Consumption Civilization: Our Prospects Since Western Civilization's Historical Adaptation

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For whatever its accomplishments and intricacies, Western Civilization has been based on (1) the exploitation of people and the environment, and (2) the attempt of constant expansion -- geographically, quantitatively, and in the mind.

This expression has had such a long run that it has comprised all conventional history. All the while, civilization as top-down exploitation and expansion has been ratcheting up spectacularly, especially in recent decades, despite -- and partly because of -- fast-shrinking resource limits. Climate instability is barely beginning to act as a brake.

The relatively slow process of civilization's march via exploitation and expansion has finally graduated and adapted to something unanticipated little over a century ago: mass consumption.

Abetted by frantic corporate competition, governmental accommodation, and just-in-time distribution advances, mass consumption has become the dominant feature of Western Civilization. Globalized culture has rapidly changed accordingly. If seen from the outside, consumption has been a frenzy and an end in itself.

Since modern civilization and its transnational corporate driver is no longer just Western, it would be more accurate to speak of Consumption Civilization than Western Civilization. Some thinkers might prefer the term Corporate Civilization, but consumers generally don't care if products come from megacorps, cooperatives, or government entities. (Mom and Pop businesses and Community Supported Agriculture farms are not lumped in, because their customers often have a personal and loyal connection to the seller and producer.) It is safe to say that consumers have much more allegiance to consuming and providing for their households than to corporations or nations. Conceivably there could be a consumer society without corporations.

The new brand of Consumption Civilization was almost universally welcomed as meaning greater wealth and convenience for all, but most significantly it benefited industrial & post-industrial society's main owners. Mass consumption, a new Middle Class, and commuting were all accepted by the more energetic powers-that-be toward the end of the 19th century as inevitable and enlightened. Slaves and the very poor could unthreateningly become wage-slaves to work hard to create an unlimited amount of aggregated money to spend for consuming.

The first social movement to question the consumer lifestyle spiritually and politically through the mass media was the hippies, whose general effort failed but has not entirely disappeared, though it has much diffused. Ironically, consumerism and the materialist life was most strongly and widely questioned in its heyday, in the 1960s. It is no mere coincidence that this was prior to such a lifestyle getting more costly and time-consuming as a direct result of the depletion of genuinely cheap oil that became felt beginning in the early 1970s. Yet, as consuming has gotten tougher while oil has become more and more subsidized to keep down its visible cost, consuming entrenched itself and grew, partly through unprecedented debt. Why? How? As people are increasingly bereft of meaningful relationships with each other and with nature, they seek happiness through possessions and money, whether it's a greedy bankster, an owner of a single home, or a living-on-the-edge survivor. Paradoxically, as population has exploded there is more and more loneliness. Consuming only feeds into it.

The world has seen mass consumerism come about very recently, within today's oldest persons' lifetimes, on a large scale following World War II. It took place first in the United States. Plain old products such as toothpaste proliferated into endless choices of flavors, additives and packaging -- an example of freedom for all at a low price, multiplied by millions of units, trumpeted by mass media and glorified by a fashion industry. Similarly, ever more widgets of all sorts, the newer the better, were a blessing and an imperative, and they were (and are) rapidly replaced through annually

updated models and planned obsolescence 1.

The overall result is the crisis of Western Civilization's highly entropic end-stage growth spurt. It has increasingly been accomplished through the desperate conversion of any potential resource into waste, ultimately. Unfortunately, it is increasingly toxic waste, primarily from petrochemicals, and radioactive waste -- tolerated in part because consuming is all-consuming.

The growing human population, mostly unquestioning and averse to basic change as members of a community or herd, is key to civilization's quantitative success and serves to a great extent as its ultimate undoing.

The obvious non-sustainability of the system is ignored or obscured by every politician interested in re-election. This facilitates the accelerating damage to the biosphere, fueling the planet's sixth major extinction since life began. This has placed humanity on a track of self-extinction according to prominent biologists. The disruption and unraveling of the climate through human activity is well confirmed, even though what has been observed so far does not include the effects of carbon and methane emissions since 40 years ago, due to climate lag 2.

