

For the opening session of the Sustainable Consumption and the Cities Workshop in Eugene, Oregon

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A recent study shows that most Americans think that we consume too much; and that we would be happier and our country would be better off if we consumed less. This opinion is independent of political ideology (Right-Left) or attitudes toward environment and climate change.

The story of how we got to the highly consuming way of life is quite familiar to many of you. The post-war huge industrial overcapacity during the 1940s refocused itself on civilian production: of houses, furnishings, cars, and the infrastructure. Suburban model of a perfect family life was invented. By 1960 the suburban residents of single family homes for the first time outnumbered rural and urban dwellers. Today, 82% of the population lives in areas with 4 or less housing units per acre and only 4% live in hyper-dense urban areas, defined as 30 housing units per acre. And we have become a consumer society. By this I mean a society where the national economy largely depends 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.

This massive collective shift in lifestyles since World War II exacts, as we all know, high ecological price. What is less often discussed is how profoundly it has shaped people's aspirations and the notion of good life. In a span of a single generation consumerism and suburban lifestyles have become *conflated* with such fundamental values as wellbeing, autonomy, and what it means to be an American. Another striking thing about this transformation is that it was a deliberate construct, not some historical inevitability. It was shaped by coordinated efforts of government (infrastructure, tax laws, other policies), organized labor (which single mindedly pushed for higher wages, not, for example, for longer vacations) and the business community. If this is a construct, and if such a massive cultural transformation could happen so fast, then we should consider that a change beyond the consumerist lifestyle model and values is also possible and, in fact, achievable.

The challenge is to reduce the ecological impact while fostering human wellbeing. In this quest, technology is an ally: through renewables, efficiency improvements,

new materials. And cities are an excellent place to exercise that technological option. Per-capita carbon footprint of dense city dwellers is about 30% lower than in suburbs. That footprint can be significantly decreased through technology and infrastructure. For instance, the know-how is well developed for constructing buildings with energy performance at the Passive House, just waiting to be adopted (maybe *through legislation?*). Solar energy is getting quite advanced. And urban high density is an opportunity for creative approaches to personal mobility and access.

But technology alone cannot get the job done. First, the reductions it can produce are simply not big enough. Second, the efficiency gains inevitably produce various rebound effects. We therefore need to shift toward lifestyles which are less dependent on material consumption.

What could drive such a collective transition in lifestyles and who the agent of change would be? Top-down policies? We can use policy instruments to modify behaviors (carbon tax, for example, or outlawing incandescent light bulbs) but in the political sphere there is little appetite for policies that would *dramatically* change consumption patterns and lifestyles. Environmental movement? There is abundant evidence that concerns about the environment is a weak and short lived motivator for adopting small footprint lifestyles.

If not a moral imperative, and not public policy, then what?

My proposal is this: if people collectively reframe their conception of wellbeing as less tied up with material consumption, then there is a chance that lifestyle choice may also shift. I stress wellbeing because a strive for wellbeing is a powerful and sustained force in people's lives.

Is such a reframing of wellbeing possible? Extensive body of research on what makes people happy sheds light on this question. Here, I highlight 3 key findings from this research.

One. There is a remarkable consistency in the basic determinants of human happiness, from the US to Japan to Afghanistan: a stable marriage, good health, membership in a community, friendships, autonomy and social trust. Not material wealth per se. Which is not to say that material wealth is irrelevant.

This leads me to finding Two: as a species we are deeply social. We realize ourselves through relationships with others and we judge our position in life in relation to others. Once the basic subsistence needs are satisfied, it is of greater importance to be ahead of others than to be ahead. And in a society where one's success in life is measured through material consumption, there is of course a tendency to pursue material wealth without end. (*In a classic experiment the MIT students consistently stated that they would rather have a lower salary that was higher than that of everybody else, than have a higher salary that was below the average*).

Third Observation: People adapt very quickly to new circumstances -- better or worse -- with a sense of wellbeing tending toward the pre-change status. People who lost a lot of money in 2008 were very unhappy, but a year or two later their happiness level was restored. And in a society where wellbeing is conflated with material acquisitions this leads to insatiability, known also as "hedonic treadmill": Aspirations increase with income; The baseline of what is necessary and "normal" keeps getting higher.

The research findings Two and Three lead to a conclusion that in a competitive society such as ours, as long as wellbeing is culturally defined through the attributes of the currently dominant lifestyles – large house, suburbs, accumulation of stuff -- we are hopelessly stuck in the consumerist arms race. Which is insatiable and, in and of itself, does not bring life satisfaction.

But what if the circumstances impose a tighter personal budget?

What if they necessitate greater interdependency among people?

What if a large and self-aware population chooses lifestyles that are financially constrained but create opportunities for a collective pursuit of wellbeing?

What if people's competitive streak draws on attributes other than consumer goods?

Here, I come back to the role of cities, and I want to propose a rudimentary scenario for the future.

The scenario is about the millennials (early 20's to mid 30's, comprising about 50 million people). Two relevant facts about the millennials: One, their economic prospects are uncertain and their economic mobility is stunted. Two, their interest in suburban lifestyle model is waning; great majority of them would like to live in city centers.

The latter finding is a huge shift in lifestyle preferences, reminiscent of their grand- and great-grand-parents' post-war move to the suburbs. We of course do not know how many millennials will actually choose city life once they have families. But those who do will have to redefine their aspirations for good life as less bound up with material consumption. Apartments in the cities are expensive, leaving less discretionary income. The living spaces are smaller, discouraging accumulation of stuff. Owning a car is a burden.

With constrained finances they may have to depend on more collaborative and reciprocal modes of organizing housing, childcare, procuring fresh food, maintaining personal mobility. They may engage in more swapping, bartering and shared ownerships. Cities -- with all their public spaces, public art, and other amenities for collective (*not private*) use -- are of course perfect places for these kinds of lifestyle changes.

This collaborative and reciprocal lifestyles may richly compensate for declining purchasing power of millennials by strengthening the sense of community and social trust, all essential for the sense of wellbeing. And the sheer size of this demographic group, and their social media-based interconnectedness, increases the probably that the incremental individual lifestyle changes may evolve into a shared collective consciousness and an emergence of a new framing of wellbeing, one that is radically different from that of the post-war generations.

Note that the cultural transition presented in the above scenario is not driven by policy or civil society organizations. I see it as a bottom up process. But make no mistake. This transition is unlikely to succeed in the absence of active support from government: local, state, perhaps federal. By one account, 20% of the US population belongs to managerial and professional class that might be able to afford current urban lifestyle. The remaining 80% are either struggling or are chronically poor (I am not counting the super-rich). Without affordable housing for the modest income and middle income families the terms "smart cities" and

“walkable cities” will be euphemisms for gentrification (it already is). Access to quality public education and mass transit, family friendly labor laws, urban design that increases density while accounting for people’s needs in life, and deep awareness of the issue of equity, are some examples of what is needed.

Municipalities have an opportunity to support and foster the emerging promising social trends toward lifestyles that involve lower consumption, regardless of the motivations: environmental, low income, changing life priorities.

Human wellbeing and technological greening must progress in tandem. Otherwise, we cannot win this game.