

Introduction

In the United States, the structures and institutions that have come to constitute our economic and social norms currently measure our progress and well-being as a nation, as citizens and as individuals by consumption. Our benchmark of success is the sale and accumulation of consumer goods, despite glaring evidence that this is economically unhealthy in the long-run, psychologically unfulfilling and disastrous ecologically. This is an opportune moment for growth towards a sustainable future. Considering how we can build a livable future means deconstructing the ills of our economic and social archetypes and investigating new possibilities. If we can examine the flaws our current standards and reorient our aims, then we can build institutional markers with goals of health, equity and ecology in mind. To begin, we examine the fault lines of consumption as an economic foundation, as a form of civic participation and as a lifestyle choice. I set out to deconstruct our current scenario of hyperconsumption and to look for sprouts of ideas and projects that lend themselves to sustainable

change. Following this critique we can better understand the economic, sociological and ecological demand for making sustainability a structural goal and measure of success. I argue and try to demonstrate that the most promising pathway towards such institutional change revolves around community interaction and a re-grounding of civic participation. Finally, we consider the potential to construct these community-oriented changes into our built environment and technological and political frameworks.

Picturing Ourselves: Consumption and America

Sitting around a dining room table, fork tongs click as they spear food on plates. Between bites, conversation revolves around family and friends. They are doing well. They just bought a new car. They just got their first house. Their new job pays better. They are carving out a space in the world for themselves within a circle of material wealth. Beyond subsistence, after basic needs are met, Americans begin to fill the space between themselves and their goals with things. Each new step in life entails new purchases, new accoutrements. This wealth is

referential in nature, placing judgment in what it means to have and not have based on in-group standards pervading class, race and sex with its insistent drive that from no matter where we start from we will always need more. Listening to the American political, social and media discourse this construction of referential measurement of success based on consumption becomes more and more obvious. Taking from the mythmaking of those such as Horatio Alger, the idea of “making-it” embodied by the achievement of wealth has been universalized in our society. It is hailed as the American Dream, referenced as a patriotic duty and serves as the measure for our national well-being. We are marketed products for each step along this endless journey towards success, displacing our wants and desires onto the next consumer good.

The United States consumes over 19.5 million barrels of oil per day as of 2008, more than any other country.¹ American meat consumption has shot up from 144 pounds per person in 1950 to 222 in 2007.² The U.S. alone consumed

¹"The World Factbook: United States," [CIA, The World Factbook, United States](http://CIA.TheWorldFactbook.UnitedStates), 24 Mar. 2010, CIA, <cia.gov>.

²"Farm Animal Statistics: Meat Consumption," [Human Society of the United States](http://HumanSocietyoftheUnitedStates), 30 Nov. 2006, <humanesociety.org>.

over 350 kg per person of steel, 25 of aluminum, 75 of plastics and 360 of cement. We exceed the world average for consumption of steel by 120 kg per person, aluminum by 22 kg, plastics by 60 kg and cement by 68 kg.³ This consumption is based on such high levels of production, purchase, use and disposal that it is in fact hyperconsumption. The statistics are tired, worn out by this point. We cannot internalize these numbers. They are too big, too often repeated without the weight they deserve, too often manipulated for seemingly incompatible agendas. We cannot rely on them alone. They have lost their shock value and still they have become compulsory. We must move beyond them and consider the political and social realities that mandates these levels of consumption.

As Juliet B. Schor illustrates in her book *The Overspent American*, Americans, despite having more wealth than most of the world, generally feel as though they do not make enough money to acquire everything that they “really

³Philippe Rekacewicz, "Raw Material Consumption in the United States and Europe," Maps and Graphics, 2004, UNEP/GRIDA, <grida.no>.

need”.⁴ “Twenty-seven percent of all households making more than \$100,000 a year say they cannot afford to buy everything they really need.”⁵ This increases to a one-third of the group making between \$50,00-\$100,000 showing that America’s middle class feels materially deficient.⁶ This says nothing of America’s poor who struggle to make ends meet in a culture where a six-figure salary has become “inadequate”. Even more unsettling, Shor reminds us that the U.S. saves less than nearly any other nation, as individuals and as a populous.⁷ This is a particular brand of consumerism that has pervaded the American conscience since the end of World War II. It is a mind-set grounded in the idea that we, as a wealthy and powerful nation, have unlimited resources that are to be used in the production of consumer goods.

Hyperconsumption: A Case for a Paradigm Shift

⁴ Juliet B. Schor, The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need. (New York: HarperPerennial, 1998) pg. 6.

⁵ Schor, The Overspent American, 6.

⁶ Schor, The Overspent American, 6.

⁷ Schor, The Overspent American, 6.

“We are surrounded by snobs, “ began Alain Botton at the 2009 TED talks.⁸ Botton spoke about the meaning of success and how we evaluate our personal status. A snob, he specified, is someone who learns one thing about you and judges you on it, most particularly with the question “What do you do?” and a corresponding judgment of achievement and wealth. Alain de Botton links the drive for our satisfaction and rewards with our drive to consume. He thinks we are part of a culture that gives us rewards, like love and the self-worth we feel from it, based on what we own and the jobs that we have. Further, he links the “spirit of equality” in a democratic, consumption-based society with an “envy” we feel for those we can relate to, namely our peers. We are made to feel as though if we have energy and good ideas we too can become Bill Gates, or rise to the modern equivalent of aristocracy. He digs into success, asking us to think about what success means and to work to see more of our individual wants and desires in our ideas of success, rather than those implanted by society.

