Chapter summary

‘Consumerist society’ is a phrase that refers to a specific set of dynamics of a predefined group of people with the assumed power and appetite for consumption. But of course, the imposition or even taken for granted use of words does not mean their meaning is uncontested or un-contestable. Consumption (of goods and services paid for in a market) need not be the sum total of individual identity and behaviour or even the prevailing characteristic of their ‘society’. People and the societies they constitute tend to be more multifaceted than these kinds of phrases would imply but somehow these words make sense. What does reflection on this concept open to view? Might it be seen as an example of a ‘shibboleth’ – an attempted enclosure of our mind as discussed in Chapter 1 or as a very useful conceptual entity from which to generate insight into ourselves with a focus on the purchasing behaviour of people who have the money to buy stuff? Significant segments of wealthy populations have always concerned themselves with significant disparities and with the unsettling needs of ‘the poor’. From charity and philanthropy to the contemporary infatuation with microfinance, those defined ‘poor’ are deemed to need the ‘help’ of the rich – be that to salve our conscience, to meet the mandates generated from spiritual beliefs, or from concern with potential violence and disease that will spill over from great disparities and so on. Purchasing stuff for justice takes many forms. Examples include the ‘online’ markets of gifts that can be purchased from the likes of Oxfam. Donations will purchase goats, chickens and water-wells, or shares in social and environmentally responsible organisations. All imply integration into capitalist orientations. Mintrom' comments that fragility of the market as a space for enacting transformative change is a useful starting point for this discussion. He suggests that because markets appear to accord more choice and hence more power, to the affluent, they often serve to perpetuate rather than arrest social inequality and social injustices. When consumers choose to spend their dollars on the products produced by women drawn into debt as a consequence of the hopeful link to microfinance projects, or when their successful ventures become swallowed up by stronger market forces, has this line of reasoning also come to a stalemate?

Webpage structure

On this webpage you will find:

7.1 A discussion starter: Tracking your consumption – ‘We know who you are’!
7.2 Eating with transformative intent – student work as activism
   7.2.1 Eating – hopefully: Keep a food diary – and enquire into it!
   7.2.2 [A]Student[’s] work as activism
7.3 People to meet, [web]places to go, actions to take

---

7.1 A discussion starter: Tracking your consumption – ‘We know who you are’!

“Chances are you’ve never heard of Alliance Data Systems Corp. But it has probably heard about you. Every time you swipe a credit card, your purchase is captured by a data base somewhere. The question is, who’s holding that information hostage, and what do they do with it? …” Credit card issuer Alliance helps clients tailor offers by tracking your buying habits. “Our job is to be invisible” says Ed Heffernan, Alliance’s US$7 million plus $60 million stock shares chief executive. The Plano-based credit card issuer and loyalty program and data marketing company is a giant of “big data”, along with Experian, Google, Amazon, and Equifax. Big data brings together demographics, psychographics and transactions – who you are, what makes you tick and what you actually buy.2

- Does it matter that some invisible Agency collects information about you? Does it make a difference if you tacitly/unwittingly agree by the very decision to use a credit card? Discuss this with your friends, family and class mates.
- How far do you think a company (or the State) should be able to ‘track’ your activities, opinions and tastes?
- Can the information about you define you?

7.2 Eating with transformative intent – student work as activism

In Chapter 1 we wrote how mindful and respectful we as authors are about all those creative and far reaching activities of courageous people in so many communities who are working to turn around the devastating outcomes of the model of development we have under review in this book. It is difficult to choose in which chapters certain examples best fit. This difficulty just goes to show how inter-related the issues are! In the example below we have chosen to focus on food (and water) as the most common of human consumption needs – no matter how these are produced, traded and disposed of. We also commented in Chapter 1 that, no matter how creative and courageous, all these efforts together seem not to be stemming the tide of destruction.

7.2.1 Eating – hopefully: Keep a food diary – and enquire into it!

In Eating – hopefully we express a hope that by eating more mindfully, we can impact the production and distribution of food – that vital aspect of sustaining life on and of Earth. The right to food, the responsibility to ensure all human beings have the food they need is a great way to connect the processes of production to those of consumption. In many parts of the world, communities once self-sufficient have been encouraged to see the sense in capitalist production processes by producing the goods for consumption that will generate them the

2 The Dallas Morning News, 4 August 2013, pp.1D, 7D.
cash that they can then use to purchase other goods – from the seeds and fertilisers to increase their production of food to the newly affordable gadgets their children will surely want/need. McDonalds or their equivalent becomes a household strategy for feeding children by time-starved parents and more forests are felled to ensure we can grow the beef we need to produce the hamburgers we consume – even if they do come in recycled paper wrappers and a proportion of the profit is donated to the health services for kids overseen by a Clown.3

**Consciousness-raising through eating more mindfully**
Make a commitment to start a food journal. Record everything you eat. Choose several items and explore the supply chain, the disposal processes, the food value, the corporate interests of these to practise some of the concepts brought to your attention in *Understanding Management Critically*. Can you replace some of the more damaging aspects of your food patterns with more healthy ones – food choices that impact for the better, not only of your own health and that of the planet, but the health of all those involved in its production, (mal) distribution and disposal?

