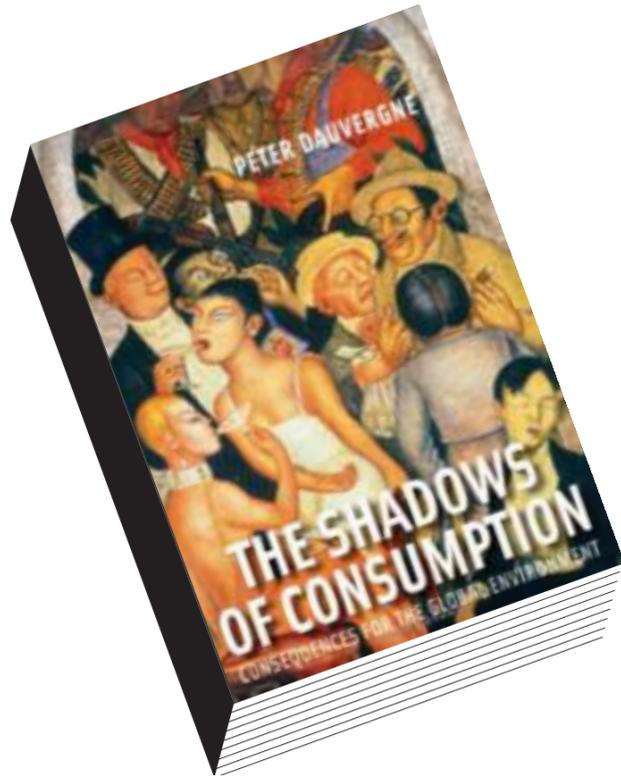


# Like lambs to the slaughter

The world cannot sustain rampant consumerism, but Jules Pretty doesn't buy all the arguments



**The Shadows of Consumption: Consequences for the Global Environment**  
By Peter Dauvergne  
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On Christmas Eve 40 years ago, astronauts Bill Anders and Frank Borman gazed out of *Apollo 8* as it swung around the Moon and snapped the first pictures of the whole of our lonely blue-green planet in the middle of black space. This world used to comprise many different cultures and ways of living. Since then, it has grown close.

Our six and a half billion people increasingly wish to do the same things, and the model is a high-consumption lifestyle typical of the most industrialised countries. There are 78 cars for every 100 people in the US (and that includes the elderly, infirm and babies) and just 0.7 for every

100 in China. A quarter of the world's population has no access to drinking water; the average Briton consumes 150-200 litres per day, the average American 400 litres and the average Las Vegan (a separate species) some 1,600 litres.

There have always been differences, of course. But now there is a convergence of aspirations. If the whole world consumed at the same levels as the average American, we would need six to eight planets. And global environmental problems are the consequence. The world cannot cope, and it is creaking at the seams.

This is the territory of Peter Dauvergne's intriguing book on the largely hidden environmental consequences of consumption. When the figures are aggregated, we – all of us – consume too much. Yet we seem not to think of the consequences, nor even to care. In exploring the costs of

rising consumption, Dauvergne tracks the rise and fall of five commodities: cars, leaded petrol, refrigerators, beef and harp seals. But it is an odd mix. Some are past problems, largely solved; others are eclectic and specific to Canada; others still utterly intractable.

The lead-in-petrol story is worth a reminder, as it was a success. Tetra-ethyl lead was discovered by Thomas Midgley as a much-needed anti-knock agent for petrol in 1921, but by the 1980s evidence was piling up that lead was accumulating in both adults and children and causing ill-health. It was contested, of course. Some said “no problem” to removing it; others were scared. In the mid-1980s, industrialised countries suddenly shifted to lead-free petrol and oil companies simply shifted their leaded petrol to developing countries. Sub-Saharan Africa phased out leaded petrol only in 2006.

The chlorofluorocarbons story is informative, too. The mysterious Midgley reappears as it was he who, in 1928, discovered stable, odourless and non-toxic refrigerants known as CFCs. The price of fridges fell and put them in the reach of almost all consumers. Out went ice packed in sawdust, in came shining boxes that would eventually populate every kitchen in the industrialised world. But poor old Midgley, who almost deserves a story to himself, had come up with another corker.

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Fifty years later, a gaping hole in the stratospheric ozone was found to have been caused by CFCs, and it was letting in harmful ultraviolet radiation. Now those fridges with CFCs are being replaced with safe ones, but the gains are being outdone by the rampant consumption of old models elsewhere.

Dauvergne rightly points out that there is not a lot of point in improving standards in some places if consumption of products that cast a deep environmental shadow grows rapidly elsewhere. But then this book pitches on its face. If convergence is the problem, then the solution lies in

divergence, which means letting some local people do what they think is culturally important. And they may choose to do something distasteful to some, like eat meat or hunt seals.

You cannot pick and choose globalisation for the good things, such as moral positions or types of governance, and then target localisation for the bad. Some think localisation may save the world, but if so, people will have to be left to choose their own pathways.

The harp seal chapters are deeply problematic. They are at first interesting, but descend into pre-designed positions. Dauvergne appears to assume that the kind of person who would read a book on the environmental consequences of consumption would be inherently against the seal harvest on Canada's East Coast. Native Canadians are mentioned only once, even though many rely on seals for a variety of products. Activists against the seal hunt are described as “idealistic, imaginative and daring”, and the Newfoundlanders “an angry mob”.

Some 200,000 to 300,000 seals are culled each year; a figure to make anyone think. Yet the author does not set this against the billion cows, billion pigs, and billion sheep and goats killed every year worldwide, or the number of fish caught from the oceans. None of these is a simple comparison. They need careful analysis and delicate moral positions. Truths almost always lie in the middle of extremes. The lack of discussion about what native peoples think about seals and the hunt is a glaring flaw.

At times, this book contains unnecessary exaggerations and loose language – the world population will not reach 11 billion, and “chemicals” make up everything, not just nasty products sprayed on fields. Moreover, the book mixes narratives – traffic accidents kill more than a million people worldwide every year, a terrible toll. But this is not inherently an environmental problem; the cars could be electric and still kill people.

Dauvergne concludes that consumers can help. Buy less, be different. Don't buy furs, don't eat meat, choose safe fridges, don't drive a car. Buy “natural” beef, if you must, but beware that companies like these terms, and natural may mean an animal that

once saw some grass. But are we free to make these decisions? How much are we shaped by advertising, by what friends and neighbours do? How much do the aspirations of others affect these decisions?

This book concludes with calls for changes to navigate towards a bright future, but sadly offers us not much more than a window on to dystopia. And what of heroic Midgley? He went to an early death after contracting polio in the Second World War, without any hint of the troubles his lauded discoveries would cause.

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