



# A Silk Purse out of a Sow's Ear

by Amitai Etzioni

**B**y the first part of 2013, the economic growth rates of China and India were falling sharply; the growth of the United States and Japan were anaemic; the EU was on the edge of a recession. While the Arab Awakening is often considered a call for democratization, most citizens of the nations involved are keen to command a significantly higher standard of living, which may well not be forthcoming. As Dominic Rushe and Phillip Inman report in *The Guardian*, the IMF is warning that the global economy is headed toward its lowest growth rates since 2009. Governments seem unable to find the economic tools that would restore the economy of their nations, and indirectly that of the world, to the levels enjoyed in previous decades. Historically, domestic upheavals and conflicts among nations occur not when they are most poor and oppressed but when growth is lost and expectations are dashed. Indeed, one sees in many nations an increase in nationalism, xenophobia, racism, religious fanaticism, and extreme politics. The fact that inequality is rising very sharply in all the nations involved adds further fuel to the sociologically combustible condition.

If the people of the world cannot return to what is being called the 'old normal' (paid for by strongly growing economies), what will the new normal look like? Will it simply be a frustrating and alienating, scaled-back version of the old normal? Or will people develop different concepts of what constitutes a good life, as they did in earlier historical periods? If successful, a recharacterization of the good life will allow people to make – to use a rather archaic turn of phrase – a silk purse out of a sow's ear; in plain English, to turn their misery into an opportunity.

## The Good Life in Historical and Transnational Perspective

People immersed in the consumerist culture that now prevails in large parts of the world find it difficult to imagine a good life that is based on profoundly different values. However, throughout history different conceptions of what makes a good life have dominated. For instance, for centuries the literati of imperial China came to prominence not through acquisition of wealth, but through the pursuit of knowledge and cultivation of the arts. This group of scholar-bureaucrats dedicated their early lives to rigorous study in preparation for the exams required for government service, spending years memorizing the Confucian classics. Having passed the imperial exams, the literati carried out their government duties in tandem with various artistic pursuits, or even retired early in order to dedicate themselves to those pursuits. They played music and composed poetry, learned calligraphy, and gathered with like-minded friends to share ideas and discuss great works of the past.

Sociologist Reinhard Bendix writes that in keeping with Confucian teachings 'the educated man must stay away from the pursuit of wealth... because acquisitiveness is a source of social and personal unrest... The cultured man strives for the perfection of the self, whereas all occupations that involve the pursuit of riches require a one-sided specialization that acts against the universality of the gentleman'.

Another alternative conception of the good life can be found among knights during the Middle Ages, who were expected to adhere to an exacting code of chivalry that is well captured in *The Song of Roland*, an 11th-century poem. Throughout the poem, the worthy knight is shown to serve his liege lord gladly and faithfully, to protect the weak and the defenceless, to display proper reverence for God, to respect and honour women, to be truthful and steadfast, and to view financial reward with revulsion and disdain.

Even in recent Western history, there have been significant changes in what was viewed as the good life. One such major change occurred after the end of World War II. At that time, economists held that human beings had fixed needs, and that once these were satisfied people would consume no more. Noting that during the war the American productive capacity had greatly expanded, economists feared that at the end of the war the idling of the assembly lines that had produced thousands of tanks, planes, and other war-related materials would lead to massive unemployment, because there was nothing the assembly lines could produce that people needed, given that their fixed needs were sated.

In this context, Harvard economist John Kenneth Galbraith came up with

a solution. In his book *The Affluent Society* he conceded that private needs were satisfied, but pointed out that the public sector could absorb the 'excess' capacity by investing it in public schools, parks, museums, and such. Similarly, David Riesman published an influential essay, 'Abundance For What?', in which he suggested that the 'surplus' be used for projects such as paying the people of New Orleans to continue to maintain their 1955 lifestyle so that future generations of children could visit this sociological Disneyland to see what life was like in earlier ages, as they do in Williamsburg.

Instead, in the years that followed WWII, industrial corporations discovered that they could produce needs for the products they were marketing. For instance, first women and then men were taught that they smelled offensive and needed to purchase deodorants. Men, who used to wear white shirts and grey flannel suits like a uniform, learned that they 'had to' purchase a variety of shirts and suits, and that last year's wear was not proper in the year that followed. The same was done for cars, ties, handbags, towels and sheets, sunglasses, watches, and numerous other products – as Vance Packard laid out in his bestselling book, *The Hidden Persuaders*. More generally, the good life was newly defined as enjoying a high and rising level of consumption, in the sense that a person could never consume enough. There was always a new product, or a fashionable new version of an existing product, that the person 'needed'.

