Foreword

Greenwashing is not just for corporations anymore—it has gone personal. Instead of feeling guilty about the huge gaps between wealthy and poor, the ways consumerism causes global warming, or how our daily pleasures cause rainforest destruction and de-spoil the sea, we can drink a few cups of fair-trade coffee and eat a rainforest crunch bar and instantly feel better. The consumer marketplace today offers us every kind of ethical, ecological, and healthy option we can imagine, from recycled toilet paper to household wind turbines.

The editors and authors of this book turn our attention toward the way goodness and moral values have been privatized in our post-Reagan-Thatcher neoliberal world. Green consumer goods promise the eternal lie of the huckster—that we can have our cake and eat it too, that we can change the world without sacrifice or any more effort than smarter shopping. Because our gold ear-studs have been ethically mined, we are absolved from thinking about why we feel we need to wear gold at all. We can take expensive vacations in exotic tropical lands, ignoring the poverty around us while we enjoy sustainable gourmet meals and a timeless beauty ritual enhanced by traditional bathing (chapter 10).

Through eco-chic consumption, all of the problems of the world are condensed into making the right shopping decisions. If the World Trade Organization is helping to bring sweatshop products into our local shop, it is up to us to go find some fair-traded alternative, certified by some impoverished nongovernmental organization and its idealistic unpaid interns. When illegal Spanish fishermen chase down the last bluefin tuna in the Mediterranean, we are supposed to find out where the tuna in our local sushi bar came from to make sure we are not partners in crime.

From a critical distance, the entire premise that justice and sustainability can be purchased in the marketplace is patently absurd. The proliferation of new consumer choices is just as likely to increase total consumption as it is to lead to actual cuts or measureable reductions. And without the intervention of trusted intermediaries, any system of certification is likely to be co-opted by producers and marketers, to the point where it just becomes another meaningless mark on the package. Products and brands that do establish some sort of trusted position among consumers are just increasing their brand value in a way that makes them vulnerable to takeovers and buyouts. This happened with iconic countercultural brands in the United States like Kashi (now Kellogg) and Ben & Jerry’s ice cream, which is now a division of Unilever, though you would not know this from the company’s website. In a marketplace now awash in green paint, candy bars have become granola bars from a fictional Nature Valley, which is actually the factory of megacorporation General Mills.
This is hardly the first time that frugality and morality have become fashionable in the marketplace. Nonslavery sugar was an early example of social marketing, followed by the Salvation Army’s manufacture of matches made without the white phosphorus that poisoned match factory workers. At the higher end of the social scale, examples include Marie Antoinette’s little farm at Versailles and Theodore Roosevelt’s sojourn on a western ranch, where he toughened himself and regained his masculinity. Generations of the middle class have sent their children off to summer camps to live simply with nature and to colleges where they experience temporary poverty, hopefully relieved after graduation. Even ancient Babylonian city dwellers worried that opulence was spoiling their children, and by the time of the European Renaissance, a large fraction of the population was living in the enforced frugality of convents and monasteries. A hunger for authenticity, direct experience, and knowledge of origins and production has been deeply embedded in elite consumption for hundreds of years, for example in the connoisseurship of French wines and foods like truffles and caviar. Even the ancient Romans loved the simple life on their rural villas, at the same time that they sought the finest and rarest spices, clothing, cosmetics, and wines. Nostalgia for an imagined past or a perfect landscape has driven consumption and tinged it with a deep sense of morality for a long time, perhaps since the very first cities of the late bronze age.

What is different about eco-chic in the contemporary world is that the problems it tries to address are so much larger and more serious than the issues faced by previous generations. More people live in absolute poverty—without even the ability to feed themselves on subsistence farms—than ever before in human history. Consumers have never faced such a wide range of dangers from a witches’ brew of toxic chemicals, resistant diseases, and engineered organisms. And we have rapidly burned through hundreds of millions of years of sequestered carbon in the form of fossil fuels, changing the composition of the planet’s atmosphere in a gargantuan uncontrolled experiment in climate regulation.

