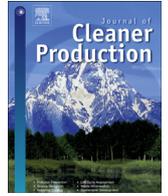




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From consumerism to wellbeing: toward a cultural transition?

Halina Szejnwald Brown^a, Philip J. Vergragt^{b,*}^a Clark University, Worcester, MA, USA^b Tellus Institute, Boston, MA, USA

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ABSTRACT

As it becomes evident that technology alone is unlikely to fully counteract the ecological impacts of consumer society, the debate increasingly focuses on a need to shift beyond the consumerist economy and culture. This paper considers how a cultural shift toward less consumerist lifestyle choices might originate, driven not by moral imperatives or environmental movements, but by the core pursuit of human wellbeing. Our goal is to jumpstart a serious conversation about plausible pathways to change, grounded theoretically and empirically. The history of consumer society is a reminder that cultural transformation of that magnitude could occur in a relatively short period of time. We hypothesize, drawing on demographic and economic trends, that technologically connected, educated, and open to change millennials might lead the way in that transition. Their diminishing interest in suburban life in favor of cities, constricted economic opportunities, and their size and interconnectedness all point in that direction. We envision a scenario in which the core understanding of wellbeing will change through the combined effects of changing lifestyles, adaptation to the economic, technological and demographic realities, and emerging new social practices. Extensive research on wellbeing suggests that such reframing can readily incorporate a shift away from consumerist lifestyles. To succeed, this shift needs government support at all levels through policies that enable young urban families to thrive.

This paper is about the United States because it is a global leader in the creation of the consumer society, with a per-capita ecological footprint about twice that of Europe, and with many emulators across the world. We contend that the US-grounded analysis presented in this paper has relevance for other parts of the world, and that it can inform research and debate on similar cultural transitions in other national contexts.

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1. Introduction

Since the end of the Second World War the USA has been transformed into a society where the national economy depends to a large extent on private consumption; and where mass acquisition and use of material goods is the dominant lifestyle, the centerpiece of social practices, leisure time, cultural rituals and celebrations. We refer to it as consumer society.

The ecological costs of this transformation have been high. While technological improvements in resource efficiency have slowed down the relentless growth in demand for materials, water and energy, they have not kept up with the growing demand, much less attain radical *reductions* in demand. It is becoming increasingly

apparent that technology alone will not solve the ecological unsustainability problem. The returns on energy investments in producing useful energy sources – both fossil-based and others – are much lower than in the past (Zehner, 2011; Gupta and Hall, 2011; Murphy, 2013). The rebound effects of various types are now a widely acknowledged and quantified phenomenon (Owen, 2011; Jenkins et al., 2011; IRGS, 2013). And the institutional and organizational barriers for rapid technological changes are formidable (Serman, 2014a). Reductions in consumption levels are necessary as well.

Consumer society is a complex system of technology, culture, institutions, markets, and dominant business models. It is driven by the ideology of neoliberalism and infinite growth. It has evolved through a sophisticated exploitation of the fundamental human quest for a meaningful life and wellbeing (Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 2012; Serman, 2014b; Speth, 2008; Lorek and Fuchs, 2013). To consider reducing its ecological costs is to question this entire complex system, and especially consumerism as the organizing

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: hbrown@clarku.edu (H.S. Brown), pvergragt@tellus.org (P.J. Vergragt).

principle for the economy, culture, and political process. In essence, a transition beyond consumerism would entail a society-wide evolution toward different lifestyles and conceptions of well-being, as well as a transformation of the system.

Questioning the consumer society has become increasingly vocal during the past decade, largely under the banner of “sustainable consumption”; scores of books, articles, special journal issues, official reports, and countless conferences and workshops have been dedicated to this theme. At the same time, the contours of such alternative society remain rather vague, and so is the understanding of how a transition beyond mass consumerism might take place. The debate emphasizes various mechanisms and change agents: from considering the role of small scale out-of-the-mainstream social innovations and experiments (Brown and Vergragt, 2008; Seyfang, 2009) to more instrumental approaches, such as altering human motivations through government policies (Lorek and Fuchs, 2013; Spangenberg, 2014; Schapke and Rauschmayer, 2014); to meso-level considerations of evolving social practices (Shove et al., 2007; Halkier, 2013; Spaargaren, 2013), socio-technical regimes (Geels and Schot, 2007; Kemp and Van Lente, 2013), and new business models not calibrated for unlimited growth (Kelly, 2012); to macro-level policies, such as abandoning the economic growth paradigm in national policy (Harris, 2013; Jackson, 2009; Kallis, 2011), introducing new fiscal policies like carbon taxes (Parry et al., 2014), or mobilizing social movements toward a different type of economy, institutions and ethics (Raskin, 2011).

The dilemma is that widely accepted theories of social change have limited applicability for critical analysis of the above ideas. Since the 1980s a rich body of theories of social change has emerged in the fields of social movement studies, organizational theory, economic sociology, historical institutionalism in political science, as well as the most recent effort to develop a unifying synthesis of those (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). They conceptualize social change as primarily involving contestation between self-aware incumbents and challengers with specific agendas and alternative collective visions of the future.

