

Consuming until Consumption



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In late 1998, Patrick Cheng Yiu-chung, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Hong Kong, offered me a position that I accepted. My office was located at the HKU SPACE extension in Admiralty. I submitted a research project on *Pleasure*, an area I had been exploring for a long time, and had conducted research at the University of California Davis.

My class would be made of adults –mostly female- who were looking for a Diploma; the Admiralty Offices were used, and expert in running such programs, and the manager suggested that I started with a Questionnaire that would be e-mailed to all applicant at registration; this would give me a good start in addressing the specific areas of interest of my future students.

I drafted a >80-question-long questionnaire, and decided to have it vetted by Susan Jung, a former pastry chef, and Food Columnist of the South China Morning Post. Susan looked at it and exclaimed: *You forgot the MOST IMPORTANT ONE in Hong Kong!* (I was thinking of food, sex, art, –who knows?) **SHOPPING!!!!**

Of course she was right, as I discovered rapidly. My problem was – and still is- I *hate* shopping; for all the reasons you can figure out. And I could not –even- imagine that *anyone* would have shopping as a

visceral priority.

I do have excuses for this ignorance: my family never considered buying stuff for the sake of it. We were poor, nomad, stateless (or ostracized), sole family survivors of WWII, and knowledge, art, appreciation of senses, solidarity with the victims of incessant carnages were our goals. *Shopping?* Never. I remember our mother taking us at dusk, during Christmas time of 1946, to look at the shopwindows of the Galeries Lafayette replete with toys. We were hypnotized, but never had any desire to *own* these unattainable toys; they belonged to another planet, or time.

My wife was born near Tokyo, less than a year after the March 9th 1945 Operation Meetinghouse commanded by Maj. Gen. Curtis LeMay, the single deadliest air raid of World War II, when 330 American B-29s rained incendiary bombs on Tokyo, touching off a firestorm that killed upwards of 100,000 people, burned a quarter of the city to the ground, and left a million homeless. Gathering scraps from garbage cans was the Tokyoites' *shopping*...

But other forces were back after WWII. They knew that the economies of major industrialized countries would re-emerge, come back to strive –for some. Always the same wealthy, powerful class. Capitalism was not an ideology of the poor, or of the brainwashed masses. It was and remains a system, well oiled, counting on its advertised successes, and handled by heartless, ruthless, malevolent puppeteers who pull the strings, control the transactions, harpoon the profits from their lairs in the City, on Wall Street, or the antechambers of the White House, Downing Street, the Elysée, Zhongnanhai, or the Quirinal.

Its major incarnation, reigning supreme in Hong Kong, Chaoyang, Lujiazui, Kufürstendamm, or Ginza is Consumer Capitalism.

Consumer Capitalism

Consumer Capitalism is a theoretical economic and social political condition, in which **consumer demand** is manipulated, in a deliberate and coordinated way, on a very large scale, through **mass-marketing** techniques, to the advantage of sellers.

The power of such 'manipulation' is not straightforward. It depends upon a new kind of individualism - projective individualism, where persons use consumer capitalism to project the kind of person who they want to be.

The broader idea is that the interests of other non-business entities (governments, religions, the military, educational institutions) are intertwined with corporate business interests, and that those entities also participate in the management of social expectations through mass media.

"Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production; and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to, only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer" Adam Smith confidently announced in *The Wealth of Nations* (Book IV, Chapter VIII) in 1776. Smith's quote is famous, but in reality this was one of the few times he explicitly addressed the topic.

Consumption is conspicuous by its absence in *The Wealth of Nations*, and neither Smith nor his immediate pupils treated it as a separate branch of political economy.

It was in an earlier work, 1759's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, that Smith put his finger on the social and psychological impulses that push people to accumulate objects and gadgets. People, he observed, were stuffing their pockets with "*little conveniences*," and then buying coats with more pockets to carry even more. By themselves, tweezer cases, elaborate snuffboxes, and other "*baubles*" might not have much use. But, Smith pointed out, what mattered was that people looked at them as "*means of happiness*." It was in people's imagination that these objects became part of a harmonious system and made the pleasures of wealth "*grand and beautiful and noble*."

