

The other pleasures of post-consumerism

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Kate Soper promotes the attractions of a post-consumerist life-style - something that is of critical importance in winning wider support for a sustainable future.

The evidence for the impact on global warming of affluent lifestyles is now incontrovertible and receiving belated mainstream media attention. One has to be glad of this. But it is difficult not to be disheartened by the blinkered nature of the two most commonly encountered reactions. On the one hand, there are the *carpe diem* fatalists. Resigned to the prospect of ecological devastation, they see little point in mending their profligate ways, since the impact globally will be so minimal. Every percentage reduction of carbon emissions in the UK, they point out, will be more than cancelled out by their increase in China or India. As the counter to this we have the technical-fix optimists, who 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 put it, can be kept to a minimum.

I shall not here address the particular arguments of these responses, nor

seek to arbitrate between them. What concerns me, rather, is what they share in common, namely, the presumption 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 be unwelcome and distressing. Neither the 'seize the day' fatalists nor the technical optimists dwell on the negative consequences of Euro-American-style affluence for consumers themselves (the stress, ill-health, congestion, pollution, noise, excessive waste); and neither suggest it might be more fun to escape the confines of the growth-driven, shopping-mall culture than to continue to keep it on track. We hear all too little 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.

The reason for this is obvious. Counter-consumerism is bad for business. It is ultimately incompatible with the continued flourishing of de-regulated global capitalism. (It is a measure of the Stern report's alienation that it cites the risk to economic growth as the main reason for attempting to curb carbon emissions, when it is, of course, that very growth that is the major factor in their creation.) The market economy, in short, is averse to the promotion of any non-commodified conceptions of human gratification and personal development. Its main productive mission is not human or environmental well-being, but the multiplication and diversification of 'satisfiers' that can realise profit; and since this mission runs entirely counter to any idea of accommodation to natural limits, it can hardly surprise us that alternative conceptions of the good life have been so under-represented in consumer society. Indeed, everything conspires to ensure minimal outlet to any countering imaginary, and the forces arrayed against it are truly formidable.

The advertising budget for promoting consumerist spending is an estimated \$435 billion per annum, and, according to a recent Human Development Report, the growth in advertisement spending now outpaces the growth of the world economy by a third. Such astonishing expenditure is indicative of the need to repress all inclinations towards freer forms of enjoyment and to reinforce a demand otherwise at risk of becoming sated. Businesses are ever fearful of what they term 'need saturation', and bent on the development of new purchasing whims. According to a director of the General Motors Research Laboratory, the aim of business must be the 'organised creation of dissatisfaction'; another senior executive, cited in Naomi Klein's *No Logo*, has put it with even greater

candour: 'consumers are like roaches - you spray them and spray them and they get immune after a while'. Hence the need for ever more powerful stimuli to buy. Advertisers are also targeting children at increasingly young ages, employing manipulative strategies in order to 'groom' them for a life of consuming. Dependent as it is on the revenue from commercials, the media will do little to stem the flow of this merchandising activity. For more than a decade, the anti-consumerist campaigning group Adbusters has been trying to buy airtime for its social marketing TV spots, often called 'un-commercials', but they have been regularly rejected by CBS, NBC, ABC, FOX, MTV, and major networks around the world. Nor are we likely to find much expression given to a countering ethic within mainstream politics, where, with the exception of the Green Parties, the same consumerist mantras on the importance of economic growth, expanding markets and boosting high street sales are sounded, to the exclusion of all other visions and conceptions of how to live and prosper. Everything conspires to ensure that the 'other pleasure' to consumerist pleasure is so marginalised, occluded and denied representation that any choice in the matter has been more or less eradicated. The choice *not* to be identified and exhorted as a consumer is precisely what is denied in the current era of choice.