Another difference between our own consumer culture, and that of our ancestors, is that now we know so much more about the way our consumption connects us to each other, to our own health, and to the health of the planet. For the first time, we can see, or even talk to, the people who grow our gourmet coffee, weave our artisanal rugs, and put beads in our cornrows on a holiday beach. This marvelous network of information leaves consumers more exposed to moral fault than ever before and makes the burden of moral behavior heavier and more perilous. Often the only choices seem to be tokenism—making changes that are more symbolic than substantive—or cynicism grounded in the experience of falling for new trends or solutions that turn out to be misguided, co-opted, or fraudulent.

This is why this volume of studies is so important. These chapters explore the territory in between cynicism and tokenism, showing us that by learning more about the way the consumer marketplace works we can think more productively about the kinds of strategies that can make a symbolic and material difference. While generally critical of the superficiality of eco-chic consumption, the authors recognize that green consumerism is just one of the ways that citizens try to change the marketplace. Rather than being
an either/or choice, the passive activism of green (or greenish) consumption often articulates with other kinds of more overtly political activities, from changing local health codes to allow edible landscaping or backyard chickens, seeking further education on environmental issues, or joining an activist group. Green consumerism may play a key role as a kind of gateway drug for people who would otherwise be disengaged from any action at all. Changing your brand of toilet paper requires no more than a minimal commitment of time and money, but it might provoke some questions about the origins and effects of other consumer goods. Fear of bad publicity or consumer boycotts has also been a powerful force in getting the attention of manufacturers and service providers, eliciting many levels of response to issues of sustainability. But as the editors point out, there is a thin and often invisible line between green actions and greenwashing. Sometimes we can only tell in retrospect if actions by governments and corporations really do reach the intended goal of reducing waste, increasing efficiency, and promoting public health. At what point do thin coats of green paint add up to something more substantial and self-supporting?

The editors and authors of this volume have opened an important discussion about the complex practical and moral terrain of eco-chic and the more general marketing of sustainability and fair trade. They deserve a broad audience, particularly among those who are thinking about how much longer the planet is going to be able to support consumer culture in its present form.

Richard Wilk
The Paradoxes of Eco-Chic

Bart Barendregt and Rivke Jaffe

This book deals with what we call eco-chic: a combination of lifestyle politics, environmentalism, spirituality, beauty, and health, combined with a call to return to simple living. Eco-chic connects the fields of ethical, sustainable, and elite consumption, with the distinctions among these forms of consumption becoming blurred in practice. Where just a decade or two ago, green lifestyles and fair-trade purchases were perceived as the domain of activists or the open-toed-sandal-and-woolly-socks brigade, sustainable and ethical initiatives are now increasingly popular among affluent hipsters. The popularity of these forms of consumption should perhaps be located not so much in a newly emergent interest in saving the world, but rather be understood as indicating that eco-chic has become one of the many modern lifestyle choices that late capitalism has to offer. The question remains whether the effect of shifts in consumption choices is any less when these shifts are not informed by deep-felt ideological convictions.

Over the last few decades, achieving radical societal change toward sustainable development has come to appear less and less feasible. Displacing more revolutionary initiatives, green lifestyles and ethical consumption have emerged as attractive alternative propositions in moving toward environmentally friendly societies and combating global poverty. Where previously the environmental movement saw excess consumption as the global problem, green consumerism now places consumption at the heart of the solution. However, ethical and sustainable consumption—from organic and fair-trade food, fashion, and jewelry to eco-tourism and low-carbon forms of urban transport—are not just politically virtuous practices. These practices also represent forms of cultural and moral capital that are central to the creation and maintenance of class distinction. Eco-chic is increasingly a part of the identity kit of the upper classes, offering an attractive way to combine taste and style with care for personal wellness and the environment.

Specific cultural objects feature significantly in what has become a global upsurge of green consumption: local, natural, and artisanal goods are refashioned in terms of aesthetics and price to allow the gentrification of a back-to-basics, place-based nostalgia. Eco-chic consumption is evident in everyday consumer choices such as food, clothing, and transport options, as well as in luxury consumption such as spas and fair-mined gold jewelry. The classed nature of ethical and sustainable consumption is recognizable in
leisure practices, such as green hobbies and eco-tourism, and in the adoption of clean technology in architecture or transport.