This moral assessment was a giant step towards a more sophisticated understanding of consumption, for it challenged the dominant negative mindset that went back to the ancients. From Plato in ancient Greece to St. Augustine and the Christian fathers to writers in the Italian Renaissance, thinkers routinely condemned the pursuit of

things as wicked and dangerous because it corrupted the human soul, destroyed republics, and overthrew the social order. The splendor of *luxus*, the Latin word for “luxury,” smacked of *luxuria*—excess and lechery.

The term “*consumption*” itself entered circulation with a heavy burden. It originally derived from the Latin word *consumere* and found its way first into French in the 12th century, and from there into English and later into other European languages.

It meant the using up of food, candles, and other resources. (The body, too, could be consumed, in this sense—this is why in English, the “wasting disease,” tuberculosis, was called “*consumption*.”) To complicate matters, there was the similar-sounding Latin word *consummare*, as in Christ’s last words on the cross: “*Consummatum est*,” meaning “It is finished.” The word came to mean using up, wasting away, and finishing.

Perhaps those meanings informed the way that many pre-modern governments regulated citizens’ consumption. Between the 14th and 18th centuries, most European states (and their American colonies) rolled out an ever-longer list of “sumptuary laws” to try and stem the tide of fashion and fineries. The Venetian senate stipulated in 1512 that no more than six forks and six spoons could be given as wedding gifts; gilded chests and mirrors were completely forbidden. Two centuries later, in German states, women were fined or thrown in jail for sporting a cotton neckerchief.

To rulers and moralists, such a punitive, restrictive view of the world of goods made eminent sense. Their societies lived with limited money and resources in an era before sustained growth. Money spent on a novelty item from afar, such as Indian cotton, was money lost to the local treasury and to local producers; those producers -and the land they owned- were heralded as sources of strength and virtue.

Consumers, by contrast, were seen as fickle and a drain on wealth.

Adam Smith’s reappraisal of this group in 1776 came in the midst of a transformation that was as much material as it was cultural. Between the 15th and 18th centuries, the world of goods was expanding in dramatic and unprecedented ways, and it was not a phenomenon confined to Europe. Late Ming China enjoyed a golden age of commerce that brought a profusion of porcelain cups, lacquerware, and books. In Renaissance Italy, it was not only the *palazzi* of the elite but the homes of artisans that were filling up with more and more clothing, furniture, and tableware, even paintings and musical

instruments.

It was in Holland and Britain, though, where the momentum became self-sustaining. In China, goods had been prized for their antiquity; in Italy, a lot of them had circulated as gifts or stored wealth. The Dutch and English, by contrast, put a new premium on novelties such as Indian cottons, exotic goods like tea and coffee, and new products like the gadgets that caught Smith's attention.

In the 1630s, the Dutch polymath Caspar Barlaeus praised trade for teaching people to appreciate new things, and such secular arguments for the introduction of new consumer products—whether through innovation or importation—were reinforced by religious ones. Would God have created a world rich in minerals and exotic plants, if He had not wanted people to discover and exploit them? The divine had furnished man with a "*multiplicity of desires*" for a reason, wrote Robert Boyle, the scientist famous for his experiments with gases. Instead of leading people astray from the true Christian path, the pursuit of new objects and desires was now justified as acting out God's will. In the mid-18th century, Smith's close friend David Hume completed the defense of moderate luxury. Far from being wasteful or ruining a community, it came to be seen as making nations richer, more civilized, and stronger.

By the late 18th century, then, there were in circulation many of the moral and analytical ingredients for a more positive theory of consumption. But the French Revolution and the subsequent reaction stopped them from coming together. For many radicals and conservatives alike, the revolution was a dangerous warning that excess and high living had eaten away at social virtues and stability. Austerity and a new simple life were held up as answers.