In addition to civilization's transformation from catering to the elite through past colonialism and imperialism, to mass consumption the world over, there has been a transformation of awareness: almost all the significant players know the global consequences of what they are doing. In the futuristic but scientific short story The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future, by Naomi Oreskes & Erik M. Conway (MIT Press Journals, 2013), the point is hammered that Western Civilization knew what was going on and didn't stop it even though the consequences were becoming clear:

For more than one hundred years, physical scientists in the Western world had known that carbon dioxide (CO2) and water vapor absorbed heat in the planetary atmosphere. A three-phase Industrial Revolution led to massive release of additional CO2, initially in the United Kingdom (1750–1850); then in Germany, the United States, and the rest of Europe (1850–1950); and finally in China, India, and Brazil (1950–2050).

Since we have not yet arrived at the story's science-fiction future of "the Great Collapse and Mass Migration of 2074," (though the distant 2074 is starting to sound extremely optimistic), for a little while longer we have the luxury of applying ourselves to ever more rigorous analysis and political suggestions. And perhaps a culture change.

Numerous minds have come to understand and warn about the culture of consuming, but fewer have grasped the imperative of consuming as a directive. We now know it has rapidly begun to spread from the West as if there is no other way to live:

"The western world now obeys the precepts of commerce. A bloody demanding religion, if you ask me. The do's and don'ts change every season and your 'everyone' doesn't want to be left out, so they rush headlong to comply. That continuous change has a function, a single aim. Maximum consumption. They want to go on milking you. From the cradle to the grave. Face it: You're a brain washed, walking purse, a robot, the fuel multinationals run on." - Esther Verhoef, Close-up (2009 novel)

A major stumbling block in challenging consumerism is irrational faith in technological progress, as it tries to defy resource limits and side-effects of technology proliferation. Yet, in overcoming exaggerated faith in technology as well as blind faith in a righteous god of old, and overcoming escapist New Age magical thinking, we can and must explore fresh insights, data, and kinds of actions to take. It will take great imagination, and as Albert Einstein said, "Problems cannot be solved with the same mind set that created them."

As stated in my previous Culture Change column that also appeared on Truthout.org Sept. 2, 2014,

[R]elated to love and peace: the right to living amidst healthy nature and enjoying the beauty of life. This means rejecting

gross artificialities such as the industrial environment, the market economy, and wage slavery.

Can people get along without bosses, employers, brilliant capitalists, corporation-bought politicians, the plethora of techno-whiz gadgets, the god of science, and the bliss of isolated consuming? Are the militarized police who are keeping us in line with fear -- aided by the national surveillance establishment -- securing long-term for life's essentials of untainted food, clean water, clothing, shelter, and the rest?

Until we imagine a different way of thinking that we put into practice, we are further and further away from John Lennon's appeal to Imagine. Imagine there's no division between people. Imagine we can work together. Imagine we are all free, beautiful and creative. Imagine nature is not our enemy. Imagine music and art being truly important for everyone every day. Imagine that time is your own for spending it with family and friends, collaborating voluntarily in mutual aid.

Or, instead, we keep on being "realistic" and live as if it's every man for himself. That's the dead end of the culture of competition and its relentless expansion on our commodified, finite, dangerously stressed planet.

It is not yet popular to think of Western Civilization as a mistake or mutation in human development. But whatever one's view, the novelty of history as we know it and its "progress" is extremely recent relative to the 200,000-odd years of human existence. Perhaps it is easier by now to question "progress" -- unprecedented self-destruction that can eclipse and negate the pride-instilling wonders of the Louvre, Mozart, the Moon Walk, etc. -- when acknowledging we have come to really have Consumption Civilization. Despite its attractions and overbearing self-image, the Consumption Civilization is crowding our lives, serving up history as a plastic bowlful of toxic slop as the possible end result, and is trying to chase Mother Nature over the ecological cliff.

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1. Planned obsolescence was explained by Vance Packard in his book The Waste Makers, 1960.

2. Climate lag is described at SkepticalScience.com and discussed in Global Warming Culture versus the Natural Future for Humanity, and the Real Denialism on Culture Change.

Further reading:

The Collapse of Western Civilization: A View from the Future, Winter 2013 Daedalus, Vol. 142, No. 1: 40–58, MIT Press Journals. Note: A Culture Change correspondent furnished the PDF and reports that the authors have since expanded the Daedalus piece.

A lively history and analysis of the rise U.S. consumption is in the celebrated 2011 book (chapter 8) Plastic Ocean by Capt. Charles Moore.

Imagining an alternative system for work and human survival, in Labor Day Reality for Humanity on the Gallows - or Shall We Imagine Differently?, by Jan Lundberg, Culture Change