Less often noted, probably because it is so self-evident, is that paying for this high level of consumption required hard work. It was initially mainly



the husband who worked to provide for the family, leaving – as depicted in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* – little time and energy for other pursuits, including being with the family. In later decades, as more and more women joined the labour force, the combined incomes of husband and wife went to paying for the high-consumption lifestyle. More and more people began to take their work home with them, even on holidays, courtesy of Blackberries and their equivalents, and more seniors and teenagers took jobs.

In short, there is nothing natural or unavoidable about what is today considered the good life, the affluent life. Indeed, it is a lifestyle that was rejected in earlier historical periods in the East and West.

### **Replacing Versus Capping Consumerism**

Criticisms of consumerism, materialism and hedonism are at least as old as capitalism and are found the world over. Numerous social movements and communities originating from within capitalist societies have pursued other forms of the good life. The Shakers, who left Manchester for America in the 1770s, founded religious communities characterized by a simple ascetic lifestyle. Other ascetic communities (some secular, some religious) have included the Brook Farm Institute, the Harmony Society, the Amana Colonies, and the Amish. In Britain, John Ruskin founded the Guild of St George in the 1870s, which he intended to guide the formation of agrarian communities that would lead a simple and modest life. Jewish refugees who emigrated to Palestine early in the twentieth century established kibbutzim, in which the austere life was considered virtuous, consumption was held down, communal life was promoted, and advancing a socialist and Zionist agenda was a primary goal of life.

In the 1960s, a counterculture ('hippie') movement rose on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Its core values were anti-consumerism, communal living, equality, environmentalism, free love, and pacifism. Timothy Leary encapsulated the hippie ethos when he advised a crowd to 'turn on, tune in, drop out'. The British iteration of the hippie movement manifested itself in London's underground culture, which Barry Miles, writing in *The Guardian*, has aptly described as a 'community of like-minded anti-establishment, anti-war, pro-rock'n'roll individuals, most of whom had a common interest in recreational drugs'.

Many of the movements and communities that wished to opt out of both the consumption and work systems of capitalism sought to form an alternative

universe wherein people could dedicate themselves to transcendental activities, including spiritual, religious, political, or social pursuits. The aim was to *replace* capitalism, rather than to *cap* it and graft onto it a different kind of society.

The historical record reveals that practically all these movements and communities failed to lay a foundation for a new contemporary society, let alone a new civilization, and practically all of them either disintegrated, shrivelled, or lost their main alternative features. It seems that there is something in ascetic life that most people cannot abide for the longer run.

Hence it seems that if the current austere environment calls for a different attempt to form a society less centred on consumption, this endeavour will have to graft the new conception of a good life onto the old one. That is, not seek to *replace* consumption but to *cap* it and channel the resources and energy thus freed into other pursuits.

Once one approaches the subject at hand through these lenses, one finds millions of people who already have moved in this direction, although they are not necessarily aware that they are following a new vision of a 'good society' or coming together to promote it. These millions include a large number of senior citizens who retired before they had to, to allow more time for alternative pursuits. These seniors typically lead what might be called a comfortable life from a materialistic viewpoint, but spend more of their time socializing and engaged in spiritual, cultural and politically active pursuits, rather than continuing to be employed and to consume full-throttle. (Note that by definition those who retire early earn less than those who continue to work, and hence either consume less or leave less of a bequest, which limits the consumption of their families.) The same holds for the millions of women or men who decide not to return to work after having children (at least until the children reach school age, and, for many women/men, long after that) although doing so means that they will have to consume less.

As these two large groups illustrate, as well as those who drop out of high-earning pursuits to follow a more 'meaningful' life (say, as teachers for those less privileged), to consume less one need not lead a life of sackcloth and ashes, of deprivation and sacrifice. One can work enough to ensure one's basic creature comforts but dedicate the rest of one's resources, energy, and aspirations to goods other than the consumed variety. One can, indeed, find *more* satisfaction in pursuits which offer an alternative to working long and hard to pay for consumption above and beyond what is needed for a comfortable life. The fact that millions have long persisted in capping their consumption and finding other, more authentic sources of contentment suggests that such

capping is much more sustainable than the ascetic life advocated by the social movements and communities that sought to replace capitalism altogether.

