The Green Paradox:
Conscious Consumerism and Environmentalism in Contemporary Discourse

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What Does "Green" Really Mean Anyway?

Ask this question and you might get no more conclusive an answer than the most recent variation on the trend-spotter's old saw: "GREEN IS THE NEW BLACK." It's both the title of a guide published in the fall of 2008, and a slogan that has already cropped up on countless t-shirts and reusable tote bags. It is undeniable that the notion of "green" as a sort of panacea for all our consumption-related global ills – from energy use to plastic grocery bags – has become ubiquitous. You can hardly turn on a TV, turn a page in a magazine, or scroll down a website without receiving some kind of message encouraging you to be greener, or reassuring you that the consumer choices you've made are, on some level, ecologically informed. And yet, there doesn't seem to be any real consensus about what "green" really means. In a recent interview on CBS the chairman of General Motors, Bob Lutz, spoke with Leslie Stahl about their new "green cars"

program and the (primarily) electric Chevrolet Volt, a car that is already being touted, though it will not be on the market until 2010, in ads that are splashed with green backgrounds and text and depict the car sitting in a field of flowers in an alpine valley – basically green advertising by the book. Lutz was happy to talk about fuel efficiency during the interview but did nothing to retract a statement that he made in January of 2008 that "manmade global warming is a crock of shit." To quote Stahl: "He's no environmentalist." Clearly, the new "green" rhetoric allows for some ideological elbow-room that "environmental" does not.[1]

The current moment in public discourse and consumer habits related to the environment is a unique one. As information about the rate of climate change has diffused itself through the American populace, along with more troubling and palpable manifestations such as the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina and a seemingly endless series of floods and wild fires, a new, concerned consumer has emerged. In the mid-'90s, consumer-culture theorist Juliet Schor identified the roots of this movement in her assessment of the phenomenon of "downshifting," which was a vaguely Gen-X affiliated push to replace material and monetary "wealth" with less stress in daily life and more meaningful work. Implicit in this behavior was a shift away from "growth" both economic and material as the loftiest ideal of American living. Unsurprisingly, there was crossover among Schor's subjects into ecologically minded behaviors such as recycling, the re-use of objects and materials, the DIY aesthetic, and other symbolic behaviors rejecting the dispersed, globalized economy:

> Some Americans are pursuing another path. Want less. Live more simply. Slow down and get in touch with nature. A growing voluntary simplicity movement is rejecting the standard path of work and spend. This is a committed and self-conscious group of people who believe that spending less

[1] Stahl, Leslie, "Race for the Electric Car; Tesla's Roadster," *60 Minutes*, CBS, October 5, 2008.

> does not reduce their quality of life and may even raise it.[2]

Ten years on, many of these same indicators are now grouped under the rubric of the "green" economy. The rhetoric of downshifting for personal health has been transformed into that of consuming fewer and more "responsibly" chosen goods, and less energy for the good of community and planet. And yet, this "downshifted" behavior seems to have backed itself into an ideological corner, as, even while trying to step aside from rampant consumption, the debate about how to effect such changes in our lives and communities remains centered on the choices of individual consumers. It is the chain of consumption, rather than the actions of a voting public that takes the central role. While there are a host of terms that overlap in the Venn diagram of these issues – sustainable, organic, biodynamic, energy-efficient – in the past three years, a macro term has come to function as a catch-all for this realm of cultural affiliation: "green." But this is not the green of the Green Party, of Greenpeace, or any other such politically loaded associations.

"Environmental," and adjectives of its ilk suggest a defined political focus on issues relating to one's surroundings. Take for example, the subtleties of use and meaning in just one paragraph of the recent manifesto put forward by Michael Nordhaus and Ted Shellenberger, "The Death of Environmentalism":

> The concepts of "nature" and "environment" have been thoroughly deconstructed. Yet they retain their mythic and debilitating power within the environmental movement and the public at large. If one understands the notion of the "environment" to include humans, then the way the environmental community designates certain problems as environmental and others as not is completely arbitrary. Why, for instance, is a *human*-made phenomenon like global warming — which may kill hundreds of millions of *human beings* over the next century — considered "environmental"? Why are poverty and war not considered environmental problems while global warming is? What are the implications

[2] Schor, Juliet, *The Overspent American* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 133.

