

Overcoming Cultural Dissonance in the Transition to a Postconsumerist Future

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Introduction

The national economies of the global North have been struggling since 2007 to regain their former vitality and the prolonged post-crisis period has given rise to a “new normal” characterized by high unemployment, sluggish consumer demand, volatile financial markets, and general societal malaise (Schor 2010; Etzioni 2011). Viewed against more established trends in many of these countries of wage stagnation, increasing income inequality, and middle-class contraction such developments suggest erosion of several important pillars of the post-World War II consumer society (Ivanova 2011; Irvin 2011; Mullard 2011). Concomitantly, many of the long-standing cultural assumptions that have organized everyday life remain in place, though they are showing increasing signs of strain.

It is not necessary to review here the large literature on social constructionism to posit that there is typically divergence—sometimes quite profound—between mental models of understanding and the corporeal world (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Hannigan 1995). Our conceptions are assembled from a complex bricolage of lay and tacit knowledge, mimetic duplication, political rhetoric, personal and familial experience, social context, superstition, religion and so forth. Because large buffers typically exist between human activities and the wider surround it is normally possible to tolerate significant discrepancies without incurring perilous risks. However, as scholars of societal collapse have capably demonstrated, failures to properly conjure accurate interpretations of extent conditions have had extremely parlous consequences (Tainter 1988; Diamond 2005). The state of the contemporary discourse surrounding global climate change is largely the result of insufficient feedback loops of this type (Stoll-Kleemann et al 2001; Madhavan & Barrass 2011).¹

Economic conditions can be even more challenging for people to grasp in a timely way because of their abstractness and variability over geographic space (thus confounding opportunities for meaningful personal appraisal) (McCloskey 2003; Waitzkin et al 2005; Storr 2010). Numerical indicators of unemployment and economic growth are furthermore embedded in various expert discourses that rely on politically contested definitions. More problematic still, when extent circumstances shift, large cleavages can open up between societal expectations and lived experiences and these gaps can, in turn, lead to marked indecisiveness.

It now appears that the breach between dominant public narratives regarding the economy and actualized conditions in many Anglo-European countries is widening and an expanding pattern of *cultural dissonance* is taking hold. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines dissonance as “a lack of agreement or inconsistency between the beliefs one holds or between one’s actions and one’s beliefs.” It is a central

¹ Dissonance should not be confused with denialism which suggests a different social psychological response and stems more from a purposeful rejection of the validity or credibility of extent information.

concept in psychology and has been taken up in various allied fields such as marketing where it is deployed as a way to explain the anxieties that often accompany processes of goods acquisition.²

Dissonance is typically approached as an individualized condition but the assertion put forth here is that societies (or collectivities of individuals) can also manifest this conflictive condition.³ Readers will likely recognize that this is not an uncontroversial claim. Over the years, some social scientists have vigorously challenged the validity of this scalar transferability, yet research on political culture continues to bear out the presence of central tendencies at the national (or societal) level (see, e.g., Almond & Verba 1963; Inglehart 1990; Inkles 1997). This paper seeks to explore how the current period of economic instability is contributing to macro-scale discordance in some of the most severely affected countries. In particular, the aim is to examine how the recent episode of economic overreach, and the subsequent process of financial retrenchment, is contributing to disjointedness between prevalent expectations surrounding consumption and actual opportunities to consume.

The next section briefly discusses several historical examples in which resounding events have triggered cultural dissonance about consumption. The third section describes the emergence of consumerism as the dominant mode of societal organization in Anglo-European countries and outlines how efforts to overcome cultural dissonance are presaging a transition to postconsumerism. The fourth section focuses specifically on the renowned idea of the “American Dream” and explains how this trope has functioned as an aspirational heuristic in the United States. The fourth section examines the manifestation of similar expressions of cultural dissonance in Europe and the fifth section considers the case of Japan. The final section situates the prospect of a postconsumerist future within the history of macro-scale economic transitions and reflects on the role of scholarship on this issue.

Brief Insights from Recent and Ongoing Economic Transitions

Over the past half century there have been no shortage of economic transitions and these disruptions have typically opened up large fissures between societal expectations and lived experiences. For instance, the economic plans implemented by occupying military governments during the aftermath of World War II induced widespread cultural dissonance in Germany and Japan (Rimer & Kerkham 2001; Geppert 2003; Kage 2011). For somewhat different reasons, mostly associated with the final stages of imperial decline and the debilitating burdens of two costly wars, the British public went through its own process of aspirational recalibration after 1945 (Barnett 1972; Marsh 1999; Conekin et al 1999; Hennessy 2007; Addison 2010).

