“The Indefinite Future”: Ideas, Ideals, and Idealized Ideology in the Global Eco-Village

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We ethnographically studied three ecovillages in three countries. Relocation of production is a common theme, along with other reconnections—people with food, people with land, people with indigenous practices, and people with other people. Our ethnographic ecovillage encounter provides provisional answers to questions about transitions to a sustainable post-consumer culture.

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tension arises on the non-profit nature of the system. While no official policy exists on reselling goods, participants express conflicting views about the appropriateness of this practice. This divergence highlights the varying motives consumers have for participation in contrast to the institutionalized mission.

Finally, we argue that the institutional framing of Freecycling as a “gift economy” is oversimplified since it ignores the hybridized form of exchange. Similar to Eckhardt and Bardhi’s work (2010) that found that not all consumers who used car-sharing services were motivated by environmental concerns, we suggest that a gift-based positioning does not fully capture the experiences participants have while engaging in the redistribution of goods. We further argue that institutionalized emphasis on efficiency and impersonalization impairs the community building potential that some participants value.

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**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Intentional communities have a long and checkered history as wellsprings of social experimentation and innovative new cultural forms (Brown 2002; Sarginson and Sargent 2004). In contemporary parlance, intentional communities include not only such specific and relatively temporary (anti) consumption-related happenings as the Burning Man project (e.g., Kozinets 2002) and the Rainbow Family Gathering (Niman 1997), but also more lasting manifestations such as ecovillages, cohousing communities, residential land trusts, communes, student co-ops, urban housing cooperatives, intentional living, alternative communities, and cooperative living. Each of these is considered to be a quasi-experimental “project” where people strive to live out a common vision in their everyday lives. Oftentimes, this vision is one that combines the environmental with the communitarian and which seeks to question in a collective setting the base of values underlying contemporary consumer culture and simultaneously to explore what could or should replace it (Dawson 2010).

In this cross-cultural, longitudinally-oriented, multi-sited research, we seek to deepen our knowledge of the ideologies of consumption that support and underlie participation in one particular and ecologically-oriented form of intentional community: eco-villages. The commonly accepted and value-laden definition of ecovillages is that they are “human-scale, full-featured settlements in which human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world in a way that is supportive of healthy human development and can be successfully continued into the indefinite future” (Gilman 1991, quoted in Dawson 2006, p. 13).

Eco-villages are a fascinating place for consumer researchers to ponder the transition of consumer culture and contemporary society into a more eco-friendly and sustainable form for a variety of reasons. First, they come in many shapes and sizes, and thus attract consumers from the most ecologically radical to those with merely a firm commitment and interest in sustainable living. Second, they are part of an organized and successful international intentional community movement. Third, the global network of eco-villages is not only transnational but transcultural, having been partially founded on an alliance between sustainability-based communities and networks of traditional communities in developing countries. And fourth, eco-villages are explicitly ideological enterprises concerning themselves with the alteration of the economic values underpinning contemporary consumer culture, particularly, the linkage of economic growth and personal and social well being.

We begin with an overview of the core notions of intentional community. We develop our understanding of ecovillages as a concept and a movement. We then introduce our research that was conducted at three different eco-villages, speaking three different languages, in three different countries (Germany, Scotland, and French Canada). We undertook an ethnographic exploration of eco-village life and conducted (and are in the process of conducting) over one dozen interviews, as well as using participant-observational techniques. Data collection and analysis at two sites has been completed, with a second wave possible before the October presentation. Initial data collection in the third site is planned for June, and full analysis will be completed by October. As of February, we have more than enough data collected and analyzed to present, even without the third site.

As with the other presentations in this session, the members of eco-villages are concerned with sharing, capacity building, and the wise use of the planet’s limited resources. However, the levels and depths of commitment, and the range of ideological engagement is more pronounced and perhaps profound. At the Findhorn ecovillage in Scotland that we studied, the ecological footprint per person is a bit over half of the UK average, which is the lowest footprint recorded for any settlement in the industrial world.

Perhaps even more interesting than the achievement of low energy usage is the means for its accomplishment. Most of the energy-saving activities also are credited with increasing the well being of eco-village members. For example, the decision by eco-villages to grow a significant amount of their own food creates a social situation where community members must work together cooperatively. Similarly, living together necessitates new social forms of engagement. The net effect, as with other types of intentional community both temporary and permanent, is that economic activity becomes local and thus ideologically linked to the immediately social. This powerful relocation of production is a common theme of the eco-village experience, along with a series of other reconnections—reconnecting people with their food, reconnecting people with their land, reconnecting people with indigenous people and practices, and reconnecting people with other people with whom they live. Add to this an educational and experiential ethos, and you have a potent potential for social change.

What is the net effect with our encounter with the distant boundaries of living as an eco-village embedded consumer and consumer researcher? It is nothing short of informing our understanding of connection, disconnection, and reconnection. There are answers to our questions about new transitional forms of living that can lead the way to a more ecologically sustainable post-consumer culture.

**REFERENCES**


