few seconds of the time of all of those thousands of people. What brought them together and induced them to cooperate to make this pencil? It was no commissar, sitting at the office, sending orders from some central office. It was the magic of the price system, the impersonal operation of prices that brought them together and got them to cooperate to make this pencil so that you can have it for a trifling sum. This is why the operation of free market is so essential, not only to promote productive efficiency but even more – to foster harmony and peace among the people of the world”.

(Friedman 1980, from “Free to choose – vol. 1”, interview)

This assumption not only ignores the power relations between individual agents, assumes the neutrality of the object itself, refers to irrational forces of magic but also emphasizes the fact that the economy consists of two separate realms: production and consumption, which interplay with each other when goods and services are exchanged under the price system. I can recall from my first lecture of 101 Microeconomics at the Warsaw School of Economics, the opening sentence of the course: “Economics deal with answering 3 questions: What is produced? Where it is produced? For whom it is produced?” Taking these questions as a proxy for what global market economy is believed to be driven by, the last question emphasizes the fact that consumer demand is a vital part of how parts of nature, human labor, and embedded energy are being exchanged. According to the logic of neoclassical economics producers supply what consumers demand. They agree on a price that keeps the market in equilibrium and leaves all the market agents satisfied (given the fact that there is perfect competition) (Brennan, Moehler, 2010). In this light I venture to ask: who are consumers? After investigating how the construct of a consumer came to be I will locate my participants in a specific context of Melbourne, Australia and explore their identity as consumers. I will inquire about their experiences of consumption and what are their reflections of participating in the process of a global exchange.

3.2. CONSUMER AS AN IDENTITY

Over the course of the history we can see groups of people organize themselves in different ways, and they would call themselves or be called by the outsiders depending on the form of their organization and sense of belonging. Let it be clans, tribes, nations, classes, societies or any other labels. In the latest history, from the beginning of the 20th century, various societies transformed and merged into a new, never known before, consumer society. This happened, as Schor describes it, when consumerism: as a way of life, where one is defined by its discretionary, ever increasing spending, had turned into a mass phenomenon so that the middle-class lifestyles can be mimicked almost by everyone (1999). Therefore, from being a person, a member of a specific community, country, working class, members of these societies transformed into consumers who formed a new consumer society. This transformation lead to a radical shift in ethics, reference points and values, which Featherstone describes that “Traditional values and more gradually gave way as more and more aspects of life were brought under the influence of the expanding market with its propaganda for commodities” (1982).

Of course there was no cutting-off point that defined the transition into a consumer society. The transition process can be traced as early as 17th century enclosures of the English commons which

facilitated commodification of human labor. Consequential rise of the Industrial Revolution facilitated total dependency on wage labor as means for subsistence (Polanyi, 1944). This transition was intertwined with the phenomena like urbanization, mass production, appearance of leisure time (Smart, 2010). Consequently more and more people had to obtain the means of their subsistence through the institution of the market in exchange for their commodified lives – wage labor. What they got in exchange was experience of consumer goods.

A prelude for the consumer society was the phenomenon of conspicuous consumption described by Veblen at the end of 19th century in the upper middle class of the American society (Veblen, 1994) later followed by the appearance of mass market of cheap good, phenomenon of shopping malls and building social life around shopping and the way one spends her money. Although there is no clear definition of where exactly and since when the consumer society came to be, speaking from my personal experience, a person who would meet up with the her teenage friends to hang out at the shopping mall, I come from a family who clearly went through this transition. Both of my grandparents grew up on subsistence farms not knowing what a shopping mall or a mid-season sale was and both of them retired in cities, getting their daily groceries from multinational supermarket chains. No matter how broad we understand what hides under the umbrella of consumerism, there was a reason for attaching this extra label in describing what modern societies are being transformed into.

If I am about to examine individuals who underpin the 'society of consumers', consumers, first I need to clarify what I mean by a 'consumer'. After what Bauman refers to as: “Unlike *consumption* primarily a trait and occupation of individual human beings, *consumerism* is an attribute of *society*” (Bauman, 2007:28) this distinction it helps us understand the difference between consumption and consumerism but doesn't clarify what is meant by a *consumer*. The word consumer depicts both a body that consumes, i.e. metabolizes, breaks down matter, eats to sustain its life functions and a member of a consumer society. And this depiction represents two different things. No matter which society you are part of – you still have to eat, you are still a consumer in that sense. Because you don't photosynthesize you need to find other organisms to feed on. It does get blurry when one wants to separate this biological, metabolizing being from a consumer as a social construct. That's why it is hard to discuss the phenomenon of this social construct in separation from the biological imperatives of the body. It gets even harder when one takes into account people who as part of consumer society try to acquire parts of means of their subsistence outside the conventional ways, for example by growing their own food. *By directly producing some of the means of subsistence, within a consumer society they become producer and a consumer at the same time.* When

contextualizing the problem of a consumer in the world-systems I have to stay alert to this double-sided meaning of a consumer.

In my analysis I am going to look at a consumer as a social construct and an identity from different angles. One of them is the way Baudrillard defines a consumer through “private and collective consumer mentality” (1998:31) to which he ascribes miraculous thinking, beliefs in signs of happiness encrypted in the objects. The way consumer relates to her world is through practice with the everyday objects which seen as miracles and are promised to bring happiness. When it comes to world beyond exercising acts of consumption, consumer’s “relation to the real world, to politics, history, to culture is not relation of interest, investment or committed responsibility – nor is it one of total indifference: it is relation of **curiosity**” (1998:34). When it comes to the ability of exercising one's agency Baudrillard places the consumer as a product of its society, not as an active agent:

“the fundamental, unconscious, automatic choice of the consumer is to accept the style of life of a particular society (it is, therefore, no longer a choice(!) and the theory of the autonomy and sovereignty of the consumer is refuted)” (Baudrillard, 1998:70).

Bauman describes consumers as people whose life relies on excess, waste and constant disillusionment of what the market promises they would become, but in fact fails to deliver. He assigns them attributes such as “bereaved, ignorant and perplexed” (Bauman 2008:52). Another understanding of who is a consumer is presented by Alan Durning. In his view, the global population can be divided into 3 classes, according to the environmental impact of their consumption, into: consumers, sustainable middle and the poor. A consumer is characterized by the least sustainable way of life. According to Durning's classification it is a person with earnings at least \$7500 (USD) a year, reliance on packaged food, especially meat and soft drinks and treatment of materials as disposable (1992:27).

There is also a question what other authors have to say about consumers' agency. According to neo-liberal economists consumers make informed choices based on their preferences and income and they are free to choose from whatever producers offer to them. Consumers preferences are an important part in dictating what producers will produce, therefore the choices consumers are of a great importance in shaping market exchange. This message was especially reinforced by Milton Friedman in his life time work, especially expressed in the work “Free to choose: a personal statement” (Friedman, 1990). On the other hand we have an insight that comes from Marx, who stated that a consumer is no freer than a worker in her choices, which depend on her social position,

which in turn, is a result of social organization. He concludes that “The world turns almost entirely round the needs, not of individual consumption, but of production” (Marx, quoted in Foster, Clark, York, 2010:383). Raj Patel develops this idea by comparing a ‘dilemma’ of consumer as if it was a choice between Coke or Pepsi, because the 'choices' are already pre-determined by complex history and politics of the global food system. On the top of that the choices presented in front of the consumer in a supermarket, which in itself is a patented invention designed for the consumer to encourage them to buy what they might not have intended to (Patel, 2007). This discussion led me to questioning how then we could position consumers in the whole discussion of:

'for the past two centuries, and particularly during the last thirty years, solving environmental problems has been constructed as a producer responsibility and consumers have been places at a distance from the assignment of culpability' (Murphy and Cohen 2001:4)

This question of how a consumer fits into the bigger picture of ecological unequal exchange is a relevant one, once we start introducing terms like green consumer, consumer responsibility, consumer power, 'doing your bit for the planet', environmental awareness.