### **Consumerism Versus Happiness**

Overviews of social science data have repeatedly concluded that after income rises above a given level, additional income buys little happiness. Japan is an often-cited example. Between 1962 and 1987, Japan's economy more than tripled its GNP per capita. Yet according to Richard Easterlin, Japan's overall happiness remained constant over that period. Providing further support for this point, Easterlin also shows that although in America the average income could buy over 60% more in 1970 than it could in the 1940s, the average happiness of Americans did not increase during that time. True, as is often the case in social science, not all the data point in the same direction. However, if all studies are taken together they leave little doubt that at high income and consumption levels, additional consumption (and the work required to afford it) leads people to deny themselves the joys of alternative pursuits.

The import of these data ought now to be revisited, as many middle- and working-class people face not so much the option of giving up additional income (and obsessive consumption) in order to free time and resources for alternative pursuits, but are forced to give up on the dream of an affluent life built upon high and rising levels of consumption. Can people come to see such capping not as a source of frustration but as an opportunity to re-examine their priorities? The analogue is not someone who has lost his job or is paid only a minimum wage, but a worker with a decent job who finds that he is furloughed one day each week and hence works only four days, and finds that the extra day offers a welcome opportunity to spend more time with the kids or go fishing.

The thesis that people will be better off if they cap their consumption and dedicate the freed energy and resources to alternative pursuits should not be interpreted as a suggestion that people should buy into what sociologists call 'status acceptance', the ideology that whatever your position in society, you should accept it as your place in life and not seek upward mobility. Status acceptance finds its roots in Aristotle, the philosopher who dealt most explicitly with the subject at hand – what makes a good life – and gave us the felicitous term 'flourishing'. He did not mean by it (as modern commentators often do) those people who live up to their fullest human potential – but that people will find basic contentment if they labour to carry out best whatever social role they find has been cast their way. The servant serves well, the lord leads well, and

so on. (Aristotelian philosophy is much more nuanced and complex than the preceding lines suggest, but this need not detain us here.) The Catholic Church made this precept one of its central tenets during the Middle Ages, and status acceptance is built into the Indian caste system.

In contrast, my claim is not that a low wage, a low status, or even unemployment should be tolerated, but that – whatever a person's earnings, above a certain basic level – working fewer hours and hence consuming less can be viewed as an opening for re-examining one's lifestyle and as the beginning of a quest for alternative sources of contentment. So what is the 'basic level'? To answer this question, it is useful to draw on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs. At the bottom of this hierarchy are basic creature comforts; once these are sated, more satisfaction is drawn from affection and self-esteem, and, beyond there, from self-actualization. When the acquisition of goods and services is used to satisfy the higher needs – as in when we use our purchases to signal success, show off, or impress a date – consumption turns into consumerism, an obsession. The transition is empirically indicated by the level at which additional income and the associated consumption generates little or no additional contentment.

### **The Alternatives**

The main alternative to consumerism is what I call 'transcendental pursuits' – those activities whose focus is neither materialistic nor commodity-based, and which yield much more contentment than does the obsessive pursuit of consumer goods. Many transcendental pursuits are very familiar, but deserve restatement as they seem to have fallen into neglect, eclipsed by the rise of consumerism.

*Social activities:* Individuals who spend more time with their families and friends are more content than those less socially active. As Robert E. Lane writes, 'Most studies agree that a satisfying family life is the most important contributor to well-being... The joys of friendship often rank second'. Robert Putnam presents a mountain of data to the same effect in his classic book *Bowling Alone*.

*Spiritual and religious activities:* Individuals who spend more time living up to the commands of their religion (attending church, praying, fasting, making pilgrimages, and doing charity work) are more content than those less so engaged. In his book *The Politics of Happiness*, Derek Bok points to studies that demonstrate that people with a deep religious faith are healthier, live longer,

and have lower rates of divorce, crime, and suicide. Robert Putnam and David Campbell found that the difference in happiness between an American who goes to church once a week and one who never attends church was 'slightly larger than the difference between someone who earns \$10,000 a year and his demographic twin who earns \$100,000 a year'.

*Non-instrumental activities:* Much of consumerism's failure to bring satisfaction can be attributed to the fact that the focus of consumerism is the *pursuit* of enjoyment rather than the enjoyment itself. People labour long hours for the sake of getting money which, in turn, is only a means to purchasing things that they will hardly have time to enjoy after all the time spent working and shopping. By contrast, there is great joy to be found in those activities that we consider to actually *comprise* the good life as opposed to those that are merely the means to attaining that good life. These non-instrumental activities include studying for studying's sake – rather than doing it for vocational purposes – or engaging in cultural activities such as painting or making music, again not to serve a market but for the intrinsic enjoyment that they bring. Such activities are characterized by what Kant called 'purposiveness without purpose': intentional, motivated action that is engaged in for its own sake.

