

Kate Soper ‘The Fulfilments of Postconsumerism and the Politics of Renewal’.

In the midst of deepening ecological and financial crisis, the growth model of the economy remains almost unchallenged. Yet the longer we continue with it, the more intense the competition for dwindling resources will become, and the more uncivil the methods to which societies of affluence are likely to have recourse in defending their advantage. These could include measures that most of us would currently regard as deeply repugnant, indeed they would spell an end to rights-based humanitarian morality as we know it, (the quite blatant and cynical manipulation of poverty, disease and famine to control global population; the coercion of Third World economies into an almost exclusive servicing of First World needs for bio-fuels and other energy substitutes; ever more fascistic policies on immigration in privileged regions such as the EU to check the flow of eco-refugees from the more devastated areas of the globe). These measures are likely to encourage increasingly desperate forms of terrorist activity and could very well end in genocidal and even terminal forms of global warfare.

That’s for the future. As for the more immediate present, things already look bad enough. Even the more modest, and probably insufficient, targets on carbon emissions are unlikely to be met. Around the world, two billion have been injured or made homeless in recent decades through disasters triggered by global warming, which have more have more than doubled since the 1970s.¹ Over the same period, the disparity between rich and poor has grown ever greater, and is now gaping.

Yet mainstream thinking remains in denial about the role of capitalism and its ‘work and spend’ dynamic in generating the crisis. Even those most concerned about

¹: World Disasters Report, International Federation of Red Crescent and Red Cross Societies, 2002.

global warming believe – or hope - that new technologies will solve the problem, thus ensuring continued economic growth with very little alteration in our life-style.

Provided we make the investment now, the ‘pain’, as these optimists like to think, can be kept to a minimum. Their common presumption is that the consumerist model of the ‘good life’ is the one we want to hold on to as far as we can and that any curb on that will necessarily prove unwelcome and distressing. We hear little or nothing of what might be gained by moving away from our current obsession with consumerist gratifications and pursuing a less work driven and acquisitive way of life.

There is an obvious reason for this. Since the immediate mission of the market economy is not human or environmental well-being but the multiplication and diversification of ‘satisfiers’ that can realise profit, counter-consumerism would prove very bad for business. Companies, therefore, with little restraint from government, continue to pressurise us into ever more self-destructive and environmentally vandalising forms of consumption, and they are constantly expanding the outlets for their merchandising activities. The infiltration of the child’s world by branding gurus and marketing experts is highly ingenious and particularly blatant.² [IMAGES 2-5] Indeed, it would be regarded as sinisterly totalitarian were it to occur in any other context but that of the market. Dependent as it is on the revenue from commercials, the media has done little to stem the flow of this advertising activity. All this has meant that very little expression has been given to any countering ethic and aesthetic imaginary within mainstream politics, where, with the exception of the Green Parties, the same consumerist mantras on the importance of expanding markets and boosting high street sales are sounded to the exclusion of all other visions and conceptions of how to live and prosper.

Yet despite this virtual repression of alternatives, there are signs that the contradictions between capitalist and ecological pressures, and between what the economy demands and what is humanly most valued, will not be contained indefinitely. Certainly, the lure of the shopping malls remains very powerful and it would be very mistaken to assume anything much in the way of explicit support for an alternative way of life to that of present consumer culture. Yet we can now detect a more implicit disenchantment with consumerism, both in the sense that other conceptions of the 'good life' are gaining more of a hold among some, and in the sense that the affluent lifestyle is now more commonly seen as compromised by the stress, time-scarcity, air pollution, traffic congestion, obesity and general ill health that go together with it. **[IMAGE 6]** In other words, this is a lifestyle that is today being questioned not only because of its environmental consequences (although these are also deplored), but because of its negative impact on people themselves, and the ways it distrains on both sensual pleasure and more spiritual forms of well being. We can take note in this connection of the many laments for what has gone missing from our lives under the relentless pressure from neo-liberal economic policies, and the frequently expressed interests in less tangible goods such as more free time, more personal contacts, and a slower pace of life. Whether it be distress (to take Britain as the example here) about the closures of the local Post Offices, or the nostalgia for a nationalised rail service (for a time as a fellow traveller said to me the other day 'when we were passengers, not customers'), or the dejection over an educational system so tailored to the needs of industry rather than the intrinsic rewards of learning, or alarm over the commercialisation of children and the evidence of depression among the young,² in all such cases, what is voiced is a sense of sadness