I am curious how people are able to combine their awareness of consequences of their consumption, as some authors claim to be captured by “numerous national and international polls suggesting that substantial public agreement with sustainable development goals exists, expressed as environmental concern and awareness” (Taylor quoted in Hobson 2001:192-193) with a growing complexity of the processes happening along the production chain. How does it influence their ability to enact their power as individual consumers? I want to combine the notions of 'green consumerism' and the idea of 'doing your bit for the planet' with what Maniates critically discusses as individualization of responsibility. “We are individualizing responsibility when we agonize over the “paper-or-plastic” choice at the checkout counter, knowing somehow that neither is right given larger institutions and social structures” (Maniates, 2002:45). I wanted to examine for myself how people as consumers make sense out of such experience. Where do they position themselves in this whole process? To cast the light on this issue I decided to talk to people who live in Melbourne, Australia to talk about their experiences connected to consumption and the impact it has on other people and the environment.

4. HOW DO AUSTRALIA AND MELBOURNE FIT INTO THIS PROBLEM?

My journey to examine how Australia and especially Melbourne fits into the problem of consuming natural wealth of this planet and how people relate to the problem started with a very personal story. During my stay in Melbourne in 2009 – 2010 I lived with an Australian family. One night we were about to cook dinner and there was some left over rice sitting on a stove, so I asked my host: “Are we going to use this rice tonight? Or should I put it back to the fridge for you to use it later?” She replied: “Nah, throw it away, it is so cheap anyway”. It was a shock for me to hear, given my background of being born in a socialist country of Easter Europe, in a country, which has a myth of a culture of a particular respect towards bread (there is a famous quote in which a 19th century poet reminisces Poland as a land where people pick crumbs of bread from a ground out of respect for heaven's gifts). Given my upbringing, I think there is some persisting catholic conviction in the back of my head that tells me that throwing out food is a sin. But since I was far away from my home I threw the leftovers away. I would never look at the culture I was slowly growing into with the same eyes again. The abundance, cheapness and waste I was witnessing inspired me to asking myself questions of how Australia as a country fits into the problem of ecological unequal exchange.

4.1 STATISTICS – HOW MUCH DOES AUSTRALIA CONSUME?

According to the report published by Sustainable Europe Institute with collaboration with GLOBAL 2000 (Friends of the Earth Austria) *Overconsumption? Our use of the world's natural resources*, an average inhabitant of Australia and New Zealand consumes 100kg of resources per day, which support their livelihood and infrastructure they depend on. The estimates tried to include as much physical matter that is being used in each continent, independently on the form (ores, water, biomass, co2). An Australian estimate turned out to be 10 times more than an average African and quite surprising to me more than twice of an average European.

Continent	Consumption of resources per capita per day, 2000
Africa	10kg
Asia	14kg
Latin America	34kg
Europe	43kg
North America	88kg
Oceania	100kg

Source: SERI 2009 *Overconsumption? Our use of world's natural resources*; Own design

In 2009 Australia won a title of the biggest CO2 emitter per capita, surpassing USA in this infamous race (Worldwatch Institute, 2010), the amount of waste that an average Australian produces almost doubled from 2000 to 2010 amounting to more than 2 tons per person per year (ABS, 2010). On average an Australian spends \$1126 per year on things they never use, and thirty five per cent of Australians admit to discarding more than \$500 a year in fresh food alone, one in seven households (14 per cent) throwing more than \$2500 worth (Hamilton, 2005:103-104). From 1984-5 to 2002 the area of new residential houses grew by 40% and the number of people in a household decreased for this period from almost 3 people per household to a little about 2.5. (ABS, 2005, 2010)

When it comes to the ecological footprint of Victoria: the state that Melbourne is capital of, according to Environment Protection Authority (EPA):

“The average Victorian requires 6.8 productive hectares to support their lifestyle. However, there are only 1.8 productive hectares available per person. This equates to a total Ecological Footprint of 33 million productive hectares, or 147 per cent of Victoria’s biocapacity. Victoria’s Footprint is more than three times higher than the world average of 2.2 productive hectares per person”.

(Environment Protection Agency, 2008:5)

4.2 HOW THINGS ARE MOVED AROUND – AUSTRALIA IN WORLD-SYSTEMS

In the research conducted by Rice on empirically examining ecological unequal exchange Australia was position as a semi-peripheral country (Rice 2007). It means that the country has a fairly even distribution of producing core-like products (high-value added), which are shipped to the periphery countries and extraction of periphery-like products (low-value added, low processed resources) which are sent to core-like states (Wallerstein 2004). This positioning of Australia as a semi-periphery country can be explained by a high level of urbanization of Australian population. Almost 90% of Australians live in the cities, out of which a huge majority is concentrated along coast of 5 metropolitan areas (Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, and Adelaide). This is where the production of high-value added goods and services takes place. The uneven distribution of population leaves vast and sparsely populated areas, which were turned into mines, grazing areas and cash crop lands.

Australia as a country is specialized in exporting fuels and mining products, and currently its main partner for export is China (World Trade Organization, 2011). At the same time the country is specialized in importing manufactured goods and again its main trading partner is China. In terms of volumes from 2005 to 2009 the imports were growing faster than the exports, but the country still stays a net exporter of its wealth, according to SERI report extracting on average 130 kg of matter per person a day but consuming only 100kg.

The direction of how the matter, embedded in goods, circulates in the case of Australia can be exemplified by the announcement of International Trade Centre, a subsidiary of World Trade Organization that advertises its services by saying:

“ITC and our networks aim to assist Australia with sourcing good quality products from the developing world. On this page you will find information relating to the organizations which work in Australia that are dedicated to assisting people based in Australia who import goods and services from the developing world, as well as those organisations hoping to assist exporters wanting to sell their product or service to Australia from their own developing country”.

(International Trade Centre, 2012)

Taking into the context of a core and periphery theory and Australian example where the vast amounts of raw materials are being shipped away and brought back in form of products from the countries where the labor cost is cheaper: the core would be represented by the metropolitan areas of Australia, where the accumulation of the goods takes place and the core the widely perceived 'outback' from which the state and the companies are able to extract goods. The only detour in this context that the resources are not transformed directly in the Australian cities (like at the beginning of the industrial revolution in the metropolitan factories) but shipped all the way to other countries (in this specific historical context it would be mainly China). The matter and embedded energy come back transformed by foreigners back to the Australian households. And this situation can be located specifically in the context of a consumer by Richard Tucker in the relation between the core/centres as the places of consumption of goods and the peripheries as production locations:

“Consumerism as a dominant set of values is rooted in the emergence of the colonial world economy. In the era of mercantilism, which created links between colonial production locations and metropolitan centres of investment and consumption”

(Tucker, 2002:179)

In this flow of displacing resources and energy around the globe in pursuit for profit, as if bits of nature were ponds on the chessboard (Mies and Shiva, 1993), coordinated by the logic of the international trade, I want to place Melbourne, a city of almost 3 million inhabitants as this “metropolitan centre of investment and consumption”. In this city of 3 million of people I went to investigate the idea of a consumer society that as Thomas Princen refers to “claims rights but assumes few responsibilities for the resources they use” (Princen, 2002:125).

