



# Consumers, Commodities & Consumption

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## Where do we go from here?

by Nicki Lisa Cole

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Much is being written about the current “economic crisis,” or “crisis of capitalism,” as others call it. What will become of the world, as this is popularly understood as a global crisis, is a question that many are concerned with. Social scientists are quickly turning to the crisis to assess and analyze it, and predict how the crisis and measures for mediating it will unfold. But despite all the fuss, those who understand the history of the capitalist system understand that a periodic collapse of the designed-to-fail system is not only expected, but *necessary*. Capitalism has, since it was instituted as the dominant global economic system, periodically experienced a crisis of over-accumulation, to which it has responded by slightly changing the rules and destroying capital, thus preserving and strengthening the central structure and relations of the system.

Global capitalism isn’t going anywhere in the wake of this self-made crisis. More likely, it will emerge more forcefully entrenched and oppressive after its phoenix-like reincarnation because it will be popularly received as a global capitalism softened and contained by state intervention. Whether capitalism will survive is not a question to spend our time on, at least as it applies to this current moment. What changes might be made in order to maintain its overall dominance, though, is a worthy question that many are addressing. How will the system of global capitalism adapt in order to persist? Can we see evidence of shifts and adaptations already? What cultural logic will accompany the changes to the system? What will consumption and consumer identity look like in the post-crisis landscape?

In this essay I respond to these questions by building upon a lecture recently delivered by Dr. William I. Robinson, Professor of Sociology and Global Studies, at the University of California, Santa Barbara (2009). In this lecture Robinson outlined five possible paradigms of response to this crisis of global capitalism based on his theory of global capitalism. In his work, Robinson recognizes the truly transnational nature of the relations of capitalism in our era, and the significance of transnational configurations of power and governance that accompany this organization of capital (1996a; 1996b; 2002; 2006).

In his lecture Robinson emphasized that the five paradigms are not mutually exclusive, and that they reflect already observable trends in the world. These are: 1. A shift toward global reformist/neo-Keynesianism that would embrace heightened regulation of transnational capital; 2. A global resurgence of the left, accompanied by radical reforms driven by popular movements, such as have been seen across Latin America over the last decade; 3. A global return to national protectionism in the vein of Russia, China, and India, that is similar to, though not the same as previous historical forms; 4. A twenty-first century fascism that fuses capital with reactionary political power, as was employed by the neo-conservatives of Bush administration and the McCain/Palin team; and 5. A global systemic and structural collapse that results in global warlordism, total social breakdown, and global ecological demise.

Robinson figures that options two and three are unlikely for reasons that are easily understood. A global resurgence of the left and the strengthening of effective global popular movements are unlikely because the population of “surplus labor,” the poor, working poor, and workers of the world, is scattered across the globe. They systematically experience inequality; they lack resources, power, and access to the means to forge a unified movement to challenge a global system. Robinson points out that even in Latin America, where such ideals have produced significant change on a state-by-state basis, those changes themselves are the product of a precarious and self-conflicting relationship with transnational capital. The leftist movements and gains we observe in our era operate with, *and within*, the system of global capitalism. They have not subverted or overturned it.

This observation points to why Robinson thinks the third scenario unlikely. Capital and labor are truly transnational now in terms of how they are brokered and valued as resources, and the relations of global capitalism are too globally dispersed and integrated with nation state economies to simply be undone. Robinson thinks the fifth scenario, of global collapse, is unlikely too. He argues that the global capitalist system has not reached the kind of structural breaking point that would result in such an outcome. To date, he argues, capitalism is experiencing *systemic* crisis, but not yet *structural* crisis, and so far the power elite have moved to protect and preserve the system, not to undo it.

What does seem likely, Robinson argues, is that we will continue to see evidence of the first and fourth scenarios. The neo-conservative, fascist movement in the U.S. took a hit with the resounding ejection of the Bush administration, and the hearty dismissal of the McCain/Palin candidacy, but that the tip of the iceberg has been temporarily evaded does not mean the behemoth that lies beneath has been vanished. Neo-conservative, racist fascism is widely popular among poor and working class whites across the country. They are the displaced workers of the United States who have suffered from the globalization of capital, and these conditions have cultivated a distaste for immigrants and international trade. The old “nativist” ideology celebrated by Anglo-Saxons at the dawn of the nation’s birth is alive and well today.

