

Design, Lifestyles and Sustainability. Aesthetic Consumption in a World of Abundance

Peter Dobers^{1*} and Lars Strannegård²

¹*Business Studies in Sustainable Development, School of Business,
Mälardalen University, Sweden*

²*Centre for Advanced Studies in Leadership, Stockholm School of Economics, Sweden*

ABSTRACT

This paper strives for a conceptualization of sustainability, design and contemporary consumption. By sketching out how effective production systems have created an abundance of products, the paper links this development to the aestheticization of society and an increased interest in design. In market economies characterized by profusion, corporations engage in activities filling their offerings with aura, aesthetics, symbols and meaning. In such lands of plenty, conspicuous consumption becomes a thoroughly expressive activity and highly problematic for actors with ambitions to design a sustainable future. Our conclusion is that sustainability must ultimately be seen as intertwined with social processes such as fashion, identity and identity construction. Copyright © 2005 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd and ERP Environment.

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A World of Abundance

SOME SCHOLARS ARGUE THAT AN INCREASING NUMBER OF WESTERN ECONOMIES HAVE TRANSFORMED into arenas where information, services and knowledge have become primary value creators (e.g. Castells, 2000). However, even if such economies have moved toward more services in their national incomes, they are overfilled with physical products, with material consumption still increasing, and even if industrial production has become more efficient in economic terms, the great quantity of products and services, and the way they are used and consumed, appears to inhibit the social trail toward sustainability (Gardner *et al.*, 2004). Underlying this development is the notion that produc-

*Correspondence to: Peter Dobers, Business Studies in Sustainable Development, School of Business, Mälardalen University, P.O. Box 883, 721 23 Västerås, Sweden. E-mail: peter.dobers@mdh.se and lars.strannegard@hhs.se

tion and consumption are becoming progressively more fashion sensitive, dependent on aesthetics and well designed products and services.

In such lands of plenty, serious ecological problems come to the surface. Products and services overflow an increasing number of saturated markets, and companies need to search for new creative ways of selling their products and services. Companies become more sophisticated in their marketing and sales activities, and benefit financially from an ever-increasing consumption pattern. From a sustainability viewpoint, this is bad news. Scholars have suggested that the road to sustainability requires measures such as green accounting (Gray and Bebbington, 2001), green product development (Ritzén, 2000), life-cycle assessments (Baumann, 1998; Baumann and Tillman, 2004), new consumption patterns (Solér, 1996), green marketing (Belz, 2001) and functional sales (Söderström, 2004). A majority of the influential texts in the field of corporate environmental management are normative and technical in the sense that they point at what *needs* to be done in order to reach a more desired future (Dobers *et al.*, 2000, 2001a). Hence, the academic community has generated substantial knowledge that the present situation is unsustainable; we know immensely what needs to be done, and there are ideas of how this desired future could be achieved. However, the growing knowledge base in corporate environmental management has, apparently, done very little in terms of sustainability for consumption and corporate practice.

The overarching argument stemming from the normative strand of corporate environmental management suggests that consumption patterns need to be altered, lifestyles need to be changed and the ways products and services are extracted, distributed and consumed need to change. Hence, the general critique of today's business system is that a production system geared toward ever-increasing growth and consumption creates one of the most serious impediments for sustainable development, especially when the business practices move away from addressing people's needs to exploiting their desires (Böhme, 2003).

One of the key questions calling for answers is how the production system can be altered in order to be more sustainable. Yet, the answer to this question is uninteresting if it is not connected to consumption patterns, or rather, to the role of consumption in contemporary society. The production system must, in every aspect, be related to consumer needs. Sustainable products and services need to be enrolled and activated in consumption to be a part of an economic system.

This paper takes the interplay between production and consumption as a point of departure for understanding the quest for sustainable development. We argue that studies of sustainable consumption have not sufficiently taken the role of lifestyle consumption into account. Even though normative solutions on alterations of the production and consumption systems are praiseworthy, our standpoint for several years has been that a hermeneutic knowledge interest (Habermas, 1968) can generate an alternative understanding of sustainability (Dobers *et al.*, 2001b). Also, technical and normative knowledge interests dominate the academic field of corporate environmental management and studies aiming at hermeneutic knowledge generation are under-represented. In the endeavour to expand the hermeneutic knowledge base of sustainability we, in this paper, take the increasing aestheticization of society as a point of departure. By exploring contemporary consumption and production, and connecting them to different aspects of the design concept, we seek to draw the perspectives together in order to point at the complex interconnectedness between design, consumption and sustainability.