Moreover, economic writers at the time did not dream there could be something like sustained growth. Hence consumption could easily be treated as a destructive act that used up resources or at best redistributed them. Even when writers were feeling their way towards the idea of a higher standard of living for all, they did not yet talk of different groups of people as "consumers." One reason was that, unlike today, they did not yet single out the goods and services that households purchased, but often also included industrial uses of resources under the rubric of consumption. The French economist Jean-Baptiste Say—today remembered for Say's law, which states that supply creates its own demand—was one of the few writers in the early 19th century who considered consumption on its own, according the topic a special section in his *Treatise on Political*

Economy.

Interestingly, he included the “reproductive consumption” of coal, wood, metal, and other goods used in factories alongside the private end-use by customers.

Elsewhere, other economists showed little interest in devising a unified theory of consumption. As the leading public moralist in Victorian England and a champion of the weak and vulnerable, John Stuart Mill naturally stood up for the protection of unorganized consumers against the interests of organized monopolies. In his professional writings, however, consumption got short shrift. Mill even denied that it might be a worthy branch of economic analysis: “*We know not of any laws of the consumption of wealth as the subject of a distinct science,*” he declared in 1844.

“*They can be no other than the laws of human enjoyment.*” Anyone pitching a distinct analysis of consumption was guilty by association of believing in the possibility of “*under-consumption,*” an idea that to Mill was suspect, wrong, and dangerous.

It fell to a popular French liberal and writer, Frédéric Bastiat, to champion the consumer—supposedly his dying words in 1850 were “*We must learn to look at everything from the point of view of the consumer.*” That may have sounded prescient but it hardly qualified as a theory, since Bastiat believed that free markets ultimately took care of everything. For someone like Mill with a concern for social justice and situations when markets did not function, such laissez-faire dogma was bad politics just as much as bad economics.

By the middle of the 19th century, then, there was a curious mismatch between material and intellectual trends. Consumer markets had expanded enormously in the previous two centuries. In economics, by contrast, the consumer was still a marginal figure who mainly caught attention in situations of market failure, such as when urban utilities failed or cheated their customers, but rarely attracted it when it came to the increasingly important role they’d play in the expansion of modern economies.

The origins of consumer capitalism are found in the development of American department stores in the 1850s, notably the advertising and marketing innovations at Wanamaker’s in Philadelphia.

William Leach describes a deliberate, coordinated effort among American ‘captains of industry’ to detach consumer demand from ‘*needs*’ (which can be satisfied) to ‘*wants*’ (which may remain unsatisfied). This cultural shift represented by the department store

is also explored in Émile Zola's 1883 novel *Au Bonheur des Dames*, which describes the workings and the appeal of a fictionalized version of Le Bon Marché.



In 1889, Simon Patten, the chair of the Wharton School of Business, announced that the country had entered a “*new order of consumption.*” For the first time, there was a society that was no longer fixated on physical survival but that now enjoyed a surplus of wealth and could think about what to do with it. The central question became how Americans spent their money and their time, as well as how much they earned. People, Patten wrote, had a right to leisure. The task ahead was no longer telling people to restrain themselves—to save or to put on a hairshirt—but to develop habits for greater pleasure and welfare.

This was more than an academic viewpoint. It had radical implications for how people should consume and think about money and their future. Patten summarized the new morality of consumption for a congregation in a Philadelphia church in 1913:

“I tell my students to spend all that they have and borrow more and spend that ... It is no evidence of loose morality when a stenographer, earning eight or ten dollars a week, appears dressed in clothing that takes nearly all of her earnings to buy.

Quite the contrary, he said, it was “a sign of her growing moral

development.” It showed her employer that she was ambitious”. Patten added that a “well-dressed working girl ... is the backbone of many a happy home that is prospering under the influence that she is exerting over the household.” Some members at the Unitarian Church were outraged, insisting, “The generation you’re talking to now is too deep in crime and ignorance ... to heed you.” Discipline, not spending on credit, was what they needed. Whether they liked it or not, the future would be with Patten’s more liberal, generous view of consumption

In 1919 Edward Bernays began his career as the 'father of public relations' and successfully applied the developing principles of psychology, sociology and motivational research to *manipulate* public opinion in favor of products like cigarettes, soap, and Calvin Coolidge. (Bernays’ work *Crystallizing Public Opinion* was a direct inspiration for Joseph Goebbels' propaganda campaigns!)