But at least for now, those in charge are celebrating a different agenda. Since the coming of the Obama administration early this year, evidence of Robinson’s first scenario, of a global reformist, or neo-Keynesian trend, is pervasive. The policies and objectives of the Obama administration clearly exhibit this tendency, as do the “bail-outs” and interventions enacted by other wealthy nation states throughout Europe. Robinson reminds us though that this is not a traditional Keynesianism, but a *neo*-Keynesianism. It reflects our present historical moment, with its particular *global* relations of capitalist production and consumption. Regulation in this context is different from the Fordist era Keynesianism. Regulation is still in service of the nation state and the population, but now the fates of the nation state and the population are inextricably bound to the fate of the global economy. Thus, neo-Keynesianism protects transnational capital at the behest of the nation state. A prime example is the U.S. funded bailout of AIG, which does not bail out a business operating within the confines of the economy of the United States, but rather, a transnational corporation that is foundational to the global economy as it exists today.

This kind of response is certainly counter to the dominant free-market ideology, but then again, the market has never been all that free anyway, so it is not much of a shake-up from standard operating procedure, all things considered. While major systemic change of global capitalism is unlikely to happen, the kinds of subtle nods toward socialism described above are taking place. We can thus expect that the cultural logic of capitalism, particularly consumer practices and values, are shifting too.

Though we are not looking at a revolution, popular regard for the system has indeed changed. Given widespread loss of wealth, homes, jobs, and financial security, the popular classes in the United States who have borne the brunt of the necessary destruction of capital are fed up and disenchanting. People have less faith in the power elite to steward them. They see gross manifestations of avarice and malice in the largest firms in the nation and among transnational corporations. State budgets are failing and public services are drying up. Things are a mess, and people are aware. A recent poll shows that growing numbers of Americans believe socialism would be better than capitalism (Rasmussen Reports 2009). The jig is up. At least, this particular jig, for the time being.

It is at times of social instability such as these that the possibility of change increases. As fissures in the system appear they offer opportunity for rearrangement of social relations. Right now, the material conditions for change are ripe, just as they were when Marx wrote of the Industrial proletariat class. But whether the ideological conditions are ripe, is a different concern altogether. People are not looking for change so much as they crave *stability*. People want a return to normalcy and social order. They want the

system repaired and its legitimacy redeemed. This would be the most comfortable solution for all because it does not represent change -- particularly for those who are empowered and advantaged by this particular set of relations.

What I suggest here is that the source of redemption and legitimacy that people crave and that the capitalist system requires already exists. This crisis of legitimacy facing the global capitalist system occurs at an historical moment when the concept of "ethical" capitalism, with its attention to environmental, social, and health concerns, and practices and discourses of ethical consumerism have spread to a mainstream, everyday level. Elements of ethical capitalism are incorporated into most products to some degree at this point, and are employed to address a range of concerns. Ethical capitalism, itself a *symptom* of global capitalism, emerged in response to more minor crises of legitimacy that have plagued capital in the United States and Europe since it went global, and reports of abuse and misconduct started trickling "home" to the consuming countries.

Thus, ethical capitalism was conceived in direct response to the illumination of the bad corporate actor, who is assigned the role of the destructive villain who reaps poverty and injustice in producing regions, misleads consumers as to their corporate image, and all the while earns record-breaking profits. The bad corporate actor is a trope against which the ethical capitalist is juxtaposed, and the ethical consumer in turn is defined in contrast with the uneducated, or careless consumer. In this conceptualization of social problems there is nothing wrong with the system of global capitalism, rather the problem is bad actors who necessitate moral regulation.