The Design Concept

The first time the concept 'industrial designer' was used was in the 1920s USA (Ahlklo, 2004). A group of trained decorators, set designers, graphic designers and advertising professionals started to propagate

the necessity to 'style' products in order to make them more attractive, demanded, status loaded and modern. The term 'consumer appeal' started to enter the corporate world and one of the most visible examples was how the classic T-Ford, taken into production in 1908, lost market dominance in 1927. That year, the competitor General Motors started to change models every year, and apparently, a model remake was considered necessary. In 1928, Ford introduced the A-Ford, and from then on, industrial design became an important part of the product offering. During the years to come, the focus on design grew, and the concept 'corporate design' was launched. In the increasing flow of products that started after World War I, it became increasingly important to make the corporate brand, expressed in products, more visible, distinguishable and clear. Designers such as Peter Behrens in Germany and Raymond Loewy in the United States were hailed in the press and contracted by companies and brands such as AEG, Greyhound and Lucky Strike to provide complete corporate 'style' programs for products, logos, advertising and packaging.

In the following decades, the design concept started to imply both the look and appearance of a product, but also the process through which the product was developed. Corporate design was developed through the introduction of terms such as branding and corporate identity. During the 1980s, companies started to market their products through 'attitude', 'lifestyle' and 'passion' (Adams, 2004). Thereby, design started to become more of an immaterial matter. Products were not bought for their own sake, but for their capacities as lifestyle carriers.

In the 1990s the marketing and consumption focus became increasingly immaterial and one of the marketing buzzwords of the early 21st century became 'experience' (Mossberg, 2003; Salzer-Mörling and Strannegård, 2004). This implies that the user, the buyer or consumer of a product or service becomes a co-producer, and in the increasingly aestheticized environment he or she also becomes a co-designer. This is to say that, symbolically and immaterially, production and consumption merge. Hence, in Western economies in the early 21st century, design is becoming a key part of consumption. A functionalistic, modernistic aesthetic ideal has re-entered in the 21st century. The difference, as compared to half a century earlier, argues Ahlklö (2004), is that the ethical imperative and the moral claims are non-existent in the contemporary style ideal. Taste, Ahlklö writes, is all about aesthetics and not at all about ethics.

An increasing number of human activities are undergoing aestheticization (Löfgren and Willim, 2005). Consumer spheres such as the home, the body and the soul are now subject to individual design. Magazines focusing on interior design, gardening and lifestyle are booming; educational courses focusing on design are rapidly growing in numbers throughout Europe and members of parliaments in several Western countries speak of design as one of the most important economic factors for developed economies (Ahlklö, 2004). This is to say that design, during the last few decades, has exploded in popularity.

Part of the explanation for the increased interest in design is the multitude of meanings that the concept encompasses. It has become an empty space at other space fillers' disposal (Dobers and Strannegård, 2004). Design is, for instance, defined by the Swedish Industrial Design Foundation as 'a process of developing purposeful and innovative solutions that embody functional and aesthetic demands based on the needs of the intended user. Design is applied in the development of goods, services, processes, messages and environments' (www.svid.se¹). Hence, design is in this definition both a process and a result of conscious and planned product and service development. Such a definition can well create consensus on one level, but it neglects the perspective that the design concept also encompasses a number of effects and results.

¹<http://www.svid.se/wlt/0074CE32-2B18-406D-B6E1-6203B923B183.wlt> [16 June 2005].

Design is a matter of intentionality and plans, and thereby design could potentially become the answer to each problem that needs to be solved. For instance, when sustainability is seen as a desired state, design is presented by several societal commentators as a solution. Designing smart transportation, smart housing and smart food is, when cast in a sustainability discourse, presented as well designed solutions to the problem of environmental degradation. When design is seen as a solution, however, ideological, cultural and political concerns come to the surface. Hence, design, defined broadly, is to solve a myriad of problems – everything from employee satisfaction and corporate culture to increased exports and strengthened competitive positions on the world market. In order to understand the role of design in the quest for sustainability, it is thus necessary to critically examine the role of the design concept, the design process, and the relation between design and consumption. This is to say that ultimately the role of *aesthetic* consumption enters centre stage in a society aiming at sustainability.