But we should not assume that this is how the evolution beyond mass consumerism will take place. In fact, we propose that the change is more likely to start more inconspicuously, as a *bottom-up cultural shift toward different lifestyles and conceptions of wellbeing*. Partly, this is because of the complexity of the system, in which a target for a challenge is unclear, where multiple targets are interdependent, and where potential incumbents and challengers have multiple interests and loyalties. Furthermore, no plausible challenger seems to be emerging. The government is unlikely to lead any initiatives that may directly challenge economic growth. The private sector is similarly committed to growth and increased consumption. And there is little evidence so far that major NGOs have sustainable consumption on their agendas. From a theoretical perspective, the conception of a transitioning beyond consumerism presented in this paper is more consistent with Olin Wright's (2012) framework for social change, which envisions an incremental process through “infiltration” of new economic and institutional models from niches into the interstitial spaces of the dominant system. The latter framework though would need further development through a robust empirical evidence and by addressing cultural, in addition to political and economic, changes.

This paper considers *how* a change beyond mass consumerism might begin in the US through the combined processes of (1) emerging shifting lifestyle preferences among young generation; and (2) necessary adaptations to the present economic, technological and demographic realities. The underlying assumption of this analysis is two-fold: that any change in individual and collective lifestyles must be tied to the core human strive for a

meaningful life and wellbeing; and that the transition does not need to be driven by ecological concerns or moral imperatives (though these are by no means precluded). Both assumptions stem partly from the abundance of research findings that ecological concerns, even among the most committed and well-informed activists, produce small changes in consumption behaviors, and are of significant magnitude only among the most committed tiny minority of activists (Bowerman, 2014). Furthermore, we contend that only the fundamental strive for meaning and wellbeing in life has the kind of power and constant presence that is necessary for radical changes in people's lifestyle choices and priorities.

This paper asks the following questions: What lessons can be drawn from the history of consumer society and from the large body of research on happiness and wellbeing to inform our thinking about cultural transition beyond consumerism? Can the very meaning of wellbeing be framed in a new way, one that is radically less dependent on mass consumption and materialism? What factors might play a role in such a cultural shift? Who might lead the transition? Is there evidence for such a shift taking place? The analysis draws on the history of consumer society (its deliberate construction and its rapid emergence), the scholarly literature on human happiness and wellbeing, and on the documented contemporary societal developments. We formulate informed hypotheses and present a *rudimentary scenario* of how a cultural transformation might take place in the near future. While acknowledging alternative scenarios that have been put forth for a putative transformation beyond the consumerist culture, the goal of this one is to frame the debate and to guide further research.

This paper mainly focuses on the United States. Much of what research explains about human strive for well-being and about the forces that have created – and continue to do so – consumer societies worldwide, is universal. However, the United States has been the global leader in the construction of consumer society: historically, structurally and in terms of outcomes. The low-density suburban model of well-being has been perfected in the US and is an aspiration of the majority of its population; the US home sizes, the ownership of private material possessions, and driving distances greatly outpace those in other rich European countries; its per-capita ecological footprint is about twice that of Europe (Global Footprint Network, 2015); and the US economic model is emulated by many rapidly developing economies in the world. Finally, we write about the United States because we live here and are concerned about its future and its global impact. At the same time we seek to stimulate researchers in other parts of the world to reflect on the likely paths to a similar cultural transition in their own national contexts.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section provides a historical account of the rapid emergence of consumer society during the first two decades after the end of the Second World War, which in a span of a single generation transformed the American economy and lifestyles, and profoundly affected the perception of well-being. Section three discusses the limitations of consumer society in delivering on its many promises, and concludes that in the face of the great stability of this complex system, change beyond consumerism needs to be bottom up, through changing lifestyles and re-framing of the very concept of wellbeing. Section four explores this hypothesis by drawing on the literature on wellbeing and happiness in the context of material consumption, and leads, in part five, to a proposition that the changing aspirations, lifestyles choices, and broader circumstances of the large millennial generation may make them the most likely place for the advent of a cultural shift. The article ends, in part six, with reflections on the potential relevance of the emergent sharing economy and the “new economy” movement as facilitators of the cultural transition, followed by a discussion in part seven and a Challenge in part eight.

2. Constructing the consumer society

The story of the emergence of consumer society in the US has been told numerous times and from various angles (here, we draw on several sources: Garon, 2012; Ewens, 1998; Cohen, 2004; Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Gallagher, 2013; Higgs, 2014). We briefly summarize it here in order to highlight how rapid and well-coordinated that social change was, despite the complexity involved – the economy, infrastructure, land use, institutions, lifestyles, and cultural norms – and how closely linked to the moment in history in which it took place.

Its advent is generally placed in the first two decades of the twentieth century. In this period, marketing experts and major think tanks, supported by big business, laid the groundwork for consumer society. Edward Bernays, the nephew of Sigmund Freud, who lived and worked in the US, is considered one of the founders of the principles of modern mass advertising. Having honed his skills by putting in place a government pro-war effort propaganda during the First World War, Bernays used the psychoanalytic insights of his famous uncle to develop methods for engineering wants and turning them into habitual practices of everyday life. He is credited with using mass media to create public acceptance of women smoking cigarettes (Botsman and Rogers, 2010, pp. 21–23; Ewens, 1998; Higgs, 2014). The National Association of Manufacturers supported think tanks and various campaigns to create a demand for domestic goods, and popularized the term “consumer” while referring to the American people.

By the 1930s both the government and labor unions, in addition to private business, actively supported the consumerist lifestyles of the population as the path to full employment and improved living conditions. The creation of Social Security in 1935 facilitated the transition to mass consumption by relieving Americans from the need to save for old age. The US entry into the Second World War briefly slowed down this trend while government conducted vigorous campaign to promote frugality and family savings in support of the war effort. Similar campaigns took place in Europe and Japan, but, as Garon (2012) notes, only in the US it came with a promise of a future payback in the form of purchasing power: “*save now, spend later after the war is over*”.