The current "crisis" of global capitalism has done nothing but reinforce the trope of the bad corporate actor in the minds of American citizens and others around the globe. In particular, after the "bail-outs" were doled out to leading banks and corporations, and with that money, bonuses were handed out by the tens of millions and lavish corporate retreats at expensive resorts were enjoyed, people are balking, and rightfully so. But they are not balking at the system, they are balking at the behavior of the bad corporate actors. There is a nostalgic zeal to the aggression and death threats directed at the corporate elite who enjoyed bonuses and benefits on the tax payers' dollars. It calls to mind the racial lynch mobs and food riots of early America. Like those crowds of yore, this manifestation of social effervescence is not an attempt at overthrowing the system, rather, *it is expressed in defense of the system*. This kind of event occurs when egregious violations of moral sensibilities have been observed. People want the system stabilized and its legitimacy repaired. They crave demonstrations of morality in the wake of rampant greed and recklessness.

Numbers for 2007 show that, even during what is now recognized to have been a period of economic recession, sales of ethically branded products in the U.S., appealing to concerns for the environment, for laborers, and for consumer health, have grown and out-performed their competitors in their respective product markets (TransFair USA 2009). Classic economic theory of supply and demand, and cost benefit analysis cannot account for the increase in distribution and sales of ethical products, for this is a moral issue -- it is not a process of "rational" choice. Recent studies conducted in the U.S. and the U.K. show that concerns for "responsibility" and "sustainability" are common among consumers polled, and that a dedicated minority are consistently willing to pay more for ethical products (Carbon Trust Standard 2009; Cohen 2009). Individuals I've recently interviewed in Seattle have said that they are living with a tighter budget right now, and that they are cutting expenses like dining and drinking out. But they are not cutting back on ethical choices they embrace in their consuming practices.

I advance, then, that this crisis, and the state responses to it we can observe to date, only strengthen and more deeply entrench practices and discourses of ethical capitalism/consumerism across the globe and in our everyday lives. This mode of capitalism and its cultural logic appeal to the popular desire for morality and social order. In truth, ethical capitalism/consumerism has been responding to the crisis of global capitalism for years now, but those of us in the comfortable position of privileged consumer are only now just seeing the crisis, much like how a sonic boom is perceived as audible *after* the sound barrier has broken.

Ethical consumerism, the cultural logic of ethical capitalism, runs deep and strong in the currents of our social world. As a symptom of global capitalism, and an assuaging response to the current crisis of legitimacy, it can only grow under these conditions. The cultural logic of ethical capitalism fits well with what some are calling "Obamaism," others "fascism" or "socialism." What the Obama administration has done is neither fascist nor socialist. Rather it is a softening of the bonds of inequity that bind people to capitalism. It is not a true state take-over, but an attempt at equalizing the playing field just a little bit. It is a

tip of the hat to socialism. Simultaneously though, and rather counterintuitively, the state funded bail-outs sustain that which disempowers most of the players: the system of global capitalism. This kind of regulation plugs the holes in the dyke of global capitalism, and so provides temporary relief from the systemic crisis of over-accumulation. In doing so, the Obama administration both reinforces global capitalism, and offers a mantra of hope that pulls at the anomic heart-strings of a nation looking for something to believe in. Two birds, one stone.

In much the same way, ethical capitalism makes symbolic gestures at change and maps morality and legitimacy onto the whole system. But it can only last so long. Another crisis of over-accumulation is inevitable, and the state can't "bail-out" the sinking ship of global capitalism interminably. It is hard to predict where we will be in ten or twenty years, but for now at least, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

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- I refer to two interviews I conducted with self-identified consumers of ethical coffee. These interviews occurred in coffeehouses in Seattle, Washington, on March 23 and 25, 2009.

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# The Carbon Trust Standard

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## **Businesses should seize opportunity to demonstrate green credentials**

GREEN EXPECTATIONS: CONSUMERS STILL WANT TO BUY GREEN,  
BUT EXPECT EVIDENCE OF ACTION  
Businesses should seize opportunity to demonstrate green credentials

New research from the Carbon Trust Standard shows that consumers still want to buy green despite the current economic climate, with 62% of consumers saying environmental concerns influence their purchasing decisions 'the same as a year ago' and just over a quarter saying they influence them 'even more' than in 2008.

The research shows that a business's green credentials have a significant impact on consumer buying choices. Two thirds (66%) of consumers say it's important to buy from environmentally responsible companies, with one in seven (14%) saying they have voted with their feet by deciding not to buy from a company based on their environmental reputation and almost a quarter based on a company's ethical reputation.