New techniques of mechanical reproduction developed in these decades improved the channels of mass-market communication and its manipulative power. This development was described as early as the 1920s by Walter Benjamin and related members of the Frankfurt School, who foresaw the commercial, societal and political implications.

In business history, the mid-1920s saw Alfred P. Sloan stimulating increased demand for General Motors products by instituting the annual model year change and *planned obsolescence*, a move that changed the dynamics of the largest industrial enterprise in the world, away from technological innovation and towards satisfying market expectations.

Probably the most obvious example of consumer capitalism tactics in the United States’ history occurred during the First World War during which the United States’ government put out several campaigns and advertisements aimed at gaining support for engaging in the war. At this time the government’s involvement in the economy was known as *propaganda*. Advertisements, posters and campaigns were found everywhere, encouraging the public to add to the economy and consume more. Many of these public attempts encouraged mass consumption of domestic food to help put back into the economy and support the war.



In her book *For Home and Country: World War I Propaganda on the Home Front*. (Lincoln: Nebraska, 2010), Celia Malone Kingsbury even discusses how during the war the government manipulated the economy in such a way that the consumption of domestic food was made into a “powerful weapon.” The government manipulated the public by turning commercialism into a sort of nationalism, pride and support of one’s country.

On February 25th, 2004, Clive Hamilton, Executive Director of the Australia Institute delivered the 15th Maurice Blackburn Oration at the Town Hall of Coburg, Victoria. Hereunder are excerpts of his well-documented Oration, slightly edited:

“The democratic impulse – which until the seventies took the form of collective struggles to be free of political and social oppression – has segued into something else, a search for authentic identity, for self-actualization, for the achievement of true individuality. At last, here was the opportunity for people to aspire to something beyond

material security and freedom from political oppression.

“But it was not to be. Before we had an opportunity to reflect on our new-found freedom, and to answer the question ‘How should I live?’, the marketers arrived with their own answer to the quest for true identity. Over the last two or three decades, the agents of the marketing society have seized on the primal search for authentic identity to sell more gym shoes, cars, mobile phones and home furnishings. And what happened at the level of the individual translated into society’s preoccupation with economic growth, an autistic behavioral pattern reinforced daily by the platitudes of the commentators and the politicians.

Today, most people in rich countries seek proxy identities in the form of commodity consumption, consumer capitalism’s answer to the search for meaning. The hope for a meaningful life has been diverted into the desire for higher incomes and more consumption. Why do we succumb? We continue to pursue more wealth and consume at ever-higher levels because we are afraid of the alternative. The yearning that we feel for an authentic sense of self is pursued by way of substitute gratifications, external rewards and especially money and material consumption. That attaining these goals can never satisfy our yearning leads us only to set higher goals – more money, a bigger house, another promotion.

“As the liberation movements of the sixties and seventies undermined the values and conventions of the past, the values of the marketplace spread in their stead. The counterculture tore down the social structures of conservatism that, for all their stultifying oppressiveness, held the market in check. Now many of the cultural leaders of the protest generation work for advertising agencies and major corporations for the benefit of capital. There is even a name for them – *bobos*, or bourgeois bohemians. The women’s movement sought liberation but settled for equality. Gender equality has meant, above all, unfettered opportunity for women to create themselves in the images invented for them by the marketers. Whether a woman is a dutiful housewife or a kick-arse careerist is a matter of indifference to the marketers, as long as she continues to spend.

The demands of the baby boomers for freedom in private life, for freedom from the fetters of social convention, and for freedom of sexual expression were noble in themselves, but it is now evident that demolition of the social customs and moral rules did not create a society of free individuals. Instead, it created an opportunity for the marketers to substitute material consumption and manufactured

lifestyles for the ties of social tradition. In the face of revolutionary changes in social attitudes in the West, consumer capitalism has remained unruffled. Indeed, each new social revolution has provided an opportunity for it to rejuvenate itself.

