

# WE'RE STUFFED

## OVERCOMING CONSUMPTION

As we know, in liberal democracies the right for people to own private property is a given. The capitalist system encourages people to make money and then to spread it around by buying things, contracting for services, and paying taxes. In primal tribal society personal property was largely absent - collective ownership was the order of the day, and it seemed to work. But that was then and this is now. The world has changed in so many ways, that it's almost impossible to imagine how we could ever go back to the communal lives of our tribal past. The genie is well out of the bottle and most of us in the West would hate giving up our privacy and independence, and our ability to have and to buy what we want when we want it.

After his Cuban expedition in the late 1980s, Carlo Gebler<sup>1</sup> concluded that, *"despite socialism, the Cuban people have remained the sons and daughters of Adam. Years of indoctrination have eliminated neither the desire for goods nor the willingness to resort to devious means to obtain them. There is an enormous currency black market in Cuba, far bigger than anything I'd experienced when I had travelled in Eastern Europe."*

And he quotes Marge, a US citizen who had lived in Cuba since the early Sixties: *"Under capitalism, the worker is insecure about his job but once he's earned his money, he can buy whatever he wants, provided he's earned enough. In Cuba, it's the reverse. Everyone, more or less, has a job and everyone has some money. The worker's anxiety instead is channelled into consumption, into getting hold of scarce goods."*

The anthropologist Daniel Miller<sup>2</sup> says that we should not undermine the importance of our "things". What we have around us matters and can reflect who we are, how others see us, and how we see ourselves. Miller visited an ordinary street in London and studied thirty households. His book reveals the aspirations and frustrations, the tragedies and accomplishments that are played out behind the doors and focuses on the things that matter to these people, which quite often turn out to be material possessions – their house, the dog, their music, even their Christmas decorations. These are the means by which people express who they have become. Their relationships to their objects turn out to be central to their relationships with other people - children, lovers, brothers and friends.

While this may well be true, here in the developed West, being able to buy things does not necessarily always make us happy.

According to Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, in *The Spirit Level*,<sup>3</sup> whether we look at health, happiness, or other measures of wellbeing, there is a consistent picture. In poorer countries, economic development continues to be very important for wellbeing. Here, increases in material living standards result in substantial improvements both in objective measures such as life expectancy, and in subjective ones

<sup>1</sup> Carlo Gebler (1988) *Driving through Cuba: an east-west journey*; p.38/9

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Miller (2008) *The Comfort of Things*

<sup>3</sup> Richard Wilkinson & Kate Pickett (2009) *The Spirit Level-why more equal societies almost always do better*; p.9/10

like happiness. But as countries become affluent and developed, further rises in income and living standards count for less and less. If you are hungry, a loaf of bread is everything, but when you are full, more loaves don't particularly help you and may become a burden as they become stale.

As economist Richard Layard puts it,<sup>4</sup> *"there is a paradox at the heart of our lives. Most people want more income and strive for it. Yet as Western societies have got richer, their people have become no happier."* He says the evidence shows that, on average, people are no more content today than they were fifty years ago, despite the fact that during this time incomes have doubled. We have been able to buy more food, clothes, and cars. We live in bigger, warmer houses and we go on annual holidays to the sun. Yet, studies show that we are no more fulfilled.

Once subsistence income is guaranteed, it's hard to make people happier.

Psychologist and journalist, Oliver James<sup>5</sup> talks about "affluenza" which he says is a *"contagious middle class virus"*, a *"set of values which increase our vulnerability to emotional distress and involves placing a high value on acquiring money and possessions, looking good in the eyes of others and wanting to be famous"*. The affluenza virus is making us miserable, increasing our susceptibility to emotional distresses such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse and personality disorder.

Tim Kasser<sup>6</sup> makes the point that shopping can become a treadmill. The desire to have more and more material goods can lead to an ever more frantic pace of life. Not only must we work harder, but once we have the goods we need to maintain, upgrade, replace, insure and constantly manage them - which can take our energy away from other areas of life, like spending time with family, learning new things, enjoying a hobby, or just relaxing

Our consumer culture also tells us that we can buy our way to self-esteem and love and that we will feel better about ourselves if we collect symbols of worth, and keep up with fashion. Kasser suggests that it is because our psychological insecurities are so easily connected with the promise of self-esteem, through buying, that the fires of consumption are hotly fuelled.

