



TRANSFORMATIONS

SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS IN 21ST CENTURY AMERICA

A NEW HEDONISM

A Post-Consumerism Vision

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A NEW HEDONISM

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TRANSFORMATIONS: Systemic Challenges & Solutions in 21st Century America

The United States now confronts a daunting array of challenges in the well-being of our people, in the conduct of our international affairs, and in the management of our planet's natural assets, at precisely the moment that it has become unimaginable that American politics as we know it will deliver the needed responses. The plainest truth is that conditions of life in America have deteriorated across a broad front and are headed straight to a place we would not want for our children and grandchildren.

When big problems emerge across the entire spectrum of national life, it cannot be for small reasons. We have encompassing problems because of fundamental flaws in our economic and political system.

In recent decades America failed to build consistently on the foundations laid by the New Deal, by Franklin Roosevelt's

Second Bill of Rights, and by the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Instead, we unleashed a virulent strain of corporate-consumerist capitalism. This system of political economy—the basic operating system of our society—rewards the pursuit of profit, growth, and power and does little to encourage a concern for people, place, and planet. “Ours is the Ruthless Economy,” wrote Paul Samuelson and William Nordhaus in their famous text *Macroeconomics*. And indeed it is.

To deal successfully with all the challenges America now faces, we must therefore complement reform, incrementalism, and working within the system with at least equal efforts aimed at transformative change leading to a new political economy—a new operating system that routinely delivers good results for people and planet at home and around the world.

What then are the American challenges that should trouble us most? Here are ten.

- 1 **failing democracy and governance**
- 2 **race relations and institutional racism**
- 3 **climate change and the loss of a clean, safe, and beautiful environment**
- 4 **the power of Wall Street banks**
- 5 **the hollowing out of our local communities—the places we live**
- 6 **the plight of the American family and American children and the tough future they face**
- 7 **vast economic insecurity and the concentration of wealth in the 1%**
- 8 **the abuse and power of America's giant corporations**
- 9 **the dearth of meaningful work at decent wages**
- 10 **working long hours or two jobs to make ends meet or in order to buy, buy, buy, with no time left for the things that really matter**

This list of American challenges is certainly not complete.

The Next System Project is pleased to offer a new series of policy-oriented papers that explore the theme that meeting America's gravest challenges requires systemic change and, relatedly, that many of the measures needed to address our major challenges would themselves be system changing, including what have been called non-reformist reforms. This new series of papers, "Transformations," will show that, while there are short-term measures that will help in these areas, their best and only lasting resolution will occur by moving to a new system.

I would like to thank each of the authors in this series for their contribution to this important discussion, and also Kathy Courier and Joni Praded for their invaluable editorial assistance.

James Gustave Speth

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INTRODUCTION

Consumerism is the major cause of global warming and wrecking the planet for future generations. It is driven by a growth economy that favors the ever-expanding consumption of the already very affluent and has allowed the gap between the richest and poorest to grow to inflammatory proportions, both within the nation-state and globally. Today 16 percent of the global population consumes 80 percent of its resources. Americans alone are responsible for around 25 percent of global carbon emissions, and their ecological footprint is five times the global capacity of 1.8 hectares per capita.

But the shopping-mall culture is also in many ways bad even for those who live in affluent societies. What the economist, John Maynard Keynes, condemned as the pathology of monetary greed is now not only regarded as a normal response to our times but also an essential driver of national well-being. Its effect is to subordinate everyone to a time economy and work ethic that sees free time as a threat to human prosperity rather than a form in which it can be realized. Despite the huge gains in productivity, time scarcity, stress at work, and insecurity remain the

dominant life experience of huge numbers of people. An existence devoted to the creation of ever more stuff, most of it unneeded other than to enhance corporate profits or to secure the reproduction of the consumerist economic infrastructure, leaves all too little time and energy for actually having a life. Indeed, it functions as a major constraint on the self-development and political awareness required to enjoy a fuller and freer life. Everything that should be central to human pleasure and well-being has become marginal, whether it be convivial

time with family or friends, engagement in civic and political projects, the enjoyment of hobbies and educational activities, making music, reading, gardening, being in nature, or just idling. The hedonist deprivation of consumer culture is further compounded by an unhealthy reliance on fast food and very swift forms of transport, notably air flight and automobile. Environments free of the noise, stench, light pollution, and congestion of our high-speed existence are now increasingly difficult to find. The constantly expanding supply of commodities requires methods of production and distribution that destroy both the ecological viability and the aesthetic appearance of the environment. They also involve much animal suffering and wildlife extinction, and create a legacy of often toxic waste. One in ten US households now rents a storage space for their excess clutter, while the junk resulting from domestic consumption is also mountainous and well-nigh uncontainable. Although promoted by corporate power and its advertising industry as the model of the “good life” to which everyone should aspire, in reality there is all too much that is dystopian about the consumerist way of living and it is beginning now to be recognized as such. Indeed, the consumerist way of life should now be seen for what it has mainly become: a means of

further enhancing the global reach and command of corporate power at the expense of the health and well-being of both the planet and the majority of its inhabitants.

Perhaps the time has come, then, for America, the nation that has exercised the most influence on the formation of the shopping-mall culture, to rethink the commitment to it: to begin the transition to a more sustainable and more sensually, spiritually, and aesthetically rewarding way of living? Can Americans now respond more publicly to what many have always privately sensed—that the passion for ever more consuming is neither really much of a passion nor a very worthy ideal in life? Can they now lead the way in overcoming the obsession with cumbersomely materialist acquisition? Can they convert to a slower-paced, more time-enriched existence and a more reproductive manner of meeting their daily needs? Surveys have suggested that 80 percent of Americans agree that protecting the environment will require most of them to make major changes in the way they live. Can they now act on that consensus and adopt “one planet” living?

In this paper, I first expand on the more negative aspects of consumer culture, and explain why it needs to change and

why many Americans themselves might want now to do that. In the second part, I point to the advantages of moving beyond the consumerist system, and argue for an “alternative hedonist” approach to thinking about human well-being, consumption, and the politics of prosperity. Part three outlines some of the measures already advocated or enacted with a view to curbing the hold of consumer culture on our life experience and imagination, and then moves into a discussion in part four and the final section of the cultural revolution and more systemic socioeconomic changes that will be needed to bring about a post-consumerist order. Some examples in this context are provided of the form that would be taken by a slower-paced, less time-scarce existence and of the benefits it can provide.

Overall I argue for a profound revision in the ways in which we think about the nature and conditions of human flourishing. This will be comparable, in its scope and radicalism, to the socioeconomic reorganization argued for in other Next System Project papers. Indeed, it will be a condition of creating the necessary support for any such practical changes, and hence an essential cultural dimension of them. We have to break with the social and environmental exploitations of money-driven, high-speed ideas of

progress and instead promote the means to allow for creative and non-repetitive lives without social injustice and without environmental damage. This means challenging the monopoly of advertising over the depiction of the “good life” (and especially its manipulation of children). It means opening ourselves to new forms of ownership and control over the means of provision for consumption; to hybrid ways of making and doing that draw on traditional methods alongside newly emerging green technologies; and to a revised aesthetic of material culture for which commodities once perceived as enticingly glamorous lose their appeal by virtue of their profligate resource use and legacy of unrecyclable waste.

A cultural revolution along these lines will be comparable in the forms of social transformation and personal epiphany it will demand to those brought about through the feminist, anti-racist, and anti-colonialist movements of recent history. It will not be easy to mount, and will be fiercely opposed by those currently in power. But the gains it promises will be immense (indeed, without it the long-term future is bleak for everyone). Those who commit to a renaissance movement of this kind are not likely ever to regret it, nor will those who come after them.



I. CONSUMERISM AND ITS DISCONTENTS

THE CONSUMERIST WAY OF LIFE IS GOOD FOR GROWTH

Dubbed the land of “Coca-Cola culture,” America has long been associated with a “consumerist” way of living. It has, indeed, proved to be the major global influence in developing a notion of the “good life” centered on shopping, the everyday use of car and air flight, and the acquisition of an ever-expanding range of material goods and services. The consumer culture that has grown up around this lifestyle is resistant to non-commodified means of advancing well-being and personal fulfillment, and is backed by an unprecedented investment in branding, packaging, advertising, and other inducements to purchase. Its productive mission is the multiplication and diversification of goods to satisfy already experienced forms of need and, wherever possible, the creation of new “needs”—provided these can be met

through articles or services provided on the market. Today it is this culture, with its materialistic and expansionary model of well-being, that holds sway around the world and to which many less industrialized economies continue to aspire. Its monopoly is not accidental, but has followed from America’s leading role in the establishment of the now- globalized, capitalist economy. Since this is a profit-driven system that ultimately measures prosperity by how much gets spent on goods and services, constantly expanding markets are essential and more is always better.