4.3. WHERE DO THINGS COME FROM? DISCUSSION

Currently, there are signs of a discussion about where things that end up in Australia come from and what it means for the places of its origins. One of its examples is broadcast of series of BBC TV production on the national TV in Australia in April 2010, which investigate places of origin of daily things, especially focusing on working conditions: *Blood, Sweat and T-shirts*, and its follow-ups: *Blood, Sweat and Takeaways*, *Blood, Sweat and Luxuries*. The reports of the working conditions in Foxton factories – one of the biggest contractors of the IT products that you can buy in Australia – are present on the national Australian newspapers (the Age 2012, the Australian 2010). Campaigns against unsustainable sourcing of palm oil resulted in Food Standards Amendment (Truth in Labelling—Palm Oil) Bill 2011, which still waits for the approval of the House of Representatives, which requires to enclose clear labeling if palm oil is used.

Home of permaculture agro-ecology is Dalsford, an hour drive from Melbourne, close and far enough to reach the city with alternative ways of thinking about human-nature interaction. Melbourne as a city slowly (re)embraces the idea of urban agriculture, the idea of low-food miles diets is supported by the Local Harvest Project started at the Sustainable Living Festival in 2012, an annual event that promotes re-defining Australians ways of living. There are 8 farmers Markets organized in the city⁴. Melbourne hosts the discussions on the impact of consumption led by the Ethical Consumer Group or Meet the Maker and at the same time one of the biggest shopping mall of the Southern Hemisphere, Chadstone in the East of Melbourne. There is increasing number of Sport Utility Vehicles (SUVs) driving around the city and for the March 2012 they ‘continue to dominate Australian car sale’ (Federal Chamber of Automotive Industry, 2012). Also, an increasing rate of recycling which can be read as a sign of a 'doing my bit', is not able to catch up with the absolute increase in produced waste (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). In this coexisting contrasts a survey conducted for one of the biggest Australian supermarket chains

4 From Victorian Market Association: <http://www.vicfarmersmarkets.org.au/markets/region/4>, accessed on the 23.04.2012

indicated that more than 80% of surveyed shoppers expressed their environmental concerns about 'impacts their shopping decisions have on the environment' and knew what a green product was. More than 50% of the respondents "claimed to know something about the environmental reputation of the companies they were buying from" (the Australian Food and Grocery Council, Net Balance, 2010).

4.4. CONSUMPTION IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL DEBATE IN AUSTRALIA: EXAMPLES

I encountered different ways of tackling the issue of consumption when talking about environmental problems within Australian academia and politics: from ignoring the problem through shy acknowledgments to an open confrontation.

Ignorance came from the side of political discussion. During a discussion panel titled: "Four degrees or more? Australia in a hot world" in July 2011 at Melbourne University, Ross Garnaut, adviser to the Australian government on the climate change policies stated that Australians cannot deny other countries standard of living that they currently enjoy and that the first thing Australians, need to tackle climate issue is a sound economy. He might have not implied that everyone should consume so many resources as an average Australian but since this kind of lifestyle so far requires such an extensive extraction and processing of natural resources this would consequently lead to an enormous increase on a global scale. At the same time during the talk "Mitigation – can we?" which was supposed to be a platform for discussion for potential policy responses to stop the process of climate change there was no single word mentioned about production and consumption side as a part of the problem of increasing CO₂ emissions. After having heard that there is not enough space in Australia to plant enough trees that will absorb all the carbon that contributes to the climate change I decided to keep investigating who else could touch on issue of consumption as a part of the environmental and social problems.

Shy acknowledgments and an immediate withdrawal in terms of problematizing consumption came from writings of David Yencken and Debra Wilkinson, where the authors recognize consumption as a problem in Australia's journey towards sustainability but according to them it is too difficult to persuade people to change their habits (referring to failed but unspecified attempts of promoting consumer societies) therefore it is more efficient to concentrate on other approaches that will bring about needed change (read: technology and policy settings) (2001).

The most confrontational approaches when addressing the issue of consumption I found when reviewing writings of Clive Hamilton and Ian Lowe who both incorporated the question of consumption as part of the current environmental crisis (Hamilton, 2005; Lowe, 2009). Both of them advocated for the departure from a growth-driven economy as a root of the problem. Lowe in hinting at the shift from the ever-increasing consumption of resources by Australians that dramatically grows faster than its population addressed the issue of “lifestyle choices that counter the sustainable future”. He addressed the problem that “we all make lifestyle choices every day that affect the natural systems of Australia” (Lowe, 2009:65) giving examples of choosing means of transportation, diet, type of housing advocating for a shift to “live more simply so that others might simply live” (Lowe, 2009:66).

From encountering this stark contrast of on the one hand lack of addressing subject of consumption in the current environmental crisis and on the other call for the individuals to make a change through everyday choices I was curious about the stories I will hear from the individuals themselves.

5. MEETING A CONSUMER: INTERVIEWS

5.1. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

“I am not a spectator, I am involved and it is my involvement in a point of view which makes possible both the finiteness of my perception and its opening out upon the complete world as a horizon of every perception” (Merleau-Ponty quoted in Gooch, 1998:93)

The above quote by Merleau-Pony opens up the methodological framework of how I am going to examine people's narratives on consumption. I will focus on their understanding of being in the world through stories on the experiences and reflections connected to consumption. I approach my participants through a specific identity – as a consumer keeping in mind that this is just a part of who they are in this world, through Heidegger's notion of Dasein, being in the world, elaborated by Gooch in her understanding of phenomenology that “a human being is in the world through involvement in it: being-in-the-world. This is an active, existential involvement or immersion in the world, its projects and everyday activities” (Gooch, 1998:96).

To understand this involvement I am using an approach of examining my participants as 'body-subjects' which reaches beyond the dichotomy of subject/objects in the discussion of an individual influencing environment or being shaped by it. Phenomenological framework perceives the embodied subject as inter-actors with the world which at the same time “is not an object ‘out there’ but a world *in* which I am through my body” (Gooch, 1998:90). The participants I chose to engage with come from a specific background – big, industrialised city of the Western world and the highly urbanized environment they live their lives in can be described as “cultural” or “human world” (Gooch, 1998:94). Heidegger describes dwelling in the world as interacting with the objects that surround us and through this interaction we become one with our surrounding. The description of Merleau-Ponty that “For most of us, Nature is no more than a vague and remote entity, overlaid by cities, roads, houses and above all by the presence of other people” (Merleau-Ponty quoted in Gooch 1998:e-version) would fit the reality my participants come from. But also what I tried to prove through the previous discussion on the world-systems is the fact that dwelling in the world for specific people is facilitated by greater reliance on the flows of materials and energy that thanks to globalized market economy come from more and more distant parts of the world and undergo more sophisticated processes of production. And because of the phenomenological spirit the “most authentic mode of being in the material world ... involves an intimate hands-on knowledge of particulars, which are so closely connected with him that they virtually become, in their usage, parts or extensions of his body” (Code 1991:146 quoted in Gooch, 1998:98) I wanted to examine through the phenomenological lens how people through a specific identity of a consumer relate to the experience of consumption and its consequences. I join the framework of being in the world with narratives that people use when describing their experience and understanding.

