

The Surprising Link between Sustainability and Social Justice

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Large segments of the world experienced a major financial shakeup in 2008, followed by a major economic downturn in the United States and Europe, especially in southern Europe and Ireland. Unemployment has remained high, especially among the young, and many millions of people lost not merely their jobs, but also their homes, their investments, and their pension funds, with many more having to settle for low-paying jobs providing little to no benefits. While emerging economies—China included—initially held up much better, they too experienced a significant slowdown in economic growth rates. This economic downturn (and rising inequality) has contributed to the rise of political alienation; the rise of a variety of right-wing expressions including xenophobia, racism, and anti-Semitism; and support for radical right-wing parties and politicians. What do these developments portend for the future?

One possibility is that economic development will return to a high growth pathway. As a result, what might be called the “legitimacy of affluence” will be restored. The overwhelming majority of people will again be content with their condition, their society, and their polity. However, a considerable number of scholars hold that it may prove impossible to return to a high growth economy able to provide sufficient employment opportunities, due to increased automation and a greater extraction of labor from fewer workers. Others cite sustainability issues, believing that we face a world in which high growth rates (and, hence, affluence) cannot serve as the source of human contentment, due to environmental conditions, as well as social tensions resulting from growing inequality and rising demands. From the perspective of the affluent society, if the future unfolds in one of these less favorable ways, one must wonder if we shall bear witness to the continued rise in prominence of right-wing fringe groups (e.g., The Golden Dawn, English Defence League, Geert Wilders’ Freedom Party, the Jobbik party, and an increasingly radical Tea Party). Or, can one identify

other sources of contentment for those who, while having achieved an income level that enables them to meet their “basic” needs, will live in a more austere, less growth-centered, environment? What other sources of legitimacy can be developed that are not based on a continually rising standard of living?

I see great merit in shifting the focus of our actions from seeking ever-greater wealth to investing more of our time and resources in social lives, public action, and spiritual and intellectual activities—on communitarian pursuits. In small ways, this transformation is already underway. For example, a growing number of people choose to work less and to spend more time with their children. Such a society has a much smaller ecological footprint than the affluence-chasing society and hence helps cope with the triple challenge: the deteriorating environment, smart machines killing many jobs while generating few, and rising discontent.

The main merits of this society though lie elsewhere. The preponderance of the relevant evidence shows that as societies grow more affluent, the contentment of their members does not much increase. For example, between 1962 and 1987, the Japanese per capita income more than tripled, yet Japan’s overall happiness remained constant over that period. Similarly, in 1970, the average American income could buy over 60 percent more than it could in the 1940s, yet average happiness did not increase. Gaining a good life through ever-higher levels of consumption is a Sisyphean activity. Only finding new sources of meaning in life can bring higher levels of contentment.

While at first blush such a major cultural shift is hard to imagine, one needs to recall that for most of history, work and commerce were not valorized; instead, devotion, learning, chivalry, and being involved in public affairs were. True, these were often historically only accessible to a sliver of the population, while the poor were shut out from such things and forced to work for those who led the chosen life. However, capping consumption would now make it possible for all the population to lead a less active economic life and a more active social, communal, and spiritual—i.e. communitarian—life.

Abraham Maslow pointed out that humans have a hierarchy of needs. At the bottom are basic human necessities; once these are sated, affection and self-esteem are next in line, leading finally to “self-actualization.” It follows that as long as the acquisition and consumption of goods satisfy basic creature comforts—safety, shelter, food, clothing, health care, and education—expanding the reach of those goods contributes to genuine human contentment. However, once consumption is used to satisfy Maslow’s higher needs, it turns

into consumerism—and consumerism becomes a social disease. Indeed, more and more consumption in affluent societies serves artificial needs manufactured by those who market the products in question. For instance, first women and then men were taught that they smelled bad and needed to purchase deodorants. Men, who used to wear white shirts and grey flannel suits, learned that they “had to” purchase a variety of shirts and suits, and that last year’s clothing was not proper in the year that followed. Soon, it was not just suits but also cars, ties, handbags, sunglasses, watches, and numerous other products that had to be constantly replaced to keep up with the latest trends.

The new post-affluence society would liberate people from these obsessions and encourage them to fulfill their higher needs once their basic needs have been satisfied. None of this entails dropping wholly out of the economic or technological world. The shift to a less consumerist society and a more communitarian one should not be used to call on the poor to enjoy their misery; everyone is entitled to a secure provision of their basic needs. Instead, those who have already “made it” would cap their focus on their economic activities.

A society that combines capping consumption and work with dedication to communitarian pursuits would obviously be much less taxing on the environment, material resources, and the climate, than consumerism and the level of work that paying for it requires. Social activities (such as spending more time with one’s children) require time and personal energy, but do not mandate large material or financial outlays. The same holds true for cultural and spiritual activities such as prayer, meditation, enjoying and making music and art, playing sports, and adult education. Playing chess with plastic pieces is as enjoyable as playing it with mahogany pieces. Reading Shakespeare in a paper-bound edition made of recycled paper is as enlightening as reading his work in a leather-bound edition. And the Lord does not listen more to prayers from those who wear expensive garments than from those who wear a sack.

Less obvious are the ways a socially active society is more likely to advance social justice than the affluent society. Social justice, in part, entails transferring wealth from those disproportionately endowed to those who are underprivileged. A major reason such reallocation of wealth has been very limited in affluent societies is that those who command the “extra” assets tend also to be those who are politically powerful. Promoting social justice by organizing those with less and forcing those in power to yield has had limited success in democratic countries and led to massive bloodshed in others. However, if those in power embrace the capped culture and economy, they will have little

reason to refuse to share their “surplus.” This thesis is supported by the behavior of middle class people who are committed to the values of giving and attending to the least among us—values prescribed by many religions and by left liberalism.

Key Resources

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About the Author

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