Fitting Years' Worth of Trash into a Jar: Saving the Planet through Curated Consumption

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"This is all of my trash for the past five years," Lauren Singer proudly proclaims to the camera as she holds up a small glass jar filled with a jumble of small objects. Packed in the jar are a few drinking straws, a number of plastic clothing tag fasteners, a cut-up credit card, and "a lot of festival bracelets."[1] Singer is a zero-waste influencer who runs a blog on the topic of minimising the amount of trash one generates; she also owns a company making "organic, vegan laundry detergent" and a "zero waste lifestyle store."[2] As an environmental studies major, she was struck by behaviours she saw as contradictory: she and her classmates would spend time in class learning about the environmental crisis and ways to ameliorate it, but they would nonetheless purchase food packaged in plastic and use disposable items. She explains the motivation behind her work as follows:

> I used to think that the solution to environmental problems was through politicians and proactive policy decisions, but I realised that individuals have a huge impact on the world and the climate. And so, with every American making 4.5 pounds of trash per person per day, we contribute to this overall climate issue. And so, by us taking simple steps to reduce our waste, if we all take little steps and we all make little changes, that has a big positive impact, and I believe it can make a difference.[3]

[1] Singer, "My Trash In This Jar," 0:00-0:03
[2] *Id.*, 0:20-0:25.
[3] *Id.*, 3:10-3:39.

This passage encapsulates two elements of a widespread eco-friendly narrative. On the one hand, the passage reflects a belief in the environmental effectiveness of cumulative individual-level changes in lifestyle, particularly those related to the sphere of consumption. On the other hand, it exemplifies a dismissal of large-scale political (or, more properly, "institutional") solutions to environmental problems.

I selected this short video because it is representative of many videos, blogs, social media posts, books, and articles of its kind. "How I Fit 5 Years of My Trash In This Jar" is not a unique text, but rather a paradigmatic example of a popular narrative concerning environmentally conscious action.

Given the increasing awareness of climate change amongst all segments of the population, but especially young people, it is no wonder that guides to eco-friendly behaviour attract a lot of attention.[4] I do not want to investigate the source of this environmental sensibility—the sense of urgency around climate change is well warranted, as the first Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report in 1990 was already gloomy and the situation has not improved in the intervening three decades—but rather why exactly such an awareness tends to be realised in the form of lifestyle adjustments. Why is eco-consciousness understood as strictly a matter of consumption, encompassing aesthetic and identitarian pursuits, rather than a mostly political project?

In this essay, I close read a selection of lifestyle guides purporting to teach readers how to lead a minimalist life. The specific texts were chosen because they posit a strong relationship between environmental concerns and minimalist lifestyles—a move that, perhaps surprisingly, is not at all omnipresent in the literature on minimalism *tout court*. I will analyse the corpus of selected titles in order to unearth the ideological assumptions that characterise the subgenre of *environmental minimalism* and to contrast these assumptions with the apparently countercultural affective structure of the texts themselves. My argument is that the minimalist handbooks I analyse adopt the language of individual empowerment

[4] Thompson, "Young People's Climate Anxiety," 605.

and social critique, much like Lauren Singer's video, but upon closer inspection it becomes clear that the solutions they propose are compatible with the political, economic and ideological hegemony of neoliberal capitalism.

The analysis proper will be preceded by two introductory sections. In the first, I will present the corpus of texts at the core of this article in relation to the practices of lifestyle minimalism, the zero-waste movement and ethical consumption. The second introductory section will delve into the concept of neoliberal governmentality, focusing on its political consequences—especially, as Wendy Brown argues, on its incompatibility with democracy. These introductory sections are followed by close readings of several extracts from minimalist handbooks, highlighting the ideological implications of certain common narratives, such as the idea that lifestyle adjustments are the key to environmental action, that curating one's private consumption is the path to sustainability, and that one's behaviour as a consumer can essentially be understood as activism. In the final portion of the article, I will contrast the individualistic bent of minimalist and zero-waste handbooks with the openly political and communal nature of the possibilities for action proposed in other texts devoted to solving climate change.

What is lifestyle minimalism?

Unlike the idea of zero-waste, which is intuitively easy to grasp (it means striving to produce no garbage by foregoing disposable items and instead choosing goods that can be reused indefinitely), the concept of minimalism is less immediately clear. Semantically, it evokes ideas of paring down, simplifying and reducing. Accordingly, the minimalist movement in contemporary art produced sculptures "characterised by extreme simplicity of form, usually on a large scale and using industrial materials."[5] But in terms of lifestyle, the relevant domain for this article, the minimalist drive toward simplification takes two forms. At the abstract level, it encourages proponents to re-evaluate their priorities, minimising commitments that cause

[5] Chilvers and Glaves-Smith, "Minimal art," 461. Chilvers and Glaves-Smith describe artists contributing to minimal art as concerned with purity of form, transcending mimetic representations of space, and bringing artworks in conversation with the exhibition space.

unnecessary stress and take time away from enjoyable pursuits. At the material level, it involves activities like decluttering (getting rid of superfluous objects) and limiting the number of new things one brings into one's home. Rarely are these two levels completely separate from one another: most books on minimalism recommend simplifying your life *and* your home, understanding these two domains as intertwined. Despite the connection between the psychological and the domestic spheres, authors of books on minimalism typically decide to focus on one of the two, emphasising either the physical act of going through one's possessions or the process of re-evaluating one's career, relationships and priorities.

