

Consumer Society, its Dangers and its Future

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This is an invited opening essay for a special issue of the Polish monthly “Czas Kultury” or “Culture Time” (a sort of Atlantic Monthly with a more academic bend). It is published in Polish. The topic of the special issue is economic growth and degrowth, and my contribution is to link growth with consumption, with a personal touch.

When I was forced to emigrate from Poland in 1968 I left behind a country of scarce consumer goods, gray-looking objects on store shelves, poorly designed clunky soviet electronics, and an unmotivated sales and service staff. Twenty three years later, when I visited Poland in 1991 for the first time, the picture was not much different. In the communist economy of scarcity there were few incentives to foster or expand consumer markets.

What a difference a decade or three of capitalism has made! By the early years of the millennium the country became flooded with consumer goods. Essentially everything could be bought if one only had the money, and advertising relentlessly assaults one's senses from all directions. During my numerous visits to Poland since 1991 I have watched how the entire society increasingly focused on “catching up” with the West. This term, which I often hear in conversations with Polish friends and acquaintances, essentially means *increasing consumption* as manifested in material possessions and personal comfort.

To me the most striking changes in the Warsaw area, where I spend most of my time, are: the beautification of this lovely city, the rapid spread of US-type suburbs, the proliferation of shopping malls, the rising tempo of life, and leisure travel to distant places around the globe. It seems as though the pent-up demand — built during the four decades of enforced living in dreary-looking soviet-style apartment blocks and restrictions on international travel — has simply exploded. And where once upon a time people spent their abundant leisure time on social gatherings, cinema and theater, books and strolls in the glorious Warsaw parks, there is now constant rush. So many things to do, so many people to outcompete, so much money to be made, so many goods to acquire, and so little time to get it all accomplished!

The educated Polish middle class indeed uncannily resembles its U.S. counterpart: helicopter mothers and their rushed, over-enriched children, the fear of kidnappers and sexual perverts, the relentless barrage by children advertising, the positional consumption. In my sad wisdom built on the U.S. experience I point out to my young Polish friends moving to suburbs that they will spend the best years of their lives chauffeuring their children; that their and their children's social life will have no spontaneity; that they will lose the community of neighbors, that low quality mass produced merchandise in shopping malls is boringly the same across the world. My words fall on deaf ears. More and bigger is better. And why not? This is a seductive vision, the price of which — in the growing wealth and income inequality, in the loss of spontaneity, leisure time, freedom to quit a job one hates, and in greenhouse gas emissions — become apparent only

years or decades later. Furthermore, freed from central planning and government ownership, the newly capitalist Polish economy has flourished, and Warsaw has become a beautiful city with gleaming white sandstone of the 18th and 19th century buildings, gorgeous parks, skyscrapers, and lively street life. How can I argue with that?

But the economy so highly dependent on household consumption is very vulnerable, as we are in the process of discovering at the time of this writing. In the U.S. in barely five weeks since the middle of March 2020 the Covid-19 lock-down has led to about 20% contraction of the economy, 22 million unemployed (14% of the workforce), and created the need for more than three trillion dollars in federal government help to businesses, institutions and individuals alone (not counting the expenditures on the state and municipal levels). It is widely predicted that much more will be needed. This gigantic government debt will take years or decades to pay back, affecting our collective wellbeing for a long time to come.

While the politicians and mainstream economists have recognized all along the symbiotic relationship between mass consumption and economic growth -- and in fact intentionally constructed the consumer society in the US and Western Europe after the WW II -- the earliest academic studies of consumption in the 1980s and 90s took primarily the psychological and sociological perspectives. The former focused on individual behaviors by consumers while the latter on culture and institutions. Little attention was given to the macroeconomic aspects of consumption. But in a parallel development, ecological economists, a rebellious stream within the mainstream neoclassical economics, have since the 1970s sounded the alarms that infinite economic growth and consumption are impossible on the finite planet; therefore the society should aim for a steady-state or contracting (degrowing) economy. They also argued that the economy should be conceptualized as residing *within* the ecological system rather than outside of it. A robust political and intellectual movement -- degrowth -- arose in the 2000s around these ideas, initially in France, followed by Spain, Italy, and elsewhere, calling for radical social and political changes. But these economics did not study consumption as a cultural and sociological phenomenon. So, for decades these two areas of study existed in separate domains.