During the 1940s and 50s the massive project of creating consumer society took off in the earnest through the coordinated efforts of business, labor unions and federal government. Contemporary historians and sociologists have extensively recounted the corporate strategies – then and now – to grow consumer demand through aggressive marketing and advertising, tailored to various social, gender and age groups, including young children (Cohen, 2004; Schor, 1992, 1998; 2004). The labor unions, preoccupied with increasing the purchasing power of its members, were willing partners of the corporate America. As early as 1944 American Federation of Labor (AFL) wrote “*Without adequate purchasing power in the form of wages we cannot get full employment*” (Cohen, 2004, p. 116); and the activist role of the federal government cannot be underestimated.

The 1944 GI Bill helped returning war veterans to get free college education as well as down payments and government-guaranteed loans for purchasing homes and other goods. The mortgage interest deductions and government-financed infrastructure (utilities, roads, interstate highway system, among others) made home ownership a logical financial plan for families. That the federal government considered it to be its major responsibility to help create post-war prosperity through mass consumption is best illustrated in the Employment Act of 1946, the major piece of legislation regarding national economic planning: “*federal government's responsibility ... [is to] ... promote maximum employment, production, and purchasing power*” (Cohen, 2004, p.116).

The results were astonishing. National output of goods and services doubled between 1946 and 1956, and doubled again by 1970, with private consumption expenditures settling at about two thirds of the GDP (today it is 70% of GDP). By 1960, 62% of Americans owned their homes, compared to 44% in 1940. The construction industry, aided by the 1926 single-use zoning law, applied new methods of mass production of cheap and comfortable single family homes to convert large tracks of farm land and forest, increasingly removed from city centers, to suburbs that were completely dependent on car-based mobility (with the iconic 1949 Levittown on Long Island, NY, becoming its model) (Cohen, 2004; Gallagher, 2013). The massive demographic phenomenon of the exodus from cities to suburbs was so rapid that in 1960 suburban residents of single family homes outnumbered both urban and rural dwellers (Cohen, 2004, p.126). The private suburban shopping mall became the public space – stratified by race and income – replacing the previously more egalitarian public spaces of city streets, cafes, and places of commerce. Performance of the housing construction sector became an official indicator of the national economic wellbeing, the practice that continues in the US to this day.

At the peak of the cold war, American lifestyles also served as an important symbol of the superiority of the capitalist system over the soviet-style socialism. In the famous “kitchen” debate between Vice President Nixon and Soviet Premier Khrushchev at the American Exhibition in Moscow in 1959, Nixon boasted: “*The United States come closest to the ideal of prosperity for all in a classless society. ... We not do wish to have decisions made at the top by government officials about ... the kind of houses*” or “*the kind of ideas*” (cited in Cohen (2004; p.127). Cohen continues: “*Faith in a mass consumption postwar economy hence came to mean much more than the ready availability of goods to buy. Rather, it stood for an elaborate, integrated ideal of economic abundance and democratic political freedom, both equitably distributed, that became almost a national civil religion from the late 1940s into the 1970s.*”

In short, a major cultural and economic transition took place in the US in a span of not much more than a single generation. This transition occurred through simultaneous efforts of government, organized labor, and the manufacturing sector. These power centers understood the window of opportunity that opened at that particular historical juncture: the huge post-war industrial overcapacity, the national euphoria over its uncontested political and economic power and endless possibilities, a demographic boom, the post-Depression hunger for a better life, and technological advances and industrial capacity that made material goods more accessible than ever. The transition not only changed lifestyles of most Americans in profound ways, but also fostered a *cultural shift: consumerism and suburban lifestyle became conflated with such fundamental aspirations as wellbeing, freedom, and democracy.*

3. The limits and downsides of the consumerist project

The consumerist economy has certainly created great national wealth and lifted many boats. Today's American family lives in better housing with more amenities than in the 1940s and 50s, and even poor families have basic electric appliances and cars. But the price of the economic growth is the ever accelerating pace of private consumption. The size of an average new American home increased from about 950 square feet in 1950 to about 2400 square feet in 2010 (Calwell, 2010); the cycle of fashion and lifespan of other material goods has rapidly decreased over time. By the 1980s, when the middle class salaries began to stagnate and the temporary boost to family income by women entering the workforce began to wear off, the American family began to support its consumerist lifestyles through ever increasing personal debt

(Garon, 2012; Schor, 1992, 1998, 2004). The 2008 financial collapse exposed the magnitude of that bubble.

It is now well documented that the growing economy has not delivered on the promise of wellbeing for all. For the middle class families supported by two salaries the consumerist lifestyles brought declining leisure time and economic insecurity (Schor, 1992, 1998); and the growing inequality in the distribution of national wealth evolved hand in hand with an array of social problems. Using a composite of sixteen indicators of social health, Miringoff and Opdycke (2007) show that since 1970 the US society has been losing ground. This is consistent with the findings of Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) who used a composite index of nine indicators of public health and social problems to show that in wealthy developed economies a further increase in wealth does not improve general wellbeing. On the other hand, they found a strong correlation between income inequality and social problems, with the US having both the highest score for social problems and the highest income inequality among the advanced economies. And the happiness studies (discussed below), suggest that the sense of contentment has not increased among Americans over the past several decades (Pew, 2006).