According to Judith Levine,<sup>7</sup> shopping *"defeats, or at least circumvents, boredom, but not only because it fills idle time. Consumption is an exercise in hope – hope for more happiness, more beauty, more status, more fun. This sort of hope requires little negotiation; its fulfilment is relatively simple, even if temporary."*

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## THE CONSUMER

Consumers are by no means a homogenous bunch when it comes to ethical or carbon saving behaviours. In the 2007 IPSOS Mori Report,<sup>8</sup> the authors provide a basic segmentation analysis which highlights the following four consumer groups:

- **Engaged consumers** sometimes called deep greens, pioneers or "highs" - who are very engaged with the issues and proactively seek out alternatives and new behaviours
- **Aspirational consumers** otherwise known as light greens or "mediums" - who are interested but passive and look to adopt behaviours established by the pioneers on an ad hoc or "pick and mix" basis
- **Basic engagement consumers** often referred to as "lows" - who, akin to dipping a toe in the water, do some things but are constrained from doing more
- **Disengaged consumers** who actively resist or are constrained from undertaking environmental behaviours

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Layard (2006) *Happiness - lessons from a new science*; p. 3

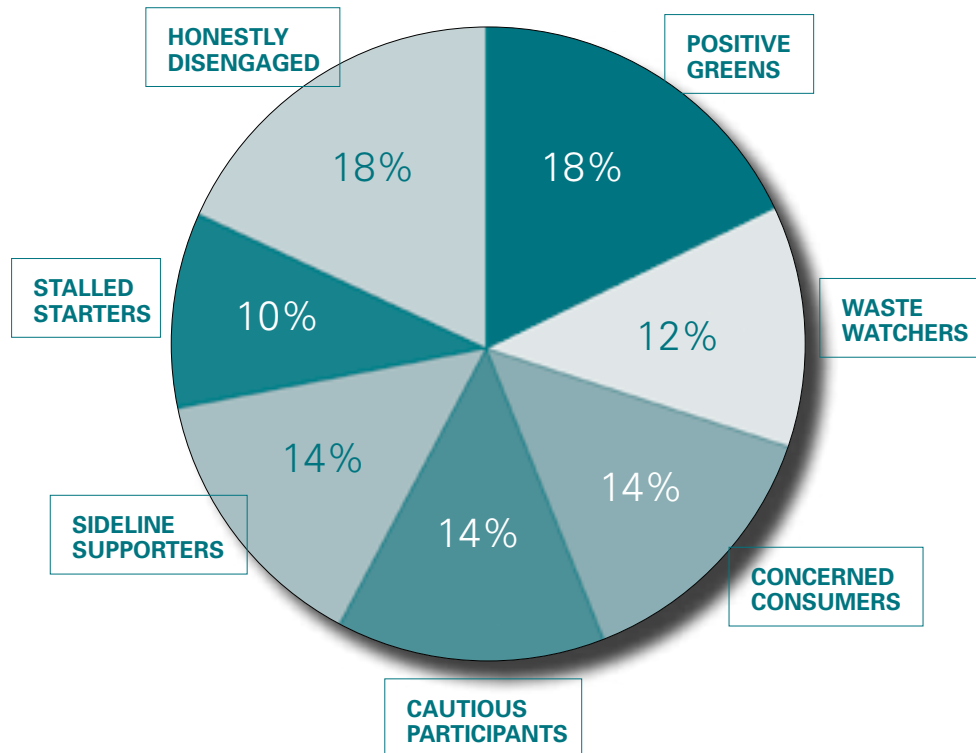
<sup>5</sup> Oliver James (2007) *Affluenza – how to be successful and stay saner*

<sup>6</sup> T. Kasser (2002) *The High Price of Materialism*

<sup>7</sup> Judith Levine (2006) *Not Buying It*; p. 93

<sup>8</sup> *Tipping Point or Turning Point*; p. 35 [http://www.ipsos-mori.com/DownloadPublication/1174\\_sri\\_tipping\\_point\\_or\\_turning\\_point\\_climate\\_change.pdf](http://www.ipsos-mori.com/DownloadPublication/1174_sri_tipping_point_or_turning_point_climate_change.pdf)

In 2008, The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) in Britain produced a report,<sup>9</sup> which set out a framework for DEFRA's work on pro-environmental behaviour. It concentrated primarily on behaviours which will have an impact on carbon savings and therefore link to climate change mitigation. They include the following model which divides the public into seven clusters, each representing a percentage of the population, and sharing a distinct set of attitudes and beliefs towards the environment, environmental issues and people's behaviour.



