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Environmentalism as Social Criticism: Engaging Material Practices in the Pursuit of Sustainability

This is a book project designed to address a key dilemma facing efforts to promote environmental sustainability: while environmental challenges including climate change threaten the very fabric of our lives, such that the present course of our societies appears literally unsustainable, ambitious efforts to address these rarely seem to resonate with the concerns and ideas most pressing to citizens. I will offer an accessible yet scholarly analysis of both the opportunities and constraints facing such efforts to promote environmental sustainability. I do so by engaging values and practices that resonate widely in affluent consumer societies, with the aim of fostering a more expansive political imagination. The book contributes to conversations among scholars in the environmental humanities and social sciences, as well as activists and policymakers.

This work stands apart from much that has been written by environmental theorists and philosophers in that I do not re-interpret liberal political philosophy, nor do I begin with an analysis of climate change, biodiversity loss, or other specific environmental issues. Instead, I examine material practices that are fundamental to contemporary conceptions of individual freedom and human flourishing, and central to contemporary environmental challenges.

Land use, automobility, and household dwelling are the key cases that I investigate. Each is a “material practice” in the sense that human experience is inextricably interwoven with technology, the built environment, and the non-human world. Each is also frequently constituted as a private realm, yet these practices shape public ideas and values in profound ways. Addressing them thoughtfully must become central to the task of environmental criticism.