The dissolution of the Soviet Union during the early 1990s is perhaps the most dramatic example of economic transition during recent memory, a process that overturned prevailing cultural narratives and created widespread insecurity (Tsygankov 2002; Kaser 2003; Abbott & Wallace 2010; Abbott et al 2011; Popov 2012). Most of Eastern Europe and the Balkans experienced a similar phase of reorganization and it took years for societal expectations and lived experiences to realign, and in some cases pronounced public ambivalence or indeed resistance to consumerism remains a notable feature of contemporary life in these countries (Mitra & Selowsky 2002; Galasinska & Krzyzanowski 2008; Albinsson et al 2010). And these are only some of the upheavals of the last few decades. A more elaborate list includes China, Vietnam, South Korea, Chile, Cuba, and numerous others.

It would likely be highly instructive to delve into these instances in detail, but that is a task for another time and place. The more immediate point is that economic transitions occur more frequently than we might initially acknowledge and these experiences constitute a repository of insights that may be relevant to a putative postconsumerist transition. Common to all of these cases is the prevalence of

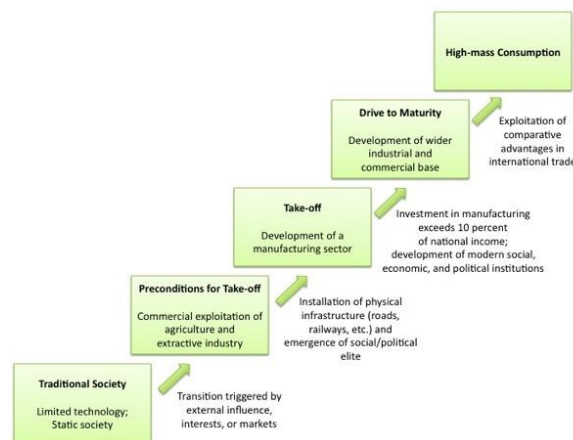
² Indeed the main objective of some forms of consumer resistance is to actively foster dissonance as a means of encouraging behavior change. See, for example, Sandlin & Callahan (2009).

³ The most famous treatment of this issue is probably Daniel Bell’s book, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* originally published in 1976.

preexisting conceptual and institutional frameworks that set the boundary conditions for societal aspirations. Either due to war, revolution, or the accumulated weight of internal contradictions, once-prevailing systems of economic organization were supplanted by new modes. Because of lag effects, it takes time for affected populations to accommodate themselves to the new circumstances and during this period of adjustment it can be quite difficult to navigate. The phenomenon is roughly analogous to trying to find one's way through an unfamiliar city using an outdated map.

There is also an important lesson here for critics of consumerism in that the relative frequency of economic transitions suggests that the dominant organizational logic of Anglo-European countries is not immutable. Though it may at times be difficult to conceive, change is inevitable and despite the common perception that we are tragically locked into lifestyles that are powerfully defined and delineated by consumerism, new avenues will avail themselves. In contradistinction to the claims once offered by development theorists such as Rostow (1960), a high mass-consumption society is *not* the endpoint of history (see Figure 1). With this in mind, the following sections consider the contours of an approaching postconsumerist era.

Figure 1: Rostow's Stages of Growth Model



Consumerism and Postconsumerism

It is becoming apparent that the current phase of economic instability in Anglo-European countries is not just a periodic downswing in the customary boom-bust cycle, but is rather the start of a more extensive process of structural reorganization. Already in 2008, a correspondent for the Los Angeles affiliate of a major news organization was prompted to intone, “Is this the end of the consumer society? The evidence is growing that America is undergoing a fundamental economic restructuring....[there is] the possibility that some radical cultural shift is taking place...How does America adjust to a zero growth economy? Can we live without all the toys of a hyperconsumer society?” (Kaye 2008).

