Apple Consumption: An Apple a Year

As a girl who was brought up in a family not quite with the trends, I always felt a step behind my friends who had iPhones while I was stuck with the less desirable Android. I got my first iPhone a year and a half ago and I'm probably one of the few who can say they are still using their *first* iPhone. The upgrade was great and I felt complete at last! I finally felt a part of society with access to all the cool apps I had always wanted. This sense of completion and inclusion is silly and sums up one of our many first-world problems, but it isn't completely silly with the social implications and sense of community belonging, especially in college, that seems to surround Apple products.

I think Apple embodies the global North's consumption trends. They are constantly working on technological improvements and coming out with new and updated products that have promises of new software being faster, bigger yet lighter, prettier (rose gold was genius), and even more embellishments while toting increasingly energy-efficient production. The frequent updates are the same throughout each of their product lines. The day of the iPhone 6 launch, my boss and manager went out and bought phones for the whole family, including their youngest children. This ritual undoubtedly happened with the iPhone 5s, 5, 4s, etc. and will continue to happen with future upgrades.

The iPhone Upgrade Program, taken directly from Apple's website, states that it "gives you an easier way to get a new iPhone every year." This is incredibly appealing to the consumer because anyone can have access to the latest and best products and not have to feel left behind. The Apple upgrade program is directly related to the Jevons Paradox, which states that advances in technology ultimately undermine gains made in production and energy efficiencies because this leads to cheaper production. This cheaper production leads to an even higher demand than

before and the increasing consumption cancels out any gains made with more efficient

technologies.

Gains in energy efficiency can be misrepresented by companies who outsource their more

toxic production to periphery countries, who are often poorer, while the "commodities and

profits flow to the North in a process of unequal exchange" (York, 2010, p. 13). This is made

possible through international trade and investment and is directly relatable to environmental

sustainability having roots in the political-economic power struggle that cannot be fixed as a

technical issue. By looking at one nation at a time, this can "hide important dimensions of

ecological problems" since nations don't exist in isolation anymore (2010, p.13). "The only

reason the United States appears to consume less energy than it did is because it has outsourced

the more energy intensive aspects of its economy to countries like China" (Garrett, 2004). This

correlates so nicely with Apple's scandal about questionable production and malpractice in their

factories in China that "resulted in some workers being poisoned and disabled, and communities

being polluted" (Schroder, 2011).

Core nations are shown to "emit less than those who traded less" (2010, p. 13), which

would have eco-mod theorists claim that those developing countries just have to keep working

on technological innovations to reach a sustainable level which is possible in a competitive and

free global market that can overcome ecological problems, natural limits, and fuel economic

growth. Yet if periphery nations were to follow suit and consume on an American level, we'd

soon reach our limit. The technological optimism that ecological modernization theorists praise

is not a good approach to environmental problems because it fails to address the root of the

problem.

We can see from history that when we approach environmental problems with technology it creates different problems, both directly and indirectly. York and Clark give a great example with our switch from biomass to coal through changes in production processes. With metal production our society had a higher demand for energy and more fuel for fire was needed. Forests couldn't keep up with the acceleration in demand and their recovery wasn't quick enough. This lead to a shortage in wood which was replaced by a new energy source, coal. Shifting from wood to coal didn't end our need for wood, it continued to put pressure on forests because a coal-powered train needed wood for its railroads. In addition to not easing the strain on forests, many other ecological problems were created like acid rain and climate change. We are now hoping to fix those new problems with other energy sources and the technology innovations involved with their production (2010, p. 11).

By shifting from one form of energy to the next we are simply creating new demands and new sets of problems. The treadmill of production continues, while technology only briefly helps us overcome production limitations. Ecological modernization will not lead to sustainability, only decreasing our consumption and addressing the root of ecological problems as embedded in the socio-economic power struggle. Relying on new technologies will continue to mask a true solution to these problems. In the words of York and Clark, "Ecological modernization theory occupies a strange intellectual land, where scientific epistemology is not useful for *understanding* ecological crises, but the techno-science industry can help us *overcome* these crises" (2010, p. 10).

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