Aesthetic Consumption

The statement ‘a good product speaks for itself’ has probably never been true, but today it is even less so. With the abundance of products in the Western world, an increasing number of companies engage in efforts to differentiate their products and services. Several commentators (e.g. Lash and Urry, 1994) have claimed that the effective manufacturing of products no longer holds as a sufficient competitive advantage, and instead the route to commercial success is supposed to be found in the artful creation of aesthetic offerings, of images and brands. To infuse meaning into products and services; to transform commodities into concepts and lifestyles has become a prime task for managers. Lash and Urry (1994) argue that there is an

increasing component of sign value or image in material objects. This aestheticisation of material objects can take place either in the production or in the circulation and consumption of such goods. Further, goods often take on the properties of sign-value through the process of ‘branding’, in which marketers and advertisers attach image to goods (Lash and Urry, 1994, p. 15).

Thus, prioritized activities of many corporations are turning to the production of images instead of focussing on the production of material objects. Moreover, in today’s economy the production and consumption of images rivals the production and consumption of products, challenging basic notions of economic practices, transforming what constitutes a system of economy and shifting the appropriate sites of analysis. The image is key to understanding how we make sense of the world. An aesthetic image serves as a stimulus, a sign or a representation that drives cognition, interpretation and preference (Zaltman, 2002). Images constitute much corporate communication about products, economic performance and social responsibility, and also inform municipal efforts to create positive attitudes for citizens, tourists and organizations. In the words of Barbara Czarniawska, today’s organizations are faced with the

frantic production of images which are circulated; a frantic translation of incoming images into collages of ‘ideal companies’; less frantic but steady attempts to translate those images into the local practices and vice-versa; and once again a production of self-images to be sent around (Czarniawska, 2000, p. 216).

Thus, images often serve two functions: legitimation and attraction (Czarniawska, 2000). Moreover, images and other forms of representation frequently ‘stand in’ for experience as sources of information

and serve as a foundation for future knowledge (Borgerson and Schroeder, 2002). Information, sensibility and attitudes gleaned from images influence thinking and understanding about personal, ethnic, organizational and national identity (Sassen, 1998; Fornäs, 1999; Holmberg and Åkerblom, 2001; Latour and Weibel, 2002). Moreover, such influence may affect the way new experiences and information are interpreted (Hebdige, 1988; Lash and Urry, 1994; Balmer, 2001). As sociologist Don Slater states,

The modern injunction to believe only what one sees [...] confusingly coexists with awesome technical powers to produce convincing spectacles: the ability to transform appearances both in remaking the material world industrially and commercially, and in organizing technologies of representation which duplicate the world in realistic exactitude (Slater, 1995, p. 232).

Mike Featherstone (1991) forcefully argues that Western societies are becoming increasingly aestheticized. He makes a case that companies' marketing efforts have led consumers to constantly search for new fashions, new styles, new sensations and new experiences. This implies that consumption in the 21st century seems to have become increasingly differentiated and trend conscious. Brands are gaining centre stage as consumption progressively becomes more expressive (see, e.g., Salzer-Mörling and Strannegård, 2004). Products and services potentially signal a particular lifestyle, and style has become a 'life project', where consumers' individuality is displayed in an assembly of artefacts, practices, experiences, appearance and body dispositions (Featherstone, 1991). In some ways, we are therefore living in a global image economy (Mau, 2000; Schroeder, 2002).

Brands, images and representational practices are important inputs to cultural processes and lifestyles, and the aestheticized Western world has led some influential design practitioners to formulate commentaries where style and life as such are put on par:

... life doesn't simply happen to us, we produce it. That's what style is. It's producing life. Rather than accepting that life is something that we passively receive, accept, or endure, I believe that life is something we generate. We use our capacities. And that all boils down to style. Style may be presented as theory, serendipity, or happenstance. But fundamentally style is a decision about how we will live. Style is not superficial. It is a philosophical project of the deepest order (Mau, 2000, p. 27)