Alain is on track with many people writing, blogging, journaling and

⁸ Alain De Botton, "A kinder, gentler philosophy of success," [TED talks](http://www.ted.com/talks/alain_de_botton_a_kinder_gentler_philosophy_of_success.html), July 2009, TED, <http://www.ted.com/talks/alain_de_botton_a_kinder_gentler_philosophy_of_success.html>.

communicating their issues with success and our standards of achievement.

People are talking about this issue of how we measure achievement and how we construct these societal norms. We, as a society, construct our visions of success and continually adapt them to material realities of the time. For example, it should not be too shocking that in the US we measure individual progress through a lens of material wealth, considering that we measure our national progress and success by GDP.

Gross Domestic Product is the most widely used measurement of economic growth and well-being. The GDP is the total value of all products and services purchased in an economy. In short, it is the rate of the flow of money. As the United States defines economic well-being as money changing hands, it is no wonder we fail at saving both individually and as a nation. So, where is our money going? What is going on with consumption in modern, industrial society, specifically the United States? We may sometimes call it the American Dream, but this urge to push through the next income bracket to have more buying power

is disconcerting. Consumption at the high volume level that it is experienced in the United States can be fittingly called hyperconsumption.

As writer of *Jihad vs McWorld*, Benjamin Barber, puts it, "The exact point at which a life of frugality – led by most people until the 1950s – developed into one of comfort, before slipping into absurd excess, is impossible to determine."⁹ Barber's focus is on the trend of obsessive consumerism that he thinks has arisen in the US and Europe over the past sixty years. His newest work, *Consumed*, shows that consumers are more often focused on the image of a product, rather than its function. In this way, consumers begin to fill in their lives with the images of the products they consume. Our image of what we own and why we own it begins to blend into our self-image. Disturbingly, if one follows this link, we are what we own.

These tensions between self-image, consumption, success and our future are rampant in the public and media discourse. The current economic climate in the United States and globally has sparked a heightened awareness about our

⁹ Benjamin Barber, "Think you love shopping? It's the marketing scam of the century," interview by Sophie Morris, *The Independent* 19 June 2009.

habits and judgments, our spending and saving, and what we do with our lives and why. Most noticeably, there is an increased mainstream media presence of these discussions. From an ongoing advertisement series presented by Allstate Insurance reminding us that it's not what we insure, but whom we are insuring, to ads that admit the hard times, there is a marketing push towards advertising differently during a recession. An *All Things Considered* piece on National Public Radio entitled "Selling Americans on the Virtuous Recession" talked about the spin on economic "doom and gloom".¹⁰ There is a "growing effort" to sell Americans on the idea that we can gain, grow, "enjoy the small things in life" and "enjoy the lesson of dignified deprivation".¹¹

The New York Times has featured a number of articles on the American Dream and its feasibility during a recession¹² along with photos and reader commentary on living during the recession in a series called "Living with Less".¹³

¹⁰ Michele Noris and Martin Kaste, "All Things Considered," [Selling Americans On The Virtuous Recession](#), NPR, WAMU, Washington, DC, 22 Jan. 2009.

¹¹ Michele Noris and Martin Kaste, "All Things Considered," [Selling Americans On The Virtuous Recession](#).

¹² Katherine Q. Seelye, "What Happens to the American Dream in a Recession?" [New York Times Online](#) 7 May 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/08/us/08dreampoll.html?_r=1.

¹³ "Living With Less: The Human Side of the Global Recession," [The New York Times Online](#),

The Economist's cover article for December 2009 focuses on our ideas of progress stating, "GDP does not measure welfare; and wealth does not equal happiness."¹⁴ For *GOOD* magazine, this paradigm shift produced an issue called *Slow Down*, featuring a manifesto called "In Defense of Time Off".¹⁵ The issue of progress, defining what success in America means and finding value in the way we spend our time, are topics currently rampant throughout media outlets.

Finally, in the academic and activist communities, issues surrounding consumption and our material culture that were present before the recession have gained a new prominence. Consumerism and material definitions of success have taken a new place at center stage for people interested in social inequality, economic prosperity, psychology, social constructs of culture and more. Perhaps the most dominant fields of study and activism in this topic are those concerned with the environment. Although the message varies, the concern that consumerism, "as if we have infinite resources", is unsustainable

<<http://projects.nytimes.com/living-with-less>>.

¹⁴ "Onwards and Upwards: The Idea of Progress," *The Economist* 19 Dec. 2009: pg. 39.

¹⁵ GOOD and READYMADE, "A Manifesto: In Defense of Time Off," *GOOD* Jan.-Feb. 2010: pg. 66.

and dangerous is throughout these bodies of work. Author and activist Bill McKibben tackles these issues in his books, blogs and op-ed pieces, examining environmental degradation alongside population, consumption and visions for a future in an era of global climate change. In his work in economics, including his book *Deep Economy*, McKibben challenges our economic goals and offers a new vision for a future of different consumption and collective value. McKibben hopes for a future of resilient communities and shapes his approach around the tenants of split-level development. McKibben suggests a governmental reorientation of ecological measurements (like putting a price on carbon) combined with the community development of building local systems with the stability to stay successful in an unsure ecological future.¹⁶ David Bollier is another writer among many who pick up on McKibben's assertion that more growth doesn't necessarily make us happy.¹⁷ He points to the rise of ecological and socially concerned economists who are re-thinking old questions of "what maximizes utility?" and

¹⁶ Democracy Now! With Bill McKibben, "Bill McKibben talks about 'Eaarth'", 15 Apr. 2010, <http://www.postcarbon.org/video/90272-bill-mckibben-talks-about-eaarth-on>.

¹⁷ David Bollier, "The Perils of Equating Wealth with Happiness," *On the Commons*, 5 Apr. 2007, <onthecommons.org>.

instead asking “Is your life good?”