² Cf. Z. Williams, "The Commercialisation of Childhood", *Compass*, February 2008.

that none other than monetary values can make any headway in our culture, that little in public life will be guaranteed survival if it cannot make profit. These voicings of discontent are still low-key, diffuse, and politically unfocussed. They are the frustrated murmurings of those who are aware of their impotence to take on the corporate giants, and have little coherent idea of what to put in place of the existing order. But the regrets and disquiet are real enough, and they feed into a now quite widely felt sense of the opportunities we have squandered in recent decades for enjoying more relaxed and less narrowly reductive ways of living. **[IMAGE 7]**

This has its counterpart at a more official level in the anxieties of the experts and policy makers about the consequences of the high-stress, fast-food life-style on the upcoming generation. It also chimes with recent researches indicating that there is no direct correlation between increased wealth and increased happiness.³

[IMAGES 8,9, 10] On the 'Happy Planet' Index compiled by the New Economics Foundation, which measures the ecological efficiency with which nations provide for well-being, the more affluent Western nations come way down the list (the UK is 108th, France 129th, the USA 150th).⁴ An International Labour Office report of 2004, records that work-related stress and ill health is on the increase around the world, and even in areas where job satisfaction in the past has to some extent compensated for relative lack of earnings, stress and insecurity have now begun to take their toll.⁵ A

www.compassonline.org/publications. Cf. Juliet Schor, *Born to Buy, the Commericalised Child and the New Consumer Culture*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2004.

³ For evidence on this, see, for example, A.T.Durning, *How Much is Enough ?* Earthscan, London, 1992; R.A. Easterlin, "Income and Happiness: towards a unified theory", *Economic Journal*, no. 111, 2001, p. 465-494; R. Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, Allen Lane, London, 2005; R. Levett, *A Better Choice of Choice: Quality of Life, consumption and economic growth*, Fabian Society, London, 2003.

⁴ New Economic Foundation, "Happy Planet Index", www.happyplanetindex.org/index.htm Cp. Richarch Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level*, Penguin 2009, on the links between equality and well-being.

⁵ International Labour Office, Fact Sheet no. 77 on Work-Related Ill health, 2004.

recent study, for example has found an increase in depression, strain, sleep loss and unhappiness during the 1990s among Britain's six million public service workers, whose job satisfaction has now fallen dramatically.⁶ And despite a near doubling of economic output in the last 30 years, there has been a rise in depression and mental illness, and feelings of trust in others have fallen dramatically (whereas in Britain some 60 per cent in the 1960s answered affirmatively to the question 'do you think most other people can be trusted', this has now fallen to around 30 per cent).⁷

These developments are indicative of the paradox at the heart of the growth economy, - an economic system that can only flourish if people keep spending, which means that they must keep working, which means that they have less time to do things for themselves, which means they have to buy more goods and services to make up for the time deficit. This is a dynamic that tends to the elimination of straightforward and inexpensive forms of gratification, only then for companies to profit further through the provision of more expensive compensatory modes of consumption for those who can afford them. The leisure and tourist industry has increasingly tailored its offerings to the overworked, with holiday breaks that promise to make good the loss in 'quality' time (this is from the brochure for one such provider):

For those of us with huge overdrafts at the Bank of Hours-in-the-Day, the real luxury is time. Time with the kids, phone switched off. Or time for yourself, to read and relax in peace. Luxury is a long lunch recovering the person you love, or a gourmet dinner with friends, cooked to order and served by your

⁶ M.Bunting, *Willing Slaves: How the Overwork Culture is Ruling our Lives*, Harper Collins, London, 2004; study from A. Oswald and J. Gardner reported in the *Guardian* March 22, 2001 ("Job Satisfaction falls for Public Workers"). Cf. the responses to the BBC programme "Do We Work Too Hard?" news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/talking_point/626333.stm

⁷ New Economic Foundation "Manifesto on Well-Being", September 28th 2004, www.neweconomics.org

own private pool. It's me-time. Family time. The elusive holy grail of modern life. (Coastline holidays at: www.coastline.co.uk) [IMAGE 11]).