Focusing on the material side of things, minimalism's emphasis on reducing consumption and living more frugally gives the lifestyle an environmentally friendly connotation. This "green" image is supported by a large amount of content on social media that plays up the sustainability of a minimalist lifestyle, relying amongst other things on a visual rhetoric consisting of images of plant-filled apartments, natural-looking materials, and an aesthetic predilection for the simple and (seemingly) unstaged. Partly because of this environmentally friendly reputation, lifestyle minimalism attracts a lot of popular interest, especially in light of growing concern about the climate crisis.[6]

In order to understand the constellation of practices discussed in this article, a third movement should be mentioned alongside zero-waste and minimalism: ethical consumption. This complex phenomenon—endowed with its own historical and cultural premises—started gaining traction around the turn of the millennium.[7] At the time, in hope of mitigating the impact of their consumption on the environment and working conditions in the Global South, many consumers started to let ethical concerns inform their purchasing habits.[8] Unable to completely opt out of consuming, shoppers who want to practically enact their ethical

[6] Minimalist authors like Marie Kondo and the American duo The Minimalists (Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus) are particularly successful, starring in Netflix shows, publishing best-selling handbooks and boasting large numbers of social media followers.

[7] Lewis and Potter, *Ethical Consumption*, 8.

[8] Shaw and Newholm, "Voluntary Simplicity," 168.

concerns are faced with two possible strategies: they can shift their purchasing habits by acquiring more ethically sourced products, and they can adopt a less consumption-heavy lifestyle to minimise the destructive consequences of their purchases.[9] Ethical consumption has steadily increased in popularity over the last two decades; today, it is possible to purchase bamboo toothbrushes, biodegradable earphones, and all sorts of groceries in glass jars—all in a bid to avoid creating plastic waste. Companies like Apple craft an image of sustainability by promoting their products as recyclable and produced minimizing waste.[10] Many companies' advertisements also emphasise how humane their production practices are and how they empower the workers who labour in their factories. Some companies even enact schemes where, for every item purchased by a (Western, wealthy) customer, another identical item is donated to a community in need.[11] The concerns informing ethical consumption have been fully embraced by corporations large and small: if customers want to purchase items that are environmentally friendly and ethically manufactured, the market will provide them.[12]

The three movements I have mentioned—lifestyle minimalism, zero-waste and ethical consumption—are often combined and integrated with one another. Minimalism proclaims that life is too hectic, that consumerism does not lead to happiness, and that a simpler lifestyle can offer greater rewards than conspicuous consumption. The average reader of books on minimalism is, however, unable to stop consuming entirely: even reducing purchases to the minimum, they will still need to acquire groceries, clothing and technology. Those more or less unavoidable

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[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Valenzuela and Böhm, "Against wasted politics," 26.

[11] See for example Nike, "Worker Engagement & Wellbeing." See also the buy-one-donate-one schemes carried out for socks and eyeglasses: Bombas, "Thank You X 5 Million," and Warby Parker, "The Whole Story Begins With You."

[12] The twin questions of transparency (is a product that claims to be fully recyclable *really* recyclable anywhere?) and of effectiveness (is donating a second pair of socks to homeless shelters really the most efficient way to help, or is it more of a feel-good practice for customers?) are often brought up by commentators and critics, but that does not seem to inspire much serious debate. On the topic see for example, Valenzuela and Böhm, "Against Wasted Politics," or Kalina, "Treating the Symptom?"

purchases are where ethical consumption fits in: the things that one *must* buy should be both ethically sourced and environmentally sustainable. One could therefore interpret zero-waste practices, which are meant to reduce the amount of waste one creates, as a facet of ethical consumption.

The above-mentioned environmentally-friendly rhetoric often goes unmentioned in published handbooks on lifestyle minimalism. The few printed titles that do explore the ecological implications of a less-consumerist lifestyle invariably focus on the practical aspects of minimalism, and particularly on household management. Such texts effortlessly combine the logic of reduction and simplification, which is so central to minimalism, with an appreciation of zero-waste techniques and a concern with the ethical aspects of consumption. By assembling these different (but related) lifestyle trends, minimalist handbooks that prioritise environmental sustainability focus on the private consumption of individuals and their families. This emphasis on individual consumption (specifically as it concerns the domestic sphere), combined with an acknowledgement of the ecological impact of a minimalist lifestyle, constitutes the core of what I call *minimalist environmentalism*.

I selected Francine Jay's *The Joy of Less*, Bea Johnson's *Zero Waste Home*, and Cary Telander Fortin and Kyle Louise Quilici's *New Minimalism* as the corpus for this article because they embody environmental minimalism as I define it. All three of these books share two key characteristics: firstly, they focus on the domestic space, on the management of material possessions, and on the nefarious consequences of thoughtless consumption more generally. Secondly, they discuss the environmental implications of lifestyle choices in detail—be it in one chapter, as in *The Joy of Less*, or throughout the length of the text, as in the remaining two titles.

Neoliberalism: *homo oeconomicus* and the rational market

In the following three sections, I aim to identify and problematise some common elements of the environmental discourse exemplified by my corpus of minimalist handbooks. I focus specifically on drawing links between arguments playing up the importance of carefully managing one's private consumption, which are a central component of environmental minimalism, and the

much-discussed concept of neoliberalism. Before delving into the analysis proper, I will briefly delineate how I understand two key terms, *politics* and *neoliberalism*, and why exactly the latter is especially relevant for my discussion.