If we adopt the perspective of the *longue durée*, the dominant mode of economic organization over the past 250 years has progressed from agrarianism to industrialism to consumerism (Galbraith 1958; Landes 1969; Bell 1973; Braudel 1992; Kumar 2005; Ferguson 2011).⁴ The early consumerist era was distinguished by a Fordist model of production and consumption—later subsumed by its Keynesian successor—whereby an ample supply of relatively well-paying jobs provided worker-consumers with the

⁴ It is common to characterize this historical process as proceeding from agrarianism to industrialism to servitization (also including financialization). However, with upwards of 70 percent of gross domestic product in the relevant countries now attributable to the consumption and a preponderant share of people deriving their identities from their roles as consumers, it is more appropriate to characterize the current period as being predicated on consumerism.

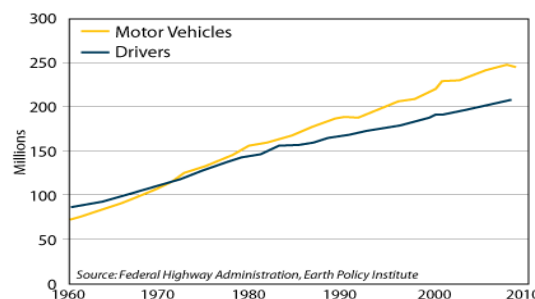
income necessary to assimilate growing volumes of mass-manufactured goods (Cohen 2003; Freeland 2011). As wages and purchasing power began to stagnate during the late 1970s, the virtuous cycle started to dissipate (Lipietz 1987; Anim 1994; Gibson-Graham 2006). However, the onset of bank deregulation and the subsequent revolution in consumer finance injected unprecedented amounts of credit into consumer markets (Calder 1999; Geisst 2009). This infusion provided the resources necessary to artificially maintain (and in many respects extend) consumer lifestyles and to catalyze a period of robust consumption-driven economic growth.⁵ This process of expansion continued in several ebb and flow iterations until 2007 when efforts to increase purchasing capacity through ever-more innovative techniques came crashing down in a wave of worthless credit-default swaps, impenetrable derivative deals, and various other financial products of dubious integrity (Reinhart & Rogoff 2009; Lewis 2010).

In the aftermath of this implosion, analysts began to observe some intriguing trends (some which appear with hindsight to actually have been set in train prior to the financial collapse). Certain leading consumption indicators have begun to evince sustained decline. For instance, several nations appear to have reached the point of “peak car” exemplified by declining vehicle-fleet size, vehicle miles traveled, and licensed drivers (within the younger age cohorts) (Puentes & Tomer 2008; Goodwin 2010; Newman & Kenworthy 2011) (see Figures 2–4).⁶ The reasons for this situation are complex and likely vary across countries, but we can speculate that they derive from a combination of more volatile commodity prices (especially oil), increasing automobile operating costs, expanding and revitalizing public transport systems, reurbanizing metropolitan populations, untenable congestion levels, demographic shifts, and widening income inequality (Cohen 2012; see also Geels et al 2011).⁷ More provocatively, Chris Goodall (2011) has recently suggested on the basis of material flow data that the UK has reached “peak stuff.” The degree to which this assessment might be applicable to other countries remains to be determined.

Are these developments harbingers that the consumerist era of continually growing volumes of resource throughputs is coming to a close? We will not know with any confidence until we have achieved some historical distance though an observation by Benett and O’Reilly (2010) merits attention.

The simple truth is that the elements that permitted hyperconsumption to flourish (near-full employment, easy credit, plentiful natural resource) aren’t coming back anytime soon, if at all. The employment sector is in upheaval, way many job categories obsolete. Easy credit has all but evaporated, and the world’s burgeoning middle classes will only intensify the pressure on our increasingly scarce resources. So even if the consumer masses wanted to go back to mindless excess, they could not.

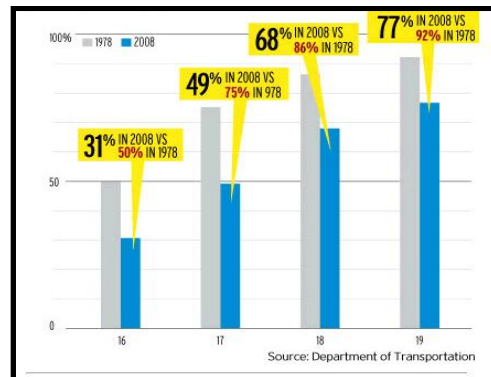
Figure 2: United States Motor Vehicle Fleet, 1960–2010



⁵ See Livingston (2011) for an provocative defense of this strategy.