YouGov surveyed nearly 2,000 UK adults in late February 2009 on behalf of the Carbon Trust Standard, the world's first carbon award that requires an organisation to measure, manage and reduce its carbon footprint and actually make real reductions year-on-year.

As consumers increasingly scrutinise business actions on climate change, they want to see clearer, more credible information on what companies are doing to reduce their environmental impact. The research shows that 70% of consumers do not feel confident that they can clearly identify which companies are environmentally responsible. Six in ten consumers (59%) are sceptical about the environmental claims companies make, and 44% of consumers would like more information on what companies are actually doing to be environmentally responsible.

Harry Morrison, head of the Carbon Trust Standard, said:

"This research shows that consumer values do not change, even in a middle of a recession. They want companies to act and cut their carbon footprints, and provide transparent and accessible evidence of action. We believe companies that take real action will seize the dual benefits of immediate cost savings and a stronger reputation, which is good for business."

Consumers look to a range of indicators to understand whether or not a company is environmentally responsible, but the most important criteria they rely on are what they read in the media (38%) and third party endorsement or accreditation (34%). The least popular factor consumers use to judge whether a company is behaving in an environmentally responsible manner is what advertising tells them (6%).

And it's not just businesses that are under the spotlight, people also expect to see evidence of action from public sector organisations – 81% feel it is important that public sector organisations tackle climate change and cut carbon, compared to 62% who believe it is important for all businesses.

-ENDS-

Notes to editors

- All figures are from YouGov Plc. The total sample size was 1,962 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 18-20 February 2009. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).
- Businesses in a range of sectors have achieved the Carbon Trust Standard. These include B&Q, Morrison's. Diageo and Hewlett Packard. first direct recently became the first bank to receive the Carbon Trust Standard after reducing its carbon emissions by over 14%, which equates to an annual reduction of 1500 tonnes of CO2 from 2007 levels. Getting employees on board with saving energy has been central to first direct's strategy. The bank introduced a green travel plan for staff and has worked with local schools to encourage employees to recycle.. In its Leeds office, first direct has installed solar panels that produce enough energy to heat the bank's onsite crèche, which caters for over 350 children and is the largest of its kind in the UK.
- For further information or interviews on the Carbon Trust Standard, please contact the Carbon Trust press office on 020 7544 3100 or [carbontrust@fishburn-hedges.co.uk](mailto:carbontrust@fishburn-hedges.co.uk).

#### The Carbon Trust Standard

- The Carbon Trust Standard is awarded to organisations that measure, manage and reduce their carbon footprint. Organisations that achieve the Standard are taking real action to reduce their direct impact on climate change.
- All businesses and organisations, both in the UK and internationally, are eligible to apply for the Carbon Trust Standard including FTSEs, mid caps, SMEs and public sector organisations.
- Organisations that are awarded the Carbon Trust Standard hold it for a two year period and to maintain the certification they must reapply and demonstrate that they have continued to make year-on-year reductions in their carbon emissions.
- Through a commitment to continually reduce their carbon footprint, Carbon Trust Standard achievers have together cut their annual emissions by 500,000 tonnes of CO2. This equates to nearly 7,600 tonnes saved per organisation. Carbon Trust Standard achievers have also saved themselves a collective fuel bill of more than £73m through reducing energy consumption.
- Organisations wanting information about getting the Carbon Trust Standard can call: 0800 019 1443 or visit [www.carbontruststandard.com](http://www.carbontruststandard.com).
- Organisations that are certified with the Carbon Trust Standard are listed at: <http://www.carbontruststandard.com/Latestnews/CertificateholdersCasestudies/tabid/142/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>

#### The Carbon Trust

- The Carbon Trust is an independent company set up in 2001 by Government in response to the threat of climate change, to accelerate the move to a low carbon economy by working with organisations to reduce carbon emissions and develop commercial low carbon technologies.
- We cut carbon emissions now by providing business and the public sector with expert advice, finance and accreditation to help them reduce their carbon footprint and to stimulate demand for low carbon products and services. Through our work, we've already helped save over 17 million tonnes of CO2, delivering costs savings of over £1billion.
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(  
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## Executive Summary

(  
**This is a document excerpt**  
)

Most consumers care enough about the environment and the community that they consider these concerns when making purchase decisions — including taking into account whether a company treats its employees fairly or is deemed environmentally friendly by an organization like Greenpeace. A small but committed portion of consumers will even pay more for products that are produced with green or socially responsible practices. Those consumers who are willing to pay extra for products in line with their ethical concerns earn more money and are more brand-loyal than average. Smart product strategists in every B2C vertical will incorporate environmental and social responsibility into their products to help drive differentiation, incremental revenues, and brand loyalty.