Instead of taking on the challenging task of offering a coherent definition of politics, I will draw on Adrian Leftwich's schematic classification of the meanings of politics and argue that, for my purposes, the term should be understood as *processual*, addressing how "questions of power, control [and] decision-making" are mediated amongst individuals and groups, without necessarily involving governmental institutions.[13] In this article I specifically understand politics as proximate to democratic decision-making, with the idea that in politics multiple interested parties can come together to actively pursue their interests.[14]

Though younger than the debate about the nature of politics, the concept of neoliberalism has also been interpreted in a multiplicity of ways. Countless books and countless articles have been devoted to the task of defining neoliberalism. These texts tend to agree on identifying three central elements: a reliance on free-market economics, an individualistic ethos, and a belief in the idea that the functions of the state ought to be very limited—especially as they pertain to the sphere of the economy. Throughout my analysis I will show that minimalist environmentalism is shaped by these three principles, which greatly constrain the range of solutions to ecological problems that minimalist environmentalism can discuss.

Beyond these very general traits, scholars disagree on the domains they see as influenced by neoliberalism: to some, like David Harvey, it is a largely economic affair, while to others, like Rachel Greenwald-Smith, it explains social and cultural phenomena as well. Clearly, in analysing a popular lifestyle through the lens of neoliberalism, I would position myself in the latter camp. My argument is deeply informed by political theorist Wendy Brown's analysis of neoliberalism's influence on contemporary Western societies. In her study *Undoing the Demos*, Brown focuses on the

[13] Leftwich, "Thinking Politically," 14.

[14] Centering the importance of democratic organisation, I follow the arguments laid out by Naomi Klein in *This Changes Everything* (see, for example, chapter 4) and Jon Alexander in *Citizens*.

incompatibility between neoliberalism—which she defines, following Michel Foucault, as "a specific and normative mode of reason, of the production of the subject, 'conduct of conduct,' and scheme of valuation"[15]—and democracy.[16] Democracy, which Brown understands as "political self-rule by the people, whoever the people are,"[17] asks that people understand themselves as members of a community, and as such pursue the public good.[18] This cooperative imagination is fundamentally at odds with the competitive nature of neoliberalism, which Brown defines as a rationale that understands every human behaviour in economic terms, evaluating every sphere of life as if it were governed by the logic of the free market.[19]

In neoliberalism, crucially, human subjects shed the role of citizens and take on the role of *homo oeconomicus*: they are only intelligible insofar as their actions make economic sense, whether or not they function in domains that are expressly monetized. *Homo oeconomicus*, in other words, justifies taking a break over the weekend because rest will allow greater efficiency at the workplace, not because a break might be enjoyable. Texts on minimalist lifestyles likewise often cater to the interests of *homo oeconomicus*. A particularly straightforward example of this orientation toward efficiency and profit—focusing, of course, on how practices like decluttering can contribute to profit maximisation—is found in *New Minimalism*. Quilici and Fortin recount their experiences with a client, Shawn, "a highly in-demand Silicon Valley engineer, . . . [whose] time was so valuable that it didn't seem worth it to him to deal with his stuff."[20] Shawn thinks like a *homo oeconomicus*: if time is money, then spending time on activities that do not bring profit is an irrational waste. It soon becomes evident to him, however, that living in an organised minimalist environment is economically worthwhile, because it reduces the amount of time it takes him to pack for work trips and it ensures that he is able to reliably arrive at

[15] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 48.
[16] *Id.*, 39.
[17] *Id.,* 20.
[18] *Id.,* 24.
[19] *Id.*, 10.
[20] Quilici and Fortin, *New Minimalism*, 45.

work on time.[21] After receiving professional decluttering help, Quilici and Fortin point out, Shawn's mental state is so much improved by his more organised surroundings that he decides to move cities and pursue even more lucrative work.[22]

For the purposes of this article, the most important implication of *homo oeconomicus'* overextension of market logic to every facet of life—including domains traditionally untouched by it—is that it stands to reason that the market would also be its preferred space for action. According to this framework, goals, be they individual or social, can only be pursued by keeping a close eye on the opportunities afforded to economic actors. The horizon, then, is not one of democratic mobilisation for the good of the community. As Brown argues, individuals under a neoliberal regime are called upon to act as subjects of the market, not as members of a coherent political body.[23] Minimalist environmentalism, I will argue, is deeply steeped in this market-centric understanding of social and political action.

Environmental concerns: from the centre to the periphery

The three books in my corpus were selected because they devote a significant amount of space to the topic of environmentalism, but they do not approach it in the same way—or with the same intensity. On the more involved end of the spectrum sits *Zero Waste Home,* which could be broadly described as a guide to environmentally friendly homemaking. In this text, Johnson highlights the beneficial effects of her lifestyle recommendations on the environment and psychological wellbeing, while generally overlooking the aesthetic pursuit of sparse-looking interiors. The title, too, explicitly attracts readers whose environmental sensibility pushes them to make lifestyle changes, and it primes them to expect a book whose main goal is to promote a "green" lifestyle. The same cannot be said of *The Joy of Less*, nor *New Minimalism* (whose subtitle, "Decluttering and Design for Sustainable, Intentional Living," ambiguously evokes two meanings of *sustainable*, both as

[21] *Ibid.*
[22] *Id.*, 46.
[23] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 22.

"environmentally friendly" and "easy to maintain in the long run")—and in fact these latter two texts devote much less space to environmental concerns, and more to the creation of elegant domestic spaces.