“As discussed by Harvey (1995:9-17), there is now in postmodernist thinking *both* the realm of actual-authentic-living-in, what Heidegger calls ‘dwelling’, and the realm of being-part-of-discourse. In this way it includes aspects of both the pre-objectifying, direct relationship of humans in their world and a reflexivity of that world as part of discourse”. (Gooch, 1998:82-3)

With this postmodernist outlook on phenomenology in my research I decided to analyze qualitative interviews which explore people's reflections on being in the world and not actually being in the world with other people.

5.2. RESEARCH TOOLS: QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS

To examine my research question of how a person positions him/herself against environmental and social impacts of consumption I decided to use qualitative interviews, which draw from the tradition of in-depth interviewing, under which I understand what Seidman suggested as:

“In this approach interviewers use, primarily, open-ended questions. Their major task is to build upon and explore their participants’ responses to those questions. The goal is to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under study. The range of topics adaptable to this interviewing approach is wide, covering almost any issue involving the experience of contemporary people”. (2006:15)

The purpose of choosing such method results from a conviction that: “At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2006:9) and which as Hobson argues the use of qualitative research techniques “is consistent with their current widespread use in the investigation of lay environmental meanings and experiences” (Hobson, 2001:195). The interviews I conducted were semi-structured, I mapped out areas that would help reconstruct the experiences: stories connected to shopping from childhood, understanding of terms consumer identity, consumption, need, want, considerations of impacts of consumption on other people and the environment, placing Melbourne and Australia in this issue, projections connected to the future. Questions were open-ended and each interview varied according to each individual story, usually lasting around one hour.

In the process of recruiting participants I decided to contrast narratives of people who to bigger or smaller extent engage themselves in the question of consequences of their consumer choices with the stories of people who identify themselves as shoppers, compulsive buyers or find pleasure in act of shopping.

The way I recruited participants for the first group was with the help of the the Ethical Consumer Group (ECG), a non for profit organization working towards educating the public about the companies that are behind the brands of products people can find on the supermarket shelves. They included information about the research in the newsletter at the end of November 2011 which they sent via e-mail to people who were interested in receiving ECG's monthly updates. I got responses from people from all around Australia, predominantly women, receiving only 2 replies from men. I decided to meet with 8 people from Melbourne for about 1hour long conversations and stayed in

touch with those (6) who were either from outside Melbourne or couldn't meet with me in person through exchanging e-mails with a conversations revolving around consumption.

Participants for the other group I recruited through asking people I knew from Melbourne to help me get in touch with their friends to who can be described as shoppers. Or I would just ask people I knew “What do you think about shopping?” and after getting the sense that for this person shopping is an important part of their identity I would say that I am conducting a research of people's understanding the impact their consumption has on the environment and other people and arrange meetings. The biggest problem I faced when arranging these interviews was that the end of the year in Australia is always time when people are away for their holidays. Again predominantly women expressed their interest in participating in the research but because of the holiday season many of them were away for that time. This is why before I left Melbourne by the end of January 2012 I managed to meet with 4 participants who described themselves as shoppers.

To analyze interviews I used Morses' (1998) recommendation that for the phenomenological type of inquiry an adequate number of participants is approximately 6, depending on the saturation of the topic. It results from the type of the inquiry, which aim is to explore experience of people. By engaging with a relatively small group of people the researcher is more likely to get a profound understanding of studied phenomenon. I followed the type the method of single time, one hour long meeting, according the structures of similar researches I found during the literature review of studies on consumers' understanding of environmentally driven consumption choices (Connolly, Paretho, 2005). Although the authors of this paper claimed that they employed in-depth interviews in their analysis, they were not strictly in-depth interviews because of the lack of re-interviewing the participants. My research tools should be understood as qualitative interviews, which draw from the tradition of in-depth interviewing, but are not in-depth in a strict sense. The underpinning motivation of deploying qualitative interviews was an inquiry into lived experience and the interviews were conducted in a way to facilitate this kind of investigation.

In my analysis I decided to confront 3 stories against 3 stories. There was no specific key for choosing these specific stories. In the group of people linked to ECG I analyzed interviews with Elisa, Edward and Eva. From the other group I used conversations with Suzanne, Sarah and Sophie. The names are fictional and should help guiding the reader through analysis – to keep in mind that names that start with an “E” belong to the group associated with the ECG whereas names that begin with an “S” should be associated with the shoppers group.

The interviews took place from December 2011 to January 2012, were from 45 minutes to over one hour long, held in the public cafes of Melbourne, one of them in the house of the participant. Participants were assured of the strict confidentiality of the conversation and all of the conversations were held on a voluntary basis. The interview was semi-structured, with the questions involving understanding of the concept of consumption, consumer, stories connected with the culture of consumption and actual impacts of the consumption on the environment and other people. The same as with Connolly research the aim of the interviews was not to prove or disprove a hypothesis but “provide a deeper understanding of consumer experiences regarding the environment and their consumption habit” (Connolly, 2005:279).

In analyzing interviews I decided draw from tradition of grounded theory and recommendations of researchers working with the qualitative research but not sticking too close to any of the recommendations. From the grounded theory I drew the possibility of not having any hypothesis when it comes to analyzing the phenomenon and through analyzing the text itself. What I drew from this research tradition how Moustakas (1994:4) explains analyzing of an interview within the frame of the grounded theory introduced by one of its founders Strauss:

“study of the transcribed interviews sentence by sentence, coding of each sentence or phrase, sorting the codes, making comparisons among the categories, and ultimately constructing a theory”

This is how I come up with areas I would concentrate on. It results from the fact that the interviews do not intend to verify any thesis but rather explore certain experience. And because I didn't know what experience of my participants would be, I couldn't know in advance what areas to concentrate around. I had a certain ideas of what aspects of experience I was interested in exploring – hence semi-structured interviews. But they would rather refer to exploring as many forms of consumption as possible, but it was up to the participants to concentrate on the issues they would find important. This is why I followed the recommendation that “What is of essential interest is embedded in each research topic and will arise from each transcript.” (Seidman, 2006:118)

Through multiple readings of the text and a system of coding I was able to detect which topics my participants would revolve their speech around and then I was trying to find parallels and difference between participants and later between the two groups. In my analysis I didn't intend to create separate characters and then confront ideas of each participant against each other. At the same time I didn't try to create one voice for each of the groups, which would result in confrontation of 'aware' consumers and 'shopping lovers'. This would take away the depth of the analysis and silence the

voices of contradiction I managed to find in each of the groups. I was trying to present each of the participants as a separate speaking agent, with their individual story but I am aware that for the sake of analysis I went through a process of simplification of participants' ideas. Through the analysis I intended guide the reader through the multiple narratives which sometimes might sound incoherent or contradictory.

When it comes to the limitations of this research they are the same as when casting a very concentrated ray of light as opposes to disperse source of light. It enables me to explain in detail understanding of certain phenomenon but I am not able to put these stories in any kind of bigger, representative context. It is a complimentary offer to the discussion of placing consumption and people who are linked to it in the context of environmental and social problems. And this is how the analysis should be understood.

