

# **Market interrupted: climate change and social reproduction skills**

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## **Abstract**

The paucity of understanding about the likely impacts of climate change on the world of work – paid and unpaid – leaves citizens with little direction about how to transform their working and living patterns along more sustainable lines, beyond green consumerism. This paper argues that the deep social and economic instability that is already emerging as a result of climate change will fundamentally transform the relationship between the relations of production and social reproduction. It poses questions about the implications of the anticipated increasing instability of the global market economy for the continued provisioning of human needs in western nations. What might the economic, food, water and energy crises mean for how Australian citizens ‘make do’? It is contended that an over-reliance on the market for the necessities of life has undermined citizens’ skills and capacities to survive and socially reproduce in world where supply chains are increasingly disrupted and inoperable.

**Keywords:** Environment, Labour, Consumerism, Social Reproduction, Environmental Sociology

As the pace of climate change hastens, with increasingly frequent and destructive impacts now likely, the need to transform all aspects of how humans live and work could not be more urgent (Campbell et al. 2007; DCC 2009). Yet, how the world of work – productive and reproductive – will be transformed by climate change has received too little attention in public debate and research (UNEP 2007). A just and inclusive whole-of-community response to climate change in terms of mitigation and adaptation depends on a more robust understanding of how employment patterns are

likely to change and how they will intersect with household labour patterns and survival strategies.

### **Social impacts of climate-induced market volatility**

The deep social instability that will accompany the physical manifestations of climate change will compromise the capacity of Australians – particularly the most disadvantaged – to reshape their workplaces, homes and communities in sustainable ways. Significant increases in energy prices will trigger cascading inflation across all other goods and services (Garnaut 2008:572). The impact of rising prices will fall unevenly to lower income earners because of the higher proportion of their income being spent on energy and basic commodities. Employment precariousness will worsen as industry realigns in a carbon-constrained economy. This will be exacerbated by displaced labour (climate refugees) from within and beyond Australia's shores (Campbell et al. 2007). A thorough reckoning of these complex, interconnected phenomena is the only way that adaptation to a future of unprecedented ecological and social volatility might be possible.

The human costs of a reduced level of individual and household control over their physical and social environments are starkly illustrated by World Health Organisation estimates of 150,000 deaths occurring annually in poorer countries, due to climate change outcomes such as 'crop failure and malnutrition, diarrhoeal disease, malaria and flooding. Almost 85% of these *excess* deaths are in young children' (WHO 2009, emphasis added). Moreover, climate change is already magnifying international and domestic class cleavages and resource conflicts (Campbell et al. 2007). These uneven experiences and risks are not confined to the global South.

Campbell et al. (2007) argue that the social fallout from climate change events, like increased bushfires and floods in Australia, will mirror pre-existing social inequalities. Low income households in wealthy nations are feeling the brunt of climate change, even though they are less resource-intensive than average (Sandler and Pezzullo 2007; Simon 2000). This experience was amply illustrated in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The fault-lines for climate injustice are already apparent in Australia. Low-income and low waged Australian households are more likely to go without home heating and meals (Masterman-Smith and Pocock 2008). Indeed, poverty has always necessitated energy prudence (Campbell 1984; Seabrook 1990; Lyon et al. 2003). Climate-related inflation and social and economic uncertainty will only intensify their vulnerability.

Many climate scenarios were developed prior to the global financial crisis and based on assumptions of continued economic growth, increased living standards, and ongoing budget surpluses in the Australian context (for example Garnaut 2008). Today, private investment in Australian green technologies has stalled and public investment is generating unprecedented levels of debt (Rudd 2009). Unemployment is anticipated to rise to 8.5% in 2011, a year after the expected ETS roll out (Rudd 2009). Despite the Federal Government's scheme to cushion some low income earners from climate-related inflation using ETS proceeds, the likelihood of a growth in low income households remains. There is also considerable downward pressure on wages in the wake of the economic slump, which will undermine the capacity of working households to absorb further inflation of basic staples. The United Nations ominously reports that world 'food prices have roughly doubled over the past three years, but between April 2007 and April 2008 alone they increased by 85%

(UNCTAD 2008:1). The ‘diabolical policy problem’ has become considerably worse (Garnaut 2008:2).

If nation-states are already hoarding resources, buying up agricultural land and shoring up defences in preparation for this bleak and sobering future, how might households and individuals have to respond? To date green consumerism is about all that individuals have been supported to pursue and it is woefully inadequate to the task of climate change mitigation or adaptation (Roberts 2009). As Benton explains, the emphasis on green consumerism ‘cannot address the structural problems that shape consumer choice’, such as the way gendered employment and care patterns, drive demand for the energy-intensive production of convenience food (2002:253; also Roberts 2009).

### **Social reproduction and the marketplace – an unsustainable relationship?**

The way that people strive to meet their material needs through formal and informal labour (paid and unpaid) fundamentally influences consumption patterns and the prospects for sustainable lives. The global political economy has never been able to provide the water, food and living wages needed by all humankind (Campbell et al. 2007). As climate change worsens, the market mechanisms upon which most Australians rely for their survival will falter even further. The current global economic, energy and food crises are symptomatic of this untenable relationship (Dickens 2002; UNEP 2007; Roberts 2009). Until we have a better grasp of the imminent, unparalleled and inevitable shake-up of the world of paid work and its reverberations for social reproduction in a carbon-constrained economy, Australians will continue to flounder in their efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

While there has been some belated attention to ‘green’ employment, what the future of work in a carbon-constrained economy means for social reproduction is less than clear (UNEP 2007). As indicated above, Australians and most other western citizens are chained to the market provisioning of their daily needs. The increasing commodification of social reproduction raises questions about how individuals and households will survive in a world where the functioning of the global market economy is increasingly subject to commodity shortages and resource conflicts. If Australians are not content to drift into a war of want, what sorts of household strategies and skills might need to be revived or invented?

