The (post-human) consumer, the (post-avian) chicken and the (post-object) Eglu
Towards a material-semiotics of anti-consumption

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the potential of material-semiotic ontology to the field of anti-consumption research.
Design/methodology/approach – The paper’s approach is multi-site ethnography, following a consumer object, the Omlet Eglu, to trace a field of study within the practices and processes of urban stock-keeping.
Findings – It was found that the Omlet Eglu was produced as an ambivalent actor within the practices of urban stock-keeping, allowing an analysis of multiple aspects of consumption/anti-consumption and consumer resistance/domination that challenges those dualisms as organizing constructs.
Practical implications – The paper fdds to knowledge about the complex constructions of the meaning of egg consumption by consumers. This has the potential to inform retailers and farm producers, as well as organizations that provide goods and services to home food producers.
Originality/value – The paper provides a novel ontological approach to anti-consumption that addresses current concerns in this field over its underpinning categorizations and over-reliance upon neo-liberal models of consumer agency.

Keywords Anti-consumption, Ethnography, Consumer research, Consumer resistance

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction – anti-consumption and the material-semiotic

Anti-consumption and consumer resistance represent diverse literatures where the action, meaning and experience of the consumer are foregrounded, and explain “a resistance that is both a consumer activity and an attitude” (Cherrier, 2009, p. 181). However, critiques of this analytical focus have emerged, demanding alternative models to the dominant neo-liberal rational consumer (Connolly and Prothero, 2003; Moraes et al., 2008) and a shift away from the focus on choice and micro-aspects of resistance that this engenders (Kilbourne and Beckman, 1998; Dolan, 2002). This focus configures a specific subject-object ontology somewhat incommensurate with contemporary theories of materiality, we suggest, which essentializes the consumer as a choosing, experiencing agent and the consumption object as something which is acted on, and a “thing-in-itself” around which consumers make meaning.

Cultural theories have emerged that accounted for the sociality of objects, not just in terms of the meanings we imbue them with, or the myriad ways in which we use them, but in terms of their radical indeterminacy within multiple arrays of cultural relations (Dant, 1999; Miller, 1987; Slater, 1997). This has been an ontological shift from “social
construction” formulations (i.e. the object is socially constructed by the human and subjective relations around it) and away from a focus upon what things mean and/or how they are used to construct the self. This shift has underpinned the development of theory which does not begin with a sentient consumer ascribing meanings to, and deriving experiences from, ontologically primitive objects but instead considers how objects and their boundaries co-emerge with other human and non-human entities, are ontologically mutable, active and embedded in relations of emergent and entangled meaning and materiality.

Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 1992) for example, presents a material-semiotic ontology, in which all human and non-human participants in the analysis are treated equally as participants, offering a different rendering of the concept of agency. Latour (2000, p. 192) argues that, “purposeful action and intentionality may not be properties of objects, but they are also not properties of humans either. They are properties of...collectives of human and non-humans”. Thus, agency is attributed in terms of formations of meaning and materiality in which objects, bodies and other heterogeneous entities, are embedded. In this approach, what might have been called subject and object are flattened into complex analyses of meaning and materiality, and things that “matter” (i.e. that both “materialize” and “mean” borrowing Judith Butler (1993) telling play on words) co-emerge in fragile and ambivalent co-constitution from within specific cultural milieu. Interrogating the object within material-semiotic formations is a political intervention into neo-liberal discourses of choice and action which challenges the primacy and agency of the human subject.

Using this approach provides novel theorizations of anti-consumption practices. Emergent ontologies in which everything is in process and at stake, can provide a rendering of the complex binaries underpinning the concerns evident in the anti-consumption literature, including working through the binaries of consumption/anti-consumption and consumer resistance/domination. For example, in the literature on voluntary simplicity, these binaries have proved a theoretical sticking point. The ambivalent character of the voluntary simplicity highlights the foregoing of maximum consumption to live in a way that is outwardly simple and inwardly rich vis-à-vis anti-consumption (Leonard-Barton and Rogers, 1980; Elgin and Mitchell, 1993). However, anti-consumers also face scrutiny by adopting inconsistent approaches in their simplified lifestyles. Attitude-behaviour gaps have been noted amongst anti-consumers (Boulstridge and Carrigan, 2000; Moraes et al., 2008; Kozinets, 2002; Dobscha, 1998) whereby, for example, consumers pursuing the ideals of simplified living have ended up spending and consuming more in pursuit of such goals (Craig-Lees and Hill, 2002). Downshifters, moderate simplifiers who are relatively economically well off, and who voluntarily give up some consumer goods, have been found to give up some luxuries, but not the luxurious lifestyle (Etzioni, 1998). Approaches that seek to classify consumer behaviour within anti/consumption or resistance/compliance binaries cannot adequately theorize such ambivalences without adopting a somewhat critical view vis-à-vis the consumer. Material-semiotic approaches can instead provide a more holistic, non-judgmental approach.