Mau thus underscores the close connections in contemporary society among identity, design, consumption and the production of lifestyles. Style is something fundamental and as far from superficial as anything can get. From the academic side of social commentary, the development has been aptly captured by Holt (1997) where he uses Bourdieu's term cultural capital in contemporary consumption. Holt states that cultural capital no longer is associated with goods consumed, but that the accumulation and proliferation of cultural capital is more becoming a matter of practice: eating at particular restaurants, staying at particular hotels or choosing particular means of transportation. Cultural capital, in Holt's interpretation, is thus first and foremost a matter of choice, of practice and of consumption. He argues further that

cultural elites engage in consumption practices that reflect an ineffable sense of what is right, appropriate, and tasteful, that is disdainful of fashion mimicry and so requires asserting idiosyncrasies in relation to it (Holt, 1997, p. 104).

Aesthetics, taste and design thus cannot be treated superficially, but they are drivers of consumption that are fundamental issues for understanding the path toward a sustainable future, and the potential

impediments on that path. As has been stated previously, consumption remains intensive in energy and material use (Daly, 1996), despite attempts at modeling dematerialization and less material-using strategies (Dobers and Wolff, 1999; Gardner and Sampat, 1999; Sun, 2000). 'Planned obsolescence' of consumer products (Renner, 2004) leads to an overuse of energy and material resources. It is also one indicator of effective marketing, that several authors identify as a key force for driving unsustainable consumption (Durning, 1992, cited by Peattie, 2001; Sanne, 2002), although potential consumers are willing to consider the durability of products at the point of purchase (Wong, 2001). Marketing and advertising, as persuasive management and sales activities, seem to branch out into almost every corner of the market-driven society, not only financing the advertising sector itself, but also all those of newspaper and many other media industries that make a living out of advertising-based work (Sanne, 2002).

In an aestheticized world of abundance, consumers seek to distinguish themselves from other groups or fields of society, and companies seek to distinguish themselves from their competitors. These coinciding processes propel an increased interest in design and aesthetic consumption: both from the producers' side as a value-creator, and from the consumers' side as an indicator of lifestyle and status. We argue that design is becoming a central feature for companies to become competitive, and meanwhile a means for consumers to express their identities. This has far-reaching implications for the understanding of sustainable development in general and sustainable consumption in particular.

Contemporary Studies of Sustainable Consumption

A vast number of articles focusing on sustainable consumption have appeared in sustainability-oriented academic journals since the beginning of the new millennium. A substantial number of articles cover issues of 'fundamental needs' such as food, clothing, housing and transportation. Yet, these fundamental needs are also arenas for cultural and social expressivity. Apparently, we do not eat to survive only. We also eat to socialize and feel well. An example is the booming interest in organic food, which has led to remarkable changes in retail profitability and changing consumption patterns (Pedersen, 2000; Halweil and Nierenberg, 2004). The same goes for clothing; we do not only dress to stay warm or dry, but to express identities, socialize and feel happy (Meyer, 2001). The role of households in recycling schemes and waste management (Lundmark, 2003; Barr, 2004), sustainable construction (Høyer and Næss, 2001; Svane, 2002) and the management and the use of buildings in terms of energy use and reduction of material dependence (Gardner and Sampat, 1999) are examples of housing and household-related studies. In the field of sustainable transportation, green electricity and electric vehicles (Gärling and Thøgersen, 2001; Rowlands *et al.*, 2003) and ways of commuting (Emerson and Tansley, 1999) are central topics.

Closely related to the studies of sustainable consumption in terms of fundamental needs is an array of studies focusing on welfare-related issues. Sustainable tourism (García-Falcón and Medina-Muñoz, 1999; Welford *et al.*, 1999; Eligh *et al.*, 2002; Lester and Weeden, 2004) and environmental, social and sustainable investments (Fayers, 1999; Halme and Niskanen, 2001; Sparkes, 2002; Jayne and Skerratt, 2003) are examples of studies aiming at coming to grips with unsustainable consumption practices.

Common for most of these texts is the tendency to describe and explain the progress of green consumers or sustainable consumption, or the lack thereof, with arguments linked to snapshots of individual choice or structural factors having impact on the purchase itself. Thus, it implies that studies of sustainable consumption focus on the consumer and on consumption as bracketed in time and space: on the 'point of purchase' (Zukin, 2004). An alternative perspective, however, is to consider consumption as a process. Such a perspective implies a movement from a focus on the consumer and the purchase to a view of consumption as an identity project and an ongoing construction of lifestyles (Peattie,

2001). Hence, when aesthetic consumption is seen as an identity project, consumption becomes problematic.