One of the limitations of the methods I used can be phrased in a question: was a one-time meeting enough to get back a truthful understanding of how people relate to their experiences? This is a valid question. I was full of doubts which path I should follow: using a 3 times meeting as a method tool, according to Seidman's recommendations or a 1 meeting, as in the paper of Conolly (2005). When I meet with the first participant I decided to treat the meeting as a 'pilot' interview to get the sense how much time I will need for a conversation. After a 70minute talk I was convinced that the time we spent is enough to get the understanding how people portray their connection with the consequences of their consumption.

I am mindful though, that the conversation is a thinking process each of my participants went through. Through my presence I acknowledge that the interview is a process of a dialogue and I, as a researcher played a role in participants' reflections. Also, depending on how much time each of the participants spent on thinking and engaging themselves with the subject prior to our conversation it influences the wording they use and how they express their thoughts. But this I see as advantage to the analysis, because the ability of expressing one self tells us something about positioning of the speaker to the subject of the conversation.

5.3. ANALYSIS

5.3.1. BRIEF INTRODUCTION OF THE PARTICIPANTS

As I mentioned before, although I gathered more material, for the analysis itself I decided to use only 6 interviews. Here is a brief description of participants to help the reader to navigate through the analysis.

Shopping team: Sarah, Susanna, Sophie.

Sarah is a mother of 3, in her early 40'. Lives in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne in a one family house and runs a business together with her husband.

Susanna is a young professional, in her early 20', works as at a entry-level position in one of the big banks in Australia. She was born in Indonesia but has spent half of her life in Melbourne.

Sophie is a University student, starting her career in free-lancing writing. She spends lots of her time traveling, claiming that she goes to Europe at least once a year, where she spent some time living in the UK, Sweden and France.

Group associated with the Ethical Consumer Group: Elise, Edward, Eva.

Elise is in her 40', a mother of two girls in their early teens. She lives together with her partner in a rented family house, works in a waste management group and botanical gardens as an educator.

Edward is in his late 30', works in the same waste management group as Elise. He has recently become a father. He grew up in the outer suburbs of Melbourne.

Eva is in her early 20' and works as a model. She completed her degree in sociology and psychology. At the time of the conversation she was preparing herself to make a documentary on sustainable fashion.

5.3.2. UNDERSTANDING THE TERM CONSUMPTION

In my inquiry to understand how people position themselves against the issue of consumption and its environmental and social impacts I took two different approaches in opening of the semi-structured interviews. With the group I contacted through the EC group I would simply ask for their explanation for the question “What is consumption”? With the other group I would ask the question of “What is consumption” after I had asked the question: “What is shopping for you?” to make sure that I didn't impose the identity upon a person, and really got to speak to people to whom shopping is an important part of creating their identity. Some of them talked about shopping as: “Retail therapy”, “part of feeling glamorous” or talk about themselves as “I am a impulsive/compulsive buyer” or “I am a bag and a shoe person”. After hearing these statements I would proceed to the further part of the interviews, which in its structure wouldn't significantly differ from each other.

In general consumption was associated by all participants as a part of biological imperative of a body, something that you do because of the need of your body, not as a want. It involves using resources, materials but also intangible things like music, cinema, and experiences. Some already linked social aspects of consumption, like Edward who said that using up resources, for example mining, depends on how society deals with consumption. Or by Sophie, who already at the very beginning stated that consumption has to do with hedonism, going through things, it has elements that are unnecessary and is linked to consumer culture and capitalism. Throughout her talk she came back to eating actual food expressed in weight – and used a metaphor of feeding animals in a zoo. It was interesting for her to see how much food in kg she goes through in a week whenever she carries bags from the shop. Interestingly, Susanna couldn't really explain what consumption is, it was not a clear term for her. But after we went through questions about consumer culture, who is a consumer and finally difference between buying and consuming she was able to elaborate more on the notion of consumption. After she went through this thinking process she could finally explain that consumption is “using something you really need like: food, toothbrush, shampoo”. It would indicate that she was familiar with the concept but maybe it wasn't something she would consider or discuss on a daily basis.

5.3.3. CONSUMER – WHO ARE YOU?

The question I approached my participants with was: “On which occasions do you identify yourself as a consumer”? The general idea was that it is an identity they bear the whole time. According to all of participants, given the society we live there is no choice of not being one, but according to

Elise “it is the degree to which you are a consumer”. According to her it is not a zero-one definition, you can be less or more of a consumer, there is a degree to which you can immerse yourself as a consumer. Similar way of thinking was expressed by Edward who said:

“I identify myself as a consumer all the time, it is kind of requirement if you live in our society. I believe that there is scope of degrees, you can choose a different degree to which you think about yourself and act as a consumer. So you might say you identify yourself as a consumer at a specific moment, but at the same time everybody does consume. I remember growing up wanting things but throughout my life the ethos I follow has changed and I can decide what it is that I consume”.

This comment ties in with the fact that the term describes two realms: biological and sociological and Elise indicated that you have a choice in terms of the sociological realm. Sarah linked the idea of a consumer with a notion of excess by spontaneously answering my question with a question: “Do you mean when I am consuming too much?” I asked her to say what is it that she understands under the term 'consumer' and it turned out that the negative image persisted, because she said: “Sometimes, when we have to throw things out of the fridge. I have noticed we started throwing too much away so I started making lists of things to buy for the week”. Susanna's answer to who is a consumer was: “A consumer is the 'king' because he controls the market in a way. Currently there are lots of websites, have you heard ofgroupon? They use consumer buying power to control the price, I realized that”, but later when she referred to her own experience she confirmed that she thinks of herself as a consumer only when it comes to providing herself with the necessities for her life, which she defined as food and hygienic cosmetics like soap and shampoo.

Having a general image of what my participants understood under the terms consumption and consumer I would proceed to talk about perceptions of their impacts of their consumption on other people and the environment. In my investigation I was very curious to identify what concerns my participants expressed. In this part I will discuss key areas in which people expressed their concerns: food, imports from China and the ability to enact change. The reason for choosing food as an entry discussion was that this is the subject that my participants felt comfortable talking about, was an area that the group connected to ECG would especially stress throughout their conversation. I wanted to contrast their narrative with the 'shoppers' group. Next area – importing products from China - as it was indicated by the 'shoppers' as the primary place where the things come from. Keeping the statistics about the trade relations between Australia and China and the world-systems theory I decided to concentrate on the narratives evolving around this topic. The last area concerns

the issue of possibility of enacting change, in terms of personal choices, government policies and ways out of perceived problems.

5.3.4. FOOD – ENVIRONMENT AND PEOPLE

Because consumption was always linked to the biological necessities food was an issue people would usually bring up after I asked “What is the impact of your consumption on the environment?”

It turned out that for Sophie the biggest problem lied in the packaging and transportation involved in the processes, but she admitted that it is not an area of her concern in terms of how food is grown or produced. Susanne also shared the same point of view.