This paper provides an illustration of such an analysis stimulated by these approaches to understand a consumption object, the “Omlet® Eglu™” and its related consumer subjects as mutably and multiply emergent within the culture of urban hen-keeping. In doing so we provide a possible route to an alternative model of
consumer agency, and use this as a route to explore the concepts, concerns, conflicts, and convergences of anti-consumption and consumer resistance as constructs that, we conclude, are necessarily always emergent, contested and in-process.

2. Method
This paper presents an illustrative vignette from a year-long multi-site ethnographic project on urban stock-keeping in the UK. Multi-site ethnography (Marcus, 1995) emerged in response to the de-territorialisation of culture, defining the “field” not in terms of its geographical location, but instead as the circulation of cultural meanings (Hannerz, 2003; Hage, 2005). The culture of urban chicken-keeping in the UK is a distributed, heterogeneous domain of cultural meanings, human and non-human objects, bodies and circulating discourses and practices that emanate from government, experts, welfare charities, hen-keepers and their associations, local communities and providers of husbandry supplies. Therefore, research encounters took place in a myriad of locations, but primarily consisted of in-situ, in-depth (in-coop) ethnographic interviews of urban hen-keepers (Table I). These participants were selected through judgment sampling, ensuring a broad range of opinion and experience were represented.

Our route into this analysis is to follow a new product that has achieved almost cult status among urban henkeepers, the Omlet® Eglu™, a low maintenance, polymer chicken coop designed for the first time chicken owner (Figure 1). We unpick how this object emerges as an ambiguous actor in the cultural milieu of urban henkeeping, and the repercussions for the kinds of consumer actor that can co-emerge, by presenting two ambivalent stories. These stories in urban hen-keeping culture are complex with the Eglu emerging as an ambivalent node of contestation through which anti-consumption and consumer-resistance relationalities and practices are configured.