⁶ See Millard-Ball and Schipper (2011) for a discussion of the related concept of “peak travel.”

⁷ Consideration of the codependency between automobility and consumerism is beyond the scope of this paper.

Figure 3: United States Vehicle Miles Traveled Per Capita and Real Gasoline Pump Prices, 1991–2008**Figure 4: Percentage of United States Population 16-19 Years Old with Driver's Licenses, 1978 and 2008**

A growing number of observers are grasping this situation and the debate on postconsumerism has been joined (see e.g., Roach 2008; Leonhardt 2008; Rosenbloom 2010; Walker, 2010; Whelan 2011; Cowell 2011a; Edsell 2012; see also Etzioni, 2004, 2009). Moreover, the current wave of austerity policies is likely to hasten this transition by dampening purchasing power.⁸ This development imposes an ironic and perhaps unexpected twist on efforts to transcend currently ecologically untenable modes of consumption—sustainable consumption is being triggered by poverty rather than affluence.

Sustainable consumption under these circumstances is coming to be operationalized through a multitude of efforts: alternative agro-food networks, community energy schemes, worker-owner cooperatives, passive home construction, transition towns, and planning projects to reappropriate the public streetscape for nonmotorized activities. These are commendable initiatives, but like most social experiments they are cutting against the organizational logic of a disabled, but still intact, consumerist system. Moreover, it will be a major undertaking to successfully scale up these initiatives to a level where they might begin to challenge dominant lifestyle modes.

Somewhat more optimistically, there are indications that the business community is similarly coming to recognize that fewer consumer dollars will be available for it to capture and that the era of rampant goods acquisition is disintegrating. Recent years have seen the publication of a number of books hailing a new consumer mindset predicated on “mindful spending” (see e.g., Bennett & O’Reilly 2010; Gerzema & D’Antonio 2010; Hsieh 2010). Even the celebrated business strategist Michael Porter is encouraging companies to embrace “shared value” and policies to encourage well-being as part of efforts

⁸ There is, of course, no single vision of a postconsumerist future and different authors invoke varying terminology to describe the era that will supersede the current consumerist era.

to rehabilitate consumer-driven capitalism (Porter & Kramer 2011). It is however important to keep these developments in perspective. The marketing industry is quite adept at appropriating consumer disaffection to sell the next generation of products. The current enthusiasm that surrounds “green consumerism” is but the latest manifestation of this practice (Strasser 2011; Owen 2011).

The American Dream in Retrospect and Prospect

The term “American Dream” was coined by James Truslow Adams in his 1931 book *The Epic of America* to capture public resilience in the face of severe dislocation during the early years of the Great Depression. Contemporary usage of the expression is multifaceted and it encompasses economic opportunity, freedom, financial security, happiness, employment satisfaction, homeownership, and wealth. While there has always been disparity between the American Dream as an aspirational heuristic and its realization, the fit over time has been sufficient to preserve the general idea. As of 2010, according to opinion polls, 67 percent of the public had confidence in being able to attain it (Good 2010).⁹ This level of resolve is perhaps surprising given the actual status of the central tenets of the American Dream. A recent synopsis by Robert Borosage and Katrina van den Heuvel (2011) captures the essence.

Every element of the dream is imperiled. Wages for the 70 percent of Americans without a college education have declined dramatically over the past forty years, although CEO salaries and corporate profits soared. Corporations continue to ship good jobs abroad, while the few jobs created at home are disproportionately in the low-wage service sector. One in four homes is underwater, devastating what has been the largest single asset for most middle-class families. Healthcare costs are soaring, with nearly 50 million uninsured. Half of all Americans have no retirement plan at work, pensions are disappearing and even Social Security and Medicare are targeted for cuts. College debt now exceeds credit card debt, with defaults rising and more and more students priced out of higher education.

Throughout the post-World War II period, the suburban house has been at the heart of the American Dream (Kruse & Sugrue 2006; Anderson 2010; see also Duany 2010). Less readily acknowledged is that this housing style—and by extension consumer society more generally—has received over the decades massive subsidies specifically targeted at relatively wealthy (middle class and above) homeowners. These inducements have been delivered primarily through the tax deductibility of mortgage interest and the provision of federal guarantees on home loans.¹⁰ There is though in the new age of austerity recognition that such favorable treatment is no longer affordable (estimated to cost \$100 billion annually) (Landis & McClure 2010; Ventry 2010; see also Sullivan 2011). For instance, the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform waded into these turbulent waters in 2010.¹¹ Despite being attacked from both sides of the political aisle, the issue of how best to reform mortgage lending is on the table and will likely continue to attract pragmatic policy makers especially now that homeowners appear more inclined to exercise their strategic default option (Ellis 2011; Wilkinson-Ryan 2011).