Surveys actually show that most Americans – regardless of their political leanings and views on the threat of global warming – think that we consume too much and should reduce it. But that perception hardly translates into private behaviors; and policy elites are even more reluctant to consider decreased consumption than the general public (Bowerman, 2014). Part of the problem is the emotionally and politically loaded nature of the idea of consuming less, which for many people conjures images of retreat and loss. Furthermore, consumption in people's lives is a complex phenomenon, highly habituated, and enacted without conscious thought of their ecological cost and absent questioning their contribution to wellbeing (Shove et al., 2007; Spaargaren and Oosterveer, 2010). Through technological innovations and aggressive marketing and manipulation of desires, these social practices relentlessly evolve toward more complexity, more functionality, and more seemingly necessary uses (such as multiple refrigerators or bathrooms in a “standard house”). In that process, they repeatedly redefine what is normal, basic, and necessary (Quitau and Røpke, 2008).

Another barrier to change is the fact that socio-technical regimes, such as, for example, automobility, food production and consumption, and housing construction (the major determinants of the ecological impact of consumerist lifestyles) are stable complex structures, highly resistant to change (Geels and Schot, 2007; Kemp and van Lente, 2013). Furthermore, the prevailing economic system and power relations (especially in this age of dominant neoliberal ideology) are so profoundly dependent on the ever-larger amounts of material and energy throughput that neither policy makers nor scholars nor activists have a vision of how to decouple the two without triggering widespread disaster.

In the face of such systemic complexity and stability, it is not surprising that mass consumerism as an engine of unsustainability is hardly acknowledged in the US policy discourse, which is heavily influenced by business interests of large corporations, and focuses largely on technological solutions and economic incentives for energy conservation. Should such an acknowledgment materialize in the near future, it is unrealistic to expect government to challenge mass consumption as the organizing principle of societal and private life. Neither can we expect Walmart or Patagonia not to want to sell us more and more stuff. And there is little evidence that NGOs have consumption on their agendas. The change would have to come from citizens in the form of changing priorities and lifestyles.

The history of emergence of mass consumerism shows that a society-wide radical shift in lifestyles and aspirations can be rapid,

but gives few clues as to how a move from mass consumerism to its alternative might proceed. What could initiate and maintain such an evolution? It is unlikely that a moral imperative to protect the earth's supporting system for future generations will be the driver, based on the evidence accumulated over the years (Bowerman, 2014). Rather, we hypothesize that a collective reframing of the idea of good life as less fixated on materialism and high intensity leisure activities, may be the engine of change. In the next section we consider the possibility of such a cultural shift by drawing on the large body of research on subjective wellbeing and happiness – their meaning, determinants and connections to material wealth.

4. Material consumption and human wellbeing

During the past decade the sustainability discourse has incorporated the concepts of good life, wellbeing, and happiness as part of the questioning the economic growth paradigm as a path toward societal flourishing. The writings of Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum, Manfred Max-Neef and others on the universally applicable elements of good life (objective wellbeing) have been used to frame the debate (reviewed in, for example, Jackson, 2009; Di Giulio et al., 2012; Jackson and Victor, 2013).

We find the concept of *subjective wellbeing* more useful for this paper because of its explicit links to lifestyle choices, including material consumption. Since the pioneering work of Easterlin (1973) and Inglehart and Klingemann (2000), scores of books and articles have been published on the subject of subjective wellbeing and happiness, from the economic, sociological and psychological perspectives (in this brief review we draw principally on the works of Graham, 2012; Layard, 2011; Skidelsky and Skidelsky, 2012, which in turn build on a very large body of relevant scholarship, mostly empirical in nature).

Despite controversies over definitions, metrics, study design, and the validity of survey data, several shared understandings about human happiness and subjective wellbeing have emerged to date. One of those is the remarkable consistency and stability of certain basic determinants of happiness across very different countries and cultures, ranging from Afghanistan to the US: a stable marriage, good health, community and friendships are good for subjective wellbeing, and so are social trust and personal autonomy. Another consistent observation is that people judge the emotional value of their material wealth *in relation* to others. Once the basic subsistence needs are met, it is of greater importance to have more than others than to have more. The third central observation is that people are extremely adaptable and quickly get used to new circumstances, with the sense of wellbeing tending toward the pre-change state. This is true for both decreased and increased material wealth, the latter leading to insatiability and the so-called “hedonic treadmill,” as aspirations increase with income.

A more nuanced picture of the role of material wealth in achieving subjective wellbeing can be teased out by distinguishing between, on the one hand, wellbeing as an emotional state of pleasure/contentment/joy (referred roughly as Benthamite perspective) and, on the other hand, wellbeing as satisfaction arising from evaluating one's life (referred to as Aristotelian perspective). Both are determined by such fundamentals as health, family, friendship, community, and security. But the former is more linked to one's natural predisposition to cheerfulness, satisfaction of basic subsistence needs, and meeting one's expectations. The latter is a more complex evaluation, having to do with autonomy, search for meaning, spirituality, commitment and ethical behavior, and gaining respect, status, and a sense of achievement in life. In a large study of Americans, Kahneman and Deaton (2010) found that the index of emotional wellbeing increases with income up to a certain point, beyond which additional income does not produce

incremental gains in wellbeing. On the other hand, the wellbeing as evaluative life satisfaction correlates with income without showing such signs of leveling off. Apart from the obvious possible interpretation that money *can* buy life satisfaction, the latter finding may have a different explanation: in the modern open society income is a proxy for professional achievements and business success relative to one's peers, which in turn confer respect, status and a sense of achievement in life. Hence, more income correlates with more satisfaction. In a different culture, in which personal achievement were less strongly correlated with income than is the case in the US, the observed correlation between life satisfaction and income might level off after a certain level, just as the emotional state of happiness does.