While *Zero Waste Home* centres on the impact that thoughtful domestic management might have on the environment, *The Joy of Less* and *New Minimalism* only mention the potential ecologically beneficial aspects of minimalism as welcome side effects of their projects, which are mainly intended to achieve the aesthetic goal of a tastefully decorated home and the psychological goal of improved satisfaction. Jay, for example, acknowledges that her readers may "have embraced minimalism to save money, save time, or save space in [their] homes," but reassures them that their minimalist practice—the decluttering and re-using, donating and ethical purchasing—has nonetheless had the effect of "[saving] the Earth from environmental harm, and [saving] people from suffering unfair (and unsafe) working conditions."[24] Similarly, the authors of *New Minimalism* point out that along with improving one's wellbeing, a minimalist lifestyle offers "less obvious benefits . . . like, ahem, saving the planet."[25] Quilici and Fortin are mindful of the fact that their readers might not be particularly motivated to turn into "warrior[s] for our planet's health," but they are adamant that if readers enact the advice offered, "[their] actions will be a benevolent service to our earth."[26]

These passages offer a feel-good rhetoric that has a reassuring effect on readers. By only addressing environmental concerns peripherally—as the last items on a list of a given lifestyle's benefits, or in the last chapter of a rather lengthy book (as in *The Joy of Less*, where the environment is only discussed in chapter 30)—the authors confine issues like pollution and climate change to the fringes of their projects. Whether that is because the anxiety-inducing reality of environmental degradation is at odds with the uplifting self-help tone of the texts, or because the authors do not deem environmental topics all that important, is difficult to conclude. It can, however, be safely argued that Jay, Fortin and Quilici's books suggest that

[24] Jay, *The Joy of Less*, ch. 30, paragraph 1.
[25] Quilici and Fortin, *New Minimalism*, ix.
[26] *Ibid.*

politically addressing climate change and pollution is made irrelevant by the fact that adopting a minimalist lifestyle already automatically takes care of it. After all, if the practices of self-control and restraint one would adopt to enhance happiness, productivity and wellbeing are already so beneficial for the environment, what is the point of addressing climate change separately?

My critique of the above-mentioned rhetoric is that it communicates the idea that by adhering to minimalist lifestyles for individual wellbeing readers can automatically be (to use Fortin and Quilici's phrase) "saving the planet." Following one's own self-interest, in other words, ultimately adds up to the collective interest, making it unnecessary to consider the common good.[27] Furthermore, the extracts analysed above suggest that curating one's consumption is the most impactful thing one can do to fight environmental decay, which implies that other forms of environmental actions can be overlooked. My concerns with these suggestions are addressed in more detail in the following two sections.

The limitless power of consumption

The reassuring passages analysed above rely on the assumption that lifestyle adjustments have a decisive impact on the serious environmental issues the planet faces in this era of ever-accelerating climate change. The texts in my corpus repeatedly propose the idea that small quotidian behaviours can have larger, rippling effects. Sometimes these effects are said to have an interpersonal impact, such as showing friends and family that a minimalist lifestyle is beneficial and not overly difficult to implement. There is some merit to the argument that one's personal actions can be effective in inspiring others and demonstrating one's commitment to the ecological cause.[28] But in the environmental minimalist handbooks I investigate, the emphasis on interpersonal influence is evoked to support the spreading of a minimalist lifestyle for its own sake, not for any "green" goal. When lifestyle changes are explicitly called for in service to an environmental ethos, their effect is, on the other hand, represented as simultaneously economic and social: the idea

[27] Alexander, *Citizens*, 6.
[28] Jamieson, *Reason in a Dark Time*, 182.

is that buying certain goods (and, conversely, not buying others) directly influences which products corporations manufacture, as well as the working conditions in the factories that produce these items.

This narrative betrays a boundless faith in the efficacy of the individual choices one makes as a customer. This faith is—as previously mentioned—coherent with a neoliberal worldview whereby individuals are exclusively understood as economic actors. Accordingly, buying ethically produced goods, avoiding products packaged in plastic and moderating personal consumption becomes the equivalent of overtly political action, because by performing one's role in the market as a consumer one contributes to the causes one deems important. By endowing consumption with the potential for environmental and social change while never exploring any other strategies to achieve the same goals, environmental minimalist texts effectively adhere to a neoliberal understanding of individual potential.

In this framework, responsibility for climate change is placed squarely on the shoulders of consumers, whose only available option for solving it is shopping thoughtfully—not, for example, participating in grassroots environmental movements or pressuring governments to prioritise the fight against polluting practices. In the environmental minimalist texts I analyse, the possibility of regulating corporations and forcing them to engage in profit-compromising but ecologically beneficial behaviours goes completely unmentioned. Instead, the solution these texts all propose can be boiled down to ensuring that desirable environmental and social changes coincide with the economic good of corporations. In other words, in step with typical neoliberal discourse, environmental minimalist texts argue that the market can be made to work toward environmental goals, provided that such environmental goals are profitable. The consumers' job, ultimately, is to make sure that the right ethical goals become profitable.

I would argue that this particular understanding of market economics indexes a vestigial form of politics: it shows that environmentally minded minimalists are aware that their actions have larger consequences, and that one's behaviour, coordinated

with others', can bring about social change.[29] But an awareness of the potential of collective collaboration only goes so far; in this hybrid domain of economics and politics, individuals are only ever called to act as consumers. Instead of imagining people actively championing their values as citizens (for example, by arguing that environmental preservation should be a social priority), minimalist texts can only picture their readers as consumers sending messages through their purchasing habits. This imbrication of economics and a vestigial politics is the structuring principle of environmental minimalism. All that matters is what one buys, owns, and discards—the three consumer practices inevitably depicted by environmental minimalism as the privileged arena for environmental change. The consumer-centric meshing of economics and the social sphere constitutes the foundation on which the architecture of lifestyle minimalism (as well as zero-waste and ethical consumption) is built. I will illustrate this claim with a passage from *Zero Waste Home* explaining how individual purchasing habits supposedly "trickle up" to the domain of production.