⁹ The Center for the Study of the American Dream at Xavier University monitors public sentiments associated with the American Dream on a regular basis. See <http://www.xavier.edu/americandream>.

¹⁰ Homeowners in the United States are able to annually deduct interest payments on mortgages valued up to \$1 million and on home equity loans up to \$100,000. Heavily subsidized highway construction has also played an important role in the development of suburban landscapes to encourage consumerist lifestyles.

¹¹ The Committee’s report was released at the end of 2010, but actually failed to secure formal endorsement of the required supermajority of its membership.

The precariousness of the American Dream is also attributable to the income dynamics affecting the country's shrinking middle class which is becoming polarized between, on one hand, a relatively small cadre of affluent consumers and, on the other hand, a far more sizeable group of people engaged in basic household provisioning supplemented by occasional forays to deep-discount retailers (Freeland 2011; Clifford 2011; Rich 2011). It is therefore unsurprising that incipient social movements on both the right and the left sides of the political spectrum are using the growing elusiveness of the American Dream as a springboard (Marovic 2012; Dorrien 2012). Within this general framing, the tendency of some constituencies to paradoxically favor policies that would compound their own economic marginalization has prompted a lively debate on whether the public is actually able to discern its political interests (Frank 2004; Wisman & Smith 2011; Graeber 2011).

In the face of all of this roiling turmoil, there seems to be conspicuous inability to adequately acknowledge that the giddy, credit-fueled days prior to the Great Recession are unlikely to return (Roach 2008; Ivanova 2011; Crotty 2012; Edsell 2012). With few realistic political prospects of reversing wage stagnation or regaining access to unbridled consumer credit, attention has turned instead to cutting taxes as the next best alternative for increasing personal incomes. The primary problem with this strategy is that household consumption is not inseparable from public investment. For example, the personal automobile is of little value when governments lack sufficient resources to maintain the roadways. More generally, the public institutions that facilitated upward mobility in prior decades are being systematically hollowed out. What is remarkable (and perhaps paradoxical) is that some of the most historically marginalized groups in the United States—African-Americans, Hispanics, and other immigrants—retain the greatest confidence in and regard for the American Dream (Good 2010; Ford 2011).

There is nonetheless a point at which short-term accommodation to challenging economic circumstances elides into the status quo (Goodman 2009; see also Alderman & Thomas 2012). A tendency exists to presume that many Generation Y-ers and others are simply biding their time until the job situation improves. But what happens if a return to robust employment takes a decade or longer to achieve, and in the mean time provisional arrangements of, say, living at home with parents, become entrenched and free of social stigma (something that already seems to be occurring) (Rampell 2011; Hoder 2012)?¹² It is plausible that the ability to avoid onerous housing payments and to enjoy a more streamlined lifestyle will gradually gain acceptance as part of the tradeoff of being able to engage in more creative and fulfilling—but less remunerative—activities.

One manifestation of the uncertain current and future status of the American Dream, both as an idea and an attainable objective, is a vigorous debate taking place around American declinism versus American exceptionalism. Books and articles published over just the last few years on this subject could fill an entire library (see, e.g., Panzner 2009; Ackerman 2010).¹³ This is not the place to weigh in on this ideologically charged controversy, but instead the aim is to make a somewhat more subtle point. Both sides of this dispute may be misreading the evidence. The assertion here is that it is less a matter of decline or renewed exceptionalism that is at issue and more a case of fundamental economic realignment, one where familiar organizational logics are being upended.

A Pending Transition to Postconsumerism in Europe?

The European public does not subscribe to an equivalent synthesizing cultural narrative predicated on economic opportunity, material accumulation, financial independence, and libertarian freedom as is the case in the United States. The closest approximations to a “European Dream” are

¹² See also “Room for Debate” at <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/12/26/the-whole-family-under-one-roof/extended-families-depends-on-the-country>. The term “boomerang kids” is used to describe this phenomenon.