Clearly, these two human traits – forming one's sense of wellbeing in relation to one's peers, and rapid adaptability to new circumstances – are important drivers of many people's pursuit of wellbeing through accumulation of material wealth and its symbols. The capitalist economy of course builds on that insatiability by creating wants and monetizing success, and shaping aspirations through displaying the lifestyles of the rich.

Some people reject the hedonic treadmill by choosing a simpler life of more balance between work, leisure, and civic engagement. The concept of “voluntary simplicity” was popularized by Elgin in the 1970s and received renewed attention over the past two decades, both among scholars and writers of popular self-help books (Schor, 1998; Paehlke, 1989; Elgin, 1997; Doherty and Etzoni, 2003; De Graaf et al., 2001; Hammerslough, 2001). The term and the idea are not new in the American cultural history, but in the recent rendition it has taken a specific meaning: a reaction to the consumerist values and lifestyles dominating the contemporary culture, and their human and ecological price, a potential engine of a major cultural change (Etzioni, 2003).

But despite a wide recognition of the concept and the term, there is no evidence so far that the practice of voluntary simplicity is moving into the mainstream. These findings have led some advocates of less materialistic lifestyles to embrace the idea of a mandated shorter workweek. The underlying logic is that working and earning less would lead to diminished material consumption. The payoff to individuals would be to have more leisure time, which could then be spent, partly, on offsetting the decreased purchasing power through self-provisioning, and partly on engaging with family, friends, community, and civic life. The ground-breaking macroeconomic modeling by Victor (2007) for the Canadian economy suggests that shorter workweek *could* be achieved under certain conditions without creating unemployment, and that the ecological gains would be significant.

The shorter workweek idea has been part of national economic policies in Europe for decades, driven largely by the concerns about unemployment and general wellbeing of populations. More recently, it has been promoted as the means of reducing ecological footprint and improving subjective wellbeing (Jackson, 2009; Schor, 2010; NEF, 2010; Coote and Franklin, 2013; Rosnick, 2013). But it remains mostly under-researched whether in the countries with radically shorter workweek than in the US – for example, Germany and the Netherlands – additional leisure time has translated to more community- and family-oriented activities, and more self-provisioning (Jürgens and Reinecke, 1998). More importantly, in the US context such a policy proposal would have limited traction both on the grounds of political feasibility and as an equity issue; a relatively small segment of the population could actually afford and benefit from a shorter workweek (see Kallis et al., 2013 for an economic critique).

On the other hand, in the present post-Great Recession economy the circumstances of many middle class people *impose* a tighter personal budget and less consumption. But the reduced purchasing

power may not necessarily denote diminished wellbeing if it is accompanied by meeting the basic subsistence needs, greater mutual reciprocity, and deeply satisfying lifestyle choices. In the next section we consider one such case: the millennial generation. Our exploration centers on the notable emerging shifts in the priorities among the millennials toward more urban lifestyles, and in the context of their more constrained economic opportunities. The main thesis is that the lifestyle of greater inter-dependency within a community and more reliance on self-provisioning may compensate for reduced purchasing power and in fact increase a sense of wellbeing. It might, furthermore, facilitate an evolution of the meaning of good life as fundamentally grounded in lifestyle pursuits other than consumerism and accumulation of material goods. While this proposition is at this point a hypothesis, one thing is certain: considering the great importance of one's standing in relation to others in achieving wellbeing, and the obvious society-wide nature of any cultural framing, such evolution of the meaning of wellbeing can only occur if it is a *collective process* experienced by a large and self-aware population.

5. Millennials and the city

The millennial generation, understood to comprise young people in the age bracket of roughly 21–32 at the time of this writing in 2013 (the age cut-off varies between authors), comprising approximately fifty million people, is the largest demographic group in the US since the post-WWII baby boomers. If we are looking for putative signs of a cultural shift, this group is a good place to start.

Based on a massive 2009 survey by Pew Research many of the millennials can be described as connected, open to change, and racially and ethnically more diverse than any other American generation in history. They grew up with the internet and social media technology and are entirely comfortable with it. Millennials are more confident and optimistic than their elders were at the same age: despite the fact that one third of them were not employed when the survey was taken, and claimed not to have enough money to live the way they want, ninety percent of survey respondents believed that they will eventually meet their financial goals (Pew Research, 2010).

The most notable fact about millennials is their coming of age during the era of diminishing middle class and uncertain financial prospects. This economic picture is striking. Between 1979 and 2007 the after-tax income of households in of the top 1% of income distribution increased by 275% while the 60% of households in the middle saw their income grow by just under 40% (Traub and McGhee, 2013). During the slow recovery from the Great Recession, the incomes of most Americans, including those with college degrees, have been flat while the top 1% of earners increased theirs by 11%. For the middle class Americans the social and economic mobility, the very essence of the American dream, has stagnated or declined in the U.S. since the late seventies, and recent data show that young men are earning less than their fathers did 30 years ago (Traub and McGhee, 2013). For American middle class the problem is not only wages but also the soaring cost of childcare, health insurance and college education.

The second notable trend among millennials is their growing interest in urban living, and their frequent disdain for the suburban model of good life. Fully 77 percent of the survey respondents indicated that they plan to live in city centers (Doherty and Leinberger, 2011). And the applications for drivers licenses – a coming of age ritual among the post WW II American youths – have been declining among the 16–24 year olds since 1990 (Cohen, 2012).

