

Stop Shop 2012 and the role of simplicity movements in sustainable change

Author:

Anita Borch (PhD), Consumption Research Norway (SIFO)

It has been maintained that given the hegemony of the growth policy in the political and economic sphere, a realisation of a macro economy beyond growth will need to build from the grassroots up. From this perspective, grassroots initiated simplicity movements represent some of the seeds without which sustainable change would be difficult. However, if we take a more critical stand asking whether these kind of initiatives actually have an impact in environmental change in terms of reducing the level of CO₂ emission in society, another and more nuanced picture may appear.

In this paper, I report the main results of a case-study of Stop Shop 2012, a simplicity initiative initiated by three women who reduced their shopping significantly in two years. Stop Shop 2012 can be associated with the experiment “No Impact Man” conducted by Colin Beavan and his family on Manhattan Island in the mid 2000s (see for example the documentary “No Impact Man” launched in 2009). However, whereas the members of No Impact Man aimed at a complete life style change for one year, the members of Stop Shop 2012 confined themselves with the aim of not shopping “unnecessary” goods and services, mainly clothes, for two years. The research questions are: In what way did Stop Shop 2012 contribute to reducing the level of CO₂ emissions of its founders and other consumers? What support did it get from actors in the market – the authorities, businesses and organizations? Although the results from a single case-study cannot be generalised to similar initiatives in other countries, the results will contribute to the ongoing knowledge development of the role of green social movements in sustainable change.

Based on the analysis, I will argue that a main lesson learned from this case-study is that consumer-driven, de-growth initiatives like Stop Shop 2012 at this stage in history plays a minor role on sustainable change. One reason is that Stop Shop 2012, like most simplicity movements, is based on individual rather than collective actions. Indeed, there were some sporadic attempts to exchange clothes and advices between the initiative's members, but for the most part these attempts remained on an individual level. To increase the impact of the Stop Shop 2012, the members could have focused less on their own consumption and more on cooperating with other members to find more efficient ways to reduce their level of consumption, e.g. by establishing a site for putting collective pressure on unsustainable and unethical businesses.

Another, related reason is that Stop Shop 2012, like most simplicity movements, tended to make use of informal rather than formal political channels. True, the initiative got some political publicity especially after the Irina's book was launched, but the publicity seemed to confirm rather than change political opinions that were already established in society. In short, whereas adherents of the de-growth paradigm seemed to support the initiative's cause, adherents of the growth paradigm did not. As such, it seems like the initiative stabilised current opinions in society rather than moving it in a more sustainable direction. To increase the impact of Stop Shop 2012, more formal political channels could have been used. For example, the members could have taken more actively part in political processes at local, regional, national or global levels. They could also have identified and influenced key actors in the market, e.g., taken part in their organizations and changed their networks from within.

The most important reason for suggesting that consumer-driven initiatives like Stop Shop 2012 play a minor role in sustainable change is however not based on the initiatives' individual character and use of informal political channels, but on the observation that the members' reduced consumption of clothes seemed cause rebound effects in terms of legitimising a relatively high level of consumption of meat and travelling by plain. Of course,

a criticism of Stop Shop 2012 could have been that members' should have had higher ambitions and followed the example of No Impact Man, that is, changed from being what Etzioni calls "downshiffters" (characterised with giving up some luxuries), into being members of a 'real' simple living movement (characterized with a complete life style change). Making such complete life style changes in a world dominated by the growth-paradigm is however hard and may even be ethical debatable as it may put too much responsibility on the consumers. Even No Impact Man, which had followers all over the globe, ceased after one years, apparently to great relief for the family members (see the final scenes of the documentary "No Impact Man").

As pointed by several researchers on sustainable change, moving society in a more sustainable direction requires a change from the growth to the de-growth hegemony. As a change of hegemony is a structural shift going beyond consumers' control, the main responsibility has to be placed on those being best equipped doing these kinds of shifts, namely on the authorities, in cooperation with businesses, organisations and consumers (Shove et al., 2012; Borch et al., 2015). In other words, if authorities' facilitate for change, consumers and other actors in the market can make them happen.