Then there is the extra you often now have to pay for dealing with a person rather than a machine; the speed dating and Wife Selecting agencies that promise to make up for your loss of the arts of loving and relating; the multiplication of gyms to which people drive in order to do treadmill running in cities where, because there are so many cars on the street, they no longer find it pleasant or safe to walk or run. (In Los Angeles, as dusk falls, the multi-storey gyms are packed, the streets ominously empty). [IMAGES 12,]

[IMAGE 13]The consumer society, one may therefore argue, is now becoming increasingly dependent for its continued flourishing on our collective preparedness to spend the money we earn by working too hard and too long on the goods which help to satisfy the goods we have increasingly sacrificed through over-work and over-production. What is more, it would appear very likely that if we are incapable of springing this trap, and reverting to a more rational order, we are destined for ecological collapse and all the social horrors that will entail.

Alternative Hedonism

It is in this context that I have been pressing for what I have termed the 'alternative hedonist' approach to winning support for sustainable lifestyles and for forms of governance promoting them. This responds to the current situation not only as a crisis, and by no means only as presaging future gloom and doom, but as offering an opportunity to advance beyond a mode of life that is not just environmentally disastrous but also in many respects unpleasurable and self-denying. Alternative hedonism is premised, in fact, on the idea that even if the consumerist lifestyle were indefinitely sustainable it would not enhance human happiness and well-being (or not

beyond a certain point that has already past). **[IMAGE 14]** And it claims that it is new forms of desire rather than fears of ecological disaster that are likely to have most impact in any move towards more sustainable modes of consuming. **[IMAGE 15]** The seductive depiction of alternatives to resource-intensive, polluting and unhealthy consumerist life-styles is therefore critical not only to the meeting of current commitments on climate change, waste management and environmental regulation, but also to building any more substantial opposition in the future to the economic governance of our times.

In sum, a counter-consumerist ethic and politics should appeal, not only to altruistic compassion and environmental concern, but also to the self-regarding gratifications of consuming differently. And it should seek its democratic anchorage and legitimation for these claims, and for its projections of the attractions of a postconsumerist lifestyle, in the already existing forms of ambivalence about consumer culture that I have outlined.

[IMAGE 16] By focussing on these new developments and shifts of feeling in constituting an immanent critique of consumer culture, the ‘alternative hedonism’ perspective aims to avoid the moralising about ‘real’ needs that has often characterised earlier critiques of consumer culture.⁸ It engages with ambivalence or disaffection towards consumerism as this comes to the surface and finds expression in the sensibility or behaviour of consumers themselves. **[IMAGE 17]** The concern is not to prove that consumers ‘really’ need something quite other than what they profess to need (or want) – a procedure which is paternalistic and undemocratic – but to reflect on the hedonist aspirations prompting changes in experienced or imagined need, and their implications for the development of a new electoral mandate for the

⁸ Cf. Daniel Miller, ‘The Poverty of Morality’, *Journal of Consumer Culture*, Vol.1, no. 2, 2001, pp. 225-243.

forms of self-policing essential to sustainable living. As I have argued at length elsewhere, we need to recognise in this context that there is a ‘dialectic’ through which the subjective support for new forms of ‘policing’ of consumption is reinforced and extended through provision for the ‘alternative hedonist’ experience it can help to secure. Whereas Londoners, with the ‘wisdom’ of the actual experience of the changed environment, voted in favour of the extension of congestion charging, the vote in Edinburgh, which was without the benefit of the actual experience of change, went against its introduction. The small avant garde of consumers who will opt beforehand for ‘self-policing’ on issues such as road charging is very likely to remain an ineffective minority unless it is swelled by proactive public policy that allows new structures of feeling to be actualized. In its application to public policy, ‘alternative hedonism’ is not a theory that ascribes needs in the absence of their subjective experience but a theory of the actualization of those needs through the provision that builds on their embryonic presence and potential for development. As such, it also reflects a more complex sense of needs than recent UK government policy on welfare and social provision has wanted to acknowledge, eager as it has been to focus on the idea of individuated choice and the ‘needs’ of consumers conceived as essentially private monads.