> We have incredible power as consumers. We rely on grocery shopping for survival and restock a multitude of products weekly (sometimes daily), and our decisions can promote or demote manufacturers and grocers, based on the packaging or quality of food they provide. Where we spend the fruit of our hard labour should more than meet our basic need of filling a pantry shelf; it should also reflect our values. Because ultimately, giving someone your business implicitly articulates this message: "Your store satisfies all my needs and I want you to flourish." We can vote with our pocketbooks by avoiding wasteful packaging and privileging local and organic products.[30]

Johnson here takes it for granted that sustainable consumption is made up of several different components, with each actor

[29] Soper, *Post-Growth Living*, 44.
[30] Johnson, *Zero Waste Home*, 52.

responsible for doing their part: the duty of manufacturers is to minimise their use of natural resources, but it is customers' responsibility to choose the right products and ensure that their desires are coherent with an ethos of moderation.[31]

Since consumption is implicitly regarded as a thoroughly feminised cultural domain (and one typically deemed economically marginal as compared to the male-coded domain of production),[32] this doling out of responsibility is deeply gendered.[33] In understanding consumers as the driving engines of environmental sustainability, then, the burden of responsibility is largely placed on the shoulders of women. Although Johnson does not spell it out, in fact, the "we" whose grocery shopping has the power to decide which stores, manufacturers, or production practices ought to "flourish" (and which ones should be left to wither) is made up of women. Day-to-day shopping for essentials is in fact part of the care labour with which mothers, wives and girlfriends are regularly tasked.[34]

As Ines Weller finds in her investigation of the relationship between gender politics and sustainable consumption, the twenty-first century is characterised by the privatisation of environmental responsibility, which greatly overemphasises the capacity of individual consumers—coded as female—to enact environmental change.[35] In the Johnson passage cited above, agency is wielded most effectively by the final consumer, whose environmentally conscious purchasing decisions supposedly influence the practices of whichever retailer they favour. Retailers, the story goes, will accordingly place fewer orders of unsustainable products from their suppliers, ultimately resulting in a loss of profits for manufacturers, who will decide to tweak their production methods to be more eco-friendly. Although this chain of events undoubtedly makes logical

[31] Weller, "Gender Dimensions," 333.
[32] This view rests on a traditional view, at least in Europe and North America, that associates the domestic sphere with femininity and the public domain with masculinity. See the paragraph "Separation of spheres" in Timm and Sanborn, *Shaping of Modern Europe*, 89-96.
[33] Weller, "Gender Dimensions," 338-339.
[34] Miller, *A Theory of Shopping*, 22.
[35] Weller, "Gender Dimensions," 331.

sense, its overly simplistic focus on individuals leads to a failure to adequately account for other actors. The relationships between retailers, suppliers, manufacturers and other commercial actors are imagined to be straightforward and univocal, but in reality they are complex and layered. Unlike what minimalist texts argue, the purchasing decisions of consumers do not straightforwardly influence producers. Instead, the interests of shopkeepers and wholesalers, exporters and importers stand in the way, and the waters are further muddied by regulations and subsidies, governments and trade agreements. All these different elements complicate the scene, and when bringing them into focus one inevitably must acknowledge that individual consumers in fact have very limited power: they are merely one of the final links in a long and complicated chain of production and exchange.

Under the pretence of framing the reader as "one more person moving the needle, ever so slightly, toward environmental compassion and responsibility,"[36] environmental minimalist texts regularly brush over the question of scale and feasibility. I would argue that uncomfortable questions should be asked about the efficacy of the solutions these texts propose, even if the answers make individual consumers appear rather powerless. The number of unbought Band-Aid plasters, Listerine mouthwash bottles, O.B. tampon boxes necessary for Johnson & Johnson to notice a difference in sales, let alone reinvent its production line, is astronomical. Likewise, for a consumer boycott to be successful enough to drive Nestlé to cease exploitation of farmers in the Global South, enormous masses of people would have to be coordinated over a long period of time. Such considerations reveal the overly optimistic nature of the claims made by minimalist authors by taking into account the unprecedented scale of consumer mobilisation that is called for.

Ultimately, as Weller concisely puts it, a privatised and feminised theory of environmental sustainability "fails to take adequate account of . . . the other actors who are as relevant, and perhaps even more influential, in the development of strategies and concepts for promoting sustainable patterns of consumption and

[36] Quilici and Fortin, *New Minimalism*, 100.

production than individuals."[37] To acknowledge this reality, however, would be incompatible with the narrative of consumer empowerment that is so central to environmental minimalism.

Our consumerist overlords

It would, however, be inaccurate to say that handbooks on minimalist lifestyles *completely* overlook the important role that corporations, the manufacturing sector and the macroeconomic domain play in society as a whole. On the contrary, such actors are almost inevitably mentioned whenever the authors of these books argue why most people would benefit from paring down their material possessions. Such explanations occur rather frequently, understandably enough: if minimalism is built around the idea that happiness cannot be bought, the authors need to explain why they think most people feel such a materialistic attachment to their possessions.

The authors of *New Minimalism* provide a brief historical account of consumerist society, placing the turning point after World War II, when economic growth allegedly started to depend on increased consumption. This, Fortin and Quilici explain, marked the birth of "our modern-day big-budget multimedia advertising industry," whose aim is to convince us "to buy things we don't need" by exploiting the "sneaky technique called neuromarketing, which allows advertisers to "tap into both our conscious and unconscious brain to override our natural circuitry . . . trigger[ing] our reptilian brain and make us feel that we are lacking something. And then, once we are in this vulnerable place, we are conveniently presented with the item that will solve this 'problem.'"[38] The issue, in short, is that the capitalist system (which is evoked, but not explicitly addressed by the authors of *New Minimalism* in these terms) needs constant consumption to keep itself alive, and in its vampiric desire for untapped market segments it does not hesitate to engage in the unethical manipulation of innocent people's brains.

Considering that critiques of the capitalist system have been

[37] Weller, "Gender Dimensions," 334.
[38] Quilici and Fortin, New Minimalism, 12.

part and parcel of academic discourse since Marx first put pen to paper, taking a dim view of exploitative economic systems is not especially controversial. Nonetheless, one can appreciate the value of general interest publications that dare to challenge the dominant logic of industrialised economies. Concerning to me, however, is that the environmental minimalist guides I discuss in this essay depict the malicious system as something easily avoided through consumer choice. These texts promise that one can simply opt out of "consumerist" (read: capitalist) society by being mindful about one's purchases and avoiding the lure of advertising. According to this logic, if you do not purchase unnecessary, unsustainable or disposable things, you are no longer meaningfully implicated in the workings of consumer society. In this context, not buying becomes an act of defiance; freedom is understood as the exercise of agency in one's dealings with the market.[39] To Quilici and Fortin "every thoughtful purchase—and nonpurchase—is an act of rebellion, a declaration to businesses and advertisers that you are not merely a passive consumer purchasing according to their advertising calendar and quarterly financial forecasts."[40] Johnson similarly feels "as though [she is] outsmarting the system in place" when she makes food from scratch instead of buying processed products. Her "rebellious side also gets satisfaction from being able to make do without buying into corporations and their marketing engines. It gives [her] a sense of freedom, knowing that [she does] not depend on them."[41]

Authors like Johnson, Quilici and Fortin understand the problem of material consumption as fundamentally separate from all of the other social issues that are also rooted in a capitalist society built around the maximisation of profits. "Advertisers, corporations, and politicians" desire to acquire wealth, according to Jay, leaving us "working long hours at jobs we don't like, to pay for things we don't need."[42] While that might be true, single-mindedly focusing on the accessory facets of consumption—on knick-knacks and gadgets, clothes and other discretionary purchases—means overlooking a

[39] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 179.
[40] Quilici and Fortin, New Minimalism, 13.
[41] Johnson, *Zero Waste Home*, 39.
[42] Jay, *The Joy of Less*, chapter 30, paragraph 2.

number of other things that "we" *do* need, such as housing, utilities, transportation, groceries, healthcare, education and so on. All of these needs cannot practically be rejected, and they make up a significant portion of most people's expenses. A number of such unavoidable expenses are inextricably tied up in environmentally ruinous industries, like fossil fuels and the automotive sector, especially for the less wealthy.[43] Presenting the adjustment of one's purchasing habits as a way to disengage from the binds of a neoliberal capitalist system can only be convincing to an audience willing to overlook large-scale issues like those listed above. By choosing to only spotlight those aspects of consumption that could be conceivably solved by thoughtful purchasing habits, then, environmental minimalism promotes a skewed account of eco-friendly action. Its single-minded focus on consumer choices draws attention away from the more fundamental drivers of climate change and social inequality, such as the influence that fossil fuel companies have on governments, and the typically neoliberal reluctance to let profit be threatened by social concerns.[44]

Additionally, it should be noted that distancing oneself from the ills of society comes at a cost. The above-mentioned discourses on thoughtful or eco-friendly consumption are in fact typically directed at those who have the economic means to prioritise (often more expensive) green purchases, and have enough wealth set aside to select the pricier—but longer-lasting—versions of consumer goods. Furthermore, as already remarked, minimalist authors overlook all kinds of questions related to the domain of production, because their books only engage with consumption.[45]

To be clear, it would be unfair to criticise books on decluttering for not zeroing in on the catastrophic effects of the erosion of the welfare state on the working class, or on grassroots movements attempting to shift the world away from fossil fuels. That is not their goal. Environmental minimalist books aim at

[43] If one lives in an area without access to reliable public transport and is unable to move within walking/cycling distance to their workplace, they will have little choice but to drive; similarly, those who do not own their homes cannot make them more energy-efficient, cannot install solar panels.
[44] Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 145, 119.
[45] Malm, *Fossil Capital*, 365.

encouraging the pursuit of a certain aesthetically pleasing, presumably healthy lifestyle, and therefore it makes sense that they would scrutinise shopping habits more closely than anything else. Even keeping this in mind, however, one cannot ignore how the texts in my corpus repeatedly hint at some form of systemic critique, only to quickly dismiss it by understanding it in the most literal and restricted way possible.

A politics of imagination

The dismissal of a systemic critique can be understood as a form of psychic self-protection. As Timothy Morton points out, contemplating the complexity of ecological catastrophe evokes feelings of horror and incomprehension—there is no script, no existing frame of reference through which to conceptualise the situation.[46] In this context, investing one's time and energy in purchasing bulk goods in glass jars, buying free-range eggs from a neighbour's chickens and mailing back unwanted junk mail—all practices Johnson recommends—can provide a sense of control and mastery. Even though the environmental effectiveness of these strategies has repeatedly been questioned,[47] they provide psychological reassurance to individuals who can derive a sense of agency and empowerment from the feeling that they are doing their part.[48]

Naomi Klein also evokes the self-soothing nature of this drive to curate individual consumption in the introduction to her urgent book *This Changes Everything*. Here, Klein acknowledges how necessary it can feel to shield oneself from really beholding the realities of the climate crisis. She claims that we are not truly looking at the facts of the matter when we