¹³ The website of the journal *Foreign Policy* maintains a regularly updated blog entitled “Decline Watch.” See http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/category/topic/decline_watch.

founded—somewhat incongruously—either on imperial or colonial nostalgia (Gilroy 2004) or a combination of social democracy and trans-European consolidation (Schwimmer 2004; Rifkin 2004). However, these aspirations are now actively being challenged in a wide arc of countries—most notably Ireland, Portugal, Spain, Greece, Hungary, and the UK—due to the imposition of harsh austerity policies designed to curtail public expenditures, to prevent further deterioration of bond ratings, and (for countries in the euro zone) to preserve the common currency. The requisite belt-tightening has led in recent months to growing unemployment (especially among youth), violent riots, tax boycotts, and governmental collapses. The orthodox view is that aggressive cuts will reduce outsized public budgets, restore investor confidence, and set the stage for a period of robust economic growth (Donadio 2011; Cowell 2011a). While some headway has been made on the first two objectives, as time goes on it seems that growth, at least in the conventional sense, is not going to return as quickly as proponents of this strategy have hoped. It may be the case, for better or worse, that much of Europe will be looking at low growth (or conceivably degrowth) for the foreseeable future.

Given this growing realization, there are indications that ordinary people in the most severely affected countries are beginning to face up to these new and emergent circumstances. A casual review of media accounts reveals that amidst all of the disillusionment, fiscal rectitude, and efforts to recatalyze traditional forms of consumer spending, grassroots social innovations are being pursued. It is admittedly difficult to assemble these developments into a complete picture at present because of their inchoate character, but they nonetheless merit careful attention. In the interests of space, let us take up two national cases at opposite ends of the continent.

In the UK, a harsh critique of capitalism, prompted by widening income inequality and stringent austerity measures, has gained considerable ground over the last couple of years (Cowell 2011a, 2011b; see also O’Riordan 2011). This appraisal is not random or directionless, but rather is being shaped by an active politics of energy and climate change that includes planning for a low-carbon transition and awareness that the North Sea oil bonanza is coming to an end. By one count (conducted in 2005), more than 500 community renewable energy projects were being pursued and the government’s Low Carbon Community Challenge recently attracted over 500 expressions of interest (Hielscher et al 2012). With respect to agro-food systems, numerous local organizations in cities such as Manchester are working at the interface of food security and environmental justice to develop alternative networks for food production and provisioning (Psarikidou & Szerszynski 2012).¹⁴ Though difficult to grasp, the sustainability implications of these activities need to be interpreted from the standpoint of the UK’s increasingly peripheral role in European political affairs. This changing relationship is largely due to the extraordinary lengths that Prime Minister David Cameron has had to go to insulate London-based financial firms from new European bank regulations (Thomas 2011).

Turning our attention to Greece, we find a country that is locked into an extremely debilitating downward economic spiral without an end in sight. Suffering from a massive public debt burden and precluded from pursuing currency devaluation, the government has been sharply reducing wages and public expenditures. European negotiators have been compelling bondholders to take “haircuts” in exchange for assurances that remaining debt payments will be made. Unemployment is spiking dangerously upward, more than 25 percent of Greek businesses have been forced into bankruptcy since 2009, and Chinese investors are buying up the country’s ports and other infrastructure at fire-sale prices (Shorto 2012). Offsetting this grim situation, anecdotal evidence suggests more positively that a growing cadre of youth are reclaiming disused or neglected family farms and the number of innovative—many Internet based—barter networks is proliferating (Donadio 2011b, 2012). Another interesting development is that the country’s historically low level of female labor-force participation is changing as Greek women increasingly become the primary source of household income (Kitsantonis 2011).