Perhaps the most disconcerting possibility is that the prevalence of these discussions (outside of academia) is solely due to the current economic downturn. There is the idea that we are not addressing these issues with any hope of deconstructing their sources and blazing a new trail, but rather lamenting the doom of lost jobs and decreased consumption. *However, there is another option.* This is a moment for the United States to consider its tenants of success, consumption and material wealth and to deconstruct these constructs that prominently influence our society. Like Alain de Botton’s presentation suggests, the culture of sustained growth at all costs has made many of us more unhappy and socially isolated. There are deep-seeded economic, environmental, psychological, and societal concerns about the maintenance and continuance of this current paradigm. Of course, these concerns inform one another and blend together. It is through a deconstruction of these ills at the economic, social and ecological levels that we can see their interconnectedness and perhaps

bushwhack a clearer path towards defining what is at stake and how we can change. Luckily, America has a history of inventive change in the face of daunting tasks, particularly in the pursuit of happiness and well-being.

Overspent Economy

We must start from the idea that an economic system based on continual inputs of non-renewable resources is not sustainable in a biological world of limits. Hyperconsumption is typified by the use of resources beyond their ability to renew, using things up faster than they can replenish their stocks. Therefore, an economy that measures and weighs itself on the idea of continued growth and overuse of resources is untenable in the long run.

French author, Benoit Duguay, has named hyperconsumption a prominent cause of the global financial crisis. He traces the rampant high-speed accumulation of debt within the middle class to borrowing on property, paying

excessive interest rates and accepting the now infamous subprime mortgages, all driven by the trends of consumption began after World War II. Duguay sees the consistent push to own more as having driven the United States' middle class into debt, bankruptcy and defaulted on their loans, weakening American financial institutions.¹⁸ Another take on this phenomenon comes from Climate Change Now contributor Richard Clark. For Clark, there is a sick paradox in the idea that many people work to produce goods and services that are frivolous in that were middle class Americans able to work only as much as they wanted, they would never be need or purchase the many consumer goods created to ease the scheduling of forty-plus hour work weeks with streamlined simplicity, sacrificing health over efficiency and inundating tired, after-work audiences with television advertisements. He concedes that this does not include the lower 40 to 50 percent of income earners, who are often caught in a cycle of decreasing wages

¹⁸ Benoit Duguay, "Hyperconsumption and the global financial crisis," web log post, Talk About Consumption, 28 Sept. 2008, <<http://benoit-consumption.blogspot.com/2008/09/hyperconsumption-and-global-financial.html>>.

and inflating housing prices that would not allow them to decrease work hours.¹⁹

Aside from the unsustainability of an economy reliant on hyper consumption, economic inequalities are but one among many negative side effects of hyperconsumption.

The politics of a society tied to a consumption driven economy are further cause for concern. As Lizabeth Cohen outlines in her book *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Post-War America*, there was a process of creating a consumer-citizen. She pulls on the idea that consumerism arose as a symbol of American prosperity in opposition to the "deprivations of communism."²⁰ The early stages of the Consumer Republic after World War II presented an idea of "purchaser as citizen" wherein the "consumer satisfying personal material wants actually served the national interest."²¹ This logic is still presented to us today politically through pleas to continue shopping and framing

¹⁹ Richard Clark, "Global Climate Change & The Hyper-consumption Treadmill," *Climate Crisis Journal*, Imaja: video, graphics, art, animation, multimedia, music, educational and productivity software, 06 Apr. 2010 <<http://www.imaja.com/as/environment/can/journal/hypercons.html>>.

²⁰ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004) pg. 8.

²¹ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, pg. 8.

confidence in our economy as a patriotic duty. Cohen argues that since the 1980s we have seen an increasing overlap of the roles of citizen and consumer. They have blended to create what she calls the “consumer/citizen/taxpayer/voter” in which citizens political actions and affiliations are measured in how they relate to their personal material satisfaction like a market transaction.²² This presents a social and political issue in which we are handcuffed when our civic interaction and our purchasing power are tied. If we are only worth our political weight in consumer goods then we are marginalizing enormous numbers of our population and politically excluding those who seek to reduce their consumption either out of desire or destitution.

Using consumption as a way to work for social change is another problematic of this overlapped consumer/citizen interaction. In recent years many political movements have staged a site for change with how individuals spend their purchase dollars. For instance, I want to help support the troops, so I buy American made goods. I am concerned about the environment so I buy

²² Lizabeth Cohen, A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America, pg. 9.

“green” products. Although these activities give individuals a sense of authenticity, the correlation between individual consumer purchases and political change is weak at best. Consumer choices presented as political decisions have a history in boycotts, which were extremely successful in the Civil Rights movement and Gandhi’s peaceful resistance for India’s Independence. However, these were organized, long-term, staged consumer choices with a firm movement message and a mobilized community behind them. Individual consumer choices about what is in your cart at checkout do not carry the weight of a formalized message about product boycotts or the promise of a community of others participating in like-minded product preference or refusal.

Leaving political action and social justice in the hands of the individual consumer is ineffective. Furthermore, the propagation of this sort of link between citizen/consumer roles and voting with your dollars places the agendas of social and political movements in peril. Recent publications extolling the virtues and ease of “going green” or fighting world hunger with certain brand labels and small

consumer choices are duping consumers into feeling that they have fulfilled a civic role in their shopping. This placement of social responsibility of societal ills upon the individual consumer replays a narrative common to American understanding of these ills in the first place. Mike Maniates tackles this in his article "Individualization: Buy a Bike, Plant a Tree, Save the World?" saying, that we understand these issues "half-consciously" as the result of "individual shortcomings" leading us to believe that they can be "best countered by action that is staunchly individual and typically consumer-based."²³ This is the acting out of principles we are taught about how our economy runs, which is that rational consumers make choices leading to a marketplace of logic and profit. Mike calls this "*individualization of responsibility*"²⁴ and sees it as blinding individual consumers to consideration of the larger structural issues facing us. For example, when we dwell on choices between paper or plastic or which new greenest dishwasher we can buy we are individualizing our responsibility of

²³ Mike Maniates, "'Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?'" Global Environmental Politics 1 (2001): pg. 2.

