



The Ecological Modernization of Social Practices at the Consumption-Junction

Theoretical reflections underpinning empirical research on sustainable consumption¹

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1. Introduction

When judged from the social sciences debate on sustainable consumption, ecological modernization theories most of the times can be said to represent a rather narrow defined eco-efficiency and innovation perspective, associated with mainstream politics, culture and economics. Ecological modernization is used by some authors to sharpen the contrast with more radical ‘sufficiency’ perspectives which can be said to represent a fundamental critique of modern consumer-society. We argue that there is more to ecological modernization than just eco-efficiency, since especially later formulations of the theory combine a focus on innovation and eco-rationalization with an equally important emphasis on the social, meaningful behaviors of consumers (section 2). This profound sociological variant of ecological modernization theory can be used for analyzing environmental change at the consumption-junction, where social practices of consumption are located right in between provision and demand. It is at the consumption junction that the productivist (technology and market originated) logics of providers run into the everyday-life logics as implied in ordinary consumption (section 3). Since environmental innovations are of recent origin and becoming wide-spread in modern societies, these ‘green innovations’ offer great possibilities to do research on the development, diffusion and appropriation of environmental innovations, with respect to both their technological and socio-cultural dimension. Three clusters of research questions are presented to

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help organize research on the greening of social practices at the consumption junction (section 4). First, it can be researched how providers offer new (green) products, services and ideas which they expect and hope to become accepted, appropriated and used by more or less eco-concerned consumers. We argue that the key issue here is about the construction of hierarchies of green qualities, with market actors indeed taking the lead e.g. the market mode of provision being the crucial or dominant axis of provision in modern societies (section 5). Second, we explore the ways in which green innovations become incorporated or embedded in social practices. For this purpose, we argue, ecological modernization theory has to be connected to and make use of theories of social practices as developed in the 1980's and revitalized and updated from 2000 onwards. Theories of practice direct attention to the pragmatic, routine character of everyday consumption. From these theories it can be concluded that strategies for environmental change should address issues of (new, greener) technologies, meanings and identities not at the level of isolated products or individuals but first and foremost at the level of practices themselves. With the help of theories of practices, we comment on two core themes which have triggered a lot of debate among social scientists when dealing with consumption: the interaction of humans and material objects and (green) technologies (section 6) and the issue of the greening of lifestyles and green identities (section 7). In the epilogue we shortly comment on the role of (green) lifestyles and lifestyle politics in public debates on sustainable consumption in reflexive modernity.

2. Ecological modernization theory and the sustainable consumption debate

One of the founding fathers of ecological modernization theory, Joseph Huber, in his book on the role of technologies for environmental change dismisses and defeats the role of consumers in bringing about significant environmental change. He argues that technological innovations in end-products and end-user-behaviors have a rather modest (25% and 4 % respectively) share in the potential levels of technology based eco-innovation. Technological changes higher up in the production-consumption chains are more important and significant, since innovations in raw or basic materials (44%) and changes in intermediate products (27%) have the greater contribution to make. From these figures Huber concludes that ecological modernization strategies should primarily be developed 'upstream', at the producer and provider side of production-consumption chains, while not bothering too much consumers and their consumer-behaviors 'downstream' production-consumption cycles. He suggests that environmental research and politics should stick or even return to their original focus on production, industry, providers,