



RESEARCH CONFERENCES

ESF-LiU Conference

Eco-Chic: Connecting Ethical, Sustainable and Elite Consumption

10 - 14 October 2011

Scandic Linköping Vast, Linköping, Sweden

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Conference Highlights

Please provide a brief summary of the conference and its highlights in non-specialist terms (especially for highly technical subjects) for communication and publicity purposes. (ca. 400-500 words)

The topic of this four-day conference was the emergent phenomenon of eco-chic: a combination of lifestyle politics, environmentalism, spirituality, beauty, health, which is often combined with a call to return to simple living. Eco-chic connects ethical, sustainable and elite consumption. It is increasingly a part of the identity kit of the upper-classes, as taste and style can go hand in hand with care for personal wellness and the environment. The conference approached eco-chic as a set of practices and an ideological frame but also as a much-used marketing strategy, that has emerged in the rich North as well as in the less affluent global South. The conference addressed three main questions: To what extent do eco-chic's various forms and appearances rely on specific local contexts? Why is it exactly now, at this particular moment in advanced capitalism, that eco-chic has become so popular in the formulation of new identities? And, lastly, in which ways eco-chic, with its apparent paradox of consumption and idealism, can make a genuine contribution to solving the main problems of our time and thus contribute to debates on sustainable development?

Seven key note speakers addressed the above mentioned questions, complemented by another eighteen short talks and the subsequent discussions that followed upon these presentations. They addressed a broad range of topics (from food, tourism and clothing to architecture, biking and parks), based on cases from a variety of geographical contexts (from Europe and North America to India, Latin America and Africa). The themes that emerged through this range of keynotes and short talks included the following: 1. the spatiality of eco-chic; 2. the need for eco-chic as a new paradigm; 3. an explanation of its present omnipresence; 4. the material aspects of eco-chic (as opposed to eco-chic's more ideological aspects); 5. the downsides of eco-chic and its possible reactionary character; 6. eco-chic as an ideology and possible means of inclusion and exclusion.

In addition, in the forward look session, emphasis was placed on the role of eco-chic in future formulations of citizenship, and the role of academics in outlining modes of sustainability that avoid reproducing the status quo.

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Scientific Report

Executive Summary

(2 pages max)

The topic of this four-day conference was the emergent phenomenon of eco-chic: a combination of lifestyle politics, environmentalism, spirituality, beauty, health, which is often combined with a call to return to simple living. This combination is increasingly a part of the identity kit of the upper-classes, as taste and style can go hand in hand with care for personal wellness and the environment. Specific cultural objects feature significantly in eco-chic: 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. From the outset we were interested in eco-chic as a set of practices and an ideological frame but also as a much-used marketing strategy, that has not only emerged in the rich North but of which the ideas are increasingly also promoted and appropriated in the less affluent global South.

The accelerating pace of Western societies has given rise to local counter-movements such as Slow Food, Analogue Living and the Wellness revolution. Such processes generally oppose globalization and the fragmented nature of the postmodern era. Answers are sought in nostalgic, neo-traditional and explicitly local solutions: the slow, the natural and the authentic. These are apolitical but apparently socially committed lifestyles. Concern regarding the environment is no longer restricted to subcultures. On the contrary, consuming the natural and the slow is instrumental in creating and maintaining class distinction: examples include the middle-class popularity of organic and fair-trade food and clothing. However, as radical societal change towards sustainable development appears increasingly difficult to achieve, 'green' lifestyles and 'ethical consumption' have emerged as attractive alternative propositions in moving towards 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.