- How many links can you build from the examples you have chosen from your list of foods you have consumed to projects aiming to restore justice, livelihoods and environmental flourishing?
- What issues of concern arise from your examination of the production, distribution and disposal of food that you have been researching? What solutions to these issues are you aware of? Are these solutions all/only market orientated? Can you see room in our humanity for exchanges that are not of the ‘consumption patterns’ that we are offered by the global financiers?
- What kinds of management issues arise from your reflections on the food that you eat? Goodall (2005)4 for example, challenges the very processes of production and urges people to change their consumption habits. Might you elect to contribute your management education to the support of her trajectory – or in defence of the agribusiness she abhors?
- Might agri-businesses and supermarkets be the most efficient ways to advance healthy food and fair trade production (and thus consumption) wrapped in eco-sustaining carriers on fuel efficient trucks, planes and cargo ships and sold through self-service check-out counters cutting the cost of service-staff?
- Could you publish a story about a common food item that might be re-thought in a way that would change the way we consume?

**Additional resources**

- www.harvestforhope.com
- Making the food-go-round
- Dumpster Divers at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8VIFJsuBjA0

---

7.2.2 [A] Student[’s] work as activism

Few meat-eaters in affluent nations will eat the fatty belly of a sheep called ‘mutton flap’. Along with tinned corned beef and tinned fish, such food has become a staple of many pacific island communities. Fatty food imports, such as mutton flaps and turkey tails – waste products from affluent countries – are a cause of obesity in the Pacific and have been criticised in the NZ Medical Journal. Below is an example of what student activities could achieve by using opportunities Rose Rees-Jones created in her school programme to tackle an issue she is moved by. Rose was a student in a Postgraduate Diploma in Communication Studies on the Asia-Pacific Journalism course at AUT University. Her work reproduced below raises many of the issues we have covered in this Chapter. Read her article and discuss the questions below it with your friends.

---------------------------------------------

Pacific Scoop
Report by Rose Rees-Owen

Alma Hayes returned from her two-week holiday in Samoa, refreshed and rejuvenated. She talks of beautiful sunsets on tranquil beaches and delicious and fresh produce. “You can’t get much fresher than going out to the banana tree and whacking off a bunch for breakfast,” she says. However, Hayes stayed in fales with breakfast and dinner included. “Our diet was really regulated by what our host served us,” she admits. There is a paradox between what tourists such as Hayes experience and what many local Samoans eat – supermarkets and markets in Samoa frequently sell imported fatty, mutton flaps, turkey tails and unsafe to eat eggs. An article titled ‘New Zealand’s impact on health in the South Pacific: Scope for improvement?’ in the New Zealand Medical Journal has warned “excess consumption of imported food, especially imported fatty meats, has a causative relationship with endemic obesity in the Pacific”. According to Islands Business, the most relevant survey on obesity in Samoa was done by STEP in 2002, and claims that 85.2 percent of the population in Samoa is obese. The magazine also cites figures saying that 81.1 percent of men are obese or overweight and 89.8 percent of women are obese or overweight.

‘Clean, green’
Critics condemn ‘clean, green’ New Zealand for contributing to these statistics. Mutton flaps are fatty scraps of sheep meat. They contain 27.4 gm of fat per 100 gm and New Zealand is a major exporter. The Medical Journal article says: “From July 2006 to July 2007, NZ$73 million of sheep meat was exported to the Pacific Islands, constituting New Zealand’s largest export good to the Pacific.” Co-author of the article in the NZ Medical Journal and associate public health professor at the University of Otago, Dr Nick Wilson, wrote: “I think it is really disgraceful for a wealthy country like New Zealand to export such unhealthy food. What is the point of giving Pacific countries development assistance on one hand – and then spreading heart disease epidemics via our hazardous exports on the other?” Another fatty meat regularly sold in Samoa is turkey tails. They are imported from the United States of America and

contain an even higher fat content than mutton flaps. “Turkey tails top the fat content chart with 32 grams of fat per 100 grams,” reports *Islands Business*.

**Poor nutrition**
Jason Garman, media and communications adviser for Oxfam New Zealand, says turkey tails have poor nutritional values. “They are the fattiest part of the turkey. Most Americans don’t even know they exist and wouldn’t consider eating them.” So why are Samoans and the wider Pacific allowing these nutrition imports? Dr Roman Grynberg, a Pacific authority on trade, says the reason is simple – many Pacific Islanders are poor “and these foods are cheap”.

“Local healthy foods such as fresh fish, vegetables and root crops are much more expensive,” he says. Edwin Tamasese, a domestic egg farmer in Samoa, is saddened by the quality of eggs imported from the US. Since March, imported eggs have been forced to put a use-by-date on their products but Tamasese laments that this has not changed much for domestic egg farmers.