Sarah was being able to identify the production chain involved in shipping the food to the the shop, saying that this is something she could recall from her primary school plus the images that come to her in the Australian media on the issue that “farmers are struggling”. She identifies open pastures, green houses, things that are being picked and transported. Given my interest in the topic, I was waiting for her to describe the actual process of production but she didn't go beyond the image of a fruit being ready to be picked. She was aware of the processes she gathered through media images and talked about them in neutral terms. She believed in simple, unprocessed food, because she grew up in a house that organic food was a norm, so she believed in “cleaner processes” associated with the production. An issue she would keep coming back to was problem of meat: as being moral problem, in terms of as she described it “systematic slaughter” which she knew about but would never want to be confronted about.

In the way where food comes from as a question Sophie and Sarah stressed that it is important to buy Australian since as they describe “we can produce everything”, in both cases giving example of production of Australian rice. Sophie found it strange that at her local grocer she could find oranges come from the USA and strongly refused to buy them. She admitted she was ready to spend more on Australian produce – especially when it comes to the sea food. It resulted from the experience of polluted waterways of China she saw during her last trip to this country. Sophie saw value in supporting local small businesses and didn't like the power that is exercised by the big supermarkets via home brands.

Sarah talked about community they developed with their family with the traders at the Victorian Market, one of the biggest open market in Melbourne. Although throughout the years her family

have developed a relationship with the traders she doesn't believe it is her concern to think about whether the sellers get decently paid. In her mind, people in Australia choose their jobs, so she assumes that if they didn't make enough money they could easily switch to some other job, like working in retail that guarantees you a decent wage (\$22/hour, equivalent of 18 Euros). Also, given what her mother spends on groceries, “let it be \$80 for a bag of fruits and veggies, although I am not sure what the actual bag is really worth”, she said it is a lot of money that should cover the expenses. Plus the traders are always left with the food they can have for their own needs.

The positive impacts of their food consumption would be associated with jobs that are created in this process. But what I realized when reading through the interviews and comparing them with the group connected to the ECG neither Sarah nor Sophie nor Susanna talked about the quality of farmers' working conditions or they didn't mention idea of farmers market whatsoever. It was a stark contrast to the other group connected to the ECG who claimed to incorporate this way of acquiring of food in their daily lives. As Edward names it “farmers market is a way to diminish the inequality between city dwellers and farmers”. For Elise it is important to meet the grower that's why she shops at the farmers market on regular basis and is part of organic box scheme. On this issue Eva noted:

“The farmers, I know that they are just around the corner. Most of them are within Victoria. You can see on Ceres⁵ site where each part of your veggie box came from. So that's pretty cool”.

All three of them admitted to either boycott shopping at the supermarkets or treat supermarket shopping trips as the last resort for the things they couldn't find elsewhere. Also Elise and Eva admitted to grow some of their food themselves. Sarah said she tried to grow her own food and compost, just like her father would in the past. The reason for starting gardening was because issues of pollution and packaging are something that lies on her heart, but as she put it gardening “is not my cup of tea”.

From this example we can see how in all cases people expressed their appreciation for local food but how on how different scales. From a national level by supporting Australian products, through more regional Victorian engagement, to knowing growers in person or even becoming one to some extent.

5 CERES - Centre for Education and Research in Environmental Strategies, not-for-profit, sustainability center located on 4.5 hectares on the Merri Creek in East Brunswick, Melbourne. It created a program called 'Fair Food' through which it delivers boxes of organic and local produce to inhabitants of Melbourne. From CERES' website: ceres.org.au

Still, I couldn't get clear answer what they think the actual impact of their food choices is, I was curious if people would bring up the notion of intervening with the actual place. Instead, Eva in her response would turn into narrative: I try to reduce the transportation, boycott the big supermarkets and shop at a local green grocer or with IGA⁶, get the organic boxes from the local producers and try to grow my own veggies. The same was when talking to Edward and Elise, the turn is into finding the best available options and supporting them. Their narrative concentrated on minimizing impacts: energy use, transportation, “being aware of the consequences” but not getting into discussion of actual transformation of the places all these processes triggered. From these stories I can understand that the fact of turning bush areas into grazing lands and fields is already taken as a given. Now the question is: what is the possibly lowest minimum impact we can aim at. And this translates into channeling the discussion on altering production and shipment practices.

Stories that revolved around food are an example of gradation of the concept of 'local' and different reasons for assigning value to this term (solidarity with small businesses, reduction of transportation, supporting growers etc.). From a perspective of the world-systems theory we could see with some participants resonates the idea that people who enter money transactions are not equal partners and that there is a dis-balance inherited in the transactions. Therefore, some people tried to engage in activities, that in their mind would diminish the inequality, mainly through supporting local (however defined), buying directly from growers, boycotting supermarkets in general or their specific practices, like home brand products.

5.3.5. EMBRACING COMPLEXITY: IT ALL COMES FROM CHINA TO US LUCKY AUSTRALIANS

Conversations about food gave me an insight on how people relate their consumption to some of the identified problems but we all know life is much more complex than the provision for food. One might argue that this is the basis of our existence and without providing for your basic subsistence there wouldn't be any of the on-growing complexity of the modern world. And I don't want to diminish the role of the food in this discussion. I wish to look beyond.

Throughout conversations about where things are being produced nowadays I have observed the following chain of events: after talking to people about where things come a prevalent and straightforward answer was simply: “From China”. This might not be surprising. What is for me

⁶ Stands for: Independent Grocers of Australia

fair majority of these statements this sentence was followed by laughter. Which after being something that would repeat of regular basis I started asking myself a question: Are we telling each other joke? Why is it so funny? Is it laughter that covers shame? Embarrassment? Lack of understanding? Or is it genuinely funny? It triggered my curiosity and started wondering why people would laugh and how it fits into bigger discussion of how matter is moved around and transformed to end up as a commodity in a consumer's basket.

Then I started linking this issue with the fact that throughout my altogether over 1.5 year stay in Australia I couldn't hear enough people explaining to me how lucky Australians are. Because of the climate. Because of the standard of living. Because of the fact that the financial crisis merely touched the Australian economy. Because of the abundance of the natural resources. Expression 'a lucky Australian' is something that would eventually come up when discussing economy, politics, culture or any other social subject. Keeping the world-system theory in mind I was wondering how these two issues: 'Everything comes from China' and 'We are so lucky' fits into discussion of perception of the impacts of their consumption.

And it turned out to be a complicated relationship. The reasoning of my 'shoppers' participants towards where things come from and how this process impacts the places or origin and the was hidden behind the term: 'cheap labor'. It was a self-explaining relationship that since labor is so cheap in developing countries that the businesses will move their operations overseas. In pursuit to understand why there is such a difference then I heard answers like: “so many people” or “not caring governments”. Sophie, as the youngest of all participants, in her early 20', internalized already the fact that things simply come from China and could recall it from a very early childhood. As a little girl she remembered getting toys from happy meals at McDonald's. And on the labels It would always say: “Made in China”. Only after some time she had to ask her parents: “But what is China?” since it was a word that she would see frequently but didn't understand its meaning.

In terms of concerns about issues connected to exploitation of workers, sweatshops or child labor Sophie said that because of how she lives her life, trying to always do the right thing, she has to believe that people in their positions do the right things as well. At the same time she expresses following contradiction:

“Knowing that it all comes from China I just hope they are not using child labor. I hope that they are not paid a pittance. Which I think they are”.

After this she claimed that she wouldn't support a company that she knew had a bad record about their practices, because of the loyalty to do the right thing. I asked her what an example of such company is. She wasn't able to name one.