Evidence of growing market dependence in western societies abounds. Average household consumption has increased dramatically in the last fifty years and this is perceived to equate with a higher standard of living. In Australia, growth in real household final consumption expenditure per capita rose 1.9% a year between 1960-61 and 1992-93 and by 2.6% a year between 1992-93 and 2005-06 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007:2). Household final consumption expenditure per person increased from \$10,400 in 1960-61 to \$26,100 in 2005-06; a real increase of 152% (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007:2). The increase can be attributed to a number of factors including: higher labour force participation, higher net disposable incomes, and affordable and accessible technology. The highest percentage change in the components of household consumption expenditure was in Communication Services and Goods for Recreation and Culture with 7.7% and 7.2% average annual change from 1985-86 to 2005-06 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007:4). This growth in household consumption is consistent with historical patterns and drivers of change (DeVries 2008; Harvey 2001; Baxter 2002).

Hours spent on household work gives a more complex picture. Looking at the normalisation of laundry and bathing practices as examples, Shove found there is a complex interaction between 'how suites of technologies and products are used together and how they cohere, socio-technically and symbolically, in shaping the meaning of what it is to be comfortable or to keep oneself and one's clothes appropriately clean' (2003:397). The introduction of new technology, the washing machine and wash and wear clothing, initially significantly reduced the time spent on this task but the process of normalising what it meant to be clean resulted in a subsequent increase in time spent, with Shove noting that households in the United States now do three times more washing loads than in 1950 and twice as many than are now done in the United Kingdom (2003:401). Industry efforts to maximise sales, of cleaning products and equipment for example, partly explain these trends (Matthews 1984; Walkerdine and Lucey 1989).

Notwithstanding the negation of potentially time saving technology by normalising practices, Baxter (2002:420) found that time spent overall on indoor household work declined in Australia between 1986 and 1997 and for women in particular, the decline was notable, with six hours a week less time spent on household work. These changes are 'the result of changes in consumption patterns, the way housework is performed as a result of technological devices, and changing household standards' (Baxter 2002:420). Changing food preparation and cooking practices, for example, are an important component of the decline in household work. In a five-country time-use study spanning the 1970s to the 1990s, Warde et al. (2007) found food preparation time had declined in all countries and eating at home time had decline in all but one country. They found significant differences in the rates of decline between countries, as well as differences according to gender, age, presence of children and cultural

capital. In the United States, food companies have discovered that the average household spends thirty minutes per day on cooking, down from an hour in the 1970s; a figure that is expected to shrink to five to fifteen minutes within two decades (Roberts 2009:43). These findings are echoed in the Australian literature with men now more engaged in cooking than previously, but less household time overall is spent on cooking.

The changing trends in household food practices must be understood within the context of the global food economy, whose profits have increasingly depended on the selling of convenience (or saved labour time), rather than food itself. The growth of pre-packaged and take-away food in the place of home-produced food is a more obvious example of this trend (Baxter 2002:420; Harvey 2001:37-40). DeVries (2008:262) refers to this process as the ‘substitutability’ of market-provided goods and services for those formerly produced within the household and notes the increased substitutability over time: ‘What could not be bought ‘off the shelf’ in the nineteenth century had become available in commercialized forms by the late twentieth century’ (2008:263). Roberts explains that ‘the sale of convenience depends...on the continued decline in consumers’ ability to prepare, or even understand, their own food’ (2009:31). Food companies have contributed to, and benefited from, the ‘general fading of cooking knowledge...the demise of the home-cooked sit-down meal, [and the rise of] flexi-eating’ (Roberts 2009:43). In effect, the capacity and resources of households for food self-reliance and security in the event of a breakdown in the global food system, even in wealthy nations, has been seriously undermined.

The loss of the household and non-market survival skills and underpinning knowledge associated with household production is not widely commented on in the research, with the exception of food preparation and cooking (Lyon et al. 2003). This inter-

generational transfer of knowledge is particularly fragile as its method of transmission relies on informal practices, oral communication, observation and learning usually within households and families (Bell 1988). There is concern in the sociology of food literature about the de-skilling effect of commodification, as household practices and knowledge fell into disuse and was lost to many households. This process is similar to the 'ratchet effect' described by Shove (2003:399) in that the loss of the skills necessary to perform household work will mean an inevitable reliance on substituted products. As market provisioning of household needs becomes increasingly costly in financial and ecological terms, the question of household deskilling and re-skilling takes on renewed importance.

## **Conclusion**

The commodification of social reproduction made financial sense in the context of higher average incomes and wages, women's entry into the labour market and the related decline in household time (De Vries 2008:26-27; Roberts 2009:35). It also made sense in the context of a global economy that provided cheap consumer goods by externalising the true costs of production to poorer nations and the ecosystem. Today however, factoring in the costs of finite ecological resources may tip the financial advantage of globally sourced commodities back in favour of local and household production. However, an increase in local and household production assumes certain resources and capacities. DeVries notes that a smooth rebalancing of household work and consumption may be impeded by the deskilling of households as a result of the commodification of household production (2008:268).

Precious little is known about the implications of the emerging food and energy crises on household labour and skill requirements. If the shortage of food and other

convenience goods spreads, households may well be forced to re-learn a suite of domestic skills to maintain living standards. How will climate change alter the relationship between formal and informal economic activity and the attendant gender, class and cultural relations (Littig 2002; Perkins 2007; Salleh 2009)? Greater research and public attention to the impacts of climate change on the relations of production and social reproduction are necessary if the intensification of social inequalities as a result of climate change is to be minimised.

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