Yet despite this virtual repression of alternatives, there are signs - and *The Good Society*, recently published as part of the Compass programme for renewal is a timely response to these - 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. Shopping may still be one of the nation's favourite ways of spending time, and there has been precious little reform in the use of the car and air flight, yet there is also disenchantment with the negative by-products of the affluent lifestyle, and a growing sense that it may stand in the way of other equally - if not more - valued goals. Such disaffection may find expression in nostalgia for certain kinds of material, or for objects and practices that no longer figure in everyday life; it may lament the loss of certain kinds of landscape, or spaces (to play or talk or loiter or meditate or commune with nature); it may deplore the fact that were it not for the dominance of the car, there would be an altogether different system of provision for other modes of transport, and both rural and city areas would look and feel and smell and sound entirely different. Or it may just take the form of a vague and rather general malaise that descends in the shopping mall

or supermarket: a sense of a world too cluttered and encumbered by material objects and sunk in waste, of priorities skewed through the focus on ever more extensive provision and accumulation of things.

Although these kinds of reactions are doubtless driven partly by an altruistic concern for the global ecological and social consequences of the consumerist life-style, they are also distinguished by self-interested motivations; however the form these take is rather more complex than anything recognised by neo-classical economic or rational choice theories of the appetitive individual. In these more complex forms of self interest, the individual acts with an eye to the collective impact of aggregated private acts of affluent consumption for consumers themselves, and takes measures to avoid contributing to it. For example, people may make a decision to cycle or walk whenever possible in order not to add to the pollution, noise and congestion of car use. However the hedonist aspect of this shift in consumption practice does not reside exclusively in the desire to avoid or limit the un-pleasurable by-products of collective affluence; it also resides in the sensual pleasures of consuming differently. There are intrinsic pleasures to be had in walking or cycling, which the car driver will not be experiencing. But these pleasures can only be secured through greatly limiting car use, and in this sense they are themselves conditional on commitment to self-policing in the use of the car and support for policies that restrain its consumption.

Clearly individuals who think this way are currently in a minority. But, arguably, they form the avant garde of a counter-consumerist movement and green renaissance that could well gather increasing momentum over the next decades, eventually posing a more serious threat to the market-driven economy and cultural hegemony of our times. The dependency of globalised capitalism on the continued preparedness of its consumers to remain forever unsated - forever fobbed off with compensatory forms of gratification, forever nonchalant about the consequences of consumerism both socially and ecologically - is now beginning to be recognised, across the political spectrum, as one of the more significant sources of dialectical tension of our times. This finds its most explicit expression in the expansion of green and ethical consumption, and in the centrality of the No Logo forms of opposition within the anti-globalisation movement. But it is also acknowledged in some sense by corporate capitalism itself, for instance in its appeals, post 9/11, to 'patriotic shopping' as a way of showing support for the 'Western way of Life'. And it is reflected in growing

official concerns about the consequences of the high-stress, fast-food life-style on the upcoming generation, and in recent evidence suggesting that the increase in wealth and material possessions is no guarantee of an increase in happiness. (One might cite here the findings from the 'Happy Planet' index of well-being recently published by the New Economics Foundation, and the influential work of economists such as Richard Layard.) After years of being largely confined to the campaigns, debates and life-choices of 'alternative' groups and social movements, themes of consumption, counter-consumerism, ecological crisis and sustainability, and the problems of 'over-development', are moving centre-stage. Consumption is now emerging as a possible point of vulnerability for the deregulated market, a key area of political contention, and a site where shifting cultural perspectives and new modes of representation might begin to have significant impact.

Going slow, going local, going easy

We need therefore to be more assertively utopian in promoting sustainable consumption, not only in the sense of being willing to offer blueprints or projections of other possible futures, but in the sense of seeking to form desire, and to encourage a different structure of feeling and affective response to the world of material culture. This involves, in turn, a challenge to contemporary conceptions of 'progress', and a more historically informed understanding of the regressive aspects of consumerism. Advocates of an 'alternative hedonist' response on need can reject the 'back to the Stone Age' conception of its agenda as failing to recognise its innovative quality; and they can also highlight the more backward, puritan and ugly aspects of a work-driven and materially encumbered existence. They may also want to question some of the gains of the age of 'comfort' and 'convenience'. 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 satisfying 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 it has also made interior space more boringly homogeneous, and

reduced sensitivity to seasonal changes.

