The deeply grounded studies in this book pose a fascinating question: under what conditions could eco-chic consumption become the new normal?

Eco-smart consumption already resonates with many hopes and plans, from keeping the planet Earth alive to promoting a less toxic humanity, and from developing more authentic selves to ending economic inequality. But several issues may prevent these hopes from becoming a reality.

Most important, the corporate engine of economic growth is fueled by selling more products to more consumers in more places at more times. A big business that claims to promote ecological rules of production is a corporate oxymoron, for regardless of its pious pronouncements, its everyday operations, from sourcing raw materials to disposing waste, tend to deplete and pollute natural resources.

We have little chance to escape this iron cage. In the more developed countries where people use consumption choices to express their individuality, marketing gurus have already split the commodity atom into an infinite variety of niches and brands. If we don’t like fat, they sell us lean. If we don’t want to wear leather shoes, they make them from fabric. They call their factory-processed food products *natural*, and when we no longer believe that label, they change it to a vaguer claim like *fresh* or *quality*.

Moreover, shifting consumption preferences in the Global North make it possible to expand consumption in the Global South. Growing demand for eco-tourist sites in Costa Rica and Vietnam, organically grown, fair-trade, shade-grown coffee beans from Guatemala, and relaxing spas on Bali enlarge the scale of these activities, which in turn spurs transnational corporate takeovers of individual, domestic producers. Corporate control raises the financial stakes, which likely puts more pressure on land and water. If economic benefits flow down to the work force at all, they transform men and women who had eked out a modest subsistence into ambitious consumers who want better, and easier, lives.

Transnational corporations (TNCs) have leaped at the opportunity. With shifting consumption preferences and saturated markets in the Global North, TNCs direct their efforts to emerging markets in the Global South. KFC and Pizza Hut are building franchises throughout China and Cambodia, and obesity rates there are climbing (Gomez 2013). Global beverage producers SABMiller and Diageo are moving into Africa, selling
small, cheap bottles of beer to low-wage workers and forcing individual home brewers out of business (Sonne, Maylie, and Hinshaw 2013). The Cheesecake Factory is opening branches in Mexico and Kuwait in partnership with local corporations (Kowitt 2013a, b). Do consumers in Latin America and the Persian Gulf states need more fast food in their shopping malls?

Consumers always say they want a choice. And desires, though socialized by norms and values, are hard to direct into ethical channels. A few years ago, animal-rights activists persuaded fashion designers to stop using fur. But today, rabbit-fur hats and raccoon collars are back on the runways, in the fashion magazines, and on retail websites and in the stores. “If it’s cute, I want it,” a teenager once told me about the way she shops. Empowering consumers has cultivated a sense of entitlement rather than a sense of responsibility.

For those who choose to live simply, their ethical beliefs have been commercialized, corporatized, and turned into an oxymoron, too. The slogan of the magazine Real Simple and its website is “Life Made Easier.” Sometimes these media platforms preach the message that consumers should reflect on, reorganize, and relinquish some of the stuff they own. But they never say, “Don’t buy.” Instead, they promote the same programmatic steps to happiness as other lifestyle guides, soothing consumers’ anxieties by submerging them in contradictions. Real Simple promises to show us “five ways to be patient,” along with “15 quick fixes to make around your house, 15-minute projects that won’t put a dent in your weekend.” The media seem to know us better than we know ourselves. We want happiness, we will buy it if it is for sale, and we want it now.

If we believe what the lifestyle media tell us, living simply means buying the right kind of goods, which will raise our self-worth. With this in mind, Real Simple presents “9 food items you can feel good about buying” because a portion of the revenues will be donated to charity (http://www.realsimple.com, April 18, 2013). The partnership between buying well and doing good has become a quick-fix Protestant Ethic for the new era of consumer capitalism. But it erases the moral dimension of choice and hides economic inequality. It suggests that consumers help the poor when we buy more.

With no sense of irony, Real Simple promotes a list of products whose very names are a parody of eco-chic pretentions. We see Häagen-Dazs black cherry amaretto gelato, Jcoco Edamame Sea Salt Chocolate Bars, and Davidson’s Tulsi Chai Tea, “a blend of Rooibos leaves and three varieties of holy basil, ... caffeine-free ... full-bodied and rich with minerals and antioxidants.” There is a degree of self-righteousness, a conspicuous consumption of nature, and a sense of indulgence that recalls Thorstein Veblen’s caustic critique of the leisure class.

The power of corporations to control our thoughts by media content and seductive advertisements is hardly new. But the co-optation of our better selves in the connected capitalism advocated by the former CEO of Coca-Cola is less transparent and even more effective than magazines and ads. Our living space is colonized by demonstrations of corporate social responsibility. On Earth Day 2013, for example, fashion boutiques in New York City featured installations and window displays to glamorize nature. Ralph Lauren’s windows in the West Village showed “a composting station complete with bins
and gardening tools to educate shoppers on fun ways to turn ordinary waste into rich, organic compost naturally” (Wilson 2013). And when corporations persuade us they are good, we internalize their brands. Coke, Whole Foods, Ralph Lauren: these are not just trusted products that we choose; they are US.

How can we escape the iron cage of brandization? Consumer goods corporations, backed by governments, control the global circulation of products, images, and values. When Bart Barendregt and Rivke Jaffe, the editors of this book, ask us to take a postcynical stand on consumption, they are pointing to the limits of consumers’ moral indignation and, also, perhaps, to the limits of our social action. Effective action requires community support and a political infrastructure: more grassroots movements, less corporate sponsorship; more local networks, less Facebook.

To recruit believers, these new movements must combine ethics and aesthetics. This, after all, is the promise of eco-chic consumption: we can give up more while getting better. Though the appeal of less but better reflects a self-interested concern with happiness, it also represents a collective anxiety about constant change, about endless promises of abundance, and about visions of progress promoted by government and interpreted by corporations. Yearning for authenticity is one way of expressing the anxiety. But authenticity often becomes a weapon of those consumers who already have the financial resources to choose, whether they are foodies, gentrifiers, or hybrid-electric car owners. The next step is to connect individual choices to a production system that responds to, rather than manipulates, collective needs. A more authentic self is fundamentally a more social self.

Becoming more socially conscious consumers is an urgent goal. This requires us to develop new ways of seeing the world—and of seeing ourselves in relation to that world. Eco-chic says that making the right consumption choices is a matter of style. But eco-smart says that making the right choices is a matter of survival.