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## From consumerism to wellbeing: toward a cultural transition?

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## ABSTRACT

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

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

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## 1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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