Going Slow, Going Local, Going Easy

To act on ‘alternative hedonist’ presumptions would therefore require politicians and policy makers to focus much more than they currently do on providing blueprints and projections of the potential delights of sustainable living. These would not only counter the ‘back to the Stone Age’ conception of the green agenda as failing to recognise its avant garde quality, but also highlight the more backward, puritan and ugly aspects of a work-driven and materially encumbered existence. [IMAGE 18]

Dramatic illustration, for example, of this ‘puritanism’ in the US has been given by Juliet Schor, who has argued that if Americans had settled for a 1948 standard of living (measured in terms of marketed goods and services), every worker in the United States could now be taking every other year off from work – with pay. Instead, free time fell by nearly 40 % post-1973 so although the average American by 1990 owned and consumed more than twice as much as he or she did in 1948, they also had considerably less leisure.⁹ Similar trends are evident in the UK, where two-fifths of the workforce are now working harder than in the 1980s. In the average UK household (where at least one adult is employed), partly as a result of increased hours on the job and partly as a result of fewer holidays being taken, 7.6 weeks more a year was spent in paid work in 1998 than in 1981.¹⁰ The tendency, moreover, has been for the more ‘workaholic’ elements to set the pace for everyone else, with the threat of loss of work or promotion opportunities being used as a constant discipline against resistance to longer hours.

If we were to shift to a less work-intensive economy, it would reduce the rate at which people, goods and information had to be delivered or transmitted, and the impact on resource attrition and carbon emissions would be matched by huge benefits for ourselves. People would reclaim time for personal and family life. They would commute less and enjoy healthier modes of travelling such as walking, cycling and boating. Supermarket shopping would cede to a resurgence in high street retailing, thus avoiding the ‘clone town’ syndrome and boosting local communities in ways that could reduce crime and foster new forms of conviviality and inter-generational

⁹ Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American: the Unexpected Decline of Leisure*, Basic Books, London, Harper Collins, p. 2; cf. John de Graff (ed) *Take Back Your Time: Fighting overwork and time poverty in America*, Berret-Koehler, San Francisco, 2003.

¹⁰ Madeleine Bunting, *Willing Slaves: How the Overwork Culture is Ruling our Lives*, Harper Collins, London, 2004, pp. 18-19.

exchange. All this would transform urban and rural living, especially for children, and provide more tranquil space for reflection, and opportunities for sensual experience denied by harried and insulated travel and work routines. And the costs would be negligible relative to those incurred by current provision, especially if one factors in the medical expenses to be saved through better public health and fewer accidents.

There are, of course, conveniences and pleasures that would have to be sacrificed in a low carbon economy: creature comforts of various kinds; some of the thrills of fast-paced living; the ease with which we have hitherto gratified the passion for foreign travel. But constant comfort can dull as well as gratify appetites. The machines and lifts and escalators and moving walk-ways that reduce our energy expenditure do so at the cost of the exertion of muscular power and the sense of vitality that goes along with that. Constant grazing and ‘comfort’ eating deprives those who ‘indulge’ in it of the enjoyment of a sharpened hunger and thirst. And food satiety and over-provisioning create a vast amount of waste. (It was recently reported that the average family in the UK throws out 400 pounds of food per annum – enough to fund everyone’s Council tax). The central heating and air-conditioning that ensures that we are continuously in the ‘comfort’ zone in homes, offices, airports and shopping malls has certainly cut out the pain of extreme temperatures, but also made interior space more boringly homogeneous and reduced sensitivity to seasonal changes.

In the case of foreign travel, the pleasures are undeniable and perhaps particularly hard to compensate for. Yet in the era of the so-called ‘global village’ with its pressures towards homogenised forms of tourist provision, even far-flung travel does not always live up to its promise of providing exceptional experience, and

the differing rhythm of holidays taken closer to home can also prove the source of unexpected forms of enchantment and escape from mundanity.