BUT IS VERY BAD FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

But more is far from being better if we measure it by its impact on resource use and carbon emissions. By that gauge, growth-driven consumerism is the worst offender and poses an ever-more serious environmental threat. Almost all of this

growth has taken place within the last 150 years. By 1990, the world's people had already consumed as many goods and services (measured in constant dollars) since 1950 as in all previous generations put together.¹ Even now, despite the e-economy and greener technologies, more raw materials are being consumed than ever before in human history (and in a very unequal distribution: 16 percent of the global population currently consume 80 percent of the earth's resources).²

Some economists nonetheless argue that greener technologies will allow this expansion indefinitely to continue and that we can have unending (if more eco-friendly) growth with little alteration to lifestyle. Governments and corporate elites like to believe them, and continue to measure success in terms of market growth. But the capacity of new technology to provide for indefinitely sustainable production is confounded by figures that reveal that more efficient technologies have hitherto always gone together with an overall expansion in resource use and commodities.³ Since 1975, American energy consumed per dollar of GDP has been cut by a half, but energy demand has increased by 40 percent; in aviation likewise, fuel efficiency has increased by 40 percent, but total fuel use increased

by 150 percent.⁴ In the EU, emissions have indeed been decoupled from growth between 1990 and 2012, but only at a rate of 1 percent, which is only a quarter of that needed to reach the European Commission's roadmap aim to reduce emissions to 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050.⁵ Such decoupling, as has been achieved in affluent nations, is also in part due to reliance on emission-intensive imports from China and elsewhere. If the American model of the "good life" were to be made available to all, then it would need at least three more planets to provide for the necessary resources. To measure success in terms of market expansion in consumer goods is thus to measure success by failure.⁶

A DRIVER OF EVER-WIDENING INEQUALITY

Extending commodity production and exchange has always involved intense exploitation not only of nature but also of human labor. (Consider the near-slave conditions of miners in the extractive industries of Africa; the workers locked overnight in Bangladeshi factories to meet the timelines of the fashion industry; or the quasi apartheid between those who enjoy and those who service the global playgrounds of the wealth makers.) The dependency of affluent living in the Global North on the dire

working conditions and impoverishment of the most deprived sectors of the global community continues apace and in many areas is compounded today by the devastation caused by climate change. Despite the claims of its “trickle-down” advocates, consumer culture has proved a driver of ever-widening inequalities. It has favored the greed and ever more conspicuous—and environmentally vandalizing—consumption of the already very wealthy, and allowed the gap between rich and poor to grow to inflammatory proportions both within the nation-state and globally. The highest annual incomes in the United States are in excess of one billion dollars—60,000 times more than a minimum-wage worker.⁷ Since 1980, the global economy has grown by 380 percent, but the number of people living in poverty on less than \$5 a day has increased by more than 1.1 billion.⁸ During the years of sustained economic growth between 1990 and 2005 in the major economies of China, India, and the United States, the rich became relatively richer and the poor relatively poorer. In the seventeen years between 1990 and 2007, the bottom billion increased their share of global income by just 0.18 percentage points.⁹ At this rate of progress, it would take 855 years for the bottom billion to receive 10 percent of global income. In the estimate

of a leading economist at the World Bank, both relative and absolute global inequality is now higher than at any earlier point in human history.¹⁰ Most of the wealth of the wealthiest, moreover, now comes from dividends, interest, and rents derived from using accumulated assets (such as shares, property, and cash deposits) to extract wealth from the goods and services produced by others, with less than 20 percent earned from wages and salaries.¹¹

EXPLOSIVE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

Injustice and inequality on this scale do not bode well for the future of humanity. We are already seeing their impact in the rejection of established political elites, widescale opposition to immigration, racism, and fanatical nationalism. If left unchecked, they will surely have even more explosive consequences in coming decades. The evidence suggests, in fact, that the longer the consumerist conception of the “good life” retains its hold, the greater the impact on global warming, the more intense the competition for viable territory and resources, and the more uncivil the methods to which richer societies are likely to have recourse in defending their relative advantage. Such measures are likely to encourage increasingly desperate forms of terrorist activity,

and could end in genocidal—even terminal—forms of global warfare. If viewed in this light, positions currently defended as “realistic” may quite quickly come to appear utterly shortsighted. The need for systemic change has never been more urgent.

THE WORK AND SPEND SPIRAL

But the system needs changing, not only because of the environmental devastation and global injustice it is driving, but also because it is spoiling lives and sapping the potential for happiness even within affluent societies. It makes money, but it also stands in the way of genuine personal fulfillment and not least through the impact it has on time expenditure, and thus on human life experience as a whole. Consumer culture is not only growth driven but also work driven. It subordinates everyone to a time economy and work ethic that sees free time as a threat to human prosperity rather than a form in which it can be realized. An unprecedented productivity, which might have allowed for a more sustainable expansion of leisure, has been swallowed up in an ever-expanding provision of commodities. Dramatic illustration of the opportunities missed in the US has been provided by Juliet Schor, who has argued that if Americans had settled for a 1948

standard of living (measured in terms of marketed goods and services), every worker in the United States could have been taking every other year off from work with pay.¹² Instead, free time fell by nearly 40 percent post-1973; although the average American by 1990 owned and consumed more than twice as much as he or she did in 1948, they also had considerably less leisure. Work stress has also been on the rise, with eight out of ten Americans shown to be suffering from it in a recent survey.¹³ The tendency, moreover, has been for the more “workaholic” elements to set the pace for everyone else, with the threat of loss of work or promotion opportunities being used as a constant discipline against resistance to longer hours. It is true that those who spend most time on the job are often already high earners, driven—it might seem—more by ambition or addiction to work than by interest in more money. But even if personal distinction rather than money is the incentive, these people are caught up in a work culture that is scarcely very gratifying or socially enhancing in other respects. The sixty- to seventy-hour weeks necessarily limit time available for other activities and forms of relating, makes for extensive reliance on impersonal forms of care provision, and tends to reinforce the traditional gendered division of labor. As usually

happens under constraints of this kind, the less well-off suffer the most, and among them the overworked society is now responsible for encouraging some very dispiriting routines and practices: couples, for example, so busy that they scarcely see each other all week; parents doing back-to-back shifts because child-care is simply proving too expensive, etc.

Time scarcity must also be seen as major constraint on personal liberty: the more caught up you are in work, the less time you have to envisage alternative ways of living, to acquire insight upon or to formulate any form of political resistance to the existing system. Through its theft of time and energy, consumer culture acts as a major deterrent to the development of free thinking and critical opposition. The methods whereby it drives growth and perpetuates inequalities of income, education, and cultural capital also help to secure it against political subversion.

THE TIME-POVERTY OF AFFLUENCE

Having eliminated time for people to do things for themselves in relatively relaxed and inexpensive ways, the growth economy then profits through the provision of more costly compensatory modes of consumption. The fast-food industry, in all its many forms, is the most obvious

outcome of time-poverty (and its exploitations are added to by the ways in which it often targets lower-income groups with the least healthy and nutritious products). But there are many other manifestations: the spa and therapy businesses that profit hugely from the provision for minibreaks and stress-relieving services; the holiday packages that promise to restore your “quality” time; the extra you often now have to pay for dealing with a person rather than a machine; the speed dating and wife-selecting agencies that aim to make good the loss of the arts of loving and relating; the multiplication of gyms to which people drive in order to do treadmill running or cycling in cities where—largely because of the consequences of intensive car use in urban space— they no longer find it pleasant or safe to walk, run, or bike. The consumer society is increasingly dependent for its continued flourishing on a collective preparedness to spend the money earned by working too hard and too long on the goods and services that people can no longer provide for themselves. If we are to spend time on living rather than making money, then we need to challenge the seemingly ever-more tenacious hold of the work ethic and the time-poverty it generates.

AN INDIVIDUALIZED AND COMPETITIVE CONSUMPTION

The commercialization of goods previously supplied at home is one aspect of the individualized lifestyles and consumption encouraged by market society in the interests of further profit. Smaller household units and more insular modes of living, the shift from public to private means of transport, brand marketing, the studied catering to personal whims, and the personalization of goods themselves: all this has allowed businesses to gain from the multiplication of many goods and services that would otherwise not be needed at all—or could in many cases be supplied more collectively—at less cost to the environment, and in a less socially isolating manner.