> tell ourselves that all we can do is focus on ourselves. Meditate and shop at farmers' markets and stop driving—but forget trying to actually change the systems that are making the crisis inevitable because

[46] Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 31-32.
[47] For example by Csutora, "One More Awareness Gap," 159.
[48] *Ibid.*

> that's too much "bad energy" and it will never work. And at first it may appear as if we are looking, because many of these lifestyle changes are indeed part of the solution, but we still have one eye tightly shut.[49]

I am well aware that in dismissing minimalist consumption-based approaches to changing the system, *I* am apparently the resigned voice saying that, in Klein's words, "it will never work." But to be clear, this article argues that what will never work is handling the threat of climate change as something that can be tackled by individual consumers.[50]

Many intellectuals focusing on the climate crisis have provided long lists of alternative solutions, which often call for large-scale social, cultural and economic changes. Klein, for example, writes that changing the constitutive elements of contemporary societies—such as how energy is sourced, how transportation is organised and how cities are designed—"requires bold long-term planning at every level of government, and a willingness to stand up to polluters whose actions put us all in danger."[51] Glancing at the table of contents of Klein's book makes it clear that her focus lies on issues of policy, trade and social responsibility. The use of terms like "free-market fundamentalism," "extractivism," "divestment" and "atmospheric commons," as well as references to "the invisible hand" (of the market) signal that she is concerned with analysing and opposing the political-economic structures that impede large-scale climate action, and not with on individual-level behavioural change.[52]

In the 1970s, climate scientist Donella Meadows ran a series of groundbreaking simulations showing that a number of crucial changes would be needed in order to bring human consumption to a sustainable level—that is, a level at which the rate of resource

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[49] Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 4.

[50] In referring to "the threat of climate change" I do not want to overlook that the effects of climate disruption are *already* being felt in many parts of the world, making it less of a future crisis than a present disaster. See Doermann, "Against Ecocidal Environmentalism," 147.

[51] Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 119.

[52] *Id.*, 4-5.

consumption did not outstrip that of resource regeneration.[53] Couples would need to have no more than two children; material consumption would need to steeply decrease in wealthy countries and increase in other areas until a satisfactory (but not lavish) lifestyle were granted to everyone; and technological advancement would need to allow for more efficient use of resources, significant reductions in pollution, and higher crop yields.[54] As Meadows points out, a society with a "sustainable ecological footprint would be almost unimaginably different from the one in which most people now live."[55] While Meadows, unlike Klein, does not provide examples of policies that would lead the way to the desirable sustainable future she sketches out, it is clear that the changes she envisions would need to happen on the institutional level. She argues that per capita material consumption in the Global North cannot continue increasing unchecked, implying that individual lifestyles also need to change. In this, Meadows' argument aligns with the arguments made by proponents of minimalist and zero-waste lifestyles. In *The Limits to Growth*, however, these lifestyle changes are envisioned as the *result* of large-scale, structural processes, not as their drivers.

Meadows and Klein's focus on systemic issues as drivers of individual lifestyle shifts is the opposite of what books on minimalism typically suggest. The following quote from *The Joy of Less* demonstrates this point with unusual clarity:

> So what do we have to do to become minsumers? Not much, actually. We don't have to protest, boycott, or block the doors to megastores; in fact, we don't even have to lift a finger, leave the house, or spend an extra moment of our precious time. It's simply a matter of not *buying*. Whenever we ignore television commercials, breeze by impulse items without a glance, borrow books from the library, mend our clothes instead of replacing them, or resist purchasing the latest electronic gadget, we're committing our own

[53] Meadows, *The Limits to Growth*, 254.
[54] *Id.*, 244.
[55] *Id.*, 254.

> little acts of "consumer disobedience." By simply *not buying*, we accomplish a world of good: we avoid supporting exploitative labor practices, and we reclaim the resources of our planet—delivering them from the hands of corporations into those of our children. It's one of the easiest and most effective ways to heal the Earth, and improve the lives of its inhabitants.[56]

I have already pointed out the disproportionate responsibility that is placed on consumers in this rhetoric. The passage above takes one further step—it explicitly calls for a passive stance towards the environmental crisis, rather than implicitly endorsing such a stance. The explicit message communicated here is that there is no need for active political engagement, protests or direct involvement with activism. If one of the easiest and *most effective* ways to solve the climate crisis is to stay at home and just slightly tweak one's purchasing habits, then why not do that?

Once again, Brown's diagnosis of the fundamental incompatibility between neoliberalism and a solid democratic system becomes relevant. The passage above demonstrates how the distinctively neoliberal tendency to see everything through the lens of the market ultimately clashes against a model of citizenship based on active political involvement with issues that shape the lives of the community. In Jay's view, environmental responsibility begins and ends with individual consumer behaviour, but this market-based understanding of environmental action is problematic. Specifically, it carries two crucial drawbacks: first of all, it means that a number of political stances cannot be entertained because they are inexpressible as consumer choices to indulge in or abstain from (one cannot say "I am against fracking," for example, by making specific decisions at the supermarket). Secondly, buying or not buying certain products is a rather inarticulate way to express one's concerns: a decrease in sales can be interpreted in many ways, ranging from the ideological—as Johnson auspicates—to the strictly

[56] Jay, chapter 30, paragraph 2. In Jay's words, minsumers "minimize [their] consumption to what meets [their] needs, minimiz[e] the impact of [their] consumption on the environment, and minimiz[e] the effect of [their] consumption on other people's lives (chapter 30, paragraph 1).

practical (Is the product too expensive? Badly marketed? Lacking in quality?). Citizens have more effective tools at their disposal to make their voices heard, ranging from casting their votes in elections to getting involved in acts of civil disobedience. In actively disregarding such openly political options in favour of exclusively market-based action, the environmental minimalist texts analysed in this article implicitly endorse a neoliberal approach to issues of sustainability.