2.1 Urban chickens and anti-consumption – managerial and policy implications
The trend of keeping laying-hens in urban gardens can be located within a complex milieu of familiar anti-consumption themes. In the UK, the recently published Food 2030 (DEFRA, 2010) the government blueprint for future food production, locates the need to rethink national food production within a world context of rising food prices, shortages and civil unrest. To achieve required growth in domestic food production, they advocate sustainable strategies, including consumer self-production. Meanwhile, popular TV shows tap into a credit-crunch driven nostalgia surge for the good life, self-sufficiency, sustainable living and recession-proofing through self-production of food. In Europe, ongoing food scares have increased consumer concern about intensive production, leading to demand for higher quality food products and those deemed to be animal welfare-friendly (Sossidou and Elson, 2009). Egg production represents the archetypal case, with safety of food and welfare concerns having left a shadow of suspicion over the farm produced egg that has not abated. In fact, despite government legislation (DEFRA, 2002) and retailer/producer efforts to assuage the negative impression of egg production and improve welfare, surveyed consumer attitudes show a lingering and deeply felt negative opinion about the quality of eggs and the welfare of laying hens. The egg is seen as a volatile product, where quality is non-negotiable and perceived by consumers as strongly associated with the conditions of production.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Coop type</th>
<th>Reason for choosing coop type</th>
<th>Length of time keeping chickens (years)</th>
<th>Number of chickens kept/breeds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sweetonchooks&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>Eglu</td>
<td>Health concerns for chickens; protection against foxes; temperature control; ease of cleaning; maintenance free</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>4 Ginger nut Rangers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molly</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Health worker</td>
<td>Eglu</td>
<td>No need for chemical treatments; safety of chickens; maintenance free; ease of cleaning</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4 Miss Pepperpots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Sales manager</td>
<td>Eglu</td>
<td>Convenience of Eglu (time saving)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3 Ex-battery chickens (hybrid)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Part-time librarian</td>
<td>Eglu</td>
<td>Portability of Eglu; ease of cleaning; no maintenance</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2 Hybrids; 2 Bantams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Office worker</td>
<td>Hybrid Eglu/ wooden coop (own construction)</td>
<td>Convenience of Eglu; ease of cleaning Eglu; welfare of chickens (need for a larger run)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5 Ex-battery chickens (hybrid)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>Hybrid Eglu/ wooden coop (own construction)</td>
<td>Ease of cleaning Eglu; welfare of chickens (need for more space for chickens)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1 Rhode Island red; 3 Cuckoo Marans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>Hybrid Eglu/ wooden coop (own construction)</td>
<td>Welfare of chickens (more space possible)</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3 Ex-battery chickens (hybrids)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Shop assistant</td>
<td>Wooden coop (bought)</td>
<td>Natural materials; larger run possible; Eglu too small</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4 Brown hybrids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Retired teacher</td>
<td>Wooden coop (bought)</td>
<td>Natural materials; blends in with environment</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>6 Leghorns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Solicitor</td>
<td>Wooden coop (own construction)</td>
<td>Customisable design; Eglu too small</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4 Black rocks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Wooden coop (own construction)</td>
<td>Customisable design; Eglu too small</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6 Brown hybrids</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: <sup>a</sup>Information taken from Sweetonchook's profile page
Within the context of all of the above it is unsurprising that urban hen keeping is now one of the fastest growing hobbies in the UK. This is practically relevant in two ways. First, understanding why consumers reject farm produced eggs is a key concern; allied to this laying-hen welfare has been identified as an area where producers can add value for the retailer and consumer who is seen as less price-conscious within the context of welfare-oriented egg purchases (Vanhonacker and Verbeke, 2009). The second area of concern to marketers is the growing market in providing goods and services to home egg-producers. For suppliers to this market, business is burgeoning. As predicted by Euromonitor (2005), consumption related to domestic animals is a robust, recession-proof key consumer trend. This is evidenced in the domestic chicken-keeping market, at a conservative estimate 500,000 UK households, by the successful emergence of new products, such as the Eglu, and sales growth of associated husbandry products.

3. Findings
3.1 Story 1: the natural and humane Eglu

The last 20 years have seen many changes to the system of food production. The philosophy of ‘more for less’ has prevailed, resulting in a drop of standards in animal welfare. More and more people are beginning to express interest in the ethical origin of their food. Buying organic or free-range is an excellent start, but why not go that one step further and keep your own chickens! (www.omlet.co.uk).
As the quote above demonstrates, the keeping of domestic chickens is framed within discourses of welfare and the evocation of a golden age of natural food production. The Eglu emerges strongly in research encounters as a champion of chicken welfare:

The Eglu is a 5* hotel for chickens!! My Eglu came with a fox proof run and it’s maintenance free. It is twin walled which makes it warm in winter and cool in summer. Since it all comes apart for cleaning, there are no nooks for red mite to hide in. I too was dubious when I first saw the Eglu, but I can honestly say I think it’s money very well spent (Sweetonchooks).

“Sweetonchooks” highlights the most commonly evoked welfare reasons for keeping chickens in an Eglu, which centre on the health benefits of an easily cleaned coop. However, within a context of search and other costs, and lack of trust in sourcing welfare products (Vanhoneker and Verbeke, 2009), the Eglu emerges as not only a champion of chicken welfare, but as a risk-averter. The Eglu acts as a control-facilitator, and thus a key actor in the co-production of a voluntarily simplified lifestyle in which the ability to maximize control and reduce risk and dependency is central (Leonard-Barton and Rogers, 1980), as Molly highlights:

They [the hens] have an organic diet, I know the supermarkets sell organic eggs but I don’t trust ... I mean, how do you really know? I feed fruit, vegetables, organic feed and of course there are no pesticides required for the Eglu. With wooden homes you need to treat the ... wood then pesticides for the red mites every month, so again poisonous chemicals. If you are going to do that you may as well buy eggs from the supermarket.

Diet and food are areas where consumers feel they may exercise the power to simplify as far as possible (Shaw and Newholm, 2002; Dobscha, 1998), and here respondents reflected that the Eglu, with its ease of use, facilitated that control where they might otherwise not be able to exercise it.