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## Just 53% Say Capitalism Better Than Socialism

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Only 53% of American adults believe capitalism is better than socialism.

The latest Rasmussen Reports national telephone survey found that 20% disagree and say socialism is better. Twenty-seven percent (27%) are not sure which is better.

Adults under 30 are essentially evenly divided: 37% prefer capitalism, 33% socialism, and 30% are undecided. Thirty-somethings are a bit more supportive of the free-enterprise approach with 49% for capitalism and 26% for socialism. Adults over 40 strongly favor capitalism, and just 13% of those older Americans believe socialism is better.

Investors by a 5-to-1 margin choose capitalism. As for those who do not invest, 40% say capitalism is better while 25%

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prefer socialism.

There is a partisan gap as well. Republicans - by an 11-to-1 margin - favor capitalism. Democrats are much more closely divided: Just 39% say capitalism is better while 30% prefer socialism. As for those not affiliated with either major political party, 48% say capitalism is best, and 21% opt for socialism.

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The question posed by Rasmussen Reports did not define either capitalism or socialism

It is interesting to compare the new results to an earlier survey in which [70% of Americans prefer a free-market economy](#). The fact that a “free-market economy” attracts substantially more support than “capitalism” may suggest some skepticism about whether capitalism in the United States today relies on free markets.

Other survey data supports that notion. Rather than seeing large corporations as committed to free markets, [two-out-of-three Americans believe that big government and big business often work together in ways that hurt consumers and investors](#).

Fifteen percent (15%) of Americans say they prefer a government-managed economy, similar to the 20% support for socialism. Just [14% believe the federal government would do a better job running auto companies](#), and even fewer [believe government would do a better job running financial firms](#).

Most Americans today hold views that can generally be defined as populist while only seven percent (7%) share the elitist views of the [Political Class](#).

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This national telephone survey of 1,000 Adults was conducted by Rasmussen Reports April 6-7, 2009. The margin of sampling error for the survey is +/- 3 percentage points with a 95% level of confidence ([see methodology](#)).

### **Survey of 1,000 Adults April 6-7, 2009**

Which is a better system - capitalism or socialism?	
<b>Capitalism</b>	<b>53%</b>
<b>Socialism</b>	<b>20%</b>
<b>Not sure</b>	<b>27%</b>

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### Fairtrade flows against economic tide

**EMBARGO: 00.01 HRS GMT Friday, 17 April 2009** – A global survey released today demonstrates that support for Fairtrade is on the rise. Ahead of World Fair Trade Day on 9 May, this first ever global consumer survey on Fairtrade shows that shoppers increasingly expect companies to be more accountable and fair in dealing with producers in developing countries. The survey by GlobeScan was commissioned by Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International (FLO) with a sample size of 14,500 in 15 countries. Among those surveyed, almost three quarters of shoppers believe it is not enough for companies to do no harm, but that they should actively support community development in developing countries.<sup>1</sup>

Consumers are calling for a new model in trade in which justice and equity are integral parts of the transaction. 'Active ethical consumers' make up more than half the population (55%) in the countries surveyed. These shoppers have higher expectations of companies' social, economic and environmental responsibilities. Their shopping habits and decisions tend to reward (or punish) companies that meet (or do not meet) their expectations, and they influence others with their opinions.

These attitudes are fuelling support for Fairtrade as more consumers identify with its values. Half of the public (50%) in the fifteen countries surveyed are now familiar with the FAIRTRADE Certification Mark, or in North America the Fair Trade Certified™ label. Of these people, nine out of ten (91%) trust the label. 64% of all consumers believe that Fairtrade has strict standards, a quality that also closely correlates to consumer trust. Almost three quarters of shoppers (72%) believe independent certification is the best way to verify a product's ethical claims.