What we term eco-chic can be recognized in a wide range of sociogeographical loci as a set of practices and an ideological frame, but also as a widespread marketing strategy. The chapters in this volume discuss the emergence of eco-chic among the middle class, the newly rich, and the traditional elites. They present case studies in both the metropolitan areas and the rural landscapes of Europe and North America, as well as in post-colonial settings in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean. While many of the concepts underlying eco-chic consumption emerged primarily in the global North, these ideas have also been promoted, appropriated, and transformed in the less affluent South. Across the world, then, comparable consumption agendas connect often very different life-worlds.

African recycling experiences and Brazilian favela chic hit U.S. and European lifestyle blogs, which lend a sheen of trendiness and cool to cheap globalization practices that are often born out of poverty and a lack of alternatives. Simultaneously, what were previously deemed traditional and backward practices become popular among cosmopolitan elites across the world. Typical peasant dishes, prepared with organic, farm-to-table ingredients, are now consumed with relish in upscale restaurants by rich customers, who may pay tenfold the daily wages of the Javanese, Vietnamese, or Mexican farmers who have little choice but to eat such foods every day of the year. It is not our intention to resort to simple condemnations of such practices, which are after all the very drivers of today’s global economy. Rather, we argue for careful scrutiny of the broad range of eco-chic practices: the anxieties and complex motivations that underlie their popularity, their differential effect on various actors and societies, and the diverse implications this form of consumption has for attempts to make the world we all live in more sustainable.

This edited volume connects research on consumption, identities, and globalization to debates on political consumerism. This introduction seeks to address three major questions, which the authors of the cases in this volume also engage with. Why is it now, at this particular moment in advanced capitalism, that eco-chic has become so popular in the formulation of new identities? To what extent do eco-chic’s various forms and appearances rely on specific local contexts? And, finally, in what ways can eco-chic, with its apparent paradox of consumption and idealism, make a genuine contribution to solving the main problems of our time and thus contribute to debates on sustainable development?

A Global Green Culture: Why Now?

Asking why eco-chic has become such an important force at this moment in time points to the necessity of understanding green, sustainable, and ethical forms of consumption within their historical and geographical context. Ours is a time that is continuously accelerating, with many citizens and governments placing blind faith in digital technologies that maintain a 24/7 global economy, while e-commerce and e-governance are heavily
promoted by various public and private actors. Some suggest that characterizations of our era as high paced and ever-accelerating are themselves marked by chronocentrism; perhaps the speed at which societal change is taking place is not all that different from the speed of change experienced in preceding eras (Eriksen 2001). Notwithstanding this contrary view, over the past few decades, the presumed acceleration of societies has given rise to a number of local countermovements.

In a context of fast-paced, high-tech global processes, including increased digitization and reproducibility, individuals and groups across the world feel moved to establish and safeguard slower, more traditional forms of living. These include the Whole Earth Catalogue, Analogue Living (which renounces information communication technology such as cell phones and the Internet), and more recently the wellness revolution (see Pilzer 2002; Turner 2006). Other initiatives include the revalorization of secondhand clothing as vintage (Gibson and Stanes 2011) and the growth of organic, fair trade, and slow food certification schemes, which seek to minimize environmentally and socially exploitative production processes (Goodman et al. 2010; Guthman 2002; Petrini 2001). In trying to remedy societies seen as hurtling down the wrong path—and to counteract the accelerated pace and fragmented nature of postmodern life—these movements focus on nostalgic, neotraditional, and explicitly local solutions. What Lowenthal (1992) terms the “death of the future” seems to dictate a return to past possibilities, or at least a “slowing down” of the present. Many movements and activists argue that the technology that was meant to connect people and places actually disconnects them. Regaining control over one’s own life, they claim, necessitates a turn to “slow speed” life (Honoré 2004; Parkins and Craig 2006). This might involve retro practices and outmoded technologies such as knitting, watching black-and-white television, or making cult books such as the Cloudspotter’s Guide (Pretor-Pinney 2006) into a new bible (Barendregt 2012).