Consumption as a Problem

An increasing part of the world is entering and belongs to what could be described as the consumer society. One example points out that there are 1.7 billion members of 'the global consumer class' (Bentley, 2003; Gardner *et al.*, 2004). Its members have incomes of more than \$7000 of the so called purchasing power parity (an income calculation for the purchasing possibility in local currency), which is just about equal to the publicly announced poverty line in Western Europe (Bentley, 2003). Although ranging widely in levels of wealth, the consumer class people are archetypal users of television, telecommunication and the Internet, along with contemporary media culture and commercial ideologies that these widely distributed products transmit.

One would assume that most of the members of the consumer class are found in Western industrialized nations. Interestingly enough, almost half of them come from the 'developing' world. Although there is clearly an increasing gap between the few very rich and the many very poor, it suffices here to say that a material lifestyle and consumer culture has become widely accessible to an increasingly growing middle class throughout the world. Even in countries such as the United States of America, where the majority has access to goods and services to live a decent life, consumption seems to reach levels unheard of. In 2003, there were more private cars than there were licensed car drivers, and SUVs (sport-utility vehicles) were best-sellers. In comparison with 1975, new houses in 2002 were 38% bigger, despite a decreasing household size. Moreover, even Americans themselves grow larger – thus expanding the economy literally speaking by demanding oversized clothing, tougher furniture and an industry of health-related products and services (Gardner *et al.*, 2004). 'Bigger is better' (Silvera *et al.*, 2002), in any respect, seems to be the law, not a choice in current consumer society.

We have probably only seen the start of this development, which will take on a much more massive scale. When considering the top national consumer class populations of 2002, the United States of America headed the list in absolute terms (242.5 million), slightly ahead of China (239.8 million) and well ahead of India (121.9 million). However, when looking at the share of the consumer class of the national population, we get a strong presentiment of what will happen once the consumer class of the two most populated countries in the world grows: in the USA, the share of the consumer class is 84% of the national population, whereas it is much smaller in both China (19%) and India (12%) (Gardner *et al.*, 2004). Obviously, an increased (over)consumption has become a problem in both developed economies such as Europe and the Northern Americas, and the economically growing, but in many ways still developing, economies in Asia and Africa.

A number of books published since the early 1990s document an increased frustration with societies organized around consumption (Schor, 1993, 1998; Cross, 2000; Kasser, 2003; Gardner *et al.*, 2004, p. 19). On a general level of human cognition, consumption is thereby seen as an attempt to escape the boredom of everyday life (Cohen and Taylor, 1972, cited by Sanne, 2002), as a means to create one's own lifestyle and identity through consuming goods and services with specific social attributions (Featherstone, 1991), not to mention as the material creation and interior decoration of a home 'expected to serve as a family haven with the emotional and material aspects interweaving' (Löfgren, 1990; Sanne, 2002, p. 276).

As we have stated previously, consumption is thus a strong tool in signalling belonging to, and exclusion from, certain groups. We thereby connect with the argument by Christer Sanne (2002) when he suggests that signalling does not presuppose commercial markers and thus that people most basically

want to make themselves seen, not consume. On a more subtle level of human ambivalence, people are faced with an almost endless number of choices, implying that they are also faced with existential doubt and insecurities when attempting to deal with multiple identities from one relational context to another (Gergen, 1991; Wynne, 1992, p. 295). When people put trust in a brand, company or social institution to consume a certain good or service, this trust may be a shallow proxy for a deeper level of existential ambiguity and social *Angst*. Along previous lines, consumption is thus much more of a process of social and cultural relations rather than a cognitive, single act: a process taking place in a society marked by increasing alienation, isolation and individualization (Giddens, 1990; Beck, 1992; Beck *et al.*, 1994; Giddens, 1994).

