

# Post-Consumer Sustainability

A review of *Sustainability by Design: A Subversive Strategy for Transforming Our Consumer Culture* by John R. Ehrenfield

Book Review by Mick Womersley

“Sustainability is the possibility that human and other life will flourish on the Planet forever.” With this mantra, John Ehrenfield begins his exploration of the “demand-side” of sustainability. This is a good thing he’s doing with this book. And timely. Our emerging profession and discipline is enjoying a flush of excitement, as we finally approach a real, national climate-and-energy policy, among other goodies, and so far too few of us have explored this side of the equation recently. For good reason, though: We’re going to be very busy now.

Despite the fact that we may not be thinking about it right at this moment, I think most of us *have* worried at some point in our lives and careers about consumption and demand, and about the addictive nature of consumer society. If you’ve been around the world of sustainability for a while, or studied economics from a critical viewpoint, or, for that matter read Emerson or Thoreau, or Geddes or Ruskin, most of what Ehrenfield has to say you’ve thought of or heard of before. All of the theory will be familiar, even homely or homespun. Yet Ehrenfield explores the territory with fresh eyes and suggests some practical, day-to-day understandings that are helpful.

Here’s the basic thesis. My words, not his: *If we learn to make a product or service more sustainable, all we’ve probably done is figure out how to make the wrong thing for a longer time. What we need to learn is to make not just any thing, but the right thing, for as long as possible.*

Ehrenfield demonstrates, to good effect, that when we approach sustainability only from the supply side, essentially reforming the factory, while we may be able to produce stuff more efficiently, we don’t ask important questions about what kind of stuff, or for what purpose. Even when we reduce the energy and resources necessary to make a particular widget, we still end up making the same old widgets. If they started out as stupid, silly, or addictive widgets, they will be so after they are being made more sustainably.

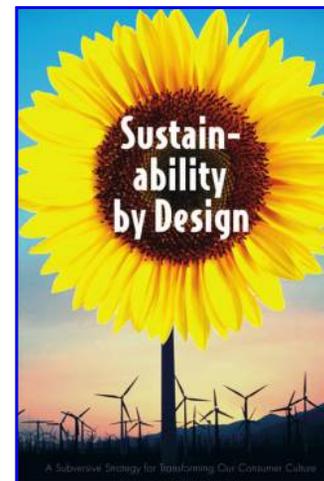
As Ehrenfield points out, the sustainability profession has become obsessed with “inside of the box” solutions that aim merely to reform capitalist industrialism, specifically the nature and by-products of production. The examples he gives comprise the most popular programs, “The Natural Step,” the “Triple Bottom Line,” and “Natural Capitalism.” Trying to reform the factory, we’ve ignored the consumer. But the consumer is not actually a consumer. She’s a human being.

Longer term, systemic answers are to be found by asking deeper, more existential questions about stuff and what it’s good for. The answers to such questions need to be built into the design of new stuff.

Ehrenfield is sensible enough to concede early on that humans have legitimate biological needs and legitimate appetites, and so avoids the trap ascetics have always fallen into—the fact that most of us don’t want to be ascetics. Even so, what we do is often biologically and psychologically maladaptive. Instead of pursuing commodified solutions to hunger pangs and other biological or psycho-spiritual needs, what we really need, according to Ehrenfield, is a more authentic form of consumption in which the consumer as human being is involved in the process. But instead of the usual proposal for authenticity, a “good life” back-to-the-land simplicity, Ehrenfield suggests that good design can be industrial and participatory, even when the final product is to be efficiently mass-produced. And if products and services can be more carefully designed with consumers at hand in the process, so can institutions, such as branches of government or charities.

I agreed with most of what I was reading. But as usual, up to this point, there was a nagging worry, and funny enough it was the same nagging worry that I had when I first read *Natural Capitalism* (Little, Brown and Co., 1999), the book (and theory) of sustainability by gurus Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins, and L. Hunter Lovins, that Ehrenfield was quick to dismiss as short-termism.

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Herman Daly, who I believe first coined the phrase "natural capital," speaks and writes often of his worry that ecological economics and sustainability discourse is concentrating on the supply side of the equation. With John Cobb Jr. in *For the Common Good* (Beacon Press, 1989), Daly also explored the demand side of sustainability. But for Daly, it wasn't the demand or the supply side that was the problem. It was our overall lack of any kind of theory in ecological macroeconomics.

Conventional macroeconomics has both demand-side and supply-side variants, although neither has much to do with the existential questions posed by Ehrenfield. The goal of macroeconomic policy in countries ruled by both demand side and supply-side theory is to increase production, or gross domestic product, to make more wealth, to make more people better off. Dispute occurs primarily over whether the government or the market is the efficient distributor of this wealth.

For sustainability advocates, academics, and professionals, this is not a moot question. Wealth, in the

form of useful goods and services, is what we are about creating, more sustainably. But how it gets to be distributed is very important, particularly if it turns out that one or the other form of distribution requires significantly more wealth for any "rising tide to lift all boats."

Put simply, if we are to stop producing cheap plastic junk, well, we also have to have dignified employment and lifestyles for those who currently survive by making it or selling it. Ehrenfield dodges this issue quite handily, and doesn't tell us what to do about distribution and inequality. This is a big problem for me as a critical reader, and I'm afraid all sustainability books that don't at least begin to help me understand the spectrum of solutions will fall short.

Like Daly, I'm going to have to wait for my ecological macroeconomics. Other than that, this is an excellent book, and recommended.

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