These are apolitical but apparently socially committed lifestyles that have attracted growing numbers of followers, whose adherence may be restricted to consumption rather than wholesale ideological conversion. A main feature shared by these lifestyle movements is that concern regarding the environment is no longer restricted to subcultural splinter groups. On the contrary, consuming the natural and the slow is instrumental in creating and maintaining class distinction. Eco-chic products are often crafted or marketed through processes of enchantment or by putting these products on spectacular visual display; they tend to target (consciously or unconsciously) aspirational consumers by making overt reference to aristocratic and celebrity lifestyles (cf. Mihaljevich 2007; Richey and Ponte 2011). Examples include the middle-class popularity of organic and fair-trade food and clothing, but also increasingly the reference to all things green and eco in public architecture, as Chris Hudson’s contribution to this volume illustrates.

Early work on green economies was largely production-oriented and took an innovation and technology-centric approach, with limited consideration of how to persuade consumers of the desirability of green products (Spaargaren 2003). Similarly, much of the work that did focus on green consumption was monopolized by a few disciplines, in particular social psychologists and economists (to the extent that this could be termed “economics imperialism,” see Fine 2002). This has changed in recent years as growing
numbers of sociologists and geographers have sought to locate the origins and effects of ethical and sustainable consumption (e.g., Barnett et al. 2011; Bryant and Goodman 2004; Cloke et al. 2010; Lewis and Potter 2010; Shove 2005).

However, as green products and lifestyles are increasingly appropriated by new wealthy classes both in the global North and in many emerging economies (from the so-called Asian Tigers to the BRIC [Brazil, Russia, India, and China] countries and more recently the TIMP [Turkey, Indonesia, Mexico, and the Philippines] markets), understanding the sheer cultural variety of eco-chic promises to be one of the next challenges for social scientists studying these forms of consumption.

Global Fantasies, Local Needs

In various sociogeographical spaces, one finds localism, environmentalism, and ethics tied—often paradoxically—to globalized identities, consumption, and elite lifestyles. A major paradox of eco-chic, then, is that ideas and movements that emphasize localism are subject to global circulation themselves, often with unforeseen consequences. Obviously, eco-chic commodities fulfill needs other than those related to sustainability or ethics alone. The specific cultural meanings and social functions of these commodities are always dependent on their historical and cultural context.

We propose a research agenda with a strong focus on the very stuff of eco-chic products, analyzing their materiality across cultural contexts, with attention to aesthetics in design and marketing. Our own research had focused on instances of eco-chic in Southeast Asia and the Caribbean, ranging from spa culture to the Rastafari-inspired “ital chic” (see part III of this volume). These studies show how similar tropicalist, often self-exoticizing representations may be used to invoke very different political projects, although the classed nature of these forms of consumption is very apparent.

There is no denying that much of what can be termed as eco-chic is designed by elite groups of producers who work from the privileged centers of the global economy. In architecture and urban design, for instance, so-called starchitects increasingly produce spectacular green plans that rebrand urban sustainability and biodiversity and more broadly shape popular understandings of nature in the city. Beyond consumption, a focus on the elite producers of eco-chic can shed light on what makes eco-chic chic, the kind of symbols their designs employ, and the extent to which these designs translate in different cultural contexts.

Eco-chic clearly has specific local dynamics that differ from one society to the other. The preference for vegetarian products over meat consumption may mean a conscious choice to abstain from animal products produced by a “cruel” industry in affluent European and North American societies, whereas high levels of meat consumption in China are more likely to signify newly gained class prestige. Where the use of green cosmetics may imply an awareness of harmful chemicals in the West, similar products may signify the longing for a long-lost feudal heritage in Indonesia or an engagement with Afro-cosmopolitan forms of modernity in Ghana (see chapters 8 and 10). Organic farming is
not only a twenty-first-century Western trend, but also can be framed as based on ancient imperial yin-yang philosophies. Eco-chic consumption in these contexts may indicate a nostalgic longing for times when things were less complex, but also a desire to signal exclusive taste and prestige. As a form of cultural and moral capital, eco-chic is instrumental in achieving class distinction and self-aristocratization.