*Community involvement:* Researchers who examined the effect of community involvement found a strong correlation with happiness. One study by John F. Helliwell, which evaluated survey data from 49 countries, found that membership in (non-church) organizations has a significant positive correlation with happiness. Derek Bok reports that 'Some researchers have found that merely attending monthly club meetings or volunteering once a month is associated with a change in well-being equivalent to a doubling of income'. Other studies have found that individuals who devote substantial amounts of time to volunteer work have greater life satisfaction.

There is no need for more documentation here as these studies are familiar and readily accessible. They suggest that capped consumption combined with greater involvement in one alternative pursuit or another (or a combination of several) leads to more contentment than consumerism does. The challenge we face is to share these findings, along with their implications for populations dragged into an age of austerity.

### **Two Bonuses**

A society in which capping consumption is the norm and in which the majority of people find much of their contentment in transcendental pursuits will receive two



bonuses of great import. One is obvious, the other much less so.

Obviously, a good life that combines a cap on consumption and work with dedication to transcendental pursuits is much less taxing on the environment than consumerism and the level of work that paying for it requires. Transcendental activities require relatively few scarce resources, fossil fuels, or other sources of physical energy. For instance, social activities (such as spending more time with one's children) require time and personal energy but not large material or financial outlays. (Often parents who spend large amounts of money on toys or commercial entertainment for their kids bond with them less than parents whose relationships with their kids are much less mediated by objects.) The same holds for cultural and spiritual activities such as prayer, meditation, enjoying and making music, art, sports, and adult education. True, consumerism has turned many of these pursuits into expensive endeavours. However, one can break out of this mentality and find that it is possible to engage in most transcendental activities quite profoundly through only moderate consumption of goods and services. One does not need designer clothes to enjoy the sunset, or shoes with fancy labels to benefit from a hike. And the Lord does not listen better to prayers read from a leather-bound Bible than those read from a plain one, printed on recycled paper. In short, the transcendental society is much more sustainable than the consumerist one.

Much less obvious are the ways in which the transcendental society serves social justice. Social justice entails transferring wealth from those disproportionately endowed to those who are underprivileged. A major reason such reallocation of wealth has been surprisingly limited in free societies is that those who command the 'extra' assets tend also to be those who are politically powerful. Promoting social justice by organizing and galvanizing those with less and forcing those in power to yield has had limited success in democratic countries and led to massive bloodshed in others. Hence the question: Are there ways to reduce the resistance of the elites to the reallocation of wealth?

Recharacterization of the good life along the lines here indicated can help, because it encourages high earners to derive a major source of contentment not from acquiring additional goods and services but from transcendental activities that are neither labour- nor capital-intensive. There are numerous accounts of rich people who have given substantial parts of their wealth to good causes. It is much better for all when such people gain prestige, self-esteem, or affection by *doing* good rather than by *buying* goods.

Among the well known examples of those who have embraced charity over additional consumption are George Soros, Bill and Melinda Gates, Warren

Buffett and the children of the Rockefellers. And there are many more like them, such as the rich who give to charity for religious reasons, but are less visible because their contributions are smaller (though not smaller proportional to their assets). The more transcendental ideals are accepted, the greater the number of affluent and powerful people who will have less reason to oppose reallocation of wealth, and the more who may even find some source of contentment in supporting it. Granted, we have seen that embracing transcendental ideals and social-minded values can take on a more extreme and excessive character, as was the case with the spread of the counterculture. There is no guarantee that we shall get it right this time, but surely it is worth a try in the face of the mounting anti-social reactions to forced austerity.

One can envision other characterizations of a good life. However, we should not delay the dialogue about what such a society would look like and what its norms and projects can be. The world would greatly benefit from a reorientation of the goals of the economic system, in particular if we face prolonged sluggish economic growth. By reframing our conception of the good life, slow growth might be viewed not as frustrating and alienating but as an opportunity to re-examine and reset life's priorities, and to determine if we can break away from consumerism without denying that we all seek and are entitled to secure, basic creature comforts. Recharacterization of the good life may not only spare the world major social and political upheavals and international conflicts but also create a world in which more people can flourish.