In general, large US cities, especially those with public transit, walkable streets, and strong economies, are experiencing a

renaissance (Glaeser, 2011; Gallagher, 2013; Ehrenhalt, 2013), even leading some researchers to proclaim “the end of the suburbs” (Gallagher, 2013). While the latter may in the short run be a hyperbole, examples of the changing priorities for housing in the United States abound, and are not related to political ideology. In Denver, the values of homes in the car-dependent suburb of Highland Ranch dropped by half during the Great Recession, while those in the Lower Downtown Historic District (dubbed LoDo) have increased. In Maryland, suburban McMansions with vaulted ceilings and granite countertops are being converted into small apartments for the needy; locally-financed public transit is emerging in improbable cities such as St. Louis and Salt Lake City (Doherty and Leinberger, 2011; Ehrenhalt, 2013). This influx into cities is driven primarily by millennials and the post-WWII baby boomers, who together comprise half of the US population.

The recent interest in city life among the millennials is a gradual trend but it is unmistakable (Adler, 2015). And it is a highly significant social phenomenon in the US context, where only 4% of the population lives in hyper-dense areas with more than 30 housing units per acre (75 per hectare), while 82% of population lives in areas that have four or less units per acre (10 per hectare) (Chakrabarti, 2014). The high cost of housing in the trendy large cities with multiple job opportunities is the principal deterrent to a more rapid transition toward urban living among the millennials who must compete with the well-to-do baby boomers for city housing. Partly for that reason, and to take advantage of the cultural trends among the populous millennials, some most car-dependent affluent suburban towns and (on Long Island, for example) are now filling in their downtowns around train stations with denser mixed-use development and pedestrian-friendly streetscapes (Adler 2105).

It is not clear at this point where these middle class urban or urban-like places will grow, or how many of the currently urban millennials will stay in the cities once they marry and have children. But those who will become urban dwellers will very likely have to redefine their aspirations for good life in a way that does not depend on amassing material possessions and consumerism. For one thing, a home in a desirable city neighborhood is much smaller than a suburban dwelling (which currently averages in the US at 2200 square feet, or 200 square meters). It is also expensive. These add up to less space to fill with stuff and less discretionary income available to purchase it. And though well-paying jobs are easier to find in the cities, the post-Great Recession economic opportunities in the wealth-polarized America are highly constrained. Young urban families will need to find new ways to create livelihoods and to provide for the basic necessities of everyday life. They will by necessity have to depend on collaborative modes of organizing housing, childcare and other types of caregiving, of procuring fresh food and maintaining personal mobility. The currently growing popularity of food co-ops, urban gardens and childcare co-ops in the hip young neighborhoods of New York, San Francisco, and others may be more than minor fads among urban elites; they may be the harbingers of these new types of lifestyles. And the popular systems of bartering, sharing, swapping, and other forms of the sharing economy (discussed in the next section) may further counterbalance tight budgets and living spaces.

The more collaborative, interdependent and reciprocal lifestyles may offer advantages in terms of wellbeing. Organizing and running collaborative living arrangements (including the unavoidable conflicts and confrontations) engages people in personal interactions, shortens distances, builds trust and develops social identity. To the extent that having a sense of belonging in a community is one of the pillars of subjective wellbeing, these new arrangements might richly compensate for the declining purchasing power; and might significantly contribute to framing of wellbeing

as less dependent on high intensity *private consumption*. The shift toward urban living may have other consequences for creating the sense of wellbeing. As Agyeman et al. (2013) notes, drawing on the cases from around the world, shared public spaces – the essence of most urbanites' life – can serve as places of physical activity, social interaction, and as a social equalizer and the source of civic participation: all contributing to subjective wellbeing. Finally, from the ecological perspective, data show that the carbon footprint of households strongly correlates with income (in the range of poor to comfortable middle class), with most of the impacts attributable to housing and individual mobility (Weber and Matthews, 2008); and that the footprint of city dwellers, especially in dense cities such as New York, is about 30% lower than in sprawling suburbs (Jones and Kammen, 2013).

It needs stressing at this point that the above scenario applies, at least in the initial stages, to the well-educated middle class millennials with professional and economic prospects, however diminished these may be in relation to their parents. In the general US population the professional/managerial class represents approximately 20% of the total (Holt, 2014). While 20% may not seem like a major force in a society-wide cultural shift, these are exactly the middle class young people who would, a generation or two ago, be right now embarking on the suburban life of consumerism, commuting and accumulating, and would be defining the aspirations of those who are less affluent.

In summary, from the perspective of wellbeing, millennials' attraction to urban living and the contraction of their economic opportunities converge in interesting ways. The economic constraints and small expensive living spaces constrain consumerism and encourages human networks and interdependent collaborative arrangements. Urban density facilitates collaborative organization of everyday lives and creates shared public spaces. And the sheer size of this demographic group as well as their technology-based interconnectedness increases the probability that incremental individual changes in lifestyles, life priorities and social practices of everyday life may evolve toward a shared collective consciousness. This shared consciousness, evolving from lifestyle experiences, might embrace a new framing of wellbeing that is different from the conventional suburban middle class model that has shaped the aspirations of the post-WWII generations. This scenario of a cultural shift is consistent with Spaargaren's interpretation of the work of Collins on the co-evolution of social rituals and practices, and culture (Spaargaren, 2013; and sited therein Collins and Makowsky 1989).

Since sharing and interdependence are the key elements of the putative cultural transition envisioned here, the next section takes a closer critical look – from the perspective of improving a sense of wellbeing – at the increasingly popular peer-to-peer economic activities which fall under the broad umbrella of “sharing economy”.