- **Positive greens** (18%) *"I think it's important that I do as much as I can to limit my impact on the environment".* Most of the members of this group came from well-off backgrounds
- **Waste watchers** (12%) *"Waste not, want not - that's important, you should live life thinking about what you are doing and using".* Thrift is important to this group, which was made up mostly from people of an older age. The thriftiness was not especially inspired by environmental goals
- **Concerned consumers** (14%) *"I think I do more than a lot of people. Still, going away is important, I'd find that hard to give up....well, I wouldn't, so carbon off-setting would make me feel better"*
- **Cautious participants** (14%) *"I do a couple of things to help the environment. I'd really like to do more, well as long as I saw others were"*
- **Sideline supporters** (14%) *"I think climate change is a big problem for us. I know I don't think much about how much water or electricity I use, and I forget to turn things off. I'd like to do a bit more."*
- **Stalled starters** (10%) *"I don't know much about climate change. I can't afford a car so I use public transport.. I'd like a car though. ".* Most are from non-affluent backgrounds
- **Honestly disengaged** (18%) *"Maybe there'll be an environmental disaster, maybe not. Makes no difference to me, I'm just living life the way I want to."*

9 A Framework for Pro-Environmental Behaviours <http://www.defra.gov.uk/publications/files/pb13574-behaviours-report-080110.pdf>

The DEFRA report argues that policy directed at changing behaviour should be multi-faceted and should aim to “enable” and “engage” the people in each of the groups. In the least interested categories the emphasis should be on “exemplifying” and demonstrating the importance of behaviour change.

The British retailer, Marks & Spencer reckons that British consumers can be divided into three groups: 10% are passionately green and will go out of their way to find suitable purchases; 25% are totally disinterested; and 65% are willing to care if they can find easy ways to make a difference.

But these categorisations were identified prior to the global economic crash and all that has followed in its wake. There is no doubt that people are now consuming less than before, even those who have not lost their jobs or their savings. And if Ireland is anything to go by, there is a noticeable change in attitude towards cost-cutting behaviours and frugality. Now it is acceptable, and even trendy, to say you bought something “on sale”, or in the second-hand shop, or better still, that you made it yourself. One suspects that some people say this, even if the item was bought new at full price!

So do we need to stop haranguing and surf the wave?

Fred Pearce<sup>10</sup> points out that we’re all a pretty pessimistic bunch, and have been for years.

In 1798 society was doomed, said English scholar Robert Malthus, who predicted that unchecked growth in human numbers would condemn our species to a “perpetual struggle for room and food”, and to an unbreakable cycle of squalor, famine and disease.

Nearly two centuries later, in 1968, biologist Paul Ehrlich stated that we had exceeded the planet’s “carrying capacity” and the world would go hungry.

Pearce says the mood hasn’t changed much, only the focus has shifted from how to feed ourselves to our insatiable appetite for energy and raw material, and the greenhouse gases we pump into the atmosphere. Soon, the argument goes, we will pass the point of no return, if we haven’t done so already.

But he points out, *“there are those who see things differently, who see a pattern emerging in the industrialised world which shows that people in the US are driving less; Europeans are using less energy; water use is down in countries such as the US and the UK; so is calorie consumption in the UK”*.

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## IS A CHANGE ON THE WAY?

In 2009, after the global economic crash, US marketing professionals, Andrew Benett and Ann O’Reilly launched a study on the “new consumer”<sup>11</sup> and what they saw as the escalating dissatisfaction over hyperconsumerism in seven markets (Brazil, China, France, Japan, the Netherlands, the UK and the US).

### **Their study showed that:**

- A significant majority are deeply worried about our consumption-obsessed society. They believe people have become both physically and mentally lazy, and that we have lost sight of what truