What if we decenter consumption and human in the study of consumption and sustainability?
A commentary on ‘Care and consumption’ by Laurence Godin

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This is a commentary on ‘Care and consumption’ (Godin, 2022). I offer my commentary to push some of the author’s points a bit further.

Key words care • commodity fetishism • consumption • feminist political ecology • intersectionality

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If our species does not survive the ecological crisis, it will probably be due to our failure to imagine and work out new ways to live with the earth, to rework ourselves and our high energy, high consumption, and hyper-instrumental societies adaptively. We struggle to adjust, because we’re still largely trapped inside the enlightenment tale of progress as human control over a passive and ‘dead’ nature that justifies both colonial conquests and commodity economies. The real threat is not so much global warming itself, which there might still be a chance to head off, as our own inability to see past the post-enlightenment energy, control and consumption extravaganza we so naively identify with the good, civilized life – to a sustainable form of human culture. The time of Homo reflectus, the self-critical and self-revising one, has surely come. Homo faber, the thoughtless tinker, is clearly not going to make it. We will go onwards in a different mode of humanity, or not at all.

(Plumwood quoted in Roelvink and Gibson-Graham, 2009: 145)

Care, as suggested by Plumwood and exemplified in the article ‘Care and consumption’ (Godin, 2022), is useful for the study of sustainability and consumption. Taking to heart the author’s recommendation to keep ‘thinking with care’ (de la Bellacasa, 2012, cited in Godin, 2022) to strategise for transition towards more sustainable and just worlds, I offer this commentary.
The author’s reference to Graeber’s observation about consumption indicates their support for the idea that anything wage labourers do, other than producing or exchanging new commodities, is consumption. This intervention, alone, leaves the reader with no option but to conclude that people are primarily wage labourers, that labour is mainly tied to the production and market exchange of commodities, and that consumption is fundamentally different from production and exchange. This thinking centres the formal market. It sees diversity in neither transactions nor labour. In this limited world, consumption is the binary opposite of wage labour. Cooking, cleaning and gift-giving are, in this world, forms of consumption. The care that binds people who love each other, maintains their lives and their relationships is also consumption. With this conceptualisation, together with Fisher and Tronto’s definition of care (1990), many activities in our everyday life become consumption and care. The narrow privileging of material consumption in this world does not see that some forms of consumption and care are possible and useful to recognise as integral to productive dynamic economies.

To be self-critical and self-revising, to revise our own opinions, while engaging in the rethinking of care and consumption, I suggest that we reconceptualise consumption and care by reconceptualising labour. Following Marx, we may conceive of labour, including emotional labour, as producing value that fulfils our own and our community’s needs whether or not these products are exchanged in the market. Within this reading of Marx unpaid cooking, cleaning, childcare performed at home and in a community, all of which and more are often understood as consumption and/or care practices in the study of consumption, are labour. They produce use value whose utility is realised through consumption. While the market dominates understanding of exchange, the perspective I find in Marx and propose here sees labour other than that paid a cash wage, labour that is often performed by women and marginalised groups, labour that meets human needs and wants. Recognition of these practices as labour and consumption is fundamental to the decentring of capitalism that is often recognised as necessary to increase the diversity and productivity of the paths available for the transitions endorsed by the author.

Turning now to a second point that bears extension, human economies interact with economies performed also by more-than-human earthothers, such as bee economies, earthworm economies, bird economies (Roelvink and Gibson-Graham, 2009; Gibson-Graham and Miller, 2015). Care is not only performed by humans. More-than-human earthothers provide care for humans by, for example, providing us with fresh air, water and agricultural products. Care is a fundamental component of commoning, a collective and often multispecies process of producing interdependent communities (Gibson-Graham et al, 2016; Sato and Soto Alarcón, 2019). I worry that staying with a narrow view of consumption and limiting ourselves to humans blinds us to relationships on which we all depend and forecloses possible futures made visible if we situated consumption as part of diverse economies that are embedded in socio-ecological relations.

The author rightly pointed out some problems involved in the commodification of care. For Marx, when commodification occurs, we often fetishise the commodity. The saying ‘we are what we eat’, from a posthumanist Marxist commodity fetishism perspective, means that we often become blind to the human and nonhuman labour performed in the production of the commodity while transforming the natural world that literally constitutes what we consume. This understanding resonates with Fisher
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and Tronto’s conceptualisation of care as relational, care as nesting on each other. If we defetishise commodities by moving beyond the comforts of an analytically comfortable but narrow understanding of consumption and of humans (as labourers and consumers), it may be possible to better see how consumption is embedded within myriad multispecies diverse economies (for example, Gibson-Graham and Miller, 2015; Sato and Soto-Alarcón, 2019).

The assemblage inflected intersectionality recommended by Puar (2012), combined with insights from feminist political ecology, may help the author address concerns that they themselves identify. The author points out the production of gendered, more specifically feminine, subjectivities associated with care through consumption. The author recognises, for example, the intersection of some social differences in the context of caring for distant others via consuming fair-trade products and through a global care chain as well as the intersection of gender and technologies in the context of technologies replacing human care work. However, the recognition given tends to focus on femininity and gender inequality and is insensitive to ecological and neocolonial relationships. Puar’s assemblage inflected intersectional approach, in combination with feminist political ecology, makes it possible to see hierarchically developed socio-material and socio-ecological relationships, such as north–south, human–nature, gender and other social relationships embedded in colonial history and in specific socio-ecological relationships that intersect with consumers’ diverse backgrounds and materialities like technologies in a given consumption practice. It also makes it possible to see affects that emerge within circuits of diverse economies.

Sustainable lifestyles will not nest well within webs of transnational inequalities and unsustainability. The lenses we use must, therefore, be sensitive to the broadest possible diversity of these inequalities. ‘Thinking with care’, the ability to see nesting socio-material and socio-ecological relationships scattered over circuits of multispecies diverse economies, is crucial for us to take responsibility for what we study and what we consume. Thinking with care would enable us to ask how labourers and more-than-human lifeworlds are treated, or ask if exploitation and/or injustices are present in our everyday consumption practice. Once seen, such recognition encourages us to come up with concrete strategies for transforming those relations. Further, we can sharpen conceptual tools from social movements like degrowth that work towards radical downsizing of production and consumption across socio-ecological borders transnationally.

The author of ‘Care and consumption’ has provided a sound foundation. Building from that basis, what I have offered in this commentary are some conceptual tools that may more adequately equip readers. The tools added enable us better, from our respective locations, to think with care.

Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

References