These levels of awareness and trust are consistent with people's action, as sales indicators show more people are shopping for Fairtrade. Sales were up in 2008 (as compared with 2007) by 24% in Austria, by 40% in Denmark, by 57% in Finland, by 22% in France, by 75% in Sweden, by 43% in the UK and by 10% in the US.<sup>2</sup>

Even where the rate of growth has slowed, sales have not fallen back in any country. In these tough economic times, the vast range of Fairtrade certified goods and wider availability means that consumers can still remain loyal to Fairtrade even while switching to other brands. As solid support continues to come from world shops, faith-based groups and campaign organizations, Fairtrade certified products are now widely available in mainstream outlets, major supermarkets and transnational coffee chains.

'It is very encouraging that consumer commitment to Fairtrade remains strong in these challenging times,' says Rob Cameron, CEO of Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International, the international umbrella organization for Fairtrade. 'With the devastating impacts of the global recession and the credit crunch, producers need Fairtrade now more than ever. Many global brands also see Fairtrade as an important part of their strategy for the future. We are working with major household names to increase the market, so that more producers will benefit from the better deal that Fairtrade offers.'

An important basis for Fairtrade's success is revealed by the survey. Alongside conventional promotion activities, its unique marketing strength comes from its loyal, dependable and global grassroots' supporter base. 32% of people learn about Fairtrade through family, friends and work colleagues, whilst 16% hear about it through education, community and faith groups. Broadcast and news media account for how 33% people learn about Fairtrade. People learn about new products and concepts from their own social groups and contacts – a key ripple effect for Fairtrade.

Binod Mohan, Chairman of the Network of Asian Producers and member of the FLO Board says, '*We in Asia have faith in the consumer and their loyalty to buying Fairtrade products. For the shopper these are staple products; for the farmer in the developing world the purchase of Fairtrade makes a big difference and we know consumers realize this.*'

For more information or to arrange an interview, please contact:

Reykia Fick, Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International (FLO) at: r.fick@fairtrade.net or +49-228 949 2314

<sup>1</sup>For 74% of people it is important, or very important, that companies dealing with poor countries should contribute to community development.

<sup>2</sup>These figures are based on estimated sales statistics released by the respective national Fairtrade Labelling Initiatives. Not all sales figures are available yet. Final global sales figures will be available in mid-May.

Notes to Editors: About Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International (FLO): 1. The FAIRTRADE Certification Mark is a registered trademark of Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International (FLO). It certifies that products meet international Fairtrade standards. In North America the Fair Trade Certified™ label indicates that Fairtrade standards have been met.

2. FLO is a non-profit, multi-stakeholder association of 24 member organizations. Its role is to develop and review the standards that Fairtrade producers must meet, and the terms of trade for importers, exporters and retailers. FLO also directly helps producers to gain Fairtrade certification and to develop market opportunities, through locally based Liaison Officers.

3. FLO is made up of regional Producer Networks and national Labelling Initiatives:

- a. Producer Networks – associations that Fairtrade certified producer groups may join. Three producer networks represent producers in Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa and Asia.
- b. Labelling Initiatives – national organizations that promote Fairtrade in their country and licence companies to use the FAIRTRADE Mark on products. There are currently 20 Labelling Initiatives in Australia & New Zealand; Austria; Belgium; Canada; Denmark; Finland; France; Germany; Ireland; Italy; Japan; Luxembourg; Netherlands; Norway; Spain; Sweden; Switzerland; UK; USA.

4. There are:

- o Over 1.5 million Fairtrade producers and workers
- o Around 3000 traders of Fairtrade certified products in over 73 countries
- o 60 countries where Fairtrade certified products are available
- o €2.3 billion (US \$3.62 billion) sales in 2007 – a 48% increase from the previous year.

#### **About TransFair USA**

TransFair USA is the only independent, third-party certifier of Fair Trade Certified™ products in the United States. TransFair USA audits and certifies transactions between U.S. companies offering Fair Trade Certified products and their international suppliers to guarantee that the farmers and workers producing Fair Trade Certified goods were paid fair prices and wages.