Consumer society has also sought to make consumption the marker of social status, and thereby encouraged a competitive spiral of acquisition that pre-empted other less socially divisive ways of spending time and energy. To this end, it ensures a readily available flow of credit that keeps consumers in a state of permanent indebtedness (individual credit card debt in the United States is set to reach \$1 trillion in 2016); and it uses every marketing opportunity to invite people to define and value themselves in terms of

what they can afford (or borrow enough) to acquire: not only is everything promoted as “new” or “improved,” “bigger” or “better,” “faster” or “smarter,” but there is also a constant suggestion that in purchasing it the buyer will gain some enviable personal distinction.¹⁴

The encouragement to engage in conspicuous and invidious consumption of this kind (buying goods to gain the attention or envy of others) has played a major role in the expansion of many markets (most notably in clothing, household goods, and cars) and has in that sense served the growth economy extremely well. But from the point of view of consumers themselves, its gratifications are jinxed by what has come to be known as “hedonic adaptation” and the “hedonic treadmill”—by the fact that happiness tends to stabilize whatever the gains in material goods, and that the desire to keep pace in the competition for status goods is like a treadmill where no one can finally win, and everyone has to keep walking simply in order to stay still. Earlier findings on this have been reinforced by more recent empirical studies of the economist, Richard Layard, and others indicating that, beyond a certain point, increased income and material wealth does not go together with any increase in happiness.¹⁵

It is true that the findings of these researches need to be treated with caution, since the simple lack of a correlation between higher income and increased self-reported life satisfaction does not in itself mean that more consumption has not led to improved well-being. This is because the standards used by people in assessing their level of satisfaction may themselves become more stringent as their life experience changes with increased income. Nor are feelings of satisfaction always the best guide to how well people may be faring. Education has often served the cause of personal emancipation precisely by generating discontent with one's existing life situation. The learning of skills may lead to increased dissatisfaction and demands on the self as one makes progress in their acquisition. Happiness, then, is an elusive state, and it can be difficult to judge when it and its associated states of pleasure, well-being, or satisfaction have been achieved. But to accept the complexity of gauging claims about the quality of life and personal satisfaction is one thing. To deny the clear evidence of the self-defeating nature of ever-expanding consumption is quite another, and all researchers on the issue are in fundamental agreement that happiness does not lie in the endless accumulation of more stuff.

GROOMING THE YOUTH

The treadmill compulsion remains, nonetheless, a powerful pressure, and nowhere more so than on children and young people. Fully aware of this, marketers devote much ingenuity to provoking an invidious consumption of high-tech and media goods, sneakers, and other fashion articles. They are also aware of the importance more generally of securing a constant flow of future buyers, and massive budgets are expended on grooming children for a life of consumption.¹⁶ The average child in the, US, UK, and Australia sees between 20,000 and 40,000 TV ads a year, but marketers are also proving very adept at camouflaging their messages by means of product placement that goes beneath the radar of most children and often deceives even their parents.¹⁷

In addition, the Internet now also provides continuous exposure to on-screen and pop-up ads, with many brands offering games, quizzes, and other entertainment on their own commercial sites. According to research by the National Consumer Council in the UK, the average ten-year-old has internalized 300 to 400 brands—perhaps twenty times the number of birds in the wild that they could name—while 70 percent of three-year-olds recognize the McDonalds

symbol but only half of them know their own surname.

Much of the marketing to children, we might note, reproduces very stereotypical views on gender and serves to reinforce existing divisions between the sexes. Toys are often highly sexualized, and branding gurus are targeting both boys and girls with an ever-greater array of age- and sex-specific items. Preteen girls especially are being wooed by fashion and beauty articles and promotional magazines that presuppose their eventual entry into conventionally gendered roles and shopping practices. The commercialization of children thus both mirrors and contributes to the larger gender conditioning of consumer culture.

Manipulation on this scale of the most vulnerable sector of society is tantamount to brainwashing and surely one of the most distasteful aspects of consumerism. Its effects are also among the saddest. What really enriches the life of a child, and provides the resources for a meaningful social and personal life later, is the development of the imagination and conceptual worlds provided by reading and conversation (not least with adults), and lots of outside activity. What is most stunting is to be an indoors, solitary

screen-watcher bombarded by ads and activated only by video games.

MATERIALISM RULES

At a deeper level, “hedonic adaptation” reflects the central failing of consumerist provision: it seeks to gratify psychological and aesthetic needs and desires by purely materialist means. Take the example of fashion. Fashion following offers the individual an escape from repetitious ways of living and allows for personal distinction (although what you have to wear is often pretty ghastly, as Oscar Wilde suggests in his description of fashion as “a form of ugliness so unbearable that we are compelled to alter it every six months”)¹⁸. Fashion’s attractions are also self-subverting. A promise of self-realization is held out but only on the condition that you submit to the dictate of a collectivity you have neither willed nor authored. Individuals, moreover, may be linked in following a fashion, but only impersonally and always dispensably as individuals. To affirm the existence of a fashion, whatever kind it be, it matters not who follows it, provided only that a sufficient number do so: it is collectivity without solidarity. And in line with the market itself, it flourishes on constantly renewed ways of providing essentially homogeneous forms of consumption rather than on promoting genuine difference

and eccentricity. Moreover, as profits have come to derive increasingly from quick turnover and style innovation rather than from sheer volume production, this market dynamic has become ever more insistent in our lives. (New fashion lines in shoes and other items are now replaced much more rapidly than before, with the average number of articles of apparel bought by women rising from 34 to 57 per annum in the last decade.¹⁹) In this respect, clothing fashion exemplifies the ways in which consumer culture plays on (and profits by) the anxieties about individuation and self-expression that it both stimulates and condemns. It promises to make one special, while condemning nonconformism.

Consumerism's general tendency, in fact, is to offer material acquisition as a means of satisfying desires requiring altogether more complex intellectual and emotional gratification. Even as it offers its extensive range of shopping pleasures, its overall tendency is to deflect these unmet needs towards material comforts and more tangible consolations, or to promote material goods as a means of meeting more spiritual desires—and this applies in the case of both bodily and non-bodily appetites and pleasures. Even where it is a question of meeting the needs of the flesh (of satisfying hunger,

for example), the spiritual and aesthetic aspects are too often neglected. The food is fast food, eaten on the run, or in the drive-in takeaway, and often consumed alone or while doing something else, such as watching television. What has gone missing from it is the sense of the meal as a prepared, shared, convivial event having its own intrinsic value in structuring time, fostering human exchange, and providing food for thought as well as bodily renewal. It is surely because they compensate for this form of alienated eating that heritage and other cookery programs have proved so popular: they appeal not because they instruct people on how to satisfy physical hunger, but because they allow viewers to virtually indulge the convivial and aesthetic pleasures of eating.

The tendency, then, of consumer culture is both to remove the spiritual dimension from the satisfaction of our more purely physical needs, and to materialize the ways in which we meet the more intangible and spiritual needs (and this often, as noted above, also comes at the cost of reducing the time and space for other, less resource-intensive and commercialized, means of meeting those needs). It is as if in consumerism we do indeed have an attempt— a necessarily failed one—to accommodate all the more irreducibly

symbolic and affective dimensions of human needing, whether for more sensual or more intellectual satisfactions, by treating them on the model of physiological need: as if they were, indeed, mere extensions or complications of that form of need, and could be met, for the most part, through the provision of tangible objects. But as Thomas Princen has pointed out, many of our most important and absorbing activities (building trust, listening, playing, having a deep conversation, resolving a dispute, grieving, etcetera) simply do not lend themselves to material forms of gratification or the “bigger, better, faster” dynamic of market provision.²⁰ Indeed, even those who

take a more positive view of consumer culture and its materialist priorities tend to justify it on the grounds that it makes up for the lost gratification of other more psychological needs. In other words, they see the urge it encourages—to constantly to acquire more stuff—as reconciling us to deprivation and emotional alienation, rather than as intrinsically satisfying. Few, if any, have presented consumerism as the goal and telos of human existence. (Consider, in this context, the depiction of shopping as “retail therapy”—but therapy for what, exactly? The paradox would seem to be that the shopping-mall culture is projected as the cure for the very psychic deprecations it has caused.)



II. THE SEDUCTIONS OF POSTCONSUMERISM

EMERGING DISAFFECTION WITH CONSUMERISM

Given these multiple downsides of the affluent lifestyle, it is hardly surprising that many now are beginning to question its grip on their lives and to regret what has been sacrificed in the pursuit of its model of the “good life.” They are beginning, that is, to experience what I have termed an “alternative hedonist” disenchantment with consumerism, and to respond to the appeal of a less-driven and acquisitive way of living.