In 2008, Philip Vergragt, Maurie Cohen and I founded the Sustainable Consumptions Research and Action initiative, SCORAI. Our goal was to interconnect scholars and practitioners who were trying to understand, from several disciplinary perspectives, how consumer society functions; and to create a better understanding of and how to shift toward less consumption. We had no funds and no idea who else might be interested in these questions out there in the huge American landscape. To our delight, about three dozen well-established scholars and institutional entrepreneurs showed up for the first workshop at my home institution Clark University. Since then the field of sustainable consumption studies has emerged as a legitimate recognized area of scholarship, teaching and policy discourse as manifested in the number of professorial chairs,

funding streams for doctoral research, and publications; The concept has even made it to the Goal #12 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Today the SCORAI network has approximately 1400 members, an active exchange of ideas on its listserv, and provides advice to policy makers.

Several major insights have emerged over the years about how consumer society functions and sustains itself, ultimately showing the symbiotic relationship between household consumption and economic growth. In the summary of the 2009 workshop at Clark we wrote that consumption is a collective activity of individuals embedded in culture and dominant institutions. That realization resulted in a shift of focus among researchers from psychological to more systemic drivers of consumption. Yes, individuals acquire material goods in order to express individuality, signal their place in social hierarchy, share and express love and belonging, but there are also powerful systemic drivers which exploit these fundamental human needs. The drivers include the advertising machinery which generates desires, wants, perpetual dissatisfaction with the present, and aspirations (always in the direction of more), and the structure of the employment landscape. The result is the creation of a circular treadmill in people's lives: want→work→earn→spend→want→and so on. And the economics of the real estate market, where houses are not just dwellings and status symbols but also important debt-driven financial investments, leads us to purchase ever larger energy-hungry houses full of stuff.

Research conducted by sociologists interested in the link between technology and human behaviors enriched this systemic view of consumption by demonstrating that technological advances can drive consumption by establishing new social practices. Social practices are the rituals and routines widely adopted by individuals and society in every day without much conscious thought given to them. Well-known examples of social practices include daily showering, frequent laundering and attitudes toward personal cleanliness, all relatively recent and driven by wide access to indoor plumbing, washing machines and dryers, and invention of showers (in place of baths). Their longer term impacts include greater demand for hot water and an upward-creeping definition of what constitutes a basic level of comfort: increasing numbers of bathrooms in family homes. Social practices can be understood through the lens of institutional theory, especially their "invisibility" to those practicing them, and their stability, resilience and resistance to change.

Once the drivers of consumption were exposed the obvious question arose: does all this consumption make people happier and societies better off? The answer came from another well-established research field: on human happiness and well-being. And it was unequivocal: while being better-off than those with whom a person compares themselves is a source of personal satisfaction, on an absolute scale material consumption does not increase individual happiness or a social well-being once the basic physical and psychological needs are satisfied. That would

imply that competitive positional consumption has a detrimental effect on well-being and that people in less unequal societies are better off. And this is exactly what empirical research has shown.

The introduction of ecological and carbon footprint accounting to the study of consumption expanded this systemic view in several directions. It showed that household income is a strong predictor of ecological footprint; introduced the concept of embodied energy of manufactured goods; and quantified the contribution of housing, personal mobility, food, and leisure travel to the overall footprint. It showed that consumption is not only about shopping for more clothing, appliances and household goods, as commonly assumed, but also about the lifestyle choices and aspirations, such as where and in what size and kind of a house to live in, how to spend leisure time, and what kind of a community to aspire to be a part of. Additionally, the introduction of carbon footprint accounting showed that consumption is a major contributor to global greenhouse gas emissions and climate threats.

And what of the change agents? Can people voluntarily change their behaviors and reduce greenhouse gas emissions? Here, extensive studies of various small scale social and cultural innovations showed their limited potential. The voluntary simplicity and ecovillage movements are very much fringe activities. The promise of collaborative consumption, alternative currencies and the sharing economy dissipated with the discovery of their failure to reduce ecological impacts or change dominant practices and cultural norms. And the study of environmentally responsible citizens showed that their footprint is hardly smaller than their uninterested counterparts.