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# Consumers, Commodities & Consumption

a newsletter of the  
Consumer Studies Research Network

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## Where do we go from here?

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### Statement of Purpose

The organizing group for the Consumer Studies Research Network seeks to foster dialogue and debate among those who are interested in and concerned about the place of goods and commodities in social life. These interests and concerns may range from the poetics of micro/personal identity formation to the identity politics of gendered, raced and classed display, from historical work on the rise of consumer culture to a critique of Nike advertising, from investigations of typical places of consumption to the study the dynamics of globalization and urban areas. Individuals affiliated with the Consumer Studies Research Network desire to bring to the fore, in their own ways, the depths to which commodities and a market logic have come to pervade virtually all forms of social life and social interaction. The primary

### by Nicki Lisa Cole

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Much is being written about the current “economic crisis,” or “crisis of capitalism,” as others call it. What will become of the world, as this is popularly understood as a global crisis, is a question that many are concerned with. Social scientists are quickly turning to the crisis to assess and analyze it, and predict how the crisis and measures for mediating it will unfold. But despite all the fuss, those who understand the history of the capitalist system understand that a periodic collapse of the designed-to-fail system is not only expected, but *necessary*. Capitalism has, since it was instituted as the dominant global economic system, periodically experienced a crisis of over-accumulation, to which it has responded by slightly changing the rules and destroying capital, thus preserving and strengthening the central structure and relations of the system.

Global capitalism isn't going anywhere in the wake of this self-made crisis. More likely, it will emerge more forcefully entrenched and oppressive after its phoenix-like reincarnation because it will be popularly received as a global capitalism softened and contained by state intervention. Whether capitalism will survive is not a question to spend our time on, at least as it applies to this current moment.

What changes might be made in order to maintain its overall dominance, though, is a worthy question that many are addressing. How will the system of global capitalism adapt in order to persist? Can we see evidence of shifts and adaptations already? What cultural logic will accompany the changes to the system? What will

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- > [Books of Note](#)

## Thinking about Consumption in a Recession

by Allison J. Pugh

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Other members of this research network are undoubtedly getting the sort of questions I am from journalists, students and friends: does consumption matter anymore, in this, the era of what Time magazine has called the New Frugality? Aren't people saving more, eschewing excess, moving in together, turning to thrift? Is the recession doing what years of simple-living jeremiads, as Gary Cross (2000) dubbed them, have been unable to? Fundamentally, is the impact of this economic dislocation powerful enough to shift spending patterns, priorities, and the meaning consumers make from buying and owning?

I don't think we can turn aside these questions solely because they are too glib, ahistorical or simplistic. I also don't think the answers are totally clear; the data are still not yet in about how consumers are responding to the global downturn.

goal is to begin to engage in an interchange.

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Have something to say? Send in essays, comments, letters, reviews, observations for the next Newsletter.

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For technical questions, please contact [Monika Deppen Wood](#)

The logo for the Consumers, Commodities & Consumption Research Network (CSRN) is displayed in a blue, bold, sans-serif font within a blue-bordered box.

For more information, please visit the CSRN website @ [csrn.camden.rutgers.edu](http://csrn.camden.rutgers.edu)

consumption and consumer identity look like in the post-crisis landscape?

In this essay I respond to these questions by building upon a lecture recently delivered by Dr. William I. Robinson, Professor of Sociology and Global Studies, at the University of California, Santa Barbara (2009). In this lecture Robinson outlined five possible paradigms of response to this crisis of global capitalism based on his theory of global capitalism. In his work, Robinson recognizes the truly transnational nature of the relations of capitalism in our era, and the significance of transnational configurations of power and governance that accompany this organization of capital (1996a; 1996b; 2002; 2006).

[More...](#)

While retail sales overall are down significantly, they are not down uniformly, bearing out what scholars in this research network already know, that cultural meanings infuse economic behavior, transforming the straightforward (“we have to cut back”) into an uneven topography of desires, obligations and needs.

I looked at how financial constraints shape consumer culture among low-income children as part of the research for my new book, *Longing and Belonging: Parents, Children and Consumer Culture* (University of California Press). The book is based on three years of ethnography in Oakland, California, where I observed elementary school children and interviewed parents in three communities, low-income and affluent.

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