“The economics profession has a lot to answer for. It has provided the intellectual cover for the penetration of market values into areas of social and personal life where they do not belong. When market values rule calculation and drives out trust, self-centeredness displaces mutuality, superficiality prevails over depth and our relationships with others are conditioned by external reward and, above all, by money. In a world of ruthless competition where market values prevail, playing fair seems naïve. When a cricketer walks or a mountaineer sacrifices the summit to help another, our admiration betrays our despair at the usual state we have descended to.

“Gary Becker, the Chicago economist *par excellence*, in an article published in one of the profession’s most prestigious journals, applied the principles of microeconomics and consumer behavior to what he called the market for marriage. Becker defined marriage as an arrangement to secure the mutual benefit of exchange between two agents of different endowments. In other words, people marry in order more efficiently to produce ‘*household commodities*’, including ‘*the quality of meals, the quality and quantity of children, prestige, recreation, companionship, love, and health status*’. The rational person will base any marriage decision on quantifiable costs and benefits. The gain from marriage has to be balanced against the losses – including legal fees and the costs of searching for a mate – to determine whether marriage is worthwhile.

After pages of differential calculus, Becker reaches a triumphant conclusion: since love produces more efficient marriages, ‘*love and caring between two persons increase their chances of being married to each other*’.

What Becker’s wife thought about this analysis is not recorded, but in 1992 the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences was sufficiently impressed to award him the Nobel Prize for Economics for this and related work.

“Universities are not immune to this attitude. As one academic wrote: *....the universities are no longer communities of scholars but institutions which are aiming to satisfy rather undefined and unexplored market needs. This will inevitably constrain freedom of inquiry often in non-transparent and non-coercive ways.*

“The values of the market are transforming not just our minds but our physical bodies too. Huge industries are devoted to changing our shapes, our visages and our lifespans, all in pursuit of the notion of happiness that the market has given us. In the USA, in what is described as *‘the latest vanity craze sweeping the nation’*, Botox parties provide a congenial environment at which the guests drink champagne and take it in turns to have Botox injections to paralyze facial muscles. Botox is described as *‘the wrinkle-free fountain of youth’*.

“Childhood, of course, has become a marketing free-fire zone, and the lounge room is the kindergarten of consumerism. We all know of the extraordinary pressures placed on children to consume. What is less understood is how the thick fog of commercial messages in which children now grow up conditions their understanding of the world and themselves.

Most children want to transcend the limitations of lifestyles manufactured by brands and available to everyone. They want to achieve the new pinnacle of social success – *celebrity*. Children do not see fame as the reward for achievement but simply as a state in itself. And with the proliferation of celebrities whose fame *owes nothing to any* talent or achievement, this is an accurate judgment.

Celebrity is a magic potion to be taken as an antidote to the affliction most feared by tweens, rejection and social isolation.

“The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to understand ourselves so that we can achieve personal integration or reconciliation with our selves. It is a process rather than a final state.

The marketers have not only sought to persuade us that they can provide us with happy lives; consumer capitalism has redefined happiness itself. People have come to believe that happiness can be achieved by maximizing the number of emotional and physical highs.

The pursuit of short-term emotional highs swamps the longer-term and deeper need to fulfill one’s potential and realize one’s life purpose. Twentieth century consumer capitalism has seen a progressive substitution of activities and desires that result in immediate stimulation in place of the more challenging and potentially more fulfilling demands of realizing one’s true potential. There is a trade-off that must be made between short-term gratification and attaining deeper goals of self-realization.

“Yet it is in the superficial form of happiness that we are told to invest our hopes. Today, the pursuit of happiness promotes a hedonistic, shallow approach to life. We don’t need the psychological studies to confirm what our intuitive knowledge and folk wisdom tell us – that a worthwhile life is one of inner contentment marked by self-acceptance, the ability to maintain warm and trusting relationships, living in accord with personal standards, having a clear sense of direction in life and realizing one’s potential.

“This idea of happiness is hostile to the market because the market cannot provide it, and recognizes that the market constantly conspires to corrupt it. Yet it is the market’s superficial idea of happiness that finds a theoretical rationale in the economics texts and that is reinforced every time a political leader offers us a fistful of dollars.