In his landmark 2010 book “Prosperity without Growth” Tim Jackson at University of Surrey pulled all these bodies of knowledge about consumption together and linked them to economic growth. At the time of this writing, it is clear that consumption has much to do with the existential issues of the day: the economic growth ideology, international trade, fundamental structure of the economy, growing inequalities, and power relations. Yes, much can be accomplished to reduce consumption through changes in infrastructure, pricing of energy, local taxation and land use, and various economic incentives, but the economic system will always pull in the direction of more consumption. The financialization of the economy and its dependence on paying off debt are powerful drivers of growth and the attendant consumption. With political power currently in the hands for the rentier class, which greatly benefits from this system, is a shift toward a steady-state or degrowing economy feasible? Or are we to travel on the current trajectory of growth until the earth’s ecological boundaries are exceeded so far that the economy collapses altogether? What would happen if we all decided not to consume?

I never thought that I would see the day when the answer to the latter question materialized in all its dimensions. But here we are, staring at it, during the Covid-19 crisis. The greenhouse gas emissions are down but at a great price of tremendous human suffering, the future of which is highly uncertain. The forecasts range from the “we shall jump-start the economy and soon

recover” to dire predictions of human dislocation, irreversible damage, and future galloping inflation.

The familiar adage says: “never waste a good crisis”. And indeed, as I write this essay the blogosphere and webinar sphere are full of opinions on how to take advantage of this crisis toward social and economic reforms. No doubt this will continue exponentially in the near future. In this essay I want to add some of my own thoughts on how we might be able to flourish in a post-consumer society.

The Covid-19 crisis has abundantly shown that in a consumer society a sudden reduction of consumption is associated with unemployment, business bankruptcies, and a lot of human suffering. Therefore, any attempts at reducing consumption need to be carefully planned. First, the economy needs to be rebalanced in the direction of less dependence on household consumption and toward larger spending on social welfare, including healthcare, education, public housing and transportation, environmental management, and other elements of social welfare. The concept of Universal Basic Services, popularized by Anna Coote at New Economics Foundation, provides a conceptual framework for this goal (this contrasts with the concept of Universal Basic Income, which seeks to increase household purchasing power).

Essentially, after five decades of neoliberalism I advocate the return to the principles of the West European welfare state, but with a fundamental difference: *this time the economy must be viewed as being embedded in the ecological system* and has to respect its natural boundaries. Doughnut economics, introduced by Kate Raworth at Oxford University, is a helpful visual metaphor for that kind of a society. It says that society needs to function within the boundaries of two concentric circles (which form the shape of a doughnut). The smaller circle represents the floor of a thriving society: ecological impacts of meeting the society’s basic needs, from nutrition, shelter, education and health to gender equality, justice, others; while the outer circle defines the ceiling not to be transgressed, the planetary ecological limits.

The ecological economics community needs to aid this transition by developing macroeconomic models for a steady-state or even contracting economy. Peter Victor, a Canadian economist, has been modeling a low- and no-growth economy for his country and has shown that social prosperity with substantial reductions in greenhouse gas emissions *can* be achieved in a steady state economy while securing full employment, economic security, less inequality, more leisure time, and control of national and personal debt.

To achieve such an economy, we would need a political will and forward-looking national government policies regarding taxation and investments in infrastructure and institutions. After five decades of unchallenged reign, neoliberal ideology needs to be set aside. But such an economy will also require a bundle of decentralized policy initiatives aimed at disincentivizing large footprint lifestyles. These will of course be country and locality specific. In the US, for example, local land use and property taxation policies as well as cooperative or otherwise community land ownership arrangements (such as land trusts) would turn the middle class away

from wanting ever larger houses in distant car-dependent suburbs. Such structural changes would over time also de-emphasize the culture of consumerism.

By all indications, the Covid-19 crisis, and more recently the visual revelations of police brutality toward African Americans, are giving rise to political mobilization on several fronts. In the US these include movements against growing inequality and pervasive racism, privatized for-profit healthcare system (and increasingly the educational system), growing economic insecurity of the workforce, and the assaults on science and evidence-based policy making. These movements can open opportunities for a push toward a non-growth-oriented economy which would provide for collective and individual wellbeing.

Finally, the Covid-19 crisis has shown that a smaller footprint lifestyle of taking walks and bicycle rides, less air travel, more engagement with the immediate family, cooking family meals, gardening, and a slower rat race have great benefits. This is the time to reflect on the meaning of good life.

References

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