²⁴ Mike Maniates, "'Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?'" pg. 2.

saving the planet when neither option is truly good for the planet in our current societal structures. Maniates drives this point home saying, "The relentless ability of contemporary capitalism to commodify dissent and sell it back to dissenters is surely one explanation for the elevation of consumer over citizen."²⁵

The threat in this is that we are "narrowing"²⁶ our vision for how to deal with social, political and environmental issues. In order to deal with these complex issues and move forward into a world that is not shackled to a material goods vision of success and progress we *must think institutionally and structurally*.

Working in this theme we can discuss visions for an economic, psychological and ecological shift away from hyperconsumption. In particular, we can begin to discuss how this shift must take place through socio-political reorientations and the built environment interacting with one another. With this in mind we can move towards ideas that *create spaces* in both socio-political and concrete environments for people to exist in ways that are not oriented towards hyperconsumption, but toward something sustainable and inspiring. It is my

²⁵ Mike Maniates, "'Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?'" pg. 6.

²⁶ Mike Maniates, "'Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?'" pg. 3.

hope that by teasing out the weight and unsustainability of our current paradigm we can mobilize a public discourse about projects, ideas and dreams for a future oriented towards a goal of *becoming* and finding new ways to evaluate our progress.

To do this, we must re-group civic interaction beyond the level of consumption. Individualization leads to “increasing fragmentation and mobility of everyday life undermin[ing] our sense of neighborhood and community, separating us from the small arenas in which we might practice and refine our abilities as citizens.”²⁷ Benjamin Barber might be reaching high when he says, “The struggle for the soul of capitalism is, then, a struggle between the nation's economic body and its civic soul: a struggle to put capitalism in its proper place, where it serves our nature and needs rather than manipulating and fabricating whims and wants. Saving capitalism means bringing it into harmony with spirit -- with prudence, pluralism and those “things of the public” (*res publica*) that define

²⁷ Mike Maniates, “Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?”pg. 7.

our civic souls.”²⁸ Yet, when facing structural and institution change, reaching high is the only way to reformat goals, paradigms and create a vision for a sustainable, healthy and more equitable future.

Deeper Roots: An Economy Beyond Cash Flow

Current economic success is gauged with high volume traffic flows of cash typified by markets that rely on the consistent and growing dedication of individuals to purchase consumer products. As previously elaborated, there are a number of weak spots in this model. Furthermore, there are detrimental long-term socio-psychological and ecological by-products of this system. Therefore, any sort of socio-political re-orientation of our societal goals in an effort to work towards a healthy, sustainable future must begin with a query of economic standards. What might a sustainable economy look like?

Gross domestic product, writes Nobel Prize-winning economist and former

²⁸ Benjamin Barber, "The Economic Crisis Isn't All Bad; It's a Chance for Us and Obama to Reimagine How We Live Our Lives," AlterNet, 28 Jan. 2009, The Nation, <alternet.org>.

chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers Joseph Stiglitz for Fortune magazine, is “outdated and misleading.”²⁹ This measurement is no longer sufficient in our global “resource-driven” economy and has caused economists to consider a new measure, green net national product. An alternative proposition, green net national product, would factor natural resource depletion and environmental degradation into a measurement of GDP. Although GDP might rise with the intensive use and destruction of natural resources, green net national product would not, as an indicator that producers within a country were not benefitting from this transaction, although foreign investors might be.

This system would offer protection for developing countries who would see that although GDP might rise with the sale of valuable land or raw resources, the overall impact would be to impoverish and pollute the country itself in the long-run. Stiglitz suggests that, “such mechanisms can help us evaluate environmental damage and quantify its impact on the economy.”³⁰ This works for

²⁹ Joseph Stiglitz, “Good numbers gone bad,” FORTUNE 28 Sept. 2006, CNN Money, <http://money.cnn.com/magazines/fortune/fortune_archive/2006/10/02/8387507/index.htm>.

³⁰ Joseph Stiglitz, “Good numbers gone bad,” FORTUNE.

highly industrialized nations as well. He offers the example of the United States where we have drained large portions of our scarce oil reserve which has raised GDP but also made our country poorer through the depletion of our natural resources beyond their renewability rates. This has now pushed us towards greater use of coal, a material with extremely devastating ecological impacts.

The role of the economic *model* is enormous. If GDP is the calculator of what a good or bad decision is then stripping an area of resources might make sense in the short-term. However, were natural resources to become part of the equation, then we might see more long-term, balanced thinking in the global marketplace.

The divide between markers of social well-being based on economic exchange versus national well-being that includes use of natural resources is exemplified in the differences between the World Bank's annual World Development Report and the United Nation's Human Development Index. While both of these reports are heavily used measurements of success for global development, the World Bank's report is based on GDP growth whereas the UN's includes a wider net

that includes ecological, sociological, and psychological well-being.

In 1995 *The Atlantic* published an article titled "If the GDP is Up, Why is America Down?" pointing to the crevasse between economic measurements and the experiences of those operating within that economy. This was an article written in the "golden days" of economic prosperity for the United States.