“The economists are the modern purveyors of hope; they are the priests who hold the secret to attaining manna. The transformation of the idea of progress into the pursuit of a higher growth rate has meant the hijacking of hope itself. The neoliberal revolution of the last two decades has robbed us of hope because all it can promise is more growth and higher incomes. For those surrounded by abundance, more growth is nothing to look forward to; it cannot give us a better society and so the economists are the thieves of hope.

“Economic growth does not create happiness. Unhappiness sustains economic growth. The vast financial and creative resources of the marketing industry are devoted to a single purpose, to manufacturing discontent and to persuading us to invest our hopes for the future in greater material consumption.”

“We need a new politics that creates the circumstances in which we, individually and collectively, can pursue fulfillment in our lives in place of an endless and futile scramble for more material goods. We need a new politics that promotes a rich life in place of a life of riches. A politics that can allow us once more to hope.”

Clive Hamilton rejoins the French philosopher Bernard Stiegler who argues that capitalism today is governed not by production but by consumption (and that the techniques used to create consumer behavior amount to the destruction of psychic and collective individuation) and has made an important contribution to the critique of consumer capitalism.

The diversion of libidinal energy toward the consumption of consumer products, he argues, results in an addictive cycle, leading to hyperconsumption, the exhaustion of desire, and the reign of symbolic misery.



The Grinch Stole Our Selves

In light of the economic choices the United States is today experiencing as a result of a strong dependence on fossil fuels, consumer capitalist tactics have been incorporated as a means to boost the economy. Some of these tactics include government incentives to buy eco-friendly 'green' products, such as tax deductions for energy conserving home improvements or the purchasing of hybrid cars. These tactics, however, are not without critiques.

James Gustave Speth for example, former dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, and author of *The Bridge at the Edge of the World: Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability*, does not believe the United States government should implement such tactics. Instead Gus Speth believes

approaches more concerned with repairing the environmental issues should be at the forefront, rather than just focusing on re-boosting the distressed economy; don't just treat the symptom, treat the problem.

Today, climate change makes the future role of consumption increasingly uncertain. The 1990s gave birth to the idea of sustainable consumption, a commitment championed by the United Nations in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Price incentives and more-efficient technologies, it was hoped, would enable consumers to lighten the material footprint of their lifestyles. Since then, there have been many prophecies and headlines that predict “peak stuff” and the end of consumerism.

People in affluent societies, they say, have become bored with owning lots of stuff. They prefer experiences instead or are happy sharing. Dematerialization will follow.

Such forecasts sound nice but they fail to stand up to the evidence. After all, a lot of consumption in the past was also driven by experiences, such as the delights of pleasure gardens, bazaars, and amusement parks. In the world economy today, services might be growing faster than goods, but that does not mean the number of containers is declining—far from it. And, of course, the service economy is not virtual, and requires material resources too. In France in 2014, people drove 32 billion miles to do their shopping—that involves a lot of rubber, tarmac, and gas. Digital computing and Wi-Fi absorb a growing share of electricity. Sharing platforms like Airbnb have likely increased frequent travel and flights, not reduced them.

Moreover, people may say they feel overwhelmed or depressed by their possessions but in most cases this has not converted them to living more simply. Nor is this a peculiarly American or Anglo-Saxon problem. In 2011, the people of Stockholm bought three times more clothing and appliances than they did 20 years earlier.

How—indeed whether—consumers can adapt to a world of climate change remains the big question for the 21st century. In 1900, many reformers looked for answers to questions about social reform, social responsibility, and consumer representation. Climate change is its own monumental challenge, but there may be lessons that can be learned from that earlier history of the consumer. Consumers were identified as important players in tackling social blight and economic

injustice. As buyers, they had some influence over what was produced, its quality as well as quantity. Organizing their interests added an important voice to the arena of public politics.

Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the 21st Century* (Belknap Press, 2014, 704p) is a best seller –despite its subject and technical language. Piketty sketches out the evolution of inequality since the beginning of the industrial revolution. In the 18th and 19th centuries western European society was highly unequal. Private wealth dwarfed national income and was concentrated in the hands of the rich families who sat atop a relatively rigid class structure. This system persisted even as industrialization slowly contributed to rising wages for workers. Only the chaos of the first and second world wars and the Depression disrupted this pattern. High taxes, inflation, bankruptcies and the growth of sprawling welfare states caused wealth to shrink dramatically, and ushered in a period in which both income and wealth were distributed in relatively egalitarian fashion. *But the shocks of the early 20th century have faded and wealth is now reasserting itself.* On many measures, Piketty reckons, *the importance of wealth in modern economies is approaching levels last seen before the First World War.*

From this history, Piketty derives a grand theory of capital and inequality. As a general rule wealth grows faster than economic output, he explains, a concept he captures in the expression $r > g$ (where r is the rate of return to wealth and g is the economic growth rate). Other things being equal, faster economic growth will diminish the importance of wealth in a society, whereas slower growth will increase it (and demographic change that slows global growth will make capital more dominant). But there are no natural forces pushing against the steady concentration of wealth. Only a burst of rapid growth (from technological progress or rising population) or government intervention can be counted on to keep economies from returning to the “patrimonial capitalism” that worried Karl Marx. Piketty closes the book by recommending that governments step in now, by adopting a global tax on wealth, to prevent soaring inequality contributing to economic or political instability down the road.

But these days, in Trump's United States –and reverberating on all continents- some dissenting voices are not necessarily academic ones like Piketty's. Modern artists, who master technologies and are

media-savvy, propose very different and diverse scenarios. Sean Penn's *Into The Wild* and David Fincher's *Fight Club* explore our millennial generation's material value system of obsession with brand-name consumerism and the domination of corporate America. In *Into The Wild*, Chris McCandless renounces association with consumerism as he tries to shake himself out of his torpid existence—he enters the wild to live free of corporate capitalism.

In *Fight Club*, Jack and Tyler Durden become so saturated with capitalist gluttony that they turn to beating it out of one another as a means of regressive catharsis. Both films focus on characters trapped within our capitalist system in which commodities take part in social interactions that render us commodities, leaving us estranged from our own labor and alienated from ourselves. These characters want to escape from their indolent, 21st century lives and return to Thoreau's natural state of man—the films suggest that there is such a possibility of returning to this primal state of intrinsic value and beauty that is not defiled by capitalistic domination.

Besides this utopian, unattainable goal, what can we reasonably envision?

The first option -based on cultural traditions- is Education. Modesty, solidarity, frugality were indispensable to most societies (agrarian or urban) until the "industrial age". Then the propaganda brainwashing machine started and is now roaring full-speed.

Can we go back to our necessary "values"? We may in fact be coerced to do so.

A marginal predatory, wealthy population may prosper -as they did for immemorial times- but the vast majority of the population will face exhaustion, disease and early death. The guzzling pipeline will run weak, and then dry.

But education in the 21st century, everywhere, requires investments, resources, flexibility, devotion, security, foresight, and will. We are not there, and who knows if and when we'll get closer.

Facing the overwhelming invasion of *Fashion* -the ultimate caricature of *wanting* (vs. *needing*)- we are left panting. The industry is so loaded in cash that it feels like a steamroller. Magazines, media, messages target precisely specific groups, from toddlers (through parents and nannies), primary schoolchildren, teenagers, and -then- distinct clusters, with devilish efficiency.

Why collect *Jane Birkin* Hermes handbags (>US\$ 42,000); or a Lamborghini Huracan (>US\$ 262,000) in Hong Kong where one can barely drive more than 8,000 miles/year at very slow speed? Obviously because one can afford it, e.g. Rosmah Mansor, wife of Prime Minister Najib Razak of Malaysia. The luxury goods industry, e.g. LVMH, Richemont, and Kering, uses these predators to trap in its blinding glitter modest moths and fleece them. These companies will tell you that thousands of skilled workers depend on their success, but –just like any Ponzi scheme- the very few at the top of the pyramid gobble the juiciest parts.