Shopping may still be a favored way of spending time, and there has been little reform in the use of the car and air flight, yet there is arguably more sensitivity than before to the discordance between the extremes of global wealth and poverty, and more acknowledgement of the grotesque and pathological aspects of hyperconsumerism. There are also signs now of disaffection with the material

culture and routine activities of the affluent lifestyle, either because of their negative by-products or because they stand in the way of other enjoyments. Their consumption is today for many people compromised by the pollution, congestion, stress, noise, ill health, and garbage it entails. There is also regret over the ways in which it has cut off other avenues of pleasure and fulfillment. This may take the form of nostalgia for certain kinds of objects or practices or forms of human interaction that no longer figure in everyday life as they once did. It may be a case of missing the experience of certain kinds of landscape or spaces (to play, talk, loiter, meditate, or commune with nature). It may be a sense that possibilities of community have been closed down that might otherwise have opened up; or a sense that were it not for the dominance of the combustion engine, there would be much better provision for greener forms of transport, and both rural

and city areas would look, feel, smell, and sound entirely different. Or it may just be a vague and rather general malaise that descends in the shopping mall or supermarket: a sense of a world too cluttered and encumbered by material objects and sunk in waste, of priorities skewed through the focus on ever-more extensive provision and acquisition of stuff.

We are talking here of reactions to consumer culture that are in part driven by altruistic concern for the global ecological and social consequences of consumerist lifestyles, but are also quite powerfully motivated by self-interest. Under this impulse, the individual acts with an eye to the collective impact of aggregated individual acts of affluent consumption on consumers themselves, and takes measures to avoid contributing to it. It is, for example, a decision to cycle or walk whenever possible in order not to add to the pollution, noise, and congestion of car use. The hedonist aspect, however, of this shift in consumption practice does not reside exclusively in the desire to avoid or limit the un-pleasurable by-products of collective affluence, but also in the intrinsic and personal pleasures of consuming differently. The cyclist or walker enjoys sensual experiences that the driver cannot. But these are themselves conditional on “alternative

hedonist” commitments to self-policing in the use of the car and support for policies that restrain its consumption.

Individuals who think this way will be disinclined to invoke a “them versus us,” producers-versus-consumers allocation of responsibility for environmental damage. They will also acknowledge the role of their personal consumption in the creation of the “risks” of modernity, and not be inclined to view themselves as innocent and passive victims of industrialism. For these consumers, what is needed—and reflected in their exercise of purchasing power or withholding of it—is not to sustain and hand down to future generations a living standard as currently defined, but to consume differently now in order to accommodate the goods (including that of dealing more fairly with those who labor to provide them) that are currently being lost or marginalized by “high” standards of living. Their need is to enjoy those goods in the present and to preserve their possible enjoyment as a legacy for future generations.

In contrast, moreover, to the mainstream responses to global warming that emphasize the technical fixes that might allow us indefinitely to pursue current lifestyles, the “alternative hedonist” position takes the view that even if consumerism

were indefinitely sustainable it would not enhance human well-being (or not beyond a certain point that has already past in over-developed societies). And it claims that it is emergent forms of desire rather than fears of ecological disaster that are likely to have most impact in any move towards more sustainable modes of consuming. Such desires, for example, are implicit in the laments already noted over lost spaces and communities, and in the now very frequent complaints against the commercial battering on children, the vocational dumbing down of education, the ravages of “development,” the “cloning” of cities, and so forth. Diffuse and politically unfocused though these may be, they speak to a widely felt sense of the opportunities squandered in recent decades for creating a fairer, less harassed, less environmentally destructive, and more enjoyable way of life. To defend the progressive dimension of this kind of yearning (one might term it “avant-garde nostalgia”) against the exigencies of “progress” is not to recommend a more ascetic existence. On the contrary, it is to highlight the puritanical, disquieting, and irrational aspects of contemporary consumer culture. It is to speak for the forms of pleasure and happiness that people might be able to enjoy were they to opt for a fairer and more sustainable economic order. It is

to open up a new “political imaginary”: a seductive vision of alternatives to resource-intensive consumption, centered on a reduction of the working week and a slower pace of living. By working and producing less, we could improve health and well-being, and provide for forms of conviviality that our harried and insulated travel and work routines currently make impossible. A cultural revolution along these lines would challenge the advertisers’ monopoly on the depiction of prosperity and the “good life.” It would make the stuff that is now seriously messing up the planet—more roads, runways, shopping malls, more makeovers, more rapidly obsolescent and throwaway commodities—look ugly because of the energy it squanders and the environmental damage it causes.

The essential focus, then, of “alternative hedonism” is on enjoyment rather than frugality, on the rewards of a socially just and eco-benign consumption rather than on the restrictions that will need to be placed on the older way of living. It is not issuing jeremiads against consumption, nor calling for deprivation. It argues, in fact, that the consumerist way of living offers *too little* in the way of joy and fulfilment rather than *too much*. And it seeks legitimation for its claims *not* in some supposedly objective knowledge of

“true” needs (that only an elite of experts has access to) but in the ambivalence that people themselves are now beginning to feel about the so-called “blessings” of the consumerist lifestyle.

BACK TO THE STONE AGE?

Those pressing for this “alternative hedonist” approach have regularly been ridiculed for their “Stone Age” (or sometimes, maybe more charitably, merely Medieval) nostalgias and generally retrograde dispositions. We hear continually that they want us to give up “progress,” “turn the clock back,” or “stop us enjoying ourselves” and so on.

It is true that the anticonsumerists and environmentalists who have been the target of this type of rubbishing have not always served their own case as well as they might. The case against overconsumption has sometimes been presented in terms that suggest a belt-tightening duty rather than a pleasure, when in fact—and unlike many other forms of duty—doing the right thing is also very often the most personally gratifying, or at the very least is seldom a source of pain, discomfort, or great inconvenience. If we were all to minimize the use of plastic bags, cartons, and bottles it would not only conserve energy, but also significantly enhance the appearance—and

thus the aesthetic pleasure—of our local environment, where at present roadways and rivers are littered with plastic waste. If we were all to reduce our consumption of meat and convert to a mainly plant-based diet, it would not only reduce global carbon emissions (to which livestock breeding is currently thought to contribute around 15 percent), but also improve personal health, reduce reliance on antibiotics in agriculture with beneficial spin-offs for human medicine, and favor more locally based and animal-friendly methods of farming.²¹ And there are countless other examples one might cite where consumption that is ecologically virtuous in its global impact also has its local and personal rewards.

The new consumption would be restricted in material terms, but not necessarily a simpler consumption nor one that requires us to forego sensual delight. It would be an altered consumption scenario, with its own complexities, excitements, and forms of sensual enhancement. Not least of these is the new forms of co-existence and inter-generational sympathy, solidarity, and cooperation it can help to open up. We need, as the critic, Raymond Williams, some time ago argued, to recall that “the most widespread and most practical thinking about the future is rooted in human and local continuities”



and that this brings us to build in ways that “are meant to last for coming lives to be lived in them”:

It is true that these ways have been weakened by particular kinds of society and economy, which set alternative priorities of quick satisfaction and return. Yet their impulses are still very strong. Beyond the snappy formulas of an instant and enclosed individualism; beyond the profitable fast exploitation of resources; beyond the market schemes of obsolescent durables; beyond the widespread and reckless borrowing from the future to solve some current difficulty without discomfort: beyond all these powerful and identifiable forces, these deeper impulses and reckonings persist.²²

Advocates, then, of an “alternative hedonist” response on need will challenge the presumption that there is only one way of thinking about human fulfilment and self-indulgence. They will reject the “back to the Stone Age” criticism as failing to recognize the avant-garde quality of the new consumption and highlight the retrograde effects of orthodox approaches to economic progress. (The misery and filth of the smogs that the Chinese people are now having to endure—thanks to their advance from mass bicycling to car use—offers a poignant example.)

III. MOVING TOWARDS THE NEW CONSUMPTION

As anti-consumerist feeling and concern about the role of consumption in climate change have gained more traction in recent years, we have seen the emergence of a number of personal initiatives and policy moves that foster a greener order of production and consumption. These have been fairly modest in their aspiration and limited in what they can expect to achieve, but they are moves in the right direction.

GREEN AND FAIR TRADE PURCHASING

In the first place, we might note the gradual expansion of organic and fair trade provision and purchasing, and the establishment of ethical trading as a significant part of the market. This development is to be welcomed for reflecting and encouraging concerns about the global sourcing and the labor that go into articles of daily consumption. The motivations and concerns of ethical

shoppers also overlap in certain respects with those of a more radical anti-consumerism, and there is reason to believe that at least some of those committed to more responsible buying and investment are resistant to the shopping-mall culture and seeking to move beyond a society of overconsumption.

Since ethical consumption, however, is essentially a shopping practice, and its niche markets coexist with rather than undermine consumer society, it can be charged with protracting the consumerist view of the good life rather than offering a serious challenge to it. It is also true that there is today a wide range of goods and services claiming to foster fair trade or care for the environment, not all of which are genuine, and buyers have to be very scrupulous in checking their credentials. At its shallowest, ethical consumption may simply be providing a cosmetic “greenwash” for producers and

retailers, and functioning as little more than a fashion gimmick.

GREEN TAXATION

Carbon taxes on the use of fossil fuels, waste disposal, and pollution can also have some positive impact in greening consumption, and so-called “feebates” on more toxic articles such as sport utility vehicles may in some cases act as incentives for individuals to shift to more eco-friendly products. But since taxation on pollution massively reduces profits, it always comes up against powerful resistance. (A recent analysis of 3,000 of the world’s largest businesses concluded that paying for their external environmental costs would erase at least a third of their profits.²³ In the United States, only four in thirty-three companies in the electric power industry remained profitable after accounting for pollutants.²⁴) And if the taxes on emissions caused in production are simply transferred to the price of goods and services, taxation remains a problematic instrument in very unequal societies for advancing a greener and more cohesive society. In almost all cases, higher product prices, which have little impact on the wealthiest (usually those with the heavier ecological footprint in the first place), unfairly penalize those who are poorer and less environmentally culpable. If it is only domestic

production, moreover, that is affected, emissions on imported, cheaper goods can go unregulated and unaccounted for. So in addition to already existing forms of taxation, much more stringent—and potentially system changing—regulation of the economy would be needed to ensure that the natural resources used in the production of goods and services, and the environmental damage caused in their making, is fully represented in the costs of production and that those costs are distributed more fairly.

REGULATION OF ADVERTISING

As we have seen, advertising exercises an almost total monopoly over representation of the “good life” with little opportunity provided for people to experience any other visions or ideas about it. Advertisers also devote huge budgets to recruiting each up-and-coming generation to a consumerist way of living, ensuring brand loyalties at the earliest possible age. Recent demands, from many parents and those involved in the care and education of children, for more regulation of the industry have therefore to be viewed as a welcome challenge. There has been particular concern of late about the impact of TV advertisement of food and beverages on the long-term health of children, as the evidence

suggests that tastes formed early in life for low-nutrition, high-calorie diets are very difficult to shift in later life. Some progress has been made in Scandinavia, Europe, and Latin America in restricting advertisement to children. Sweden and Norway prohibit all such advertisement and Brazil has recently exercised a similar ban. Mexico, too, now restricts the times when advertisements for junk food can be shown. There are also similar partial regulations in many parts of Europe. The United States urgently needs to follow suit, since at present it exercises relatively little control over child-targeted advertisement and certainly nothing on the scale of Norway and Sweden.

ALTERNATIVE MEASURES OF WELL-BEING

Lastly, we might note here the importance of the growing pressure for the replacement of GDP as an index of well-being. Ever since Robert Kennedy first made his eloquent case against the GDP in his 1968 speech, it has been recognized as absurdly flawed—to the point of being dubbed the “Grossly Distorted Picture” index. (For example, while unpaid activity such as household and voluntary work that contributes hugely is discounted, income that arises from negative developments—such as air pollution or from disasters such as the plane crashes or

automobile accidents—is included within GDP.) Proposed measures to replace it include: the Human Development Index, which now recognizes alongside living standards measured by income, the role of life expectancy and knowledge in advancing well-being; the Genuine Progress Indicator (developed by Hermann Daly and John Cobb in the late 1980s), which adds in the value created by domestic and voluntary work while subtracting the costs of crime and pollution; and, more recently, the Ecological Footprint, which measures how much land and water a human population requires to produce the resources it consumes and to absorb its waste under prevailing technologies. The Happy Planet Index uses the Ecological Footprint along with life expectancy and reported experience of happiness to calculate national levels of happiness. It thus includes ecological efficiency in providing for well-being as a key criterion of its achievement. Nations score well on the index if they achieve high levels of satisfaction and health with low levels of damage to the environment. The United States, and indeed most of the major industrial nations, have so far scored pretty badly on the index (on the 2012 index, the US was placed 105 of 151 countries).²⁵

Measures of prosperity that are more reflective of real levels of well-being

rather than purely quantitative economic growth have hitherto mainly been provided and promoted through the work of non-profit organizations. They urgently need now to be adopted by government agencies such as the US Bureau of Economic Analysis. Although it would not in itself be immediately system changing, it would have considerable impact were figures for the depletion and pollution of “natural” capital to be officially recorded alongside GDP, and the ecological footprint of growth to be given as much publicity as growth figures themselves.

The measures outlined above (especially were they to come together in some consolidated anti-consumerist social movement) would go some way to reducing the negative impacts of consumer culture and advancing “alternative hedonist” ways of living. But as we have noted, their potential for encouraging the transition to a more *re*-productive level of material consumption (a relatively stable type of provision for primary needs) and a less work-intensive economic culture is limited within the current system by the very considerable constraints that would be placed on capitalist growth and profits. Indeed any such transition could ultimately come about only through fundamental restructuring of basic economic institutions and modes of provision

for welfare: the removal, for example, of childcare, health care, education, and basic retirement needs from their dependency on market forces; powerful governance of the reach of the market in other areas; an altogether more democratic and participatory economy. All these are moves that will be massively resisted by corporate power and its currently supportive political establishment.

For this reason, even the more moderate reforms (let alone the more “non-reformist reforms” or system-challenging demands) are unlikely to make much headway in the absence of very high levels of public support for their implementation. They can begin to succeed only if the popular will to advance them becomes such that business and government find they have little choice but to yield to it.



IV. FURTHERING THE NEW CONSUMPTION: MORE RADICAL MEASURES

If anything approaching the necessary level of public support for such a radical shift of direction is to evolve, it will require, in the first place, a blueprinting exercise of the kind now being undertaken by The Next System project for social renewal in America. It will require, that is, compelling visions of fairer and more democratic socioeconomic structures and institutions: the projection of a political economy that acknowledges the importance of state and regional governance for transport, utilities, and welfare provision while also giving high priority to “local living” and to sustaining human and natural communities. And it will require practical examples of the ways in which needs can be provided for through operations and services that bypass the mainstream economy: small-scale, worker- or community-owned enterprises and cooperatives providing more versatile, durable, easy-to-repair goods; credit unions and financial services providing a

parallel system of exchange and savings, and allowing for “slow money” investment in local communities; networks for sharing, bartering, and collective provision, and so on.

THE CULTURAL PREREQUISITE: CHALLENGING TIME SAVING AND THE GLORIFICATION OF SPEED

At the more conceptual level, all this will in turn require a radical break with consumer culture’s glorification of speed and its understanding of prosperity in terms of efficiency. The bid to do things faster, and thus reduce time spent on any given activity, is at the heart of the consumerist dynamic, whether it be a matter of information technology or of physical transport. In all areas of social provision, ideas of “progress” and “development” have become more or less synonymous with those of saving time or speeding

up, to the point where it is now well-nigh impossible to travel very long distances other than by air and it would be thought grotesque for research and development teams and industrial designers to promote product innovations on the grounds that they allowed their users to proceed at a more leisurely pace. The tacit assumption in this association of human advancement with increased speed is that the faster we or our communications travel, the more exciting life will become, and the fuller and richer our experience shall be.

Yet how fast we want— or “need”—to travel (or to communicate) is itself a function of other aspects of an overall lifestyle and pattern of consumption. The affluent modern lifestyle is a structure of interconnected modes of consumption, each of which is integral to the whole and reliant upon it. But for that very reason, shifts in consumption in one area will always have secondary effects in others and thus influence the overall structure of the way we live. Were more people, for example, to shop on foot or by bike, it would encourage the return of Main Street retailers rather than out-of-town, hyper-market shopping; fewer small stores would be forced into closing because of parking restrictions in town centers. Were we to reduce the working

week or the work loads expected of employees within the working day, it would bring with it a relaxation of the speed at which goods and information were required to be delivered or transmitted. Were airfreight to be severely restricted, it would have a major impact on the sourcing of perishable goods and significantly reduce the mileage travelled by many articles of everyday consumption with benefits for consumers, the local economy, and the environment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSPORT AND MOBILITY

a) Aviation

At present, however, flying’s share of global emissions is increasing steadily, with personal air travel obviously contributing alongside freight carriage to this expansion. This is especially the case in the United States, where aviation is responsible for at least 8 percent of transportation-related greenhouse gas emissions—the largest source after automobiles.²⁶ Even in Europe, flying with budget airlines is the cheaper option on most of the standard routes, and commendations to travel overland or by sea are still regarded by many people as quaintly out of date. Yet some longer journeys by train take little more time than flying when journeys to and

from airports are added on, and provide an altogether richer and more engaged experience of the countries through which one is traveling. An ecological pricing and taxing policy could make these modes of transport as affordable as air travel. To judge by the enthusiasm that has greeted the amateur website from the “Man in Seat Sixty-One,” which provides exceptionally clear and detailed information on all aspects of rail (and rail-ship) transport throughout the world, the interest in traveling long distance by train is considerable, and increasingly sought after both for its pleasures and for its greener credentials.²⁷