Although the U.S. had just been hailed as the strongest economy in the world by the World Economic Forum,³¹ the majority of Americans were not basking in the glow. Commutes had lengthened, work hours had increased and only those in the top tiers of the economy really seemed to be benefitting. Cobb, Halstead and Rowe point to a study by Business Week/Harris that shows that "70 percent of the public was gloomy about the future."³² Perhaps GDP does not improve happiness. The article goes on to show that not only does GDP gloss over the important functions of household and volunteer sectors, but in fact portrays the "breakdown of the social structure and the natural habitat upon which the

³¹ Clifford Cobb, Ted Halstead, and Jonathan Rowe, "If the GDP is Up, Why is America Down?" The Atlantic Online Oct. 1995, <<http://www.theatlantic.com/past/politics/ecbig/gdp.htm>>.

³² Clifford Cobb, Ted Halstead, and Jonathan Rowe, "If the GDP is Up, Why is America Down?" The Atlantic Online.

economy—and life itself—ultimately depend...as economic gain.”³³

Deeper within this analysis are the psycho-social implications of turning a blind eye to the social institutions of household and volunteer sectors. This glaring exclusion has profound impacts on those who participate in and contribute to these essential functions of society. When the work of a mother raising her children and the hours spent by community volunteers to teach language classes or tutor students goes unaccounted for, our measurement is lacking. Furthermore, these cornerstones of personal and civic development are the life's work of millions in the United States, improving the lives of all those around them, but have effectively removed them from our paradigm of success. Considering the large number of women and minorities implicated in these fields of work and civic participation, this omission certainly entails issues of social justice and political representation.

The authors of this article, Cobb, Halstead and Rowe, state that they are creating a new organization called Redefining Progress in order to address “an

³³ Clifford Cobb, Ted Halstead, and Jonathan Rowe, "If the GDP is Up, Why is America Down?" [The Atlantic Online](#).

urgent need for new indicators of progress, geared to the economy that actually exists.”³⁴ Through an analysis of the historical development of the current economic model, they bring to light some of the now familiar quirks of the GDP standard. When money changing hands is our benchmark for success then terminal cancer patients, divorce, earthquakes and Superfund sites are our heros. Their findings in various other reports show that when “crime, divorce, mass-media attention and the rest...actually adds to GDP...Growth can be social decline by another name.”³⁵ When pollution, social decline and economic disparity increase economic success as it is currently defined and ignores social interaction, civic commitment and natural resources our need for a new indicator is indeed urgent.

Redefining Progress calls for the use of a GPI indicator that includes household and volunteer sectors, crime, defensive expenditures (household costs of repair and prevention, including auto repairs and air and water filters),

³⁴ Clifford Cobb, Ted Halstead, and Jonathan Rowe, "If the GDP is Up, Why is America Down?" [The Atlantic Online.](#)

³⁵ Clifford Cobb, Ted Halstead, and Jonathan Rowe, "If the GDP is Up, Why is America Down?" [The Atlantic Online.](#)

distribution of income, resource depletion, habitat degradation and loss of leisure.

GPI adds this myriad of indicators to GDP indicators, balancing growth with repairs, shifts and costs of what is currently underrepresented in the monetized economy. Most pressingly, Redefining Progress pushes for the release of more reports that reflect characteristics of GPI and more economics books and programs that are honest about GDP's urgent need for reform. Further reform that taxes the use of natural resources rather than income would shift the socio-political paradigm of earnings and losses. Most prominent among their conclusions is the need to maintain and rebuild community. "Better indicators would also strengthen the role of family and community values in our policy debates. When regional shopping centers replace traditional Main Streets, the matrix of community activity is significantly undermined as well."³⁶ Reformatting economic measurement into something akin to GPI is possible and would have long-term viability as a more durable economic indicator that pushes America to aim for greatness throughout our society, rather than solely through cash flows.

³⁶ Clifford Cobb, Ted Halstead, and Jonathan Rowe, "If the GDP is Up, Why is America Down?" [The Atlantic Online](#).

More recently in the news, Prime Minister of France, Nicholas Sarkozy, critiqued the cold and narrow view of economic growth. Sarkozy called for a “shake-up in research methods aimed at providing a more balanced reading of countries’ performance.”³⁷ He was indeed saying something about the good life and its invisibility in current GDP measurements. Sarkozy offered suggestions from a report given to him by Nobel Prize winning economists Joesph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen, calling for the international community to recognize that what we have called victorious economic growth has perhaps “destroyed more than it created.”³⁸ In effect, Sarkozy was demanding a deconstruction of ills in the current system and heralding this recession as a dawn of possibility and change. “The crisis doesn’t only make us free to imagine other models, another future, another world. It obliges us to do so.”³⁹ Under Sarkozy’s guidance, France has instituted a new measure under which it will seek to include environmental protection, leisure time and “sustainable happiness” of its inhabitants into its

³⁷ Lizzy Davies, "Sarkozy attacks focus on economic growth," The Guardian 114 Sept. 2009, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2009/sep/14/sarkozy-attacks-gdp-focus>>.

³⁸ Lizzy Davies, "Sarkozy attacks focus on economic growth," The Guardian.

³⁹ Lizzy Davies, "Sarkozy attacks focus on economic growth," The Guardian.

national statistics models and will present these findings and encourage other nations to follow suit as international summit meetings.⁴⁰

A sustainable economy creates space in which individuals can participate in group and community efforts surrounding social change and feel this reflected in economic calculations. Furthermore, any reformatted economic model must calculate for ecological degradation and the use of natural resources. The indicators and changes suggested all orient themselves towards a more equitable, healthier future that is measured with a more thorough attention paid to the happiness or good life of residents. Beyond privileging a greater variety of meaningful numbers in statistics, economic change must exist in the built environment. We must begin to live as if we are creating a sustainable economy.