Human ingenuity will surely also contrive a range of more eco-friendly excitements to make up for the loss of high-speed thrills. (One might here, for example, the popularity of the new ‘sublime’ experiences provided by public art and sculpture, and the ways in which these have lent themselves – perhaps most notably Anish Kapoor’s extraordinary urban and rural mirrors – to new forms of eco-friendly, non-consumerist idling, loitering, sky-gazing and conviviality. **[IMAGES 19-20]** One would like to think that such experiences capture the spirit of the future much more than does Virgin Galactic’s promises of space tourism. **[IMAGES 21-22]**

But there are also, of course, the more everyday pleasures and benefits of going slower. For wherever proper provision is made, to walk or to cycle is also to enjoy sights and scents and sounds and forms of solitude and silence denied to those who travel in more insulated and speedier ways. Obviously, no one could rely exclusively on these modes of transport, but most of the obstacles to regular cradle to the grave biking could readily be overcome through more committed and imaginative forms of provision: why not multi-lane tracks, with cover for those who want it, cycle rick-shaws and motorised bikes for the too young and less able, showers and changing room and cafes at regular intervals on cycle tracks ? Schemes like this look utopian in the present context of the car culture, but the costs would be negligible relative to that of continued expansion of the motor-ways (especially if one factors in the medical costs likely to be saved through better public health).

Here, too, there is much more that could be done in the way of governance, both materially and in cultural terms, to promote the needed revolution in attitudes to mobility. Materially this is so in the banal sense, that people cannot be expected to

walk or cycle or skate to work and school, and certainly not to encourage their children to do so, in the absence of safe, fully-segregated, well-lit and well-policed provision for it. But it is culturally true in the sense that the environmental damage caused by high speed travel in cars and planes needs to be the object of the same kind of campaigning strategy used so successfully against smoking. The damage done by secondary smoking to children and grandchildren pales by comparison with that which could be visited upon them as a consequence of consumption-related climate change. And in terms of the noise, air pollution and risk of death to which they subject us, car and plane travel are in many ways, much more anti-social than the smoking and drinking that government currently prefers to target. Cars may well become more eco-friendly over time, but it still seems fairly scandalous to me, that the folly of carrying around two tons of metal with you on so many everyday journeys has not been more exposed to ridicule. (Here is a sculpture by Fernandez Arman and an Erwin Wurm installation which capture the general idea.) **IMAGES 23,24]**

But it is not only with respect to transport but to material culture more generally, that we need a cultural politics designed to encourage this shift of ethical and aesthetic perception. I have compared this to the ‘consciousness raising’ brought about through Western feminism and its gradual but profound impact on our way of life. As individuals became alerted to the role of gender in their being, and to its social construction and hence mutability, so they entered into complex - and often painful – processes of self-change. Such ‘reconstructions’ can involve dramatic changes in affective response: changes whereby the attractions and repulsions of the world of lived experience undergo a kind of gestalt switch. A green economic and cultural renaissance working upon consumer sensibilities over coming years would result in some similar revisioning of self-interest and aesthetic response. The result would be

that a lifestyle once seen as compelling comes to seem confining, and previously sought after commodities come to be viewed as cumbersome and ugly through association with unsustainable resource use, noise, toxicity or their legacy of un-recyclable waste.¹¹

Advertisers have long been aware of the regulation between beliefs about and aesthetics responses to material culture and revised their appeal in the light of these shifting regimes of truth and belief. No one could today market an anti-greenfly spray, as was the case in the 1950s, with an image of mother, father and child all wreathing themselves in clouds of pesticide as they assault the rosebush.¹² **[IMAGE 25]** Cigarette advertisement had, until it was finally banned in the UK, to be emptied of any imagery of actual smoking. **[IMAGES 26-27]** Car advertisement has become increasingly reliant on an implausible depiction of the vehicle as a solitary in nature. **[IMAGE 28,29]** The green renaissance would harness this interdependency of belief and aesthetic experience for its own counter-consumerist purposes, and seek to extend it to the environment at large, such that goods that were unsustainable, even though not responsible for any immediate personal damage, ceased to exercise their one time aesthetic compulsion.