Environmentalist social scientist Micheal Maniates makes this point forcefully in his article "Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?" Despite being over twenty years old, this article offers a still-relevant critique of the depoliticized, passive mode of environmentalism that I identify as central to environmental minimalism. Maniates' main point is that the most common, most popular and best-understood "strain" of environmentalism is thoroughly informed by a neoliberal logic. It demands that people see themselves exclusively as consumers who can express concerns only through their "informed, decentralised, apolitical, individualised" consumer practices.[57] Like Weller, Maniates is concerned about the consequences of the individualization of responsibility: by foregrounding the isolated consumer, questions of institutional and systemic responsibility are allowed to lurk unnoticed in the background. The core of the problem is depoliticization, which is—as Brown also observes—an essential component of a neoliberal society.

Mainates posits that individualization is an obstacle to people's willingness to join in on the "empowering experiences and political lessons of collective struggle for social change" because it labels as irrelevant all action that exceeds the individual domain, or that is not strictly a form of consumption.[58] I, however, partially disagree with this point. While *The Joy of Less* openly disregards various forms of political activism, the other environmental minimalist texts analysed above do not explicitly argue that activism is useless. This is not to say they endorse it. Rather, they ignore it, just like they ignore the deeper, more troublesome issues that cannot be

[57] Maniates, "Individualization," 41, 47.
[58] *Id.*, 44.

satisfactorily addressed by adjusting one's consumption patterns. By overlooking the systemic problems that contribute to the environmental crisis, minimalist lifestyle guides ensure that the possibility of radical change never enters the conversation.

In light of these observations, I would instead suggest that the issue at hand is what Mark Fisher labelled *capitalist realism*—the widespread perception that the capitalist system is the only feasible way to organise society and the economy, such that it is impossible to imagine a viable alternative to it.[59] One can recognize the severely limited futurity of minimalism when Jay fantasises about a future scenario where she might scan the barcodes of products to learn about their environmental impact and whether the people who made them worked in humane conditions. She conjures up this scene of consumer empowerment rather than picturing a world free from exploitation.[60] Similarly, when Johnson paints a picture of a world where zero waste is considered primarily as an economic opportunity, rather than as a commitment to the common good, she is still thinking of "economic opportunities" as the overriding priority—as an unquestioned value.[61] Moving beyond capitalism seems unthinkable perhaps because it is largely perceived as a *rational* system, and the idea of rationality is constitutive of contemporary Western society. Rationality is the rubric according to which we evaluate which ideas make sense and which ones do not, what is right and what is wrong. As long as the identification of capitalism with rationality is uncritically accepted, the system will continue to be perceived as natural and, therefore, indispensable.[62]

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that lurking behind the depoliticized rhetoric of minimalism, one can glimpse the absolute triumph of global neoliberal capitalism, which has successfully managed to popularise its understanding of individuals as exclusively economic agents. A crucial contribution to this state of affairs is the foreclosing of other horizons of imagination. The only possibility that can

[59] Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 2.
[60] Jay, *The Joy of Less*, chapter 30, paragraph 8.
[61] Johnson, *Zero Waste Home*, 241.
[62] Straume, "The Political Imaginary," 33, 37-38.

readily be imagined is a more eco-friendly, less aggressive form of the socio-economic system we are currently embedded in.

Minimalist and zero-waste lifestyle handbooks tend to understand consumption as the only way to make a difference in a world facing several environmental disasters. This individualised and apolitical approach to the challenges of pollution and climate change is fully compatible with the neoliberal atomization and reduction of individuals into consumers rather than political beings. Despite their purportedly countercultural stance, the minimalist texts I have analysed in this essay betray, upon closer inspection, a deep commitment to the processes that have led to the current climate crisis.[63] Their inability (or unwillingness) to depart from neoliberal assessments of the present prevents them from imagining radically different systems, which I would argue—along with Klein, Mainates and Meadows—are the only possible way forward. This is not to say that individual change is irrelevant or that it should be overlooked; rather, my point is that individual lifestyle change must follow as a *consequence* of the larger socio-economic processes necessary for maintaining the Earth inhabitable—not its main engine.[64] The radical thinkers mentioned in this conclusion imagine futures that include some of the key aspects of minimalism, like a decrease in consumption, the reduction of waste, and disenchantment with the ethos of pursuing infinite growth. However, in proposing that their imagined futures be realised through democratic and communal means (like participating in elections, engaging in local politics or community-based mobilizations against fossil fuel companies),[65] these thinkers acknowledge that individual consumer choices made within the current neoliberal system cannot bring about the necessary change.

In this article I have shown how handbooks of lifestyle minimalism and zero-waste, despite often adopting a form of rhetoric that seems to criticise capitalist society, can in fact be understood as coherent with neoliberal governmentality. By weaving this interpretation together with environmentalist critics arguing for

[63] On this contradiction, see also Meissner, "Against Accumulation," 5.
[64] Meadows, *Limits to Growth*, xv; Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 10.
[65] Soper, *Post-Growth Living*, 69. See also Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 337-366.

political involvement as the only solution to climate change, I want to suggest that the salvific power of carefully-managed consumption—central to minimalist rhetoric as well as green-washed advertising campaigns—should be thoroughly questioned and problematised.

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