Our built environment affects our daily patterns. Shopping centers and areas of intense commercial traffic are built to attract us to spend money and buy products. Their very blueprint, even the layout of the grocery store, is constructed in order to encourage customers to buy more. However, if we were

⁴⁰Lizzy Davies, "Sarkozy attacks focus on economic growth," [The Guardian](#).

to change our economic measurements to include leisure time, community and volunteer work, and the use of natural resources then the way in which we build areas of service and facilitate social activity would change to reflect these included values. We could build commercial centers that encourage health and well-being with grocery stores that function more like indoor/outdoor farmers markets, provide space for sports activities and have running and walking tracks around the perimeter. Communities could situate their high traffic areas in such a way that people would walk and bike, interacting with native grasses and plants and encouraging ecological responsibility.

In an interview with Carol Coletta of CEOs for Cities she spoke about the draw of marketplaces. "We like shopping centers because they give our communities vibrancy."⁴¹ However, the way Carol sees it, although our economy might "recover" from the recession, it will never be the 1990s again. "Our economy is shifting and changing. We no longer have the same needs or

⁴¹ Carol Coletta, "Cities and Sustainable Futures," personal interview, 16 Feb. 2010.

desires that we had before.”⁴² Among these changes is a decreased need for commercial shopping space as vendors and consumers alike switch over to internet commerce. Therefore, we must begin to build for a sustainable economic future in these gaps. What can creep into the now defunct storefronts that line so many streets across America? There is of course no single answer, but rather a suggestion that communities begin to fill these voids with things that address the previously hidden market sectors (ecological responsibility, volunteer and community work, leisure time, etc.) in ways that best meet their local needs. These marketplaces would be colorful, vibrant, sustainable areas of exchange and commerce built on the real and urgent needs of resilient communities in the creation of a more sustainable future. Commerce in this sense would allow for the melding of contributing economic factors to include enterprise at a more local level, provide necessary community services and take an economy of community development and ecological stewardship as a guide.

⁴² Carol Coletta, "Cities and Sustainable Futures," personal interview, 16 Feb. 2010.

Unfulfilled

The negative psycho-social implications of a system that equates the flow of money with well-being are well documented. The critiques enumerated above mirror childhood fables in which the pursuit of wealth leads to a hard heart and a lonely life. Our culture is saturated with acknowledgements that we do have needs that extend beyond the material. Bill McKibben addresses this in an article written for Mother Jones, entitled "Reversal of Fortune."⁴³ McKibben pulls on the intersecting threads of economics, psychology and environment, painting a picture in which we have hit a wall wherein our use exceeds our availability of resources creating global climate change, reliance upon faulty economic measurements and for all of this, we are not happy. He points to the expansion of material goods including bigger homes, more cars, increased gross national product and pervasive technology, saying that "Some people have taken much more than their share, but on average, all of us in the West are living lives

⁴³ Bill McKibben, "Reversal of Fortune," *Mother Jones* Mar.-Apr. 2007, <<http://motherjones.com/politics/2007/03/reversal-fortune?page=2>>.

materially more abundant than most people a generation ago.”⁴⁴ And somehow, this acquisition of material wealth has not made us happier. According to numbers McKibben pulls from the National Opinion Research Center, there is no correlation between increased GNP and “life satisfaction”.⁴⁵

Of course at the poverty level increasing material wealth can substantially increase “life satisfaction.” However, this correlation between increased wealth and increased happiness is weak after income is sufficient to make an individual and their dependents financially secure. McKibben links this decline in quality with an increase in the quantity of time we spend isolated. Our homes, our commutes, our work environmental and our personal lives have become activities of the individual moving into a culture of hyper-individualism. “We simply worked too many hours earning, we commuted too far to our too-isolated homes, and there was always the blue glow of the tube shining through the curtains.”⁴⁶ This individualism manifests itself socially. Liberal theory has prized

⁴⁴ Bill McKibben, "Reversal of Fortune," Mother Jones.

⁴⁵ Bill McKibben, "Reversal of Fortune," Mother Jones.

⁴⁶ Robert H. Frank, "Income and Happiness: An Imperfect Link," The New York Times Online 9 Mar.

the status of the individual as a moral actor and the icon of achievement in society. However, there seems to have come a point in which the role of the individual became the cult of the individual. Perhaps our economic reliance on the idea of the individual as the wielder of an essential and all-powerful rationality, combined with our societal notion in which success is achieved and measured in the singular, individual basis, has led us to forget that no individual forms him or herself as a singular entity. When our glorification of the individual forgets the family, community, educators and institutions behind each of us, we are erasing the conditions that allow for individual success.

GOOD magazine's issue "Slow Down" asked readers to consider what achievement meant to them. "We are taught that we'll be judged by what we achieve, but what does it mean to actually achieve?"⁴⁷ Pushing this question further, I am drawn back to Alan de Botton's critique of how we receive rewards in society. When expectations are weighed upon the shoulders of individuals and our economy hinges on cash flow, then it follows that our reward system is

2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/09/business/09view.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1>.

⁴⁷ *GOOD* and *READYMADE*, "A Manifesto: In Defense of Time Off," pg. 66.

one in which the individual spends their cash in such a way that society recognizes their achievement level. It would seem that this is the design behind status symbol goods. In *The Economist's* piece "Onwards and Upwards", they assert that status-consciousness is a key factor in why wealth has increased while happiness has "hardly budged" over the past half-century.⁴⁸ Individuals seek to fit in with their peer group, keep up with the Joneses and compete for recognition of achievement. This social psychology is not sustainable. We cannot continue to build a crevasse of inequality between the global North and South, destroy natural resources and dig ourselves deeper into a mindset that does not make us happy all in the pursuit of consumer goods.