An important focus of this book is on eco-chic as an antidote to one-sided Western forms of modernization and globalization. While the best-known examples of eco-chic may have developed in Europe and North America, it is also evident in postcolonial settings such as Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. It represents a combination of environmental awareness with a revalorization of local, often indigenous tastes and traditions that predate the global era, preferably harking back to precolonial times. Ironically, this reappraisal occurs through specifically global processes and phenomena, including global media, corporations, and advertising campaigns, while the eco-chic products and services are couched in a globally translatable aesthetics. Tropes of economic development and progress are replaced by sustainability and authenticity. In this fashion, indigenous qualities become modern and eco-chic provides an alternative to a unilateral Western definition of modernity.

By developing the concept of eco-chic, we seek to introduce a cultural turn to studies of green consumption. This cultural approach directs our attention to the specific aesthetics and material culture associated with eco-chic consumption. In this context, we want to understand what colors, which keywords, images, and fonts help to make products recognizable as eco-chic. Through which associations does off-white and pale-green packaging, decorated with Victorian fonts and hand-sketched illustrations and combined with terms such as “artisanal,” “authentic,” and “natural,” evoke certain emotions and persuade consumers to pay exorbitant prices?

In addition, placing emphasis on the cultural meaning of green consumption involves closer attention to the cultural values of fairness and sustainability. This might entail more serious inquiry into the export of what might be seen as a specific Judeo-Christian subtext. Richard Wilk (2010), for instance, argues that people distinguish between good and evil types of consumption and seek to compensate one with the other in everyday acts of moral balancing, accounting cycles that frame a person’s entire life in terms of good and bad deeds. But what about Green Daoism or Islamic environmentalism and other religious repertoires that feed into eco-chic? Eco-chic can lead to the intensification of identities at specific scales (local, regional, and national), taking on a wide range of cultural forms—it is this variety of forms that we intend to interrogate in this volume.

The Politics of Eco-Chic Consumption

In addition to the global-local, modern-traditional puzzles presented by eco-chic, another paradox lies in its conservative politics in relation to sustainable development. As noted above, pursuing radical, eco-centric societal transformation to achieve sustainability—as many environmental movements did in the 1960s and 1970s—has more or less
disappeared from the political agenda. The relative success of more reformist, light green environmentalism coincided with the hegemony of neoliberal ideologies that promoted the universal application of market logic. In this context, the popularity of so-called market environmentalism or green capitalism is unsurprising (Prudham 2009). Where previous incarnations of environmentalism saw ever-increasing consumption and ceaseless economic growth as a main source of environmental deterioration, these market-based approaches to sustainability see consumption and green growth as win-win solutions.

Green, sustainable, and ethical consumptions are all forms of political consumerism. Increasingly, consumer choices have become an important site of political action, a trend that has been received enthusiastically by many societal and academic observers. Spaargaren and Mol (2008) note, for instance, that green consumption overcomes the scalar divide between the local and national organization of formal democratic politics on the one hand, and the global nature of many economic practices on the other. Others argue that market-based conscious consumption can renew democracy and empower citizens (Micheletti 2003), offering a relatively easy-access mode for ordinary people to incorporate political and ethical considerations in routine, everyday activities (Barnett et al. 2005). However, various critics point to the neoliberal character of market-based politics and the contradictions between self-interest and collective good that this entails.