b) Automobile use

The massive CO₂ emissions caused by the ever-growing aviation industry are compounded by those resulting from the expansion of automobiles and road-freight. Indeed, vehicle emissions constitute the single most important source of toxic air pollutants in industrial societies. The sheer speed of road traffic is also responsible for bringing a premature and horrific end by death and injury to many of those who use the roads. (In the United States, some 90 people die in accidents every day.²⁸) It also destroys the lives and habitat of living beings other than ourselves, and deprives us of the pleasure we take in

an abundant and flourishing wildlife and a greener environment. Insulated as car users are from the external impact of speed, they are also rendered insensitive to it. Traveling at high speed in a car, you are necessarily limited to seeing what you are traveling through, and deprived of most other sensory experiences of it. You will be confined to what Alex Wilson, in his study of the making of the North American landscape, has referred to as the “motorist’s aesthetic.” The designers of the great American “scenic” national parkways, Wilson tells us, “have created an essentially visual experience, one that has ruled out taste, touch and smell; for which landscape becomes an event in ‘automotive space,’ and is comparable in its one-dimensionality to the view that is had in aerial photography. In the process, the designers of the scenic routes have literally instructed their users in the ‘beauties’ of nature by promoting some landscapes at the expense of others, by removing whatever bits of it were deemed unsightly, and by restricting all activities incompatible with the parkway aesthetic.”²⁹ Modern media have further added to the sense of “nature” as something that is primarily seen, because so much of the experience of it now comes in virtual form: it is a matter of watching it on a TV or computer screen, often as seen from the air or a motor vehicle, and

this necessarily marginalizes sounds and cuts out the contribution of smell and touch altogether.

By contrast, where proper provision is made, to walk, ride, cycle, or go by boat is also to enjoy sights, scents, sounds, the pleasures (and benefits) of physical activity, and forms of solitude and silence denied to those who travel in more insulated and speedier ways. It is, as Wilson has suggested, to benefit from a synaesthetic rather than voyeuristic type of experience. Obviously, no one could rely exclusively on these modes of transport, but certainly many could do so for many more of their journeys than they currently do—and arguably with considerable gain in enjoyment and well-being. Almost all the obstacles, moreover, to regular cradle-to-the-grave biking could readily be overcome through more committed and imaginative forms of provision: why not well-lit, multilane tracks, with cover for those who want it; cycle rickshaws and motorized bikes for the too young and less able; and showers, changing rooms, and cafes at regular intervals on cycle tracks? Schemes like this look utopian in the present context, but the costs would be negligible relative to those associated with the continued expansion of automobile provision (especially if one

factors in the medical costs likely to be saved through better public health).

c) Reclaiming the streets

Speeding traffic not only kills people, but also communities. Research has shown that the higher the traffic volume, the less time people spend outside—and the lower the likelihood they will know their neighbours. Parents' fear of accidents has also made streets no-go areas for their children, and this has had a serious impact on the way that children play, and has denied them many of its pleasures. In the past, children were free to escape from adults for significant periods of time, and to forget their cares in the moonlit, ludic time-space so evocatively summoned in the nursery rhyme, "Girls and Boys come out to play / The moon is shining bright as day." Today, whether in the country or in the city, they are seldom released from either the nervy surveillance of their elders, on the one hand, or the predation of drivers constantly encroaching on them with their motorized vehicles, on the other. The effect is to offer them little choice: either they are vulnerably exposed to traffic, or else confined indoors, or stuck in automobiles themselves.

But it is, of course, not only children who suffer. For most of human history, as the

UK Living Streets campaign has pointed out, in addition to children's play, streets also comfortably accommodated the full range of human activity: they were the place for socializing, public meetings, entertainments, demonstrations, and social change. Today, however, they have become traffic corridors, cutting swathes through local communities. The priority in the design and classification of most roads is how much traffic they can carry. The use of streets as social places is overlooked, as is the fact that on many streets—particularly local Main Streets—there are far more people on foot than in vehicles. Roads and intersections are widened and sidewalks narrowed to speed up traffic. Barriers are erected to stop people crossing where they want. The lighting and street signs are designed for people traveling at speed. The overall result is an unfair, ugly, and intimidating environment for people on foot.³⁰ And since urban space and the road system generally are now organized around the expedition of vehicles rather than pedestrians, it is only through the provision of parks and precincts that other activity can really prove relaxed and enjoyable. “Public” (but usually privately owned and policed) shopping-mall areas will also provide some protection from traffic, but even in those the more “disreputable” (non-shopping) elements are under continual

surveillance and regularly moved on. Nor is much seating of any comfort supplied, lest nonshoppers take advantage.

Streets, then, need to be reclaimed as places for the positive enjoyments of ambling, gossiping, and passing the time of day. As the Living Streets Manifesto puts it: “Why should walkers behave like vehicles—always keeping on the move? The only right enshrined in the Highways Act is to ‘pass and re-pass along the highway’ and it’s a sign of the times that most words we use to describe stopping in the street should have negative connotations – ‘loitering,’ ‘lingering,’ ‘hanging about.’ Our streets are as much for leisure as for work, places to chat to neighbours, read newspapers, or to watch the passing scene. Living Streets need nooks and corners, benches and walls where people can pause and pass the time.”

d) Going local

Perhaps the single, most prized, seemingly irreplaceable advantage of fast travel is the ease with which it delivers us to far-flung holiday or conference destinations and permits large numbers of people (though always in global terms a small minority) to enjoy tourist experiences that would have been confined a century ago to only the wealthiest elite.

It is difficult to dispute the pleasures of holidaying in foreign places, or the life-enhancing aspects of the encounter with other spaces and cultures. Yet far-flung trips are all too often doubly exploitative of both the environment and of local workers servicing the tourist industry. Even the companies providing eco-tourist experiences cannot but abstract from the contradictions of encouraging more influx into areas hitherto “untouched” by the tourist trade. They also seem particularly adept (as indeed they need to be in order to survive) at suppressing the role of long distance air flight in creating the “threatened and fragile” environments that they invite their customers (often referred to as research or conservation “volunteers”) to help protect. The first—and last step—in these and many other similar itineraries, it goes without saying, is an international flight; many also require further domestic flights to reach their chosen outposts of civilization. The very air flights that enable tiger watching in India or polar bear observation in the Arctic are major contributors to the climate change that is eroding the habitat of these threatened animals.

The environmental impact of many long-haul trips is all the greater because of the shortness of the time spent on them. This

means that the visits themselves take place with greater frequency, and also encourages their frequency, since the interference with work routines is minimized. Here, too, we have an instance of the interlocking forms of consumerist provision required and provided in a high-speed, work-intensive culture. The high-pressure work routine encourages an escapist holiday culture of long distance, short-term breaks. Weekend breaks from the UK to New York, Scandinavian, and European cities are now regular events for many employees, and sometimes seen as essential to sanity. Journeys in these instances are measured in time taken rather than miles covered, and in fact hardly figure as anything but a means of access to the holiday location. “Escaping,” it is assumed, rather unthinkingly, cannot take place without a significant traversal of geographic space.

Even in the case of longer trips, these are seldom of a kind today to provide that sense of timeless immersion in a different environment and rhythm that once made holidays such objects of nostalgia—particularly for children. One might even hazard that the extreme contrasts to ordinary life presented by holidays in very distant and culturally unfamiliar locales militate against the more surreal and dream-like holiday experience that

accompanies a removal to somewhere closer to home yet still strangely different from normality. It is arguable that what contributes most to the pleasure of vacations is repetition, even to the point of tedium, in the ways that the days are expended. And it is the subtle shifts in what constitutes the routine and the familiar that allows the sequence of days on vacation to combine to form a rare and entrancing experience—days spent away from home are able to merge with each other in a way that will yield in retrospect their unforgettable beauty and exceptionality.

IMPLICATIONS FOR WORK

Speed in the context of work is really about the saving of labor time, which in turn is about the extraction of further surplus value through minimizing idleness or the time spent at less than the maximum productivity. Time becomes a currency that is spent, not passed, an objective force, as the historian, E.P. Thompson put it, “imprisoning the worker rather than a milieu in which they lived their life.”³¹ Today, as we have seen, we are still subject to that imprisonment. We may not be quite back with the work routines of the nineteenth century, but there is no doubt that we are still subject to a time-economy imposed by the quest for profit that is proving ever

more environmentally catastrophic and is now seriously compromising human well-being.

There are, of course, reasons for the disappearance of more progressive and imaginative thinking about work, time expenditure, and consumption; the main one being the pressures of neoliberalism, which have meant that what has come to matter most to workers is protection of employment and access to an already existing range of provisions and “standard of living.” Post-Fordist innovation in the management of labor and the revolution in information technology have contributed to the precarity of working life, and brought new forms of tedium, stress, and insecurity. Less formally hierarchical relations in the workplace have gone along with new forms of corporatism and expectations of loyalty, with “affective labor” now routinely demanded of retail and service workers. The emphasis on employment has led to unprecedented self-commodification and educational curricula tailored to careers.