While not everyone lives by these standards of consumption and feeling accepted through our consumer purchases, we can all feel it through ever-present advertising, observation and social pressures. We feel it when we chastise ourselves for working less, earning less or not having enough. We feel it when we see how so many Americans live beyond their means, spending big to

⁴⁸ "Onwards and Upwards: The Idea of Progress," The Economist; pg. 39.

keep up with their peer group while falling into debt. We certainly feel these pressures when we are encouraged to buy our politics and reflect our social ideals through purchasing certain goods. Psychologically, this is frustrating! As individuals, many of us feel that we are more than consuming automatons.

Furthermore, our civic responsibilities and ability to influence public policy cannot take place at the level of consumption, nor as individuals. A sustainable society demands some grounding for social interaction, recognition of achievement and civic duty beyond the individual, at the community level.

Psychology of Belonging

Despite our material dependencies and the advent of hyperconsumption, we are in fact in a postmaterialist society in that we no longer spend the majority of our time attending to the basic material needs of sustenance, shelter and security. Postmaterial needs are located along emotional and psychological well-being, such as belonging, authenticity and self-expression. Community is the key

to achieving post-material needs of belonging and wellness. This is not, as it might sound, an attack on the individual. Rather it is the recognition of the fact that the process of *becoming individuals* within a society *requires a community*.

As Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger write in *Breakthrough*, “Becoming a creative and self-fulfilled individual in our postmaterialist society still requires belonging, in one way or another, to a community.”⁴⁹ The process Nordhaus and Shellenberger envision of “self-creation” and authenticity has the power to become politically important as shared values and beliefs within communities influences our governance and serve as a way to interact with public policy. This is not an idea of a community of chains that binds individuals to something that is inauthentic to the person they seek to become. Rather, it is a vision of intersecting, dynamic communities that are authentic expressions of people sharing in their process of becoming, sharing values or interests, acting as social change in the way they influence personal possibilities. The way that Nordhaus and Shellenberger see it, these processes of creation will collectively shape the

⁴⁹ Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, Break through: from the death of environmentalism to the politics of possibility (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007) pg. 212.

“emerging values and new identities of our postindustrial society” and will, if we work for them, change the world.⁵⁰

Although social ties might decrease our independence with added commitment and responsibility, they make us happier. McKibben quotes psychologist Barry Schwartz saying, “People who are married, have good friends, and who are close to their families are happier than those who do not.”⁵¹ He contends that humans are, in fact, wired to participate in community and that we fundamentally require it as part of a satisfying life. This goes beyond some flighty ideal that “all we need is love”; it means that the more we can interact with fellow sentient beings, the more good we do ourselves and our communities.

This idea of community is in fact a multiplicity. Community has no fixed and essential character, but a range of changing and adaptive interactions and possibilities. To begin, we can examine community relationships as deep ties, weak ties and being with strangers. Deep ties, as one might imagine, are those

⁵⁰ Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger, Break through: from the death of environmentalism to the politics of possibility: pg. 215.

⁵¹ Bill McKibben, "Reversal of Fortune," Mother Jones.

we share with family, partners and close friends. Deep ties require commitment and time, but they are often those most rewarding in life. However, we only have room for so many deep ties in our life and these people might not always share our more particular individual interests, politics and sensibilities. We wouldn't hold them to all of that. We already love them.

Weak ties are characterized by friends, co-workers, teammates, neighbors and people who enter our lives from time to time, make their mark and part ways. Weak ties offer enormous possibilities for community interaction. Weak ties do not demand our presence and time regularly, but they provide us with an outlet to explore communities of people who share our common goals, interests and ideals. Being with strangers is valuable community interaction that many of us might not recognize as community until we took a closer look. Being with strangers is riding the bus with the same familiar faces, going to public events such as dancing and outdoor concerts and exchanging pleasantries with the engaging cashier you see every Monday. These people have a surprising ability

to affect our mood as well as our sense of comfort and belonging. We get used to them and they make us feel at home. If we let them, they expand our sense of self, opening our conception of community to include others outside of our economic, social, political, racial or gender groups.

Creating platforms for more meaningful community interaction across all three categories can take place in both technology and our built environment. Technology has already allowed for greater interaction between deep ties, allowing families who live far apart to communicate using Skype, video chat and share up to date photos and thoughts over the internet and with phones. Weak ties benefit from the internet with the capability to create online groups of people sharing interests and hobbies, organize events and open the group up to new members. Examples of this include secret dinner clubs, where people who love food meet up to share dinner together, scheduled pick-up sports games, fundraisers and volunteer opportunities. Another instance of people using technology to get together are group work meet-ups, when groups of people who

work from home or at a lonely office meet up at local cafés and restaurants and do their work together. Being with strangers in fun and creative ways is far easier when events go “viral” in public media outlets, such as facebook and twitter.

Examples of this include massive neighborhood snowball fights during winter snowstorms, weekend drum circles at a local park or impromptu block parties.

Getting the word out about events, sharing good news, smiles and activities is easier than ever with technology’s pervasive presence. Technology might have the power to individualize people, keeping us in front of screens and behind desks, but we equally have the power to use technology to create and maintain community in all of its forms.

Our built environment greatly impacts the way in which we relate to our daily activities, including the way we interact with others and create community. Creating community in a postmaterial society therefore requires that we build it, using space to engender community interaction. Carol Coletta of CEOs for Cities locates an area where these interactions were broken down by our built

environments with the rise of the middle class after World War II and the privatization of public spaces.⁵² As people became wealthier they joined private health clubs, pools, golf courses and clubs, leaving public pools, libraries, gyms and recreation rooms without funding and public attention. Reimagining the potential for public spaces such as these (matched with reinvesting in them) would give people greater opportunity to interact. Imagine if public libraries were re-built to include technology centers, career advising and publicly accessible meeting rooms or if recreation centers had after school programs for kids, low cost memberships and intramural leagues for all ages.

