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April 2009

The New Economics of Sustainable Consumption: Seeds of Change

Gill Seyfang, edited by David Elliott; Energy, Climate and the Environment Series; Houndmills, Basingstoke Hampshire; Palgrave MacMillan; 2009; 218 pages; £50.00; ISBN-10: 0-230-52533-4

Gill Seyfang opens this study of sustainable consumption possibilities with a trenchant observation: "Shopping to save the planet is big business" (p.1). With that, she foregrounds the themes of sustainability that have animated mainstream economic contexts. If, as she says, "Green is the new black" (p.168), then *Seeds of Change* is about (1) interrogating the consequences of green marketing driven by a consumption-based approach; and (2) proposing an alternate model of sustainable consumption built upon the goals of the New Economics. Her central argument is that mainstream sustainable consumption models may ask us to consume differently, but consume nonetheless they demand. Without a critique of market-driven consumption, something New Economics offers, nothing really changes.

In the early chapters of the book, she compares the characteristics of mainstream sustainable consumption to the model of sustainable consumption promoted by the New Economics. The former relies on the concept of resource efficiency achieved by consuming differently (while still consuming at full strength). Individual consumers, in this mode, send "buy" signals that are assessed using traditional measures of economic growth (GDP, spending, etc.). Seyfang argues that this approach sells "one crucial meta-message: namely that consumerism as a way of life offers answers to our problems, and is not negotiable" (p.44).

The New Economics, on the other hand, offers a radically different approach to sustainable consumption. In this framework, the goal is to consume less, not just differently, to reshape "infrastructures of provision," and to provide non-market alternatives to consumption. The New Economics focuses on sustainable well-being which "encompasses new [and broader] definitions of wealth and work, new uses of money and which integrates ethics into economic life" (p.61). Seyfang's distinction here becomes all the more important in this age of resurgent neoliberal global economic policies. IMF, World Bank, and G-20 plans and policies dominate the discursive landscape of contemporary economic thought in a way that renders alternatives invisible. Seyfang's focus on the New Economics of sustainable consumption clearly reminds us that the common features of market economy frames constitute only one way of looking at economic sustainability.

Because of its relative ease of applicability, Seyfang's most valuable contribution is the evaluation framework provided for analysing sustainable consumption. Seyfang isolates five processes that characterise effective sustainable consumption based in the New Economics. These are:

Localisation: reducing supply chain lengths; buy local campaigns; establishing local economies.

Reducing ecological footprints: cutting resource use; reducing demand; voluntary simplicity.

Community-building: valuing a range of work and skills in communities; nurturing cohesive communities.

Collective action: creating opportunities for people to make effective decisions about their lives and communities.

Building new infrastructures of provision: establishing systemic ways of exchange for people and communities to use, which value the characteristics and processes listed above.

This set of indicators becomes, for Seyfang, a critical evaluation tool for sustainable consumption. She then applies the metric to specific grassroots innovations that directly engage these processes. Seyfang foregrounds these “bottom-up solutions” because they “respond to the local situation and interests and values of communities involved” (p. 64). The second half of the book closely examines grassroots innovations in three fundamental areas of provision: food, housing, and finance. In each case, Seyfang assesses the project in light of the above New Economics sustainable consumption indicators. In the analysis of food provision, she examines local and organic food networks such as Eostre Organics. In the housing arena, she looks at grassroots sustainable housing initiatives such as the Canelo Project and Earthship Biotecture. Finally, in her study of grassroots innovations in finance, she considers complimentary currencies and time banks.

A critical aspect of each case study is the determination of each innovation’s potential for diffusion into larger contexts. Seyfang isolates three processes for diffusing niche innovations: upscaling, in which activities grow in scale; replication, in which activities grow in popularity across contexts; and translation, in which niche practices are adopted by the mainstream arena. The latter, for Seyfang, is the “principal method for *changing* mainstream practices, as opposed to simply growing niche practices” (p. 173, emphasis original). In each case study, and for a variety of reasons, Seyfang discovers significant obstacles to diffusion of niche innovations. Diffusion is, indeed, the stumbling block, as she contends that change “occurs most readily when the niche and the regime resonate together in terms of values, organizational forms, contexts, metrics, and so on” (p.173).

Seyfang concludes by offering three strategies designed to increase the rate of successful diffusion. The first involves the need for mainstream recognition of grassroots initiatives. The second requires the recognition of community action as a “previously neglected site of innovation” (p.183). Finally, Seyfang argues that government support, not control, from the top-down is needed to enable bottom-up initiatives to thrive. Because Seyfang introduces this prescription in the final chapter, she is limited in the opportunity to expand. A fuller examination of methods to overcome obstacles to diffusion would have been especially welcome, given the rigorous analysis that gets us to this point. To do so, however, might have doubled the size of the text, the primary purpose of which is to provide readers with a tool to evaluate green innovative practices coming out of localized contexts. And it is that evaluation of indicators that provides the greatest contribution in Seyfang’s text. With more formal evaluation metrics like this available, sustainable consumption activities can be assessed by researchers, policy makers, and students in a range of disciplines (business, environmental studies, public policy, etc.). Even better, the book as a whole gives us a very straightforward method for distinguishing between, on the one hand, viable sustainable consumption practices based in the goals of the New Economics and, on the other hand, the big business model of conspicuous--albeit *green*--consumption. As a business professor, I cannot think of a better lesson for my MBA students to learn.