It though must be acknowledged that these nascent activities in both the UK and Greece—many of them arguably sustainability enhancing—represent only one dimension of a putative European economic transition. Survey data, as well as more visible signs of public rage, suggest that interethnic

¹⁴ See Grimshaw and Rubery (2012) and Sawyer (2012) for different perspectives of the political landscape,

hostilities are increasing and gaining expression. In addition, recurrent political difficulties in Belgium and more urgent calls for Scottish succession suggest that we may be witnessing the early stages of active efforts to redraw the European political map. The new governments that have come to power in Greece and Italy are wobbly at best and the youth unemployment problem—more than 50 percent in Spain and almost 5.5 million in the whole of the euro zone—poses enormous challenges (Donadio 2011a; Morris 2012). Across the continent's southern tier, suicides have dramatically increased and already low birth rates are falling further, both signs of serious societal distress (Povoledo & Carvajal 2012; see also Cooper 2011; Catalano et al 2011). At the same time, Germany has consolidated its control of several important European institutions and the country has taken advantage of a weakened euro to enhance its own international competitiveness. These developments are creating palpable angst among neighboring publics that are inescapably trapped in downwardly trending living standards (Wapshott 2012; Fitoussi 2012; Donadio 2012). The resounding, and perhaps understandable, political answer to this array of unsettling problems will be to deploy the conventional toolkit to kickstart economic growth.

Japanese Postconsumerism?

For more than two decades, Japan has been portrayed by the global media as the “sick man” of the international economy, a country overwhelmed by massive public debt, “zombie” banks, “hollowed out” industries, and anemic economic growth.¹⁵ According to this view, the Japanese never recovered from the collapse of the twin real estate and stock market bubbles of the late 1980s and early 1990s and a succession of ineffectual governments failed to pull the country from its torpor. Gross domestic product (GDP) peaked in Japan in 1995 at approximately US\$5 trillion and for the past seventeen years has fluctuated between stagnation and decline. Because of lapsing demand, consumer prices have been in a vicious deflationary spiral. The country's population is shrinking and its median age is increasing (the highest in the world at 44.8 years). Japan's leading industrial firms are—especially in the wake of the triple disaster of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown of 2011—reconfiguring their supply chains and moving jobs to China and other lower wage Asian nations (Fackler 2010, 2012). The dominant understanding among economists and others is that Japan ineptly bumbled through the 1990s and 2000s and meekly surrendered its role as the world's second largest economy to China in 2010.

But have the “lost decades” really been so bad? Are these appraisals correct, or is something else going on? In fact, a growing circle of observers has begun to develop a dissenting interpretation and this work may also have wider relevance (Bowring 2008; Kato 2010; Kelts 2010; Weil 2010; Chandler et al 2011; Fingleton 2012). Of critical importance here is whether Japan is simply the leading edge of an expansive economic transition toward postconsumerism that is only beginning to express itself on a wider geographic scale.

Various indications suggest that the Japanese are taking their diminished status in stride and at the same time asking penetrating questions about topics typically beyond the pale in other countries.¹⁶ For instance, economist Noriko Hama (2012)—regarded by some observers as a Japanese version of Paul Krugman—recently wrote that a modified understanding of so-called Japanization “could be all about affluence, maturity, refinement, and leisureliness. It could be all about being grown up. A grown up

¹⁵ Conservative commentators in the United States seem to have an especially sharp ax to grind regarding Japan. See, for example, Randazzo (2009) and Scissors & Foster (2009).

¹⁶ Kazuko Aso, the director of a Tokyo artists' cooperative and lead organizer for an exhibit on display in Washington, DC, recently wrote, “This disaster put an end to the era of the post-war prosperity; the time for chasing economic success and materialistic prosperity is over. The disaster has reminded us...we can never conquer nature; we must live with it” (quoted in Hiatt 2012).

economy that is the envy of the rest of the world. That could be Japan's position in today's scheme of things."¹⁷

Though it may be hard for occasional visitors to the country to fathom, journalistic accounts suggest that the sensibilities described above are reasserting themselves among Japanese consumers and their customary enthusiasm for luxury goods is fading (Tabuchi 2009a, 2009b; Shoji 2010). Moreover, automobiles of all makes and models have become especially prominent targets for disavowal among youth and the term "kuruma banare" (roughly translated as demotorization) has been devised to capture this phenomenon (Kageyama 2009; Cohen 2012). Interestingly, Japanese retailers with expertise in adapting to more frugal consumption patterns are starting to export their business models to the United States and elsewhere.¹⁸

With the passage of time, we may find that the prevalent interpretation about Japan has been precisely backwards. In a postconsumerist world of scarce resources and impinging biophysical limits, the country's high savings and employment rates, equitable income distribution, and modest material consumption relative to GDP are likely to become envied—and emulated—characteristics.