What needs challenging above all is the presumption that 'progress' and 'development' are synonymous with speeding up and saving time. Today it is well-nigh impossible to travel long-distance other than by air, and it would be thought grotesque for industrial designers to promote product innovations on the grounds that they allowed their users to proceed at a more relaxed pace. Speed is, of course, convenient - and can be thrilling. Yet there is also a relative

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dimension to both these attributes, of which we should be aware. Travelling by chaise at fifteen miles an hour was regarded as exhilaratingly rapid by Charles Dickens, who in *Pickwick Papers* describes fields, trees and hedges rushing past at that pace 'with the velocity of a whirlwind'. Today a twenty miles per hour speed limit is regarded

by car-users as restrictively slow. (There are, in any case, more absolute limits on road capacity and the speeds at which drivers themselves can operate with relative safety.) A comparable dialectic is at work in our capacity to respond to the increasing computing power of silicon chips (which currently doubles every eighteen months). We have certainly very quickly adapted to - and indeed become extraordinarily dependent upon - the fast processing of information and the billions of electronic exchanges this allows on a daily basis. But there is a lot of evidence, too, to suggest that information overload is a major contributor to stress at work, and that the innovations are not always unmitigated blessings.

But the demand for speed of both transport and communication is relative in a further and rather different respect, since how fast we want - or 'need' - to travel (or communicate) is itself a function of other aspects of an overall life-style and pattern of consumption. Urbanisation goes together with developments such as commuting and loss of rural shops and services, developments that in turn are dependent upon provision of faster means of transport. The affluent modern life-style is a structure of interconnected modes of consumption, each one of which is integral to the whole and reliant upon it. But, for that very reason, shifts in one area will always have knock-on effects in others, and thus influence the overall structure of consumption. Were car use severely restricted, lives would be saved, communities revitalised, and children released from the nervy surveillance of their elders, as well as the dangers posed

by adults constantly encroaching on them with their motorised vehicles. Were more people to shop by bike or bus rather than car, it would encourage the return of high street retailers, and fewer small stores would be forced into closing because of parking restrictions in town centres. Were we to reduce the working week or the work loads expected of employees within the working day, it would bring with it a relaxation of the speed at which goods and information were required to be delivered or transmitted. Were airfreight to be curbed, it would have a major impact on the sourcing of perishable goods and significantly reduce the mileage travelled by many articles of everyday consumption - with benefits for consumers, the local economy and the environment.

But these are suggestions for tackling the more negative and hedonistically pre-emptive aspects of the car-culture. We also need to emphasise the positive pleasures and experiences of going slower. For wherever proper provision is made, to walk or to cycle is also to enjoy sights and scents and sounds, and the pleasures (and benefits) of physical activity and forms of solitude and silence, that are 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 rickshaws and motorised bikes for the too young and less able, showers and changing-rooms and cafés at regular intervals on cycle tracks? Schemes like these look utopian in the present context of the car culture, but the costs would be negligible relative to that of the continued expansion of the motorways (especially if one factors in the medical costs likely to be saved through better public health).

Perhaps the single, most prized and seemingly irreplaceable advantage of fast travel is the ease with which it delivers us to far-flung holiday or conference destinations, and permits large numbers of people (though always a small minority in global terms) to enjoy tourist experiences that would once have been confined to the wealthiest elite. The pleasures of foreign travel are undeniable. Yet in the era of the so-called 'global village', with its pressures towards homogenised forms of tourist provision, long-distance holidaying no longer guarantees unprecedented experience in the way it once did. Moreover, holidays today are seldom of a kind to provide that sense of timeless immersion in a different environment and rhythm that once made them such objects of nostalgia - particularly for children.

One might even hazard that the extreme contrasts to ordinary life presented by holidays in very distant and culturally unfamiliar locales militate against the more surreal and dream-like holiday experience that accompanies a removal to somewhere closer yet still strangely different from normality. Proust's Marcel scarcely travels very far from Combray to his holidays in Balbec, and its 'tourist' experiences are hardly very dramatic or sublime; there is much that is repetitious, even to the point of tedium, in the ways that the days are expended. But it is precisely in virtue of those qualities, and their subtle shifts in what constitutes the routine and the familiar, that the sequence of days combines to constitute a rare and entrancing experience: they are able to merge with each other in a way that will yield in retrospect their unforgettable beauty and exceptionality.