There are already, of course, painters, writers, film directors and anti-consumerist image makers who are working in this spirit. One thinks, for example, of the art of Paul Bonomini, Barbara Kruger, **[IMAGES 30-31]** Images of waste in the form of negative sublimates that stifle and overwhelm with the burden of our own productions, may also have a part to play in these aesthetic shifts, since the junk excreta of consumerist society is so plainly and repellently undesirable. **[IMAGES**

¹¹ Kate Soper, 'Alternative Hedonism, Cultural Theory and the Role of Aesthetic Revisioning', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 22, No. 5, September 2008, pp. 567-587.

¹² Cf. Alex Wilson, *The Culture of Nature, the making of the north American landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1990, p. 99.

32-33] (Paul Bonomini, the ‘RSA Wee Man’ photo: David Ramkalawon].

Bonomini’s RSA “Wee Man” (a 300 ton, 24 foot high android constructed out of the average weight of the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment, or Weee, that a single person disposes of in a lifetime) that loomed menacingly over the Thames in the spring of 2005, provided an instance of the kind of intervention that could contribute to the anti-consumerist aesthetic shift.¹³ Note, too, the ‘Art for Oil’ images. **[IMAGES 34-35]**

Conclusion

Lest I appear rather Luddite in all this, let me emphasise that greener technologies will be an essential part of the solution, and we cannot begin to counter global warming without them. But the implementation of alternatives to the growth economy has at the same time to become a more central concern of governance, rather than ignored or dismissed as utopian fantasy. And in a climate of financial turmoil and extensive cynicism about government commitments on global warming, more honesty about this might well win greater cooperation and respect on the part of the electorate – especially if it were accompanied, as suggested, by imaginative representation of the fulfilments of living in a sustainable society. The affluent societies of Europe and Scandinavia are well-placed to spearhead a new order and to catalyse the political will for change, and were they to take a global lead on this, they could promote an alternative model of prosperity through which the less ‘developed’ countries might critically reconsider the conventions and goals of ‘progress’ itself - and thereby better understand the worst consequences of north-west ‘over-development’ and how to avoid them.¹⁴ The commitment to low-growth

¹³ A. Akbar, ‘A 300 Ton Solution to the Problem of Electronic Waste’, *The Independent*. 30 April, 2005, p. 3.

¹⁴ And results from a simulation model of the Canadian economy suggest that it is possible to have full employment, eradicate poverty, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and maintain fiscal balance without

sustainability can be seen in this sense as a continuation of the Enlightenment project. If we have a cosmopolitan care for the well-being of the more deprived people of the world, and a concern about the quality of life of future generations, then we need to campaign for a dramatic change of attitudes to work, consumption, pleasure and self-realisation in the more affluent communities. And such a revolution will surely be comparable in the forms of social transformation and personal epiphany it will demand to those brought about through the feminist, anti-racist and anti-colonialist movements of recent history.

Making headway with any alternative will undeniably be hugely difficult. Almost certainly, in the short-term we shall have a return to 'business as usual', with a few big 'green' infrastructure projects planned as a means of pump-priming our way out of recession and back into the promised land of growth, full employment and consumer spending. Yet the banking crisis has made the going harder for the advocates and representatives of greed, speculative cunning and profit-driven turbo-capitalism. It has strengthened the hand of interventionist, social-democratic government. Talk of a 'Green New Deal' has been heard outside the red/green circles where the phrase originated (see www.neweconomics.org); EU leaders have been speaking, in early November 2008, of the need to re-engineer international financial institutions in ways that would help combat climate change and keep world food prices down.

And since, we all know really, that it is unrealistic to suppose that we can continue with current rates of expansion of production, work and material consumption over coming decades let alone into the next century, anything that contributes to a less hackneyed way of thinking about economic health and is more inventive about the quality of human well-being is surely to be welcomed.

economic growth. For further details, see the Low Grow model advocated by Peter Victor (2008) and the papers from the Sustainable Development Commission..