As the market has become progressively politicized, the figure of the consumer-citizen (or citizen-consumer) has become increasingly salient. As Johnston (2008: 232) points out, this hybrid concept “implies a social practice that can satisfy competing ideologies of consumerism (an ideal rooted in individual self-interest) and citizenship (an ideal rooted in collective responsibility to a social and ecological commons).” As a form of political action, consumer-citizenship can complement participation in formal democratic politics and other forms of political activism (Willis and Schor 2012). However, it may also diminish the power of the traditional political arena to effect social change. In addition, despite its implicit reference to collectivities, consumer-citizenship individualizes collective action, as individual consumers rather than social movements or political parties are the ideal agents of social change. Moreover, consumer-citizenship is more easily attained by those individuals who have sufficient means. Those with limited income and hence limited consumer power will necessarily have less political influence than their wealthier compatriots, in direct contrast with the equal political rights promised by many formal citizenship regimes.

Consumption as a form of politics has a long history. Various scholars have pointed to the connections between contemporary antisweatshop campaigns and fair-trade movements, and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antislavery boycotts of Caribbean sugar or products from the U.S. plantation South (Micheletti 2003; Sheller 2011). In the twenty-first century, many of the largest global corporations act preemptively to prevent their brands from being targeted for, and tarnished by, consumer activism. As Sabine Luning and Marjo de Theije emphasize in chapter 4, the growing emphasis on corporate social responsibility (CSR) has convinced many corporations that they need to be involved in an ongoing dialogue with consumers, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), labor organizations, and other stakeholders. While in many ways laudable, this trend
of partnering diminishes the possibility of radical change, giving priority to reformism and gradual achievement through stakeholder meetings or other more business-oriented events. In addition, CSR and other forms of voluntary corporate change are not only strategies to co-opt consumer activism, but they are often also intended to preempt state attempts at regulating industry. Corporate environmentalism tends to be strongest when win-win effects can be achieved. The availability of lucrative markets encourages the mainstreaming of sustainability and environmental awareness, witnessed for instance by the proliferation of major supermarkets’ own brands of organic ranges. Greening business without the promise of new markets or cost-saving benefits is obviously much less attractive (Banerjee 2002). In such cases, greening can easily be displaced by greenwashing, discursive but largely meaningless gestures toward sustainability.

Beyond the benefits of green consumption to corporations, consumers may also have less than pure motives. A green disposition is no longer countercultural or subcultural; rather, natural and slow consumption has become instrumental in creating and maintaining class distinction. Many forms of eco-chic consumption make implicit or explicit reference to “simple living,” suggesting a shift away from the opulence that is often associated with elite lifestyles and toward the celebration and romanticization of frugality. What does it mean when the wealthier classes move toward a simplicity that previously signaled a lack of income? Such practices may act to uphold class distinction even as they mask socioeconomic disparities.

Drawing on his work on food in Belize, Richard Wilk (2006: 123) uses the concept of the “style sandwich” to explain the imitation of lower-class consumption habits by the rich. Where the poor at the bottom eat or dress a certain way out of necessity, those at the top can copy this behavior out of nostalgia or as an exotic diversion, without fearing the stigma of poverty. Those in the middle, however, have not yet achieved a class position that is sufficiently removed from the poor, and securing a middle-class status involves avoiding poverty food and similar forms of consumption. This style sandwich is highly recognizable in eco-chic. The trend toward voluntary simplicity, and its celebration of going local, native, or traditional, is a signifier of class in that it only attracts those who have a choice. In addition, making low-status consumption practices suitable for elite appropriation generally involves processes of sanitization and distancing: upscaling previously marginalized products and practices often entails repackaging, repricing, and new spatial consumption contexts (see Finnis 2012).

In many cases, green, sustainable, and ethical consumption reinforces class divisions and other structural differences. As Barnett et al. (2005: 41) note, “both the material and socio-cultural resources required for engaging in self-consciously ethical consumption are differentially available” along the lines of class, gender, and ethnicity. Beyond money, knowing when, where, and how to consume what requires the right type of cultural sensibility—the cultural capital that is critical in reproducing class consumption as well as ethnonational belonging (Johnston and Baumann 2009; Wilk 2006). As Kate Cairns, Kim DeLaat, José Johnston, and Shyon Baumann point out in chapter 7, eco-chic consumption is also informed by highly gendered models of caring consumption. In addition, the more localist forms of eco-chic consumption may reproduce nationalist
and geopolitical inequalities. While locavores who try to minimize their food miles can diminish their carbon footprint, their consumption practices may also affect negatively on the economic sustainability of producers in low-income regions, while overlooking local inequalities in production (DuPuis et al. 2006). The emphasis on eating and buying locally, as evident in the European politics of terroir or the farmer nationalism of Agro-Americans, can be understood as drawing on hegemonic geopolitical discourses that safeguard the status quo.