6. The new and sharing economy; and human wellbeing

The co-operative lifestyle arrangements that are sprouting here and there among young urban families are part of a larger and highly diverse phenomenon of “sharing economy.” The term denotes various forms of collective use *among strangers* of materials goods, services, physical spaces, and financial assets. This includes shared ownership, access to privately owned goods, bartering, swapping, lending, renting, and others. The concept has gained prominence in recent years under a variety of additional names, such as collaborative consumption, alternative consumption, collaborative economy, and peer-to-peer (P2P) economy/marketplace.

Many claims have been made about the sharing economy as a radical game changer in how people relate to each other and how the economy operates (Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Belk, 2010; Albinsson and Yasanthi Perera, 2012; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Leismann et al., 2013). *Time* magazine called it in 2011 one of ten ideas that will change the world (Walsh, 2011), attributing to it the potential to reduce the ecological pressures of consumption, generating new forms of business and livelihoods, altering the functioning of the marketplace, and redefining human interactions. However, empirical evidence to support or counteract these claims is very limited. Are we really witnessing signs of social change? Or is it simply a market innovation and new business opportunity for making profit from idle assets, enabled by the internet and the social media technologies? (Cohen, 2014). The influx of venture capital into the profit oriented varieties of the sharing economy (Owyang et al., 2013) suggests the latter.

People participate in the sharing economy for a variety of reasons. These range from ideological reasons (anti-capitalism, anti-consumerism), thrift, gaining access to otherwise unaffordable assets, profit seeking, concern for the ecological impact of consumption, to have the freedom to relocate on a short notice without a heavy ballast of material possessions; and to forge connections with other people (Albinsson and Yasanthi Perera, 2012; Ozanne and Ballantine, 2010; Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012; Collective Research Group, 2012). Belk (2010) claims that the psychological payoff of participation in sharing is the sense of connection with other people and “the aggregate extended sense of self.” He associates participation in sharing practices with generosity and non-materialism, the assertion consistent with the empirical findings from a small study of voluntary downshiffters who participate in freecycling (free swapping of goods) (Nelson, 2007). A recent study of the sharing economy in Vancouver reports that for many participants interaction with other people is the main attraction, but the study was small and partly anecdotal (Collective Research Group, 2012). Similarly, a limited survey of participants in co-operatives in the UK revealed that 81% thought that sharing made them happy and 75% that it is good for self-esteem (Griffiths, 2013). Notably, the UK study also indicates that the demographic group most willing to participate, were the 18–34 year olds. Albinsson and Yasanthi Perera (2012) also found that the sense of being a member of a community characterized by interdependence, reciprocity and shared values, norms and meanings is a powerful payoff from participating in the sharing economy.

The above claims notwithstanding, the data on which they are based are very limited and the conclusions often overstated. In a critical review of many forms of “sharing” enterprises Cohen (2014) argues that only a small subset of those – namely where money is not changing hands and ownership is shared – count as truly collaborative, with a capacity to foster a sense of community and wellbeing. A well-designed study of users of the pioneering car sharing service ZipCar – where anonymity, central ownership of all the assets and efficient central management are the organizing principles – supports these findings. Despite extensive efforts by the company to create rituals among ZipCar users, they could find no evidence of emerging sense of community among users (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2012). This is also consistent with Seyfang’s research findings about various local exchanges and trading schemes, including time banks, local currencies, and community-owned energy generation: only when scales of exchange were small, there was evidence of more egalitarian relationships, trust and community building (Seyfang, 2009). But even in such small scale exchanges, recent research finds that class divisions and non-egalitarian behaviors are often at work, mirroring the society at large (Dubois et al. 2014; Schor, 2014).

In short, most forms of sharing economy appear to represent no more than “the evolution of the Internet as a platform for cost-

effective delivery of ... goods and services to disaggregated and fragmented consumers” (Cohen, 2014). It provides few incentives to rein in our impulsive consumerist instincts or to strengthen the sense of community and wellbeing.

Some authors place the sharing economy (or at least the more collaborative forms of it) in a broader context, as part of the growing movement around the concept of the “new economy” (Schor, 2014; Jackson and Victor, 2013). The latter term denotes various initiatives to create livelihoods outside the ethos of the dominant corporate model (Korten, 2010). Also referred to as “solidarity economy” (Miller, 2012), “generative economy” (Kelly, 2012), “community-sustaining system” (Alperowitz, 2013), and in one instance “green economy” (Jackson and Victor, 2013), the new economy is an umbrella concept for various business innovations as well as a political movement (New Economy Coalition <http://neweconomy.net/new-economy-coalition>). It stands for more equitable and democratic forms of business ownership and management styles (co-ops, community land trusts, and others), workplace democracy, and less income inequality. It strongly supports localism – community banks and businesses that are owned and operated locally – and holds that economic development should have human wellbeing as its ultimate goal, and not be predicated on infinite economic growth. As articulated in inspirational writings of Jackson and Victor (2013), Alperowitz (2013), Kelly (2012) and others, enterprises in such an economy create meaningful employment and sustainable livelihoods, thrive on social and market entrepreneurship and community vitality, and support civic engagement and collaboration. All provide an alternative to the shrinking pool of living wage jobs offered by the corporate sector.

The relevance of the new economy movement to the leading thesis of this essay – a transition beyond consumerism by millennials through a re-framed meaning of wellbeing – is similar to that of the sharing economy: to the extent that these new economic forms strengthen human bonds, provide opportunities for collective work toward creating livelihoods and community and individual wellbeing, they are relevant for the study of transition beyond consumerism. We bring them into this discussion as pertinent for further interdisciplinary research that is needed to understand how such social change might take place.