Conclusion

Contemporary discussions of economic transitions tend to treat processes of societal transformation in largely positive and ineluctable terms. To take but one prominent example, the notion of "creative destruction" as popularized by Joseph Schumpeter (1976) suggests that periodic reinvention is ultimately a source of human betterment. This idea is anchored in an Enlightenment discourse of continual improvement and the prevailing view is that change is tantamount to progress (Wright 2004).

There is though no getting around the fact that the sequential economic transitions from agrarianism to industrialism to consumerism were wrenching and often bewildering for people caught up in the throes of change. Laws were rewritten, new infrastructure was built, and familiar routines were torn asunder. One need only read the work of nineteenth century political economists (as well as their muckraking counterparts) to get an appreciation of the turmoil caused by the wholesale shift from a primarily agricultural system of production to an arrangement predicated on industrial manufacturing. The more recent process of deindustrialization that began in the second half of the twentieth century was (and continues to be) similarly disruptive. The abandoned hulks that still stand in many former industrial districts, and the dispirited people that often occupy the neighboring areas, are evidence of both the disarray that accompanies new modes of economic organization and the inevitable incompleteness of any transition.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries produced various initiatives to accommodate first the shift to industrialism and then the move to global consumerism. Sanitarians and public health officials were strong proponents of the early automobile as a way to rid densely packed cities of the problems of horse-drawn transportation and to disperse urban populations (to reduce the spread of disease). They also championed land-use zoning because it offered a way to relocate polluting industrial facilities away from residential districts (Cohen 2006, 2012). The construction of large public housing complexes in deindustrializing cities was another well-intentioned, but ultimately ineffectual, policy idea because it tended to concentrate poverty in places without adequate employment opportunities and to disregard complex system dynamics (Forrester 1969). As discussed above, the mass infusion of credit into the consumer economy represented yet another policy intervention that was designed to correct one problem—namely to enable people to assimilate surplus production during a period of wage stagnation—but proved economically catastrophic in the end.

¹⁷ The equivalence between Hama and Krugman is from Gross (2012).

¹⁸ A company that exemplifies this trend is Uniqlo, a Japanese retailer with a reputation for selling stylish clothing at inexpensive prices (Tabuchi 2009a; Wilson & Barbaro 2006).

We now likely stand on the brink of an economic transition from consumerism to postconsumerism. It is befitting to acknowledge that such changes take place within the context of complex adaptive systems and we are truly novices in planning for such transformations. Experiences from the past provide some instructive guidance, but each transition poses its own challenges and expresses itself in different ways depending on the conditions that pertain in particular locales. This is thus a call for caution as we move forward (see also Shove & Walker 2007). The *weltanschauung* of consumerism is deeply embedded in contemporary culture—it provides the operating system for people to negotiate their way in the world—and it would be unwise to underestimate its tenacious hold.

Having said this, the prescription that we are unlikely to be able to do everything should not be interpreted as a call to do nothing and this is a point on which some of the early theorists of ecological modernization had shrewd insight. We cannot let ourselves fall into romanticized traps. As we seek to catch a glimmer of a dawning era of postconsumerism, it is critical to remain forward looking and cognizant that efforts to reinvent an idyllic past are bound to fail. Postconsumerist is unlikely to be effectively premised on lifestyles grounded in either urban or rural repeasantization.¹⁹ Neither will it be based on the perpetuation of middle-class perquisites instituted during the twentieth century. At the same time, there are not many truly new ideas in the world and we need to gather up the threads of the past and carry them forward. Accordingly, the organizational logic of a postconsumerist future will need to entail clever combinations of the following: urban agriculture, self and communal provisioning, labor reskilling, infrastructural retrofitting, low-carbon technologies, carbon rationing, and hyperconnected modes of social interaction. We will need to be patient for cultural dissonance to recede and for collective consciousness to adjust before a sufficient number of agile minds are able to assemble these elements into workable configurations.

In the mean time, it is incumbent on scholars and others who are concerned about the future to formulate imaginaries that can begin to reveal the outlines of a postconsumerist era. It is useful to recall that the onset of industrialization was preceded by a long period dating back to the Middle Ages in which proto-industrialists sought to bring industrialism into view. Similarly, both far-sighted companies and marketing visionaries did much to anticipate (and to create) the current era. Similar engagement will be necessary to supplant the fraying consumerist age with a viable successor.

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¹⁹ See Melhuish (2011) and Corrado (2010) for discussions of the conflicting tendencies inherent in representization.

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