Global Value Chains, New Partnerships, and Persistent Exclusions

This book is organized into three parts, focusing on the global connections that underlie eco-chic; its spatialities and temporalities; and the centrality of practices and discourses regarding bodies and beauty in eco-chic consumption. In relation to the first focus, we are especially interested in the ways that eco-chic, as a cultural and historical phenomenon, travels from North to South. Given the predominant focus in studies of sustainable and ethical consumption in the global North, we need to know more about how such movements are appropriated and localized in often very novel contexts. At the same time, we urge scholars to look beyond such geopolitical categories and focus instead on the very connections between North and South, and the new forms of exploitation that now take place under the umbrella of eco-chic. While fair trade and eco-certification promise new opportunities to defetishize commodities (Guthman 2009), we need a thorough analysis of commodity chains to understand how such initiatives sometimes cause new instances of the global injustices they aim to mitigate. A wide range of literature has emerged over the past few decades on the topic of commodity chains, following Hopkins's and Wallerstein's initial development of the concept in 1977. These authors introduced the term to describe the linkages between activities and agents involved in creating goods and services within the global economy. While the term chain may suggest "a logical and ordered system that we can follow link by link," actually unraveling the system is seldom an easy task (Stone et al. 2000: 21). However, focusing on commodity chains offers a means to go beyond the local level and in doing so helps to reveal the exploitation, unequal rewards, and hidden costs that may lie hidden elsewhere along the chain.

Referring to new developments in pro-poor and fair-trade tourism, Mowforth and Munt (2008) point to the tendency of large-scale tourism operators to diversify their operations by associating their products with the notion of sustainability, if always in ways that reflect their own interests. These divergent interests are reflected in the proliferation of eco-labels and certification schemes. Eco-labeling is intended to indicate the measure of responsibility with which tour companies or hotels carry out their operations. Theoretically, labeling should enable both producers and consumers to identify service providers whose practices do not have negative social or ecological effects. However, today's bewildering array of labels and logos renders it virtually impossible to distinguish the relative merits of each scheme and may even influence the limited consumer demand for certified holidays (Mowforth and Munt 2008: 203).
Various authors have pointed to the pitfalls inherent in the practice of eco-labeling—popular from deluxe resorts to supermarkets—given the fact that the people responsible for awarding certifications are generally the same as those who run the businesses, resulting in little more than a green façade. Melo (2010), for example, points to the shakiness of some of the assumptions that characterize current eco-chic development models, emphasizing that producers and consumers are attracted to “fair trade” for widely divergent reasons. Whereas Ecuador’s Arima Cacao, for example, represents good taste and a genuine interest in traditional foods on the part of European and American consumers, it may prove to be an extremely risky enterprise for small Ecuadorian farmers who would be much better off growing newer cacao variants without all of the bureaucratic hassle.