Yet the sense of work as offering the main route to personal dignity and self-realization has been waning for some while now, with more people coming to view paid work, even if they manage to secure it in the growing gig economy,

as frustrating rather than enhancing self-expression and individual fulfilment. Hence the interest in “time affluence” that is being registered in the United States and Europe, and the formation of campaign networks linking those who have opted for “downshifting,” reduced working hours and more sustainable lifestyles.³² In a context, moreover, in which many theorists are predicting a possibly terminal decline in capitalism’s powers of accumulation, and the environmental obstacles to growth appear ever more insuperable, it has become urgent to renew and update an earlier argument (first elaborated, notably by André Gorz, in the 1970s and 1980s) on the liberation from work, and to associate that with the pleasures of a less harried and less acquisitive way of living. A beginning here was made in France with the introduction of the thirty-five-hour week, which proved especially popular with women, and despite its revocation under the Sarkozy presidency, it is still very extensively in place. In the UK, the New Economic Foundation has for some time now been advocating a shift to a twenty-one-hour week, and arguing its benefits in terms of lowering the carbon footprint, reducing unemployment, improving well-being, and promoting better childcare, coparenting, and more equality between the sexes.³³

We should also note here the potential of a less intensive work culture for introducing more fulfilling forms of work, developing new skills, and reinstating some earlier ways of doing and making. There is an opportunity here for avoiding the social and sexual exploitations of the labor processes of earlier communities while preserving their more congenial aspects. One example is craft ways of working, which by reason of their emphasis on skill, attention to detail, and personal involvement and control, run counter to prevailing views on the mental-manual division of labor and the timeline imperatives of the “work and spend” economy. In a slower-paced society, in which people have more time to provide for themselves, artisan production could expand and many more could benefit from the particular skills and forms of concentration in work and self-fulfilment that it provides. Some will contest the view that in commodified societies of mass production, where the craft contribution has been effectively removed from mainstream economic activity, there can ever be any even partial return to its labor process, but craft ways of working are quite compatible with communally owned enterprises and cooperatives and, indeed, with any organization of labor freed from the demands to make as much as possible in the minimum

time. “Craftivism,” as the political wing of the craft movement is called, is now actively associating craft with escape from the prevailing codes of mass consumerism. (The term was coined by the writer, Betsy Greer, in 2003 to indicate the union of craft and activism and it has now acquired a quite explicit sociopolitical outlook and mission.³⁴) Craft methods can thus far be reclaimed as a component of an avant-garde, post-consumerist political imaginary rather than dismissed for their association with premodern social relations. They can also, as Juliet Schor has suggested, defending her view of cooperative “plenitude” against “business as usual,” figure in new, hybrid production practices that combine advanced green technologies in the fields of medicine, transport, energy provision, and so on, with more personally rewarding forms of the labor process, slower mobility, and time-enriched living:

We are circling back and plenitude is a synthesis of the pre- and postmodern. From the former it borrows the vision of skilled artisans producing for their own use as well as for the market From the postmodern period comes advanced technology and smart, ecologically parsimonious design. It's the perfect synthesis. Technology obviates the arduous and back-breaking labor of the preindustrial.

Artisan labor avoids the alienation of the modern factory and office.³⁵

The idea of working less may well seem threatening in a society where being in work is associated so closely with personal success. Those without work are almost always deprived of the funds, amenities, and forms of education required for the carefree enjoyment of idleness, the concentrated and passionate pursuit of private hobbies, or cultural and sporting activities. But were we all to work less, freedom from work would no longer be associated with the stigmata of idleness and reduced citizenship. In other words, the skeptical doubts have never really been put to the test, since nowhere as yet has a society been created where labor and income are fairly distributed, part-time work is the norm, men and women share equally in domestic activities alongside other work, and everyone is guaranteed a sufficient basic income.³⁶ Moreover, were people to be funded in their free time, they would be likely to bring more resources to its employment. There is no reason why the more obsessive and frenetic aspects of our personality should always be harnessed to our paid work rather than other activities and forms of recreation.

The provision of an unconditional, universal basic income to all citizens (UBI) is still, of course, widely regarded as fanciful, but the idea is gaining traction around the world. A pilot scheme will be tested in Finland in 2017, and similar projects are planned for Ontario, Canada and in the Netherlands. In Germany, a single-issue party has been founded to promote UBI; in the UK, the Green Party leader, Caroline Lucas, recently tabled a Parliamentary Early Day Motion calling for research into Basic Income provision, and the possibility of its introduction has been broached by Jeremy Corbyn, the Labour Party leader. (As a footnote here, we might add that the Tax Justice Network estimates the global elite are sitting on \$21–32 trillion of untaxed assets—a quite adequate sum to fund a moderate basic income. Clearly, only a portion of that is owed to the United States or any other nation in taxes—the highest tax bracket in the United States is 39.6 percent of income. But a small universal income of \$2,000 a year to every adult in the United States—enough to keep some people from missing a mortgage payment or skimping on food or medicine—would cost only around \$563 billion each year. A larger income—say, \$12,000 a year—would cost around \$3.6 trillion, a big but arguably still manageable sum.³⁷)

GOING WITHOUT AND SELF-PROVISIONING

Several of the “other pleasures” advocated above are obtainable without further acquisition of goods or services or through exchanging and recycling existing ones. There are also hedonistic reasons to opt out of some other forms of consumption. Going without more than the minimum of tools, gadgets, machinery, and other complex or cumbersome equipment frees up space, saves the labor and frustrations of cleaning and repairing, and means that there are fewer problems of waste disposal. One of the reasons why the hours spent on domestic chores have remained almost unchanged despite the huge expansion of labor-saving equipment in the home is that standards of cleanliness have become more clinical and much more time is also now devoted to the cleaning and maintenance of privately-owned household machinery.

Under the rubric of “going without” we may also include all those modes of acquisition and consumption that bypass the market or allow people to satisfy their requirements for goods and services without purchasing new commodities or using commercial suppliers. These include the Local Exchange and Trading Scheme (LETS), rummage sales, charity

and secondhand shops, dress marts, and all the resources for the recycling of articles, for which there are now a growing number of Internet websites such as Freecycle.org and Sharestuff.com. Apart from the pleasures of personal reciprocity, such exchanges and bartering activities save money and allow people to make use of specific talents for which they may otherwise have little outlet. People, of course, are also placed in a position to make use of non-standardized services and to acquire all sorts of unusual items they would never have found on sale in retail stores. Where market provision based on the mass production of standardized articles tends to homogenize the ways in which we meet our needs and wants, bypassing conventional retail outlets encourages eccentricity, bricolage, and heterogeneous ways of “making do.”

In the United States, networks for sharing, carpooling, recycling, and exchanging goods and services (including banking and other financial services) have come to be known as “collaborative” or “connected” consumption, and they are now very extensive and quite sophisticated. Prompted in part by the financial crisis of 2008, they have helped to reduce carbon emissions and waste while at the same time creating more

eco-sensitive communities and cooperative ways of living.³⁸ If encouraged by policy moves designed to protect and consolidate their presence they could well shift current thinking about material culture in quite significant ways (through acting as a check on the individualization of consumption and allowing for more communal ownership of houses, automobiles, tools, and appliances; by challenging the dominant consumerist aesthetics of “newness,” or shunning mass-market fashions and mass production in favour of clothes swapping and craft and home-made goods). They might also over time become hubs for exerting pressure for the stricter regulation of corporations in order to end their reliance on sweat-shop labor and ever faster turn-over times, and to render them much more accountable than they currently are for the environmental damage incurred in production. One might also note their potential for influencing policy on disinvestment in fossil fuels.

There is another sense altogether in which going without might be considered a potential source of alternative hedonism, and this relates to the loss of sensory experience encouraged by consumer culture. Central heating and air-conditioning, for example, ensures that we are continuously in the “comfort” zone wherever we go.

But it has also made interior space more boringly homogeneous and reduced sensitivity to seasonal changes. Constant “grazing” and “comfort” eating cuts out enjoyment of a sharpened hunger and thirst. To defend acute sensation against its muting is not to deny the complexity and subjective dimension of pleasure. Pleasure, after all, is more than a matter of intensified physical appetite. What should also be promoted are the potential rewards of adopting a less materialistic approach to the satisfaction of human needs and desires more generally. In the first instance, however, this means a heightened sense of what we have already lost in the promotion of a hyper-consumerist culture and of what, in that sense, we are already now “going without”.

RELEASING TIME FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Consumerism, as we have noted, has systematically encouraged the individualization of consumption, in the process creating highly privatized ways of living. The insurance industry has added further deterrents to the development of collective sharing and caring. The pressures against sharing can much more easily be resisted in a society where more equality has fostered greater trust and allowed more cooperative work (and thus flexibility in where and when things can be

done). Consumerism, as we have seen, also encourages socially divisive status buying, whereas the communal production, co-owning, and collectively enjoyed activities fostered through more free time release people from the competitive mind-set and allow the development of positive forms of social capital.