Our own research had focused on the spatial nature of environmentalism, class and development in South East Asia and the Caribbean. We have identified eco-chic processes ranging from the 'Rasta chic' of Jamaica to the spa culture of South East Asia. Similarly, scholars working in Europe and beyond have started to connect environmentalism and ethics to globalized identities, consumption and elite lifestyles. An important focus for this conference was on eco-chic as an antidote to one-sided Western forms of modernization and globalization. It representing a combination of environmental awareness with a revalorization of local, often 'indigenous' tastes and traditions that predate the global era, preferably harking back to pre-colonial 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. A major paradox of eco-chic, then, is that the aforementioned Western (and often European) ideas that emphasize the local are also subject to global circulation, often with unforeseen consequences. Tropes of 'economic development' and 'progress' are replaced by 'sustainability' and 'authenticity'. In this fashion, 'indigenous' qualities become modern, and eco-chic provides an answer to a unilateral Western definition of modernity. Organic farming is no longer Western and modern, but rather, based on ancient imperial yin-yang philosophies. Here too, eco-chic, as a form of cultural and moral capital, is instrumental in achieving class distinction and self-aristocratization. The localist, nationalist or anti-globalist countercultural movements and ideologies that, in many cases, precede eco-chic consumption are commodified and repackaged as consumer products. Oppositional symbols are pacified and marketed as distinctly local, but globally recognizable versions of ethical, environmental and elite consumption. Such strategies of production and consumption allow upper classes to embrace a locally rooted lifestyle without sacrificing a cosmopolitan orientation in terms of comfort and style.

The main questions that were addressed during this meeting were: to what extent do eco-chic's various forms and appearances rely on specific local contexts? Why is it exactly now, at this particular moment in advanced capitalism, that eco-chic has become so popular in the formulation of new identities? And, lastly, in which ways eco-chic, with its

apparent paradox of consumption and idealism, can make a genuine contribution to solving the main problems of our time and thus contribute to debates on sustainable development?

Scientific Content of the Conference

(1 page min.)

- Summary of the conference sessions focusing on the scientific highlights
- Assessment of the results and their potential impact on future research or applications

Seven key note speakers addressed the above mentioned questions, complemented by another eighteen short talks and the subsequent discussions that followed upon these presentations. The most important outcomes are summarized here under the following headings: 1. the spatiality of eco-chic in various societies worldwide; 2. the need for eco-chic as a new paradigm; 3. an explanation of its present omnipresence; 4. the material aspects of eco-chic (as opposed to eco-chic's more ideological aspects (see 6)); 5. the downsides of eco-chic and its possible reactionary character; 6. eco-chic as an ideology and possible means of inclusion and exclusion.

1. The spatiality of eco-chic:

In their contribution Murray and Welch-Devine scrutinized the emergence and consequences of 'eco-chic' ideologies and practices among farmers and consumers in the Basque region of southwestern France. Beginning with the first Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC) designation of cheeses in 1980, the Basque region rapidly established itself as a place where small, family farmers adopted value-added modes of agricultural production, focusing on quality products rather than volume as an important strategy. Sarah Goler also discusses such recent manifestations of what she dubbed 'terroirism'; the cultural constructed meaning of particular locales, with a particular focus on how such meanings are manifested through branding and labeling of certain food specialties. An emphasis on traditional and quality products has become an important marketing tool in the European Union and is a way for rural areas to not only reinvent themselves but also to do so in a very modern and increasingly uniform way. These connections between agricultural product, producer, consumer and place often rely on urban consumers' nostalgic ideas of rural places and their search for 'authentic' products. What is masked by such discussions is that many of the stake-holding companies are actively supported by respectively nationalist policies and big agricultural lobbies, each with their own hidden agendas. This raises the question what recent disputes over food names have to say not only about the current status of the EU, but also how such relocalizations - often due to the uncertainties felt in an increasingly globalised era - take place in other societies than those of the EU. Geography matters, and many participants urged for more research in places other than Western Europe or the United States, looking at how place is instrumental to a different extent in East Europe, Latin America, Asia or Africa.

2. The need for a new paradigm?

The question of why eco-chic has become such an important force *now* refers to the need to put much of what has variously been addressed as green, sustainable or ethical consumption in both a historical and geographical context. Consumption as a road to politics is nothing new, as many speakers illustrated during the conference, pointing for example to the continuity between anti-slavery boycotts or today's anti-sweatshop campaigns. What is new about this 'political consumership' is that the biggest global players in the business now realize that for brands to maintain a good reputation they need to be involved in an ongoing dialogue with their consumers, NGOs, labor organizations and other 'stakeholders'. Radicalism is thus making way for reformism and gradual achievement through stakeholder meetings or other more business-oriented events. Today, sustainability and ecological awareness also have become mainstream with Sainsbury and Tesco as the world's biggest retailers of Fair Trade products. Mike Goodman used the term iSustainability to refer to an era in which our choices as a consumer finally appear to have paved the way for new sustainabilities. Individuals are thus carrying out the ideals that formerly movements did, but now without the movements. Many of these developments have hitherto been monopolized by a few disciplines only, especially social psychologists and economists, to the extent that some even speak of "economics imperialism". The cultural turn introduced in this new field of eco-chic studies hopes to address other issues such as the cultural values of fairness