Another option that makes headlines (notably in Northern California) is the *sharing economy*; and here come Uber, Airbnb, and many others. It is an umbrella term with a range of meanings, often used to describe economic and social activity involving online platforms. Originally growing out of the open-source community to refer to peer-to-peer based sharing of access to goods and services, the term is now sometimes used in a broader sense to describe any sales transactions that are done via online market places -even ones that are business to consumer (B2C), rather than peer-to-peer.

The sharing economy may take a variety of forms, including using information technology to provide individuals with information that enables the optimization of resources through the pooling of excess capacity in goods and services. A common premise is that when information about goods is shared (typically via an online marketplace), the value of those goods may increase for the business, for individuals, for the community and for society in general.

The *Harvard Business Review*, the *Financial Times* and many others have argued that "*sharing economy*" is a misnomer. Harvard Business Review suggested the correct word for the sharing economy in the broad sense of the term is "*access economy*": "*When "sharing" is market-mediated—when a company is an intermediary between consumers who don't know each other—it is no longer sharing at all. Rather, consumers are paying to access someone else's goods or services*".

The notion of "*sharing economy*" has often been considered as an oxymoron, and a misnomer for actual commercial exchanges. Some authors have proposed to replace the misleading concept of "*sharing*" by that of mutuality. A distinction can therefore be made between free pooling of resources such as genuine sharing, and for-profit profit-sharing in the likes of Uber, Airbnb, or Taskrabbit. To this

current trend towards increased consumer input in commercial exchanges refers to the notion of prosumption, which, as such, is not new. The pooling of resources is for example well known in business-to-business (B2B) like heavy machinery in agriculture and forestry as well as in business-to-consumer (B2C) like self-service laundries. But three major drivers enable consumer-to-consumer (C2C) pooling of resources for a broad variety of new goods and services as well as new industries. First, customer behavior for many goods and services changes from ownership to sharing. Second, online social networks and electronic markets more easily link consumers. And third, mobile devices and electronic services make the use of shared goods and services more convenient (e.g. smartphone app instead of physical key).

The Oxford Internet Institute has argued that key parts of the sharing economy impose a new balance of power onto workers. By bringing together workers in low- and high-income countries, gig economy platforms, that are not geographically confined, can bring about a 'race to the bottom' for workers. The benefits big sharing economy players might be making for themselves are not trickling down, and the sharing economy doesn't necessarily build trust because where it builds new connections, it often replicates old patterns of privileged access for some, and denial for others. The reality is that these markets also tend to attract a class of well-heeled professional operators, who outperform the amateurs—just like the rest of the economy.

The local economic benefit of the sharing economy is offset by its current form, which is that huge tech companies reap a great deal of the profit in many cases. For example, Uber, which is estimated to be worth \$50B as of mid-2015, takes up to 30% commission from the gross revenue of its drivers, leaving many drivers making less than minimum wage.

We are far from the Positivism of Auguste Comte, and its motto: *L'amour pour principe et l'ordre pour base; le progrès pour but* (Love as a principle and order as the basis; progress as the goal). Auguste Comte inspired *Ordem e Progresso* in the flag of Brazil. In the late 19th century, a number of communities in Brazil attempted to live and succeed according to the Comte's positivist sharing economy, but all failed.

That leaves us *wanting*, possibly *needing* a comprehensive solution for our societies. The thirst for social and economic justice will not be quenched by any for-profit-only system. Conversely, shattering existing ancient, culture-based structures like Palmyra by the “Islamic State”, or the monumental Bamiyan Valley Buddha statues destroyed by the Taliban, are worse than anything conceivable. If we need to make *tabula rasa* of the past (4th verse of *L’Internationale*) we’ll be following Attila’s horse behind which *the grass did not grow back*. We must breed a novel model, order, or system in sync with our present status, and even more with our technological future and hopes.

Best Wishes –and Good luck!

Tor Nørretranders, Jean-Claude Guez and many others that will forgive me for not mentioning their name.

Yves P. Huin was always on top of it, and serves as critic, editor, sower of ideas, and much more.

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