On the other hand participants linked to the ECG disclaimed their concern about things not being produced in Australia any more, which would make it more difficult for them to support practices they believed in. Elise would put this problem in the context of cultures getting more complex – in terms of how many things nowadays you have to be concerned about – as oppose to past when as she sees it “You only had to care about food and clothes”. She depicts it with the example of how much more her daughters need to buy for their school as oppose to what she can recall from her own experience. This is how she explains the issue in regards to technology:

“I think the challenging thing is about technology, we are so far away from where the materials come from, where the things are made, and it is difficult to get the understanding how to fit these things together, probably it needs more challenging consumption research, journey. Electronics is one of the biggest group of things that I cannot source locally and clothes probably another one, I try to buy things that are a little bit better, like Australian brand, a little bit more ethical, but it's very, very hard. I try to find brand that are a little bit more ethical, but you know, ethical to me”.

The same reasoning applies to Eva's understanding of complexity of the issue, after from talking about supporting local food production she proceeds to different examples:

“But in terms of clothing that's quite a different thing. I might buy if of a designer who makes it here but they have sourced the fabric from overseas. And I don't know who made it. I know how it could have been made, I guess, if look at the fabrics, if it's organic or whatever. But there's a big disconnection, massive actually. But with other stuff as well. But I don't know if you could provide that connection with everything. Maybe it would be too much, maybe? I don't think we are going to know the story of everything, necessarily, unless it is at the back of the packet or something”.

But as for the other group of speakers, neither Eva nor Elise were articulating why is this complexity taking place. The only sense I was left with was their sense of bewilderment why all this electronics that comes to Australia is so ridiculously cheap so that as Elise experienced it at her work:

“For example in e-waste facility with all the technology, you have huge televisions, brand new televisions, they have never been opened and are being thrown out because it is cheaper to throw them out rather than open them up and sell them. It is craziness I see all the time. Things that were never used, they are manufactured and thrown out”.

In this context I could actually come back to the description of consumers, which both Baudrillard and Bauman were advocating for. As part of dazzled mass, bewildered, easily manipulated entities who are joined in their mass in a big shopping dance. At the same time, in this whole daze, people are aware there is something wrong going on the whole consumption chain, not being able to identify what it specifically is. Just like Sarah's case:

“I'm conscious of environment but at the same time I block it out”

“So what are the things that you block out?”

“I cannot think of anything right now...”

In regards to the issue of placing consumers within the network of exchanges and comparing it to the previous discussion on food – we could clearly see that the ability to take a definite statement in regards to the issue of things coming from overseas, especially China, drops. With the food issues participants were able to indicate practices they support, when it comes to taking perspective of things being produced in one place and then moved around the issue gets more blurry. In some cases, because this situation is already taken as a status quo. In other, because looking for alternatives gets quite difficult.

In the perception of the reality getting more complex and a sense of feeling lost as I wanted to know how my participants saw themselves as actors who contribute to a change, enact their agency or how they perceived the issue of responsibility for occurring problems.

5.3.6. PERCEPTION OF AGENCY

One of the tag-lines of the ECG “Your dollar is your vote” suggests that people join the network of the Ethical Consumer Group because they feel they can influence certain practices depending on how they spend their money. This might indicate that they feel there is a space for them to exercise some kind of power, agency. From my experience, though, they are far away from the picture of naïve greenie, who either thinks she would save the planet on her bike or in the same purpose drives her SUV to the supermarket to buy a shade-grown coffee (Maniates, 2008).

On the other hand people who identified themselves as shoppers were not the kind of oblivious, bewildered entities, as portrayed by Bauman, although they shared a much different insight on the issue of the degree of responsibility and action they can take to change the impact of their consumption. I had to confront the stereotype of an ignorant shopper and managed to show that the reality is much more complex than dividing people into categories: active/ignorant, aware/oblivious, and caring/selfish.

The conversation with Susanne evolved around the use of the electronics, specifically an Ipad. She admitted the want for was created by the “producer hype” that makes everybody buy it, although people don't really need it. In tracing the history of this gadget back Susanne came to conclusion that it comes from a factory in China. Again, I have to admit that I was anticipating that the participant would continue the thread, but this is where she stopped, without mentioning the history of the materials used in the process. In further discussion she admitted she doesn't know where the materials might come from. We hit the doors of the mystical factory, where all things nowadays come from. She went on describing the situation of the worker and the issue of poor wages. She compared it with the situation in Indonesia, where her father has a cookies factory and pays less than AU\$5 (equivalent of around 4 Euro) for a day of work to his workers. Then I asked her how she sees herself connected to the consequences for other people and whether a consumer is held responsible for the wages they get. For this she responded: “No, to be honest, no. I think it is the producer who has the responsibility and the government”. And then an interesting shift happened once we started talking about environmental impacts, without me mentioning anything about responsibility, blame or need for action. She replied:

“The impact the production has on the environment is in a way bad, because if we don't buy them, like there is supply and demand, and there is no demand, and we have that power to control that, so if you think of the

environmental factors the consumer is the one to blame, because we can control what we buy, it is kind of like in a circle”.

And since she brought up the issue of blame I asked her how she as an individual can change it. And here came yet another twist. She gave me example of saving energy by using energy-efficient light-bulbs. And because people from her local government are door knocking and distributing them for free, she admitted to have heaps of them at home. Right after this she contrasted it with the example of Indonesia, where these light-bulbs are too expensive for the individuals to buy so “who would care”? Interesting twist occurred in her narrative, since she portrayed an example of actions you can take as an individual but only if the government supported these practices. Her account reveals the embedding of a consumer in a political structure and ability of the bigger policy setting influencing what an individual internalizes to be her own actions.

Similar insight in regards to question of individual actions and the role of the government was shared by Sophie who stated that:

“I think government helps raising the awareness and we do everything we are told to do, we recycle basically everything we can. We try to do the good thing in what we are educated and how they ask us to do. I like to think that we help them help the environment I have always considered myself a good citizen, paying taxes, not breaking law, so ads on TV help me being more conscious. I think we need more education and ads on TV”.

Sophie was quite explicit about her engagement in the whole process saying that she is not going to alter her practices for whatever reasons there might be, like taking plane trips once a year to Europe, since this is her hard-earned money she has the right to spend to simply do what she has to do in her life. Although she indicated these travels might be seen as unnecessary leisure. The only aspect she said she altered her behavior was when she started living in Sweden where everybody recycled. She felt pressured to start doing so to avoid social scrutiny.

A different intake on the issue of exercising power and bringing about change had Elise, who build her way of connecting her life with the broader impacts around the words 'value': used during the conversation 12 times and 'choice': mentioned 16 times. She emphasized the role of values she believed in which shaped her life. Thanks to these values she was able to choose the way she lives. Her belief in the ability to choose how you live was expressed in a statement: “I think there is always a choice how you choose to live”. In terms of choosing her diet (organic and vegan), work (with a waste management group and in a botanic garden), making purchasing choices (family

laptop instead of one for everybody and second hand clothes instead of new ones). She emphasized the sense of estrangement from people who didn't share her values, people who would confront her by asking questions: "Why organic? Why vegan? Why recycle?" But these were the values that would help stick to her choices. In her way of addressing the issue of structure she referred both to the society and its institutions. She saw the role of the government as an old structure that takes time to adapt to what the grass-roots movements advocate for. She placed it in a broader context of climate change when she said:

"I think with the higher level of politics is the same, they haven't evolved enough to the reality the way the grass roots movements have. There were talks about climate change 20 years ago but it taken until now until people can start listening and talking about it. I think culture takes a long time to evolve, to change, to adapt and it takes for these grass root movements to start moving through and the big politics, they haven't transformed yet. They will have to start shifting thinking about how the climate will be affecting housing, communities. I think it takes time, people don't relate to how we are evolving, and it can make the politics really hard, like to build a house, alternatively, it is really difficult now, planning permits cannot come through. Things have become really complex".

