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An Infrastructure of Consumption and Exploitation

In the World Watch Institute's *State of the World 2008* report, Tim Jackson (2008) argues that a key reason that materialistic consumerism is so deeply entrenched in our society is that it is perpetuated by an "infrastructure of consumption". The summation of the effects of dominant structures and institutions in society are geared to promote wasteful and consumptive behaviour: **"private transport is incentivised over public transport; motorists are prioritized over pedestrians; energy supply is subsidized and protected, while demand management is often chaotic and expensive, waste disposal is cheap, economically and behaviourally; recycling demands time and effort: 'bring centres' few and far between and often overflowing with waste"** (Jackson 2008, p. 56) This recognition does not negate the role of individual choice in sustainable decision-making, but instead highlights the means by which our structures and institutions largely promote a "social logic of consumerism" (Jackson 2009). Living in a society with such a heavy predisposition towards excess, Jackson asserts, makes it difficult for even the most highly motivated individuals to live sustainable lifestyles. Noting that "the issue of environmental quality is inextricably linked to that of human equality" (Agyeman *et al.* 2003) Jackson's conception can be built upon to argue that our Western consumer society is also constructed with a predisposition towards exploitative behaviour: disruptive, polluting industry is more likely to go into low-income neighbourhoods than wealthy neighbourhoods, goods produced with ethical labour tend to be more expensive than products of sweatshop labour *et cetera*. Thus, perhaps a more comprehensive term for that which perpetuates both unsustainable and inequitable behaviour in society is the 'Infrastructure of Consumption and Exploitation'.

The structures and institutions that perpetuate such hyper-consumptive,

assumptions that inform their internal logic (Meadows 1999). This set of dominant ideas and assumptions are woven together to form a social paradigm, or the dominant cultural narrative. In the sociological sense, a paradigm refers to “a constellation of concepts, values, perceptions and practices shared by a community, which forms a particular vision of reality [...] paradigms provide the framework of meaning within which "facts" and experiences acquire significance and can be interpreted” (Capra 1996).

The concept of a paradigm allows us to examine the root causes of our social and ecological crises by providing a framework for the discussion of ideas and assumptions which are not always explicitly stated. Tim Jackson notes how the manifestation of these ideas and assumptions can be seen in “...the subtle but damaging signals sent by government, regulatory frameworks, financial institutions, the media and our education systems: business salaries are higher than those in the public sector, particularly at the top; nurses and those in the caring profession are consistently lower paid; private investment is written down at high discount rates, making long- term costs invisible; success is counted in terms of material status (salary, house size etc.); children are brought up as a ‘shopping generation’, hooked on brand celebrity and status” (2008, p.56).

Thus, although social structures are predisposed to perpetuate wasteful materialism and exploitation, it is vital to address this “extremely powerful social logic” (Jackson 2008, p. 56) that locks both people and institutions into this type of behaviour. For the purpose of this exploration, the paradigm, or social logic, underlying our social infrastructure is referred to as a ‘core cultural mythology’. The core cultural mythology is defined as the ‘lowest common denominator’ of a shared narrative which governs our lifestyles, incorporating the values and assumptions which are widely experienced but rarely explicitly stated.

*To read the full research paper, including the bibliography, visit:
<http://environmental-justice.com/wp-content/uploads/EJR.pdf>*

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