Delivering goods faster, getting more done, enhancing productivity, these are all objectives that are intimately connected with the contemporary adulation of speed, almost always presented as entirely laudable aspects of the work culture of modernity. But speed in the context of work is really about the saving of labour time. It is, as E.P. Thompson famously pointed out some while ago now, about the clock replacing the sun, such that time becomes a form of imprisonment rather than a milieu in which life is lived. Today, we are still subject to that imprisonment. We may not be back with the work routines of the nineteenth century, but there is no doubt that we are still subject to a time-economy imposed by the quest for profit, which is seriously undermining of human happiness and well-being. Those of a more optimistic cast who anticipated a future age of leisure have been confounded; very little free time has been realised from the unprecedented productivity of the last century. Dramatic illustration of the opportunities missed in this respect is provided in Juliet Schor's 1991 book, *The Overworked American*:

Since 1948, productivity has failed to rise in only five years. The level of productivity of the US worker has more than doubled. In other words, we could now produce our 1948 standard of living (measured in terms of marketed goods and services) in less than half the time it took in that year. We actually could have chosen the four hour day. Or a working year of six months. Or, *every worker in the United States could now be taking every other year off from work - with pay*. Incredible as it may sound, this is just the simple arithmetic of productivity growth in operation (p2).

In fact, what happened in the US - where, as elsewhere, any political 'choice' in the matter was ruled out by the dictates of the economy - was that free time fell by nearly 40 per cent between 1973 and 1990; and although the average American in 1990 owned and consumed more than twice as much as he or she did in 1948, they also had considerably less leisure. Similar trends are signalled in the UK, where a steady decline in work hours since the mid-nineteenth century was halted in the 1990s, and where two-fifths of the workforce are now working harder than in the 1980s.

It has often been pointed out, as a relatively new aspect of contemporary worker 'exploitation', that those who put in most hours on the job are today also among the most highly paid. It might seem, then, that they are driven less by the need for more money than by their fear of losing their premium job, their ambition to achieve, their desire for recognition, or their sheer addiction to the 'workaholic' routine. One has to doubt, of course, whether any of these personnel would put in the same hard graft without the relatively high levels of remuneration, but it would certainly seem that the status acquired through holding down a high pressure job is a significant source of additional fulfilment. On the other hand, the blurring of the work-life distinction that is the almost inevitable accompaniment of the 60-70 hour week and constant availability comes at enormous personal cost, and in an important sense erodes the possibility of any other form of fulfilment. There are now Wife Selecting and speed dating agencies pandering to the pathology of those whose job addiction has cost them all sense of the art of living. There is a whole service industry supplying round the clock childcare to those who can no longer spare the time for it themselves. There are increasingly bizarre work practices and divisions of labour (for example, couples doing back to back shifts) in those cases where childcare is simply proving too expensive. A recent study covering 1074 working and co-habiting adults over the age of 18 found that more than a fifth of couples were so busy they could go for a week without seeing each other, often with serious impact on their relationship.

Sceptics will always question whether there really is a need for more free time, and whether people are genuinely capable of benefiting from it. But this scepticism has never had to be put to the test, since we have never yet experienced a socio-economic scenario in which work and income are relatively equally distributed, part-time work is the norm, and everyone has access to a reasonable level of basic income. Nor have we yet experienced an industrialised

society that, having ample leeway for the provision of more free time, has not extensively commodified recreation itself, so that it has come to be regarded as a source of further productivity and economic growth. In a culture where being in work is closely associated with personal success, and those without work are almost always deprived of the necessary resources for the carefree enjoyment of idleness, or for the more concentrated and passionate pursuit of hobbies or cultural or sporting activities, it is hardly surprising if 'free time' is seen as a problem rather than a source of fulfilment. We cannot predict how people would react to less work if it was no longer so closely associated with the stigmata of idleness, unemployment and reduced citizenship. There is also evidence that long hours and workaholic culture affect the capacity of people to relax and cope with leisure time. There is, in other words, a 'work-ethic dialectic', which needs to be replaced along alternative hedonist lines, so that by working less we also come to find it easier to relax. The shift required to transform the ethics of work along the lines that André Gorz and others have suggested will certainly strike many as too utopian to be feasible. But it also seems utterly implausible to suppose that we can continue with current expansion rates in production, work and consumption over the coming millennium.