Mike Maniates hits on this issue in his writing on individuation. "We build shopping malls but let community playgrounds deteriorate and migrate to sales but ignore school-board meetings. Modern-day advances in entertainment and communication increasingly find us sitting alone in front of a screen, making it all seem fine. We do our political bit in the election booth, then get back to

⁵² Carol Coletta, "Cities and Sustainable Futures," personal interview, 16 Feb. 2010.

“normal.”⁵³ However, this isolated normal lacks the sort of social health and political benefits of community interaction. Here's another statistic worth keeping in mind,” Bill McKibben reminds us, “Consumers have 10 times as many conversations at farmers' markets as they do at supermarkets—an order of magnitude difference. By itself, that's hardly life-changing, but it points at something that could be: living in an economy where you are participant as well as consumer, where you have a sense of who's in your universe and how it fits together.”⁵⁴ There is a multi-faceted gain from building community into our lives. Not only are we increasing community in all of its forms, but we are providing jobs, encouraging class, race and social mingling and improving psychological well-being. These programs would bridge gaps and deconstruct social divisions, creating space for public involvement, greater tolerance and more solidarity.

Polit-Ecology

We are living in an age of ecological awareness. Whether or not an

⁵³ Mike Maniates, ""Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?"" Global Environmental Politics: pg. 7.

⁵⁴ Bill McKibben, "Reversal of Fortune," Mother Jones.

individual agrees with the statistics, is fighting for governmental reform in the first world, is living below the poverty line in Sao Paulo or maintains a position that global warming is a credo or “belief” rather than a scientifically proven fact, ecological degradation and the politics surrounding it will likely touch you at some point in your life. For those of us in the global North with a certain level of affluence that frees our time and energy to consider our impact on ecological degradation, we begin to look for what we, as individuals, can do. As discussed, in this culture of individuation each person buying their politics with cash spent on certain goods or the rare vote at the polling station does little to organize around issues of ecology. Rather, it fuels our current institutions and their predilection for consumption in a consumer goods market and society.

Hyperconsumption in this paradigm is driving ecological devastation through its stresses in culling raw materials, production of goods, use of goods and their disposal. This profile of American socio-economic pressure to produce and sell, buy and dispose, is balanced on the idea of cheap, plentiful inputs,

especially energy through fossil fuels. So, when we consider the most current information shows that our oil supplies are running out quicker than we expected, we must begin to take seriously the mission of planning a sustainable future.⁵⁵

Increasing awareness of degradation and waved pictures of cuddly animals on the brink of extinction just won't cut it anymore. The environmental movement must think institutionally about sustainability, working to incorporate these paradigm shifts in economic and social measurements. If the yard stick for success is no longer material wealth, but community health, then the parameters of public policy change. When material wealth is the bar by which we compare all else, then environmental policy becomes an agitator in the system. If our standards of evaluation included natural resource use, community health, family and volunteer labor and leisure time then ecological concerns become central to achievement.

The environmental movement is splintered. Ecology is not a banner marching in one direction for political change, but a myriad of interests, from

⁵⁵ Steve Connor, "Warning: Oil supplies are running out fast," The Independent 3 Aug. 2009, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/warning-oil-supplies-are-running-out-fast-1766585.html>>.

changing energy policy to demanding conservation of natural habitats. Often these interests intersect and create meaningful venues for political forces to work together. Environmentalists alone cannot re-constitute our structures towards a sustainable future. Demanding that politics frame itself towards a goal of sustainability is to demand that our measurements of economic and social well-being change to encompass these principles. Drawing on the notion of Gramscian hegemony as presented by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, this movement must take place through a cross-section of society, operating as a political push that seeks sustainability as a social justice movement against the oppression of an socio-economic system built on hyperconsumption. There is distinct potential for political action of this sort to gain ground with those interested in issues surrounding gender equality, racial equality, childcare opportunities, community violence, recreational and educational opportunities, job creation and the development of supportive, vibrant communities. Not to mention the ecological

gains of addressing sustainability as a political movement! If our economic and social institutions become geared towards the flowering of a sustainable future, then the space in which to address particulars of ecological concerns is open.

Working towards environmental sustainability requires a new paradigm of success beyond that material. Furthermore, working towards the multitude of goals presented as environmental challenges, even sorting out which goals are most locally important, requires community.

Only through a political shift that reconstitutes the way in which we measure success (sustainability rather than accumulation) can we build a politics with the capacity to consider re-designing production. This might include visionary changes like that of William McDonough and Michael Brungart's Cradle to Cradle paradigm. Immediate projects that come to mind are the creation of local industries based on available technology and renewable resources like turning the under-used and under-employed airplane manufacturing plants in the Midwest into wind turbine factories, drawing on the local skilled work force. By

setting the benchmark for societal achievement as a healthy, more equitable future enacted through community involvement and the politicization of these aims there is still space for technological innovation.

Closing

Politicizing the need for new economic measurements as well as community development issues is in the best interest of environmental political aims. Gathering ground with allies of these projects enables those seeking to open more space for ecological concern within the political sphere to reach out to a variety of supporters including those who work in the household and volunteer sectors, community development and education organizations, minority and feminism activists and individuals concerned with a stable economic future and job creation. When the way we model success is refocused as an archetype of sustainability and community vibrancy as progress, reformatting our food and goods production systems, building and implementing renewable energy, and

constructing cities based on smart growth principles are the only things that
make sense.

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