In the same spirit Edward expressed his concern about the role of the structure in regard to the change. He referred to his daily experience of always searching for "smarter and more sustainable products" - as something that takes his time and effort to do the proper research, since him and his partner treat buying new products as last resort. And it gets more and more difficult nowadays since it is so hard to find new products made in Australia. He depicted role of the government rather as a hindrance then help for a change for two main reasons. First one was that the Australian government's and economy's reliance on extractive processes. Second one was the character of how the politics is organized:

"It is really short term political mentality we are talking about. When you take water example, as soon as the drought passed⁷, all the restrictions concerning water were lifted. The same thing is with use of the Victorian forests. Elections every 4 years is a long term, maybe too long to push for a change. And I think consumer culture transpires into politics, it is all about popularity, not sustainable popularity".

Except for the government as actor pushing for a change there is issue of market power expressed in the tag-line 'dollars as a vote'. In this degree Eva expressed her power to enact desired change, by supporting organic production. She said:

⁷ Speakers refers here to water restrictions imposed by the Victorian government which result from prolonged water scarcities in the state; depending on the water situation in the region the state can impose different stages of restriction, which from the beginning of December 2011 went down to the less restrictive stage.

“I might be idealist a lot but I support organic produce – because when lots of money goes into it and we keep supporting it and because of economies of scale they will be able to produce more for cheaper”.

In the further discussion she started talking more about the transition from conventional to organic farming putting this idea of market-incentive transition as a solution in a broader perspective, looking at the limits of such a transition:

“Organic farming can take more care, than conventional farming. And that's an interesting argument there, can the whole world go organic farming? Is that possible? I don't know the answer to that...I think the idea of permaculture works with it better, but then again: how do you mass produce food? Or do we have to mass produce food? Or can we start growing it ourselves?”

From these examples we can see how different intake an individual as a consumer can take on the issue of responsibility, structure and change. One role of the government is a supportive structure, which provides people with tools for a change. The other is hindrance in progressive thinking and action. It confronts Maniates' idea of individualization of the responsibility in solving environmental problems as a way of taking away policy makers' responsibility to work on designing a bigger framework for a desired change in the levels and patterns of consumption (2002). As I gathered from the conversations there are people who need institutional help to alter their behavior and those for whom the suggested changes offered by the government is not enough. Susanna might be content with the proposed use of the energy efficient light-bulbs and is eager to cooperate. But for Elise this change is not enough. She expressed her will to build a more sustainable house but with the current level of bureaucratic work, and money she would have to put into the permits, it makes it much harder to her. But as she gave an example of friends of hers who after 6 months of applying and spending over AU\$ 30 000 on permits managed to get a permission to build the house they hope might contribute to the desired change.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The aim in analyzing in above presented ideas, narratives and reflections was to place an individual against the grand narrative of the world-system theory and the research investigating ecological unequal exchange. In the face of increasing global displacement, processing and degradation of

world's natural wealth I aimed to present few voices of Melbournians, with different intakes on the questions of where things they acquire for their daily lives come from and what is the role of an individual in the network of exchanges they participate in.

What I discovered, in terms of how people positioned themselves against environmental and social impacts consumption brings with itself, was a sense of entrenchment and lock-in in the “core”, given the voices that no matter what you do, in the current society you remain a consumer who has to rely on the imports from wherever the labor and resources are the cheapest. Nonetheless, by using qualitative interviews as a research tool I managed to give back how liquid the notion a consumer is. In the conversations I managed to reach beyond the concept of a consumer: either as a passive taker of whatever market presents in front of her or as an empowered voter with her own money - and touch upon the diversity of identities people bear in them.

An identity of a consumer turned out to be one of many, which people gracefully juggled in the conversations, such as parents, citizens, professionals, neighbors and others. Depending on how they talked about themselves, they presented different ways of positioning themselves to the consequences of their consumption: let it be a determined professional (“I do what I have to, I will not alter my life”), a law-obeying citizen (“I like to help them help the environment”), solidarity expressing farmers market customer (“I wish to diminish inequalities”) or constructor of a resource-sensitive house (“I see value in preserving resources”).

The complexity of the intertwining identities was the key to understand how people related to the ability to enact change. Through talking about their background I could understand the values that lead them to enact certain consumer choices, habits or gradually shifting to a certain big life decisions. Through listening how they relate to their work I could understand their lack of interest in acting change or on the contrary: treating work as a channel to enact change. By understanding how they relate to the current political structure I could see how they interact with governmental policies in terms of shifting towards desirable consumer practices.

This is where my recommendations for directions in the future research come from. If one wants to engage so called 'consumers' in the process of enacting change and re-defining the world-system we operate under, in which consumption of one group of people suppresses the ability of others to live in a sound environment we have to look what constitutes of a consumer's identity. This conclusion comes from an observation that although my participants agreed that they identified themselves as consumers they would never talk about their experience of consumption through an identity of a

consumer. They would describe their experience through the variety of identities and roles they play in their lives. Talking about themselves as parents, professionals, students or exploring one's background was the key to understand how the participants related to the perceived problems of consumption: environmental degradation, exploitation of labor, waste and others. And this is what gave me a clearer view on the experience of consumption – because it emerges as a part of a bigger set of lived experiences.

On a daily basis, to obtain means for their subsistence, consumers enter impersonal money transactions which disguise consequences that consumption triggers. The structure of ecological unequal exchange relies on displacing the environmental problem onto those we do not have to feel responsible towards. From my research I can suggest that awakening a sense of responsibility regarding these issues might come from exploring identities that are built around the experience of consumption.

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Appendix: Time Series on World Trade 1985-2005

Total Merchandise Trade in US Dollars at current prices

	Total merchandise trade: Exports	Total merchandise trade: Imports
1985	1954000000000	2015000000000
1986	2138000000000	2206000000000
1987	2516000000000	2582000000000
1988	2869000000000	2964000000000
1989	3098000000000	3201000000000
1990	3449000000000	3550000000000
1991	3515000000000	3632000000000
1992	3766000000000	3881000000000
1993	3782000000000	3875000000000
1994	4326000000000	4428000000000
1995	5164000000000	5283000000000
1996	5403000000000	5544000000000
1997	5591000000000	5737000000000
1998	5501000000000	5681000000000
1999	5712000000000	5921000000000
2000	6456000000000	6724000000000
2001	6191000000000	6483000000000
2002	6492000000000	6742000000000
2003	7586000000000	7867000000000
2004	9218000000000	9568000000000
2005	10495000000000	10860000000000

Output from World Trade Organization's website:

<http://stat.wto.org/StatisticalProgram/WSDDBViewData.aspx?Language=E>

Accessed on 3 May 2012