and sustainability and a serious inquiry into the relevance of a specific Judeo-Christian subtext. What about Green Daoism or Islamic environmentalism, or other geographies of eco-chic? Eco-chic ultimately leads to the intensification of identities at specific scales, but as was demonstrated by various papers during those four days, this takes on a wide range of cultural forms.

3. Omnipresence of eco-chic.

There is a plentitude of books and films dealing with eco-chic products, specifically fair, organic and healthy food. US focused films such as *Food Inc.*, *Fast Food Nation* and *The Future of Food* have helped wellness, bodily health and ethical consumption to enter a mainstream discourse, in practice co-creating the new sort of audience that today's foodies are. The question remains what public discussions are engendered through these media, with what kind of audience in mind, and more importantly whose story is told here, as we witness a public contestation over not only the meaning over healthy food but who are to be labeled as a gate-keeping elites in all of this. Adam Fish discussed the democratizing potential of media more broadly, using the example of US Current TV, showing how big corporate money and the latest technology enable an audience now to online vote for programs to be aired on old-style television. Parallels are to be found in ethical online forums such as *Goodguide.com* which help consumers to rate products according to various moral criteria. However, as Fish and others conclude, access to the latest glossy media does not simply imply more or better participation, nor does an increase in such participation necessarily entail a progressive foregrounding of more eco-minded issues. This is evident in the present popularity of the Tea Party in the US, as well as other examples of populist movements, some of which will be referred to below.

4. The very thingness of eco-chic:

Talking about eco-chic, speakers covered various broad categories: ranging from food, leisure, dwelling, clothing, hobbies and consumables to sheer lifestyle products such as spas, green technology or fairly-mined gold. Obviously eco-chic commodities may serve needs other than sustainability or ethical needs, their meaning is, again, very much dependent on a historical and culturally specific context. Richard Wilk explained how food activism historically has lent itself as an everyday act of 'moral balancing', an accounting cycle in which one's entire life is seen in terms of good and bad deeds, and in which one compensates the other. Again much of this may be part of a Judeo-Christian legacy which is currently significant in many of the consumer societies that have been studied so far. Various participants emphasized that the focus should be on the very stuff and materiality of eco-chic products in various cultural contexts, including the ways they are designed and marketed and to which kind of societal aesthetics they may appeal. Overall, eco-chic products can be characterized as making use of a certain enchantment or spectacle-isation, making overt reference to the aristocratic and highly aspired-to lifestyles of middle and upper classes worldwide. Spaargaren in his contribution warned that much 'eco-economizing' until now has often focused on an innovation and technology centric approach, with hardly any consideration of how to communicate such products to its users and how to make others than its producers enthusiastic. John Blewitt similarly showed how architecture and urban design in Europe, China and the Middle East has become a visual showcase that is very much reliant on the 'wow-factor' to convey and sell ideas to clients. Increasingly environmental sustainability is part of competition design briefs with such companies thus branding the meaning of urban sustainability, biodiversity and more broadly a popular understanding of nature in the city. More study should be focusing on this small elites of eco-chic producers in order to understand what makes eco-chic, chic, what are the kind of symbols that are being used and how well do some of these designs travel or not into other cultures?

5. Eco-chic as reactionary force

Eco-chic also represents something of a conservative politics in its relation to sustainable development, a feature with global salience. European "terroirism" has its equivalent in the farmer nationalism of "Agro-Americans". Both can be perceived as drawing on hegemonic discourses that safeguard the status quo. In this respect many speakers commented on the apparent paradoxes of eco-chic. One contradiction is apparent in the current fad of branding, corporate social responsibility and partnership as described by Robert Foster, who showed how even Coca Cola could be brought to its knees, 'simply' by activists participating at stake holders meetings. Still many considered it an