As academics, we have a responsibility to point out the often long and untrustworthy commodity chains in which fair-trade goods are embedded and to call for strict national and international government policies to guarantee that such programs have a future. Notwithstanding a justified skepticism regarding the self-regulating behavior of green industries, there are a number of exciting new possibilities and actors on the horizon. A relatively new focus in the global value chain, for example, is the consumer-citizen’s manipulation of brands, as described by Robert Foster in his contribution to this volume. Foster argues that the importance of consumption in value creation—the marking and making of a product’s difference and distinction—and of risk management in brand valuation present new possibilities for consumer-citizenship. On the one hand, the capacity of consumers’ use of products to exceed the control of corporate brand owners potentially destabilizes the qualifications attached to a brand or product. On the other hand, the process of brand valuation itself introduces an element of uncertainty into the management of brands, one result of which has been the emergence of new ways of auditing the social and environmental responsibility of corporations. These conditions of value creation and calculation offer consumers and consumer groups modest resources for what Foster calls a “politics of products,” which contests the ways in which corporate brand owners conduct business. To illustrate this phenomenon he draws from historical and ethnographic research on the Coca-Cola Company, especially on the company’s recent initiatives in marketing its beverage products, some of which illustrate the concept of eco-chic surprisingly well. Foster’s examples include the Campaign Against Killer Coke initiated in 2003 by U.S. activists responding to allegations of labor abuses at bottling plants in Colombia. Foster examines the company’s response to this campaign, including partnerships with environmental NGOs, as forms of what former Coca-Cola CEO, Neville Isdell, calls “connected capitalism.” Foster’s chapter concludes with a sympathetic but critical assessment of the capacity of consumer-citizens to bring about economic and social justice.

Sabine Luning and Marjo de Theije’s chapter focuses on another type of partnership, discussing ethical jewelry initiatives developed by NGOs such as Solidaridad and the Alliance for Responsible Mining. These initiatives promise to create supply chains that allow consumers to do good when they buy gold jewelry, creating positive connections with not only the recipient of their gift but also its producers. Gold has a longstanding reputation as a symbol of the social good, epitomizing social values such as trust, love,
notions of nature and of terroir? How do we negotiate the epistemic authority we may be granted when we prioritize what we feel needs to be sustained most urgently? How might we contribute more to the transparency of complex global value chains? In our critical assessment of the power structures that underlie certification, what better alternatives can we propose, and can and should we intervene in our own academic environments to promote the adoption of green consumption and regulation at our universities and research institutes? Can we be postcynical and as scholars link up to social movements that have put sustainability high on the agenda? While we hope that this book will shed critical light on the complexities of green consumption, moving toward a real commitment to ethical and sustainable academic practice will require us to develop a reflexive, publicly engaged stance that goes beyond these pages.
Chapter 1: The Paradoxes of Eco-Chic

1. An opposite but related trend is the Barefoot Bloggers Initiative, with its own practical guide that advises users on how to grow a sustainable, green blog and that features articles from some of the world’s most influential green bloggers.

2. The Asian Tigers are commonly understood to include South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, although reference is sometimes made to the Asian Cubs of Malaysia, Vietnam, and Thailand.

3. For Green Daoism, see Duara (2011). The UK-based “Muslim lifestyle magazine” Emel published a theme issue on Green Islam in June 2009 using the somewhat provocative title “eco jihad,” using the term to refer to Muslim environmental activists and invoking the Islamic imperative that posits humans as khalifas (stewards) of the earth. See also Abdul-Matin (2010).

4. CSR is usually shorthand for extra attention to corporations’ responsibility to contribute to sustainable development, the welfare of the local population, and ecosystems of the landscapes in which they operate. CSR campaigns have long been favored by major Western companies such as Shell, Nike, and, in Robert Foster’s contribution to this volume, Coca-Cola; they are currently becoming increasingly popular among corporate players in the South as well. Whereas some see CSR as a means to reinvent the very meaning of development itself (Blowfield 2005), others fear the (unintended) consequences of large companies becoming the engine for development.

5. For a genealogy of the concept and its latest resurrection as a global value chain, see Bair (2009).

6. Mowforth and Munt give the example of the WTTC, a global coalition of chief executives from all sectors of the travel and tourism industry, which encourages governments, in cooperation with the private sector, to harness the industry’s growth while at the same time pursuing sustainable development through industry environmental initiatives such as the Green Globe scheme. They point out that, given the WTTC’s location in the global North and the predominance of first-world members, such initiatives are doomed to help reproduce global inequalities.

7. In recent years, eco-fashion has increasingly been picked up by Asian designers, for example in Malaysia and Indonesia, where interestingly enough organic and natural clothing is often dubbed “ethnic,” signaling a return to tradition rather than only nature.