> of framing global warming as an *environmental* problem – and handing off the responsibility for dealing with it to "environmentalists"? [3]

We appear to be poised at a moment in which even the correlation of "environmental" with the non-human "natural" world seems to be under question. It seems that the terms of discussion call for greater specificity, or perhaps even a new vocabulary that marks a necessary shift from thinking of the world in terms of man vs. nature, to understanding our place in a complex web of systems that links everything from uninhabited wilderness to the block where my apartment building sits in post-industrial Brooklyn. As the popular contender for this role, however, "green" as a term is alarmingly opaque. In fact, its popularity in public and commercial discourse seems due to its very history-less-ness. It doesn't carry the ideological heft of its precursors "environmental," "organic" or "eco-," which are loaded with debate over their exact meanings, with specific standards governing their use, and with an implied opposition to commonplace systems and values.

Green, as simple as a slice of the color wheel, is free of the associations that might have scared off those who opposed such things in the past, or don't see themselves as particularly radical. It's a way of approaching the inevitable changes we are all going to have to make, without specifying exactly where. Green isn't an "-ism", or a term borrowed from the biological sciences; in its most literal sense it's one of the most basic words in any language, a structural part of our visible surroundings that's among the first things that a child learns to identify. How many shades one chooses to layer on top of this root is a matter of choice. This centrality of this experience to the majority of humans gives any ideas labeled "green" a certain amount of clout, but this same ubiquity brings

[3] Shellenberger, Michael and Ted Nordhaus, *The Death of Environmentalism*, Grist, http://www.grist.org/news/maindish/2005/01/13/doe-reprint/ (accessed November 4, 2008), 12.

with it a vagueness; if we all know what it means, there isn't any need for debate, is there?

In current parlance, green most often appears as shorthand for a promise to take into account issues relating to energy use, climate change, care of natural resources whenever possible, in ways left up to the individual (or corporation), and often without making any specific, quantifiable commitments. As the green of the commercial market has seeped into even legislative discussions about environmental benefit, citizen-consumers are receiving a flurry of competing messages depending on whose interests are being served. In a recent report on "Capturing the Green Advantage", published by consumer marketing firm the Boston Consulting Group, international respondents identified 15 different meanings for a "green product" that received varying percentages of strength depending on country. Definitions ranged from "products that can be recycled and reused" to "products that use innovative technology" to "products that are produced locally" – the last of which bottomed out with only 35% of consumers agreeing in some locations.[4] Green seems to function more as an aesthetic mood, and is inevitably reinforced through the zealous use of just about every shade in the Pantone scale from lime to forest, often with a proliferation of design details that suggest flowering vines, trees, leaves, "natural" life – in opposition to our sullied, mechanized modern existence.

Most troubling, the glib simplicity of the formulation "Green is the New Black," drawn as it is from the fashion industry – where each season's hit color is replaced by the next in order to move merchandise – suggests that a vital opportunity for social debate may be swept away as merely the latest fad. In this paper, I will examine the linguistic

[4] Manget, Joe et al, *Capturing the Consumer Advantage* (Boston, MA: the Boston Consulting Group, 2009), 10.

and visual discourses of advertisements and environmental-living guides, honing in on repeated tropes and visual motifs that have replicated themselves from the realm of consumer choice all the way through even "serious" news coverage on these issues. In this way, I hope to illuminate how purchasable, manufactured commodities have come to signify environmental protection, and, in the process, helped to narrow the domain of discussion on global well-being to the consumer sphere.

In order to better understand how we got from the three Rs of "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle" as the most common refrain of mass-messaging about environmental issues to today's message of "buy green" as the avenue believed to save us from climate-collapse peril, it is necessary to consider some of the development of such communications. The history of notions of "green" travels along two parallel paths: the growth of an awareness of an "environment" as distinct from the realm of human activities, which gave rise to the environmental movement; and the shift of Western societies to consumption economies. While my overview of each subject will necessarily be more brief than is due such crucial categories of modern historical analysis, I hope to show how the development of the consumer economy and the parallel tendency to carve the non-human world into usable chunks are inextricably intertwined, and have brought us to the current paradox, in which we buy to save the environment which is being devastated by the systems of consumerism.