The Eglu also emerged within research engagements as a political actor, co-enabling resistance. This not only consisted of resistance to the power of supermarkets, but as a way to engage with animal rights politics surrounding the welfare of farmed hens which extended to the re-homing of burned-out battery chickens:

When they come out of a battery farm they have trouble standing up, they’ll have their beak clipped, they’ll have no feathers, they don’t forage, they just ... sit there. It can take months and months to get them well again (Mark).

Ex battery-chickens are not known for the regularity of their produce, and so were located within the requirement for higher needs than merely “to consume” (Zavestoski, 2002) and as a way to intervene politically into welfare concerns over intensive farming, in a manageable way:

We’re doing our little bit for the chickens, other people do demonstrations and free animals from farms, we do what we can (Katie).

The Eglu enables both a connection to nature and to other humans and non-humans, and as such offers the promise of a decommodified sociality (Binkley, 2008). This sociality is enacted through family activity, with broader community and world-building implications, and an association with the contemporary craving for authentic natural experiences (Bettany and Daly, 2008; Merchant, 2003). Descriptions of heightened aesthetic and romanticized experiences of nature were common. For
example, we were often offered eggs as gifts during research encounters, and noted how the produce itself was often valorized by participants:

I pick who I give the eggs to. They’re so precious. I honestly think, on that level I probably sound a bit weird, but it is a little miracle . . . it’s quite special (Anna).

Keeping hens gave the family a focal point around food production and a heightened sense of togetherness through caring for the hens and eating their produce, practices which often extended beyond the immediate family:

When we’ve been away over the summer my friend’s, my kid’s friend’s mum’s have come and fed them and stuff, and they can take the chickens and eggs and eat them, and I quite like that whole idea that it’s not just my kids seeing this chicken and egg thing. It’s great for me, ‘cos I know the Eglu is so easy so when people that are not used to keeping chickens take care of them I know there won’t be any problems (Helen).

Here the Eglu becomes a facilitator of community relations, a way of re-attaching the individualized consumer (and family unit) to the social, a key motif in consumer resistance narratives (Nelson et al., 2007; De Graaf et al., 2001).

3.2 Story 2: the artificial and inhumane Eglu

If you want to go down the natural route of keeping your own chickens, why stick them in a plastic box? (Kate).

The corollary of the story of the natural/humane Eglu is the story of the artificial/inhumane Eglu. As Kate’s quote illustrates the Eglu also emerged in research encounters as an object at odds with the ethos of chicken-keeping.

Oh my god, we are talking about a hunk of mass produced plastic! It’s horrible and . . . well I don’t want to collect my eggs from something that looks like an Imac in my garden (Peter).

Here, the Eglu is compared to the highly technologised Imac, which jars with the ethos of chicken-keeping, to encourage a decommodified, more natural way of life. At odds with the discourses of voluntary simplicity, the Eglu materialized as co-actualising consumerism and as the corollary of trying to control one’s consumption activities.

[. . .] yes, it is easy but it’s kind of giving in, some things are not supposed to be easy (Sandra).

Here, contrary to the co-actualisation of political anti-consumption recounted earlier, the Eglu was often characterized as a “pet-owners” option, not indicative of authentic resistance.

The Eglu also emerged as a potentially inhumane actor within chicken-keeping culture as respondents frequently discussed their fears over the welfare of Eglu-kept hens. They reported that the Eglu “seemed” too small; too cold; too uncomfortable; and due to its plastic environment simply “not interesting enough” to provide a suitable home for chickens. Often respondents reported that the Eglu approximated battery-farming conditions:

It seems too small to me . . . I’m not a chicken, so I wouldn’t know whether I’ve been brought up in that environment and that restrictive compound whether that would be enough . . . but, it doesn’t feel right (Jane).
As can be seen above, nature and welfare are enrolled as potent co-actors both for and against the Eglu, which is co-produced as, at once, an enabler of a more natural and humane alternative to traditional retailer-mediated consumption of eggs, and as the antithesis of this, as an actor of commodification of nature to commercial ends and welfare-unfriendly. The Eglu presents a paradox to the consumer, particularly as their knowledge and competence as hen-keepers progresses. However, as knowledge and expertise developed, then the paradoxes became generative of new forms of resistant engagement. Faced with the tensions between these two versions of the Eglu, we noted that these were creatively resolved in many cases by building and displaying complex hybrid Eglu/wooden chicken coops, as demonstrated by Sue. Sue, a re-homer of ex-battery chickens, wanted to free these chickens from battery conditions, but had concerns about capturing them in the original form of the Eglu:

We’ve got like, there’s the Eglu and their run, but I didn’t feel like, even though it’s supposed to be enough room for them. If you let them out and you see how much they enjoy scratching around. I don’t think you’d ever keep them in the run that they supply for you. So they’ve got the Eglu and the run and the shed, and they’ve got shade and a box of sand, they like to dust bath, and then we’ve built like, not very sophisticated, like some chicken wire and fence, they’ve effectively got the length of the house to run around in.

Here, the Eglu emerges as a mutable object not merely in terms of its two conflicting stories, but also co-generative of new, hybrid objects that offer ambiguity and tension-resolving actions. Contrary to story 1, which emphasizes the connectedness the Eglu co-actualises, the Eglu appears in story 2 as an object tainted by the disembedding, individualizing logic of the commodity. This chimes with analyses of contemporary sociality, which emphasize unsettledness and mobility in relations characterized by a carefully managed disengagement from all things solid and embedded, often through anti-consumption activities (Binkley, 2008). However, the adapted wooden/Eglu hybrids, suggest to us instead a resistance to that managed disembeddedness and an example of the co-rendering of relations around anti-consumption activities as more durable and permanent.

4. Discussion
In the call for papers for this special issue, the editors suggest that there is still much confusion about the differences and similarities between anti-consumption and consumer resistance and ask for contributions that discuss their most pertinent redundancies and differences. We take an adjacent position to this question, challenging the requirement to Harden these categories of analysis, but instead view these as categories in process, with a focus on how these categories come to “matter” in the material-semiotic circulations of consumption activity. It is unsurprising that the field perceives a requirement to pin down the underlying categories of analysis. As Dolan (2002) argues, the concepts are fuzzy, with multiple definitions evident in the literature. Besides this, anti-consumption and consumer resistance literatures reflect a field replete with the apparent inconsistency and dissonances of anti-consumption behaviour itself. To address this, researchers have highlighted the need for more holistic approaches, rather than dissecting, isolating and labeling behaviour as consumption or anti-consumption (Moraes et al., 2008; Newholm, 2005; Connolly and Prothero, 2003) and, furthermore, have indicated that the most productive analyses...
come from the interstices between this underpinning dualism (Binkley, 2008; Cherrier, 2009).

Our stories of the Eglu show that to enact anti-consumption requires complex assemblages of human and non-human objects, bodies, stories, skills and possible practices that cannot be reduced to the language of typology. This instead produces a classificatory imperative that finds the necessary theorization of ambivalence, interstices, both/and at the same time and complexity difficult to accomplish. As represented by Figure 1, the Eglu resists such classification, emerging from a nexus of commodification and decommodification binaries in tension, of both anti-consumption/consumption, of resistance/domination, as political/apolitical, natural/unnatural and social individualization/embeddedness. As an important actor within the cultural formations of urban hen-keeping its fluid boundaries, co-actualisation of consumer practices, and ambivalent ontology can be unpicked to craft accounts of how human and non-human actors co-emerge, are orderings in process, and how what appears obdurate and fixed is achieved rather than set. In such accounts bodies, objects, worlds, discourses, and categories themselves are all at stake.

Importantly, this approach challenges dominant reproductions of consumer agency. The Eglu takes shape as an actor, like the consumer, only within the heterogeneous relationalities within which it is embedded. This suggests and enables a research agenda where consumers are seen as non-agentic (as currently conceptualized within the traditional consumer research theoretics), thus engenders accounts where responsibility is not attributed to the actions of the consumer, who instead is seen as “acting” only within the confines of their material-semiotic milieu. We illustrate the possibilities for accounts of how consumers with ambivalent objects like the Eglu embedded within a myriad of conflicting material-semiotic worlds are enacting and co-producing the binaries of consumption/anti-consumption and resistance/domination and how new material forms, like the hybrid coops emerge to reduce the apparent tensions of enacting anti-consumerism within a consumerist world. At odds with the language of consumption/anti-consumption typology, these accounts can describe categories in process and of practice, always at stake and open to creative re-negotiation, a deliberately unfinished literacy suitable to enliven our practical imaginations.

References


Further reading

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