7. Discussion

Since its rapid evolution after the WWII, the consumer society in the US, and the lifestyles it has engendered, has ceased to deliver on the great promise of wellbeing for all, while exacting a heavy ecological toll. It runs on its own momentum, propelled by cultural meanings and symbols, social practices, institutional inertia, existing infrastructure, and by business and economic and political interests. Since technology alone cannot counteract the ecological cost of unrestrained growth and consumerism, much less address the shrinking gains in wellbeing, a transition beyond this dominant economic model is needed. But it is unrealistic to expect the policy and political leaders to lead that social change. Similarly, there are few signs so far that the established NGOs are about to include consumption and consumerism in their agendas. The change will need to come from the citizens and, we contend, have at its core an evolution toward a new framing of wellbeing.

While it is generally accepted that cultural change occurs very slowly, under some conditions it may actually be very rapid. This was the case with consumer society, which emerged in the US (and other economies) through concerted efforts of government, unions, and the corporate sector when the historical window of opportunity opened up. In the span of a one or two generations the middle class radically changed its “normal” lifestyles, consumption

behaviors, and its understanding of what good life consists of. Can such a rapid change take place again, this time following a trajectory beyond consumerism? The difficulty with theorizing on this question, based on the past events, is that the story of the emergence of consumer society is commonly told as a historical narrative, not through a theoretical lens. Furthermore, as discussed earlier in this paper, the theoretical framework for understanding cultural change of that nature and magnitude is underdeveloped.

In this paper we propose that the cultural change entailing a new framing of wellbeing, if it happens, is unlikely to be driven by moral imperatives or persuasive campaigns, or follow the leadership of organized NGOs, or entail political mobilization. Rather, the fundamental human strife for wellbeing and subjective happiness in everyday life is a more likely driving force. We hypothesize that the incremental collective shifts in lifestyle choices and adaptations to the current economic realities can produce new social practices, interactions and meanings, which in turn lead to reframing the understanding of wellbeing. Extensive research on what makes people happy and satisfied with their lives suggests that such reframing can readily incorporate a shift away from consumerist lifestyles. In that reframing, materially scaled-down life would be richer in other ways: more reciprocal and connected to others, and with a stronger sense of a community. We also hypothesize, drawing on the demographic and economic statistics that technologically connected, educated, confident and open to change millennials might lead the way in the shift toward a less-consumerist society. Their diminishing interest in suburban life in favor of cities, constricted economic opportunities, and the size and interconnectedness all point in that direction.

It is not known at this point whether the various forms of sharing economy, and the growing interest in the precepts of the new economy, may contribute to this reframing process. To the extent that some forms (albeit in minority) of the sharing economy foster social trust and community building, and that the new economy movement challenges income inequalities and many established institutions, there may be opportunities for mutual reinforcement. In this paper we note these trends and we summarize the small body of relevant empirical research as a way to highlight the opportunities for further research on a possible transition beyond the consumer society.

While this paper focusses on individual lifestyle choices and adaptations as engines of putative collective evolution beyond consumer society, the transition we contemplate here cannot be successful without active policy support. Such issues as affordable housing for the middle class families in the cities, family-friendly policies, and access to quality public education, mass transit, open space and other essential-to-wellbeing amenities must be tackled by local and state governments. There are signs that some municipalities are embarking on that pathway and are framing their development policies using the concept of wellbeing (Eugene Memo, 2014). National policies, such as carbon tax, if designed to avoid adding new hardships on low income households, can serve as an economic incentive for less consumerism. But we also recognize that in the current national political climate in the US the latter types of interventions are unlikely.

8. The challenge

The question of how to transition to an economy that is in harmony with ecological limits is one the greatest questions of our times. It is widely recognized that unlimited economic growth based on mass material consumption is unsustainable and a recipe for disaster. Some of the best minds are producing agendas for policy initiatives, social movements, new forms of governance, and new institutions, from local to global. The calls for value changes

are as ubiquitous as they are vague. Much less attention has been devoted to developing plausible, theoretically and empirically grounded scenarios for how a change toward a different type of economy and culture might occur, and where the likely leverage points are. Our goal is to foster serious work on such pathways to change, both in the form of a debate and research.

The hypotheses, the future scenario, and the pathways we are proposing in this paper are all open to challenge. Other authors believe that a smooth cultural transition described here toward less consumerism either requires much more central interventions (tax policies, education reform, organized social movements, or carefully designed “cultural re-engineering”) (The Worldwatch Institute, 2010, 2013); or is outright impossible, owing to the great stability of the consumer society and imminent ecological disruptions. Assadourian (2014), for example, proposes that a major ecological and economic crisis, with its attendant widespread suffering and dislocations, will precede significant changes in lifestyles and values. The Great Transition scenario by Tellus Institute envisions a global citizens' movement, driven by a new dominant set of values, as a necessary condition for change (Raskin et al., 2002, Raskin, 2011). These – and other – scenarios are not mutually exclusive. The goal of the here proposed scenario is to consider the potential and possible pathways to a non-revolutionary cultural change. And if a crisis ensues in the future, its psychological impacts might be at least somewhat cushioned when people's conception of well-being is less deeply tied up with material consumption.

We hope that this paper will stimulate debate, action and research focusing on the “how's” of transitioning beyond consumer society. These will be a welcome addition to the existing voluminous literature centered on the “why's” and “should's” of such a transition.

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