oxymoronic that Coca Cola, the flagship of capitalism, could enter into a partnership for poverty alleviation with Oxfam. Similarly Ben and Jerry ice-cream may be good to think about injustices in Nicaragua, but in terms of moral balancing is an absolute evil. The trick of eco-chic is to turn the seeming paradoxical into something non-paradoxical. Baumann showed us how 'foodies' columns in newspapers and culinary glossies made eating a political act, but in often unexpected ways. 'Good food' primarily comes to stress the supremacy of pleasure and less so justice and animal rights, let alone food security. Good food instead is portrayed as classless or - even worse - poverty and frugality are celebrated and thus romanticized. Eating thus becomes an apolitical act that upholds class distinction and even acts to mask such disparities. In this sense there is a striking similarity with similar phenomena in emergent economies such as China or India. Anantharaman illustrated how, with consumption patterns in India now beginning to move towards to the Western standard, an interest in green consumption is also taking hold of India's New Middle Classes. However, the consumption of green products, in her case the Go Green Go cycling bikes, have less to do with a burgeoning environmental awareness than with a new sort of status symbol, with green shops today being markedly high-end. Some speakers rightfully urged us to move beyond geographical compartments and focus instead on the connections between north and south, and the new forms of exploitation that now take place under the umbrella of eco-chic. A thorough analysis of commodity chains is needed in order to understand how eco-certificates run the risk of causing new instances of the global injustices they are actually meant to fight. Melo thus emphasized the risk of some of the assumptions in current eco-chic development models, demonstrating that producers and consumers can be into fair trade for widely divergent reasons. Whereas Ecuador's Ariba Cacao represents good taste and an a genuine interest in traditional foods on the side of Western 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 the bureaucratic hassle. Rumiche likewise scrutinized the popular eco-labeling practices in deluxe resorts in the Maldives, showing the very same people who are responsible for awarding certifications are in the business themselves, thus putting up a green façade. Mowforth was among the harshest critics of what he labeled as eco-gangsters, arguing the need for us academics to raise more awareness of the often long and untrustworthy commodity chains in which fair trade goods are embedded.

6. Eco-chic as ideology

Sustainability has become the key phrase of our era, to the extent that we hardly question what needs to be sustained, by whom and especially for whom? Could it, for example, be eco-chic to simply consume less and thus reject eco-chic as bold-faced capitalism in yet a newer guise? A good example is organically reared meat, which still contributes to more consumerism (and production of the greenhouse gas methane), not less. Similarly, Luning showed the dilemma of fair jewelry, which raised the dilemma of what to work with: 're-mined' gold with 50% now consisting of recycled gold and promising to be a green alternative, or gold that is mined under fair circumstances. And what are the alternatives to the eco-chic: the eco-ordinary, the eco-normal, being self-sustainable, self-sufficient and resilient? Food activism as a movement continues to be quite heterogeneous, and this goes for most manifestations of current eco-chic. People can do similar things for quite different reasons. In post-socialist states such as Lithuania or gang-war torn Mexico, the longing for traditional foods may offer different associations that have little to do with issues of sustainability. The Mexican taco or other maize-based recipes, for instance, stand for a different and more certain era that Mexicans yearn for nostalgically. We need to ask what it is that inspires people to "do" eco-chic, with more attention to possible antagonisms. Wilk referred to the historically situated phenomena found in Belize where the affluent once imitated the poor by humbly dressing up and eating as they did, a form of mockery which today still is to be found at websites such as People of Walmart.com. In this sense, going local, native or traditional, as is also found in the voluntary simplicity movement may well be a signifier of class that attracts only those who have a choice. Class antagonisms and other structural differences thus remain the fundamental fuel for most of today's consumer societies. As Josée Johnston argued in her talk on two Canadian neighborhoods, ethical consumption simply reinforces class distinction. However, ideas of place and context are found to be increasingly complicated in a society where Canadian food is fast food and healthy food is often no longer local but imported from elsewhere. New forms of exclusion are signaled by the global fashion for eco-chic, exclusions based on gender, ethnicity, race, religion, language, or sexuality. Adyar Eco Park in Chennai, discussed by Arabindoo, is an example of how Indian bourgeois environmentalism is far removed from the modern ideal of a civil society, with the Indian middle classes rather working as state mercenaries. In their desire to have the Adyar River Delta restored to its

original 'harmonious' state, this movement helped dispossess marginal communities that hitherto had used it to sustain a living. In this sense citizen politics easily become commodified, with the most engaged actors actually participating in projects of which they have little (ecological) awareness.

Forward Look

(1 page min.)

- *Assessment of the results*
- *Contribution to the future direction of the field – identification of issues in the 5-10 years & timeframe*
- *Identification of emerging topics*

In the forward look session hiatuses in the present research were recognised as well as those aspects which needed to be addressed in the forthcoming proceedings to be published by Berg, in late 2012. One of the issues that remained unaddressed or otherwise deserved a more thorough analysis was the motivation to opt for eco-chic products. What motivates people to be or consume / produce eco-chic? Who produces descriptions (narratives, images, symbols) and again how well do these designs travel? Also a focus on producers merits more attention, especially the ways they deal with regulations for fair-trade or sustainable products and how and by whom can interventions into these regulations take place. In addition we would like to single out two other issues that were prominently raised during the forward look session, i.e. the possible contribution of eco-chic as alternative means for citizenship and the possible role of us academics in such a process.

Eco-chic a trajectory for citizenship

'Political consumerism' - evident in forms of 'sustainable', 'green' and 'ethical' consumption - has become a formidable global force, with consumer choices emerging as an easy-access form of market-based politics. Reflecting the neoliberal turn, the market has become an important site of politics, collective action and ethics, where citizen-consumers are mobilized to incorporate non-economic values (such as the environment, social justice, and human rights) when selecting products and producers. This politicization of the market - and the concomitant privatization of politics - is sometimes seen as providing a more effective answer to economic globalization than 'old politics'. But what kind of new forms of participation are we looking at, and what is their potential? Sustainable citizenship implies a shared set of expectations about citizens' role in politics, but how important an environment friendly attitude is as a norm for citizenship, may again differ from one society to the other. With most researchers present still working on the USA or Western Europe we clearly lack comparative materials here. Michelletti sees a role for the sustainable citizen acting as a watch dog. Robert Foster showed how some of the biggest global brands have already come to provide a platform for civic action as such. With partnership and corporate social responsibility high on the agenda, new forms of active participation are now among the possibilities. Overall it's up to further research to see what the role of the state is, and how much of the future agenda is to be determined by multinational corporations or brands.

What can we add as academics?

A study of eco-chic behaviour should not restrict itself to the level of the individual, but focus on shared group behaviour towards consumption practices. It should also include our own responsibility in these issues, scrutinising, for example, how we as academics are complicit in creating notions of terroir, in setting the priorities of what needs to be sustained and what not but also how we may further add to the issue of transparency. How are we to critically highlight who is behind certification, who is to certify the certificates, and can and should we intervene in our own academic environments to see such regulation also take place at universities and research institutes? Can we be "post-cynical" and as scholars link up to social movements which have put sustainability high on the agenda? The idea took hold that a first step may be to write a collective ESF policy letter but also that we would help our case in making our findings publicly accessible. At the forwarding session some of the young scholars who also had been actively presenting at their poster session offered to launch a blog that can serve to catalogue (forms of) eco-chic but also may serve to disseminate our policy brief.

- Is there a need for a foresight-type initiative?
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No

Atmosphere and Infrastructure

- *The reaction of the participants to the location and the organization, including networking, and any other relevant comments*

The participants and the organizers were very pleased with the conference atmosphere. Many participants commented on the pleasant and open atmosphere of intellectual exchange and the possibility of having a high level of focused debate. In contrast to some other academic events, the tone was very much one of constructive criticism across disciplines and between older and younger scholars, offering the possibility of networking in a relaxed atmosphere. Several younger scholars expressed their appreciation of being able to attend a workshop with several “big names” in the field of consumption scholars. In addition, one such senior scholar expressed his pleasure at being able to engage with younger scholars’ work. In discussions during or after dinner, a number of participants suggested that the conference’s pleasant and productive atmosphere was facilitated by the small size of the group, the focus on one clear theme and the relatively isolated location of the venue. While some of the participants coming from outside of Europe noted that the location (Linköping) was difficult to reach, most agreed that the benefits of the location outweighed this disadvantage.

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No

Date & Author:

Bart Barendregt and Rivke Jaffe, Nov. 15, 2011