**60-day labels**
“Importers are putting a 60-day sell by date on the cartons instead of the 30-day sell by date that California uses.” This means that when eggs are close to expiring in California, the US can dump them on Samoa, and recover some of their losses. The major health risk due to the eggs being in the market place for 30 extra days is the presence of *Salmonella enteritidis* in American poultry. “With the increased selling time there is a much higher probability of deadly bacteria within the eggs,” says Tamasese. The cheap, imported eggs have intruded heavily on the business of domestic egg farmers. Tamasese says that the imported eggs have created an “uneven playing field”. The imbalance is responsible for the closure of 13 out of 15 farms on the island, and the remaining two are under severe pressure. “Domestic producers now only supply approximately 10–15 per cent of the market,” says Tamasese.

**Documentary on diet**
Mark Dolan’s controversial documentary, *The World’s Fattest Families and Me*, was broadcast recently. Dolan journeyed to Tonga where he met Towa, 222 kg, and his daughter Sia, 133kg. The documentary touched many when Dolan took Sia to the supermarket, and showed Sia the nutritional value in the fatty mutton flaps. He told Sia New Zealanders did not eat this. “This is the bit that they throw away,” he said. Sia broke down in tears. The documentary exposed that there are no food export regulations in place.

**Hands-off**
Sue Kedgely, Green Party MP and spokesperson for food, health and wellbeing, said: “New Zealand has a hands-off free trade approach to trade, and government seems to stand back and allow exporters to more or less do what they want.” Commercial interests take priority over the health of poor nations, such as Samoa. “Trade is not neutral, it can have devastating effects on nations but trade occurs in a context where poverty in our region is endemic and power is used by our neighbours to further their own commercial interests,” says Dr Grynberg. Dr Grynberg also comments that mutton flaps would be processed into pet food in New Zealand, and by exporting the flaps cheap to the Pacific, suppliers can sell their product at a higher price to humans. Nick Braxton, advocacy and research coordinator of Oxfam New Zealand, says the Samoan government is trying to ban turkey tails from being imported because of their poor nutritional value. But because turkey tails are a waste product in the United States, and are generating profit, the US is opposing the ban.

**NZ threat**
The NZ Medical Journal says that Fiji banned mutton flap imports in 2000 and New Zealand responded by threatening to refer the issue to the World Trade Organisation because it goes against the policy of free trade between the two nations. However, the threat was later dropped and the ban stands. Dr Grynberg believes that it is an issue of giving the masses what they want, and that is the reason why the government has not taken action. “Any Pacific Islands government that heavily taxes these products or bans them will suffer the ire of the working poor at the elections and so the issue is largely avoided” Dr Grynberg said.

Discussion

- Examine the ‘Free Trade’ agenda as it applies to the Pacific region – in the form of Pacer Plus. Examine the Free Trade Agreements in your region. Will this agenda serve justice?
- To what extent can micro-finance projects and local initiatives create market opportunities to counter the effects of the imposed modes of globalisation of goods and services deemed emancipatory?
- To what extent can Pacific Islanders refuse to buy their food from markets?

7.3 People to meet, [web]places to go, actions to take

People to meet


[Web]places to go

- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLBE5QAYXp8 The Story of Stuff
- http://cseweb.ucsd.edu/~goguen/courses/275f00/Burke.html James Burke
- http://www.facebook.com/betterworldbooks Face Book
- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGab38pKscw&feature=youtu.be The Centre for A New American Dream
**Actions to take**

- Buy a goat!
- Provide a well!
- Elect an eco or development holiday
- Eat hopefully
- Keep track of your transfat intake; reduce, reduce! reduce!
- Support activists such as AVAAZ

### 7.4 Avaaz v Monsanto: A fair contest of opinion?

“As long as US law allows corporations to spend unlimited sums to influence policy, they can often buy the laws they want. Last year, Monsanto and biotech giants spent a whopping $45m to kill a bill that would have labelled GMO products just in California, despite 82 percent of Americans wanting to know if they are buying GM. And just this month, the company helped ram through the Monsanto Protection Act, that blocks courts from stopping the sale of a product even if they’ve been wrongly approved by the government. Monsanto’s power in the US gives them a launch pad to dominate across the world. But brave farmers and activists from the EU, to Brazil, to India and Canada are resisting and starting to win. We’re at a global tipping point. Pledge now to join forces to break Monsanto’s grip on our politics and our food and help stop the corporate capture of our governments. Avaaz will only process the pledges if we get enough to make a real difference…”

### 7.5 Could you? Would you? Should you?

Could you, would you, should you learn to eat ‘locally grown’ and ‘locally made’? Could you eat insects such as locusts, grass-hoppers and the like, if such a change in our diet globally makes a significant contribution to human and planetary well-being?

### 7.6 Reflection

Ingredients hazardous to health are increasingly required to be listed on consumer items as a way of improving elements of customer’s choice. Should such packaging come with other information – like the numbers of trees felled, the number of people displaced, and the volume of water redirected from subsistence communities to support the creation and affordability of this product in mass markets? Why? Why not?

---