Freeing up time is also important not just as a trade-off against boundless consumption, but also as a means of promoting civic engagement and political participation. Individual liberty and electoral rights remain too purely nominal in a society that offers no institutional support for the proper exercise of democratic freedoms. Without security, the fallback support of basic income provision, and adequate time and education, people cannot be expected to participate politically. A truly functioning democracy requires informed political input and civic engagement on the part of its citizens. That in turn requires socio-economic structures and institutions that eliminate rather than encourage the vast inequalities of income and cultural capital characteristic of consumer society.

A BETTER DEAL FOR NONHUMANS

Non-human animals have always been essential to the consumption of human

beings, whether as food or for transport and recreation, and there has always been a contradiction between the abuse and love that humans have shown them. The contradiction between the instrumental use of animals as providers of articles for human consumption and their kinder treatment as personalized pets and companions has become ever more acute in consumer culture while also taking specific (and sometimes quite grotesque) forms due to the intense commodification of both aspects of the relationship. Factory farming and animal testing is but one example of the intensification of the instrumental use; the market for everything from luxury pet foods to animal spa treatments, designer bridal veils, and diamond studded collars, but one of the personal/affective. By freeing the hold of consumerism on our own lives, we would also release its hold on those of other creatures. This would spare domestic animals the very negative experiences of agribusiness and allow less intensive, more animal-sensitive methods of farming and fishing to become economically viable. It would also discourage the use of animal testing in the chemical, pharmaceutical, and cosmetics industries, and help to protect against the misuse of animals for sport and entertainment or for ostentatious displays of wealth. And with general and

incalculable benefit for all human and non-human animals, insects, and plant life both now and in the future, it would begin to reverse the trend toward what is known as the sixth extinction of flora and fauna, which is estimated by Elizabeth Kolbert in her book of that name to be between 20 percent and 50 percent of all species by the end of the twenty-first century.³⁹



V. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A NEW PHILOSOPHY OF PROGRESS

A less growth-led approach to thinking about progress and development can issue in new ways of representing the relationship between the past and present, tradition and modernity, and influence fairer and ecologically sensible methods of living and working in the future. In place of an evolutionary conception of history, this kind of post-growth project would offer a more complex story about the division between old and new, one that goes beyond the current binary opposition between modernity and tradition, high tech preoccupation and nostalgic yearning. It would seek to loosen the links between progress, speed, time saving, and economic expansion while opposing the social conservatism and bigoted thinking that has so often gone together with economic backwardness. A post-consumerist project would evolve a more mediated culture of modernization: one that retained the commitment to social and sexual emancipation and

gender parity, while at the same time revoking modernity's marginalization of spiritual well-being and promoting a less crudely materialist culture of gratification. This will mean breaking with earlier notions of both spirituality and materiality, and developing a fresh approach to thinking about both. One needs, for example, to be able to invoke the idea of a more spiritual consumption without its being assumed that one is advocating an overtly religious, mystical, or ascetic way of living. And one needs to be able to criticize consumerism for its materialism without it being assumed that one is promoting a less complex and less sensually enriching mode of existence.

And on this note, let me add that we need a cultural politics designed to encourage a shift in aesthetic perception as well as ethical response, and art has a definite role to play in this. This is because, like any other mode

of consumption, that of “alternative hedonism” will be context dependent and develop and expand its range in response to the cultural influence exercised through new discourses on selfhood and agency. Self-interest, after all, involves something more than the understanding one has at any given point *in* time of one’s needs and desires, norms, and values. It also involves coming to a better understanding *over* time of one’s interests, and changing one’s practice in the light of that.

I have compared this to the “consciousness raising” brought about by Western feminism and its gradual but profound impact on our way of life. As individuals became alerted to the role of gender in their being, and to its social construction and hence mutability, so they enter into complex—and often painful—processes of self-change. Such “reconstructions” can involve dramatic changes in affective response: changes whereby the attractions and repulsions of the world of lived experience undergo a kind of gestalt switch. A cultural renaissance working upon consumer sensibilities over coming years could result in some similar revisioning of self-interest and aesthetic response. The result would be that a lifestyle once seen as compelling comes to seem confining, and previously

sought after commodities come to be viewed as cumbersome and ugly through association with unsustainable resource use, noise, toxicity, or their legacy of un-recyclable waste.

The revisioning in question here is closely aligned with a general rethinking of pleasure and the good life that would be achieved through a “green” renaissance. Comparable to the necessary regulation between ethical concern for an object and true beliefs about it, there is a regulation between beliefs about and aesthetics responses to material culture. If, for example, you come to know that X does you harm, you tend to perceive it differently. Advertisers have long been aware of this and revised their appeals in light of these shifting regimes of truth and belief. Cigarette advertisements had, until they were finally banned in the UK, to be emptied of any imagery of actual smoking. Automobile advertisement has become increasingly reliant on an implausible depiction of the vehicle as “solitary” in nature. The green renaissance would harness this interdependency of belief and aesthetic experience for its own counter-consumerist purposes and seek to extend it to the environment at large, such that goods that were unsustainable, even if not responsible for any immediate

personal damage to the individual, ceased to exercise their former aesthetic compulsion. Images of waste in the form of negative sublimates that stifle and overwhelm us with the burden of our own productions may have some part to play in these aesthetic shifts, since the excreta of consumerist society is so plainly and repellently undesirable.

A green renaissance would also involve a break with current orthodoxy about the role and purposes of education. Insofar as education is now increasingly subject to purely vocational policy frameworks, it inhibits the development of precisely those more varied cultural interests that would help to promote satisfaction and self-realization in a less work-driven society. Education would need instead to be seen as an intrinsically valuable preparation for life rather than as an adjunct of industry. And state pastoral care of the body would need to be matched by a concern about what goes into the mind, and its cultural well-being. Instead of treating education as an incubator of economic activity, we should view it as an essential period of preparation for individuals to enjoy the free time made available in a post-consumerist era. Instead of downgrading and marginalizing aesthetic resources and satisfactions, we need to be making them more

culturally central and readily available. And alongside the focus on bodily fitness and athletic prowess, we need to attend equally to the cultivation of intellectually absorbing pursuits and achievements.

Those who press for post-growth economics and alternative hedonism are frequently dismissed as utopians, but there is also something quite unrealistic about the “business as usual” projection of the future. It is utterly implausible to suppose that we can, either socially or environmentally, continue with current rates of expansion of production, work, and consumption over the coming millennium let alone into the more distant future. And given the urgent need today for a politics of prosperity that dissociates pleasure and fulfilment from resource-intensive consumption, it is important to avoid unworkable assumptions about what would constitute globally sustainable forms of industry and lifestyle. We cannot today advocate equal, universal access to current standards of living in the affluent West. Demands for full employment, the end of austerity, and economic security for all have to be coupled with demands for the expansion of free time, the deceleration of the economy, and the establishment of an order based on a more reproductive form of satisfying essential needs.

There are, of course, huge problems confronting any attempt to “slow down” along these lines because of the integration of national economies in a pace of life determined by the dynamics of globalization. But we now desperately need another model of development and a beginning has to be made somewhere. Affluent societies are well-placed to spearhead a new order and to catalyze the political will for change, and were they to take a global lead on this, they could promote an alternative model of prosperity through which the less “developed” countries might critically reconsider the conventions and goals of economic growth—and thereby better understand the worst consequences of North-West “overdevelopment” and how to avoid them.

The move to sustainable consumption may also require—though I recognize how controversial this will sound—a more courageous challenge to the “political incorrectness” of excessive and nonchalant consumers. It is still very difficult to criticize the environmental squandering involved in people’s consumption habits, and there is much embarrassment all round if one does, but faced with the oppressive effects of the climatic impact of First World affluence on other, more deprived areas of the globe and on all

future generations, it is no longer clear why highly wasteful and polluting forms of personal consumption should remain exempt from the kinds of criticism that we now expect to be brought against racist, sexist, or blatantly undemocratic attitudes and modes of behaviour.

The commitment to an alternative politics of prosperity based on a sustainable economic order needs to be seen in this context as a continuation of the Enlightenment project. If we have a cosmopolitan care for the well-being of the more deprived people of the world, and a concern about the quality of life of future generations, then we have to campaign for a dramatic change of attitudes to work, consumption, pleasure, and self-realization in the more affluent communities. Such a revolution will be comparable in the forms of social transformation and personal epiphany it will demand to those brought about through the feminist, anti-racist, and anti-colonialist movements of recent history. Those who commit to it will surely improve not only their own lives but also those of all the generations to follow.

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