Social critics such as Eric Klinenberg (2001, 2002) have argued that interactions through and with products and services have replaced human interactions. The individualization has led to an epidemic spread of loneliness, where individuals become socially and culturally alienated. The reason is, according to Eric Klinenberg, a social breakdown, unresponsive governments and poorly equipped public services (Klinenberg, 2001, 2002). Strong social ties, a responsive government, and well equipped public services on the other hand are especially helpful in facilitating collective consumption, which often is viewed as having social and environmental advantages. Little or no interaction between people in public spaces has become an issue important not only for city developers or architects but also for those interested in a sustainable future.

Another supporting argument to this thought stems from Robert D. Putnam. His long-term studies in Japan, United States and Scandinavia show that the risk of dying in a given year, regardless of reason, is up to five times greater for socially and culturally isolated people than for people who are well connected with friends, neighbours and the public space in which they live (Putnam, 2000, pp. 327f). He argues that the American society is marked by a decline in civic engagement and in the numbers of social relations due to factors such as time limitations, urban and residential sprawl and a high rate of television viewing (Putnam, 2000, pp. 189–246): all factors, according to some, that can be linked to a problematically high and potentially unsustainable consumption.

Time pressures are often linked to the need to work long hours to support consumption habits, sprawl is a function of car dependence and the desire for larger homes and properties, and heavy television viewing helps promote consumption through exposure to advertising and programming that often romanticizes the consumer lifestyle (Gardner *et al.*, 2004, pp. 18f).

Getting to Grips with Unsustainable Consumption

Many 'solutions' to environmental, social and economical problems have been presented over the years. They include national and international legislation, the development of advanced technologies reducing our use of material and nonrenewable energy and a myriad of tools and concepts embracing presented as tools for achieving sustainability (including initiatives such as LCA, dematerialization, factor four and factor 10, ecological footprints, natural capitalism and environmental management systems). Most of them have been formulated and introduced with good intentions. However, they come short in *understanding* the underlying needs and ambitions of individuals and human interaction. The human side of society is often different from the rational characteristics attributed to people in the normative models mentioned above (Dobers *et al.*, 2001b).

Recent attempts to take into account the social and cultural side of sustainability include concepts of 'less consumption' (Sanne, 2002, 2005), 'happiness' (Putnam, 2000; Layard, 2005), or 'well-being and a good life' (Gardner and Assadourian, 2004). A heavily criticized statement is 'more leisure, less work',

implying that by working less people will have more time for leisure, but fewer financial resources to spend on consumption. The challenge lies in those leisure activities that do not rely on heavy consumption. The recent work on happiness and social ties takes on the relationship between increasing wealth and happiness. In a book based on multi-faceted pieces of scientific evidence, Richard Layard (2005) examines the fact that people do not become happier although their societies in the Western world have become richer. The West has more crime, more alcoholism and more depression than 50 years ago, although the average income has doubled in the same period (Layard, 2005). It seems that income above \$20 000 is no guarantee for happiness and a good life. Thus, extra income seems to matter more to people with less income than to people with more income. The challenge here lies in avoiding being caught in the spiral of wanting more to sustain happiness; the more we earn, the more we want to consume.

Finally, definitions of the concept of well-being might vary, but have a tendency to unite around several themes:

- the basics for survival, including food, shelter and a secure livelihood;
- good health, both personally and in terms of a robust natural environment;
- good social relations, including an experience of social cohesion and of a supportive social network;
- security, both personal safety and in terms of personal possessions; and
- freedom, which includes the capacity to achieve developmental potential (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2003; Gardner and Assadourian, 2004, p. 165).

In a recent official report on sustainable consumption from the Swedish government (SOU 2005:51), the suggestion from the investigator is straightforward, but not very helpful: 'Products and artifacts should be designed in a sustainable way and with an aesthetic that contributes to that we use them for longer time periods in our households' (SOU2005:51, 2005). The, necessary, overarching change presented in the report is 'contentedness', i.e. a satisfaction with the present state of affairs. Hence, the investigator commissioned by the Swedish government suggests that sustainability requires that consumers refrain from constantly striving for more. A suggestion of how such a switch of mindset is to be achieved is however not presented in the report.

Sustainability: A Quest for Utopia

For almost two decades, definitions of sustainability have replaced each other in order to become even more all encompassing. Scholars have criticized each other for being too narrow in their definitions, and added yet another prerequisite for what 'true' sustainability means (Welford, 1997). However, while the definitions of sustainability are becoming increasingly sophisticated, environmental problems such as global warming, greenhouse gas emissions and toxic waste are becoming more severe (Worldwatch Institute, 2001, 2003) and social problems such as bribery, child labour, crime and violation of human rights and human health are increasing (Worldwatch Institute, 2004). Hence, as time goes by, sustainability is becoming an increasingly utopian, yet sophisticated concept. In this sense sustainability fulfills all the elements of an ideology.

When coined in the late 18th century, ideology was to be understood as the true answer to the state of affairs and the answer to the question of which actions should be undertaken to reach a desired state (Liedman, 1997). During the 20th century, ideology lost its general connotations and became a concept used mainly for denoting party programmes and political theories. Therborn (1980) has however presented a definition of ideology that makes it useful for analytical purposes:

Ideologies subject and qualify subjects by telling them, relating them to, and making them recognize:

1. *what exists*, and its corollary, what does not exist, what nature, society, men and women are like. In this sense we acquire a sense of identity, becoming conscious of what is real and true; the visibility of the world is thereby structured by the distribution of spotlights, shadows and darkness.
2. *what is good*, right, just, beautiful, attractive, enjoyable, and its opposites. In this way our desires become structured and normalized.
3. *what is possible and impossible*; our sense of the mutability of our being-in-the-world and the consequences of change are hereby patterned, and our hopes, ambitions and fears given shape (Therborn, 1980, p. 18).

Therborn's conceptualization of ideology has resonance to what Vickers (1995/65) referred to as judgments. He argued that judgments consist of three intertwined parts (Vickers, 1995/65): (1) an appreciation of what reality is, based on beliefs and views on cause–effect relationships, (2) an assessment of what might, could or should be and (3) the instrumental means for getting from 'what is' to 'what could or should be'. Therborn's and Vickers' definitions of ideology and judgment may thus be summarized in three key words: *is*, i.e. what the present situation is like, *should*, i.e. the goal, and *how*, i.e. the possible means to achieve the goal.

The quest for sustainability has all these three key ingredients, and due to the slow progress, it could be argued that sustainability has turned into pure Utopia. The term Utopia is commonly used to denote an ideal society where the social, political and economic evils afflicting humankind have been annihilated. Utopia, coined by Thomas More in the 16th century, is derived from the Greek words Eutopia, meaning 'good place', and Outopia, meaning 'no place'. Hence, in Thomas More's meaning, Utopia is a good place, but it can never be achieved. This, however, does not imply that Utopias are useless. They fill important roles by creating possible, imaginable futures. The normative strand of corporate environmental management research develops ever increasing sophisticated prescriptions of Utopia. But without a hermeneutic understanding of aesthetic consumption, of design processes and consumption as an expressive project and a process, Utopias do no good. If however, researchers strive for temporary understandings of design-driven, aestheticized, processes of consumption, then sustainability as a Utopian project plays a tremendously meaningful role. Is, for instance, aesthetic consumption, necessarily unsustainable? Perhaps not, since value in this consumption is added through immateriality. Without casting aesthetic consumption in a hermeneutic light however, sustainability becomes utopian in the negative sense of the concept.

Regardless of which utopian concept of 'more leisure, less work', 'happiness' or 'well-being and a good life' one might prefer, the central question surfacing is *How much is enough?* (Gardner and Assadourian, 2004). Taking the personal consequences of answering such a question is an everyday fight when being challenged by the commercial powers of design- and aesthetics-based consumption. In this respect, a serious threat to the environment and public health is the lack of understanding of lifestyle consumption. This is to say that basically, as long as lifestyle consumption, aesthetic consumption and expressive consumption are underproblematized as social processes, sustainability will remain a utopian condition.

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Biography

Peter Dobers is a Professor in Business Administration and holds the chair in Business Studies in Sustainable Development at Mälardalen University. His current research interests include how contemporary ideas of modernity are discussed and put into practice; corporate sustainability management; sustainable cities; city management, diversity and suppressed voices; and how ideas and images of cities are produced, distributed and consumed.

Lars Strannegård is an Associate Professor at the Centre for Advanced Studies in Leadership at the Stockholm School of Economics. His current research interests include corporate sustainability management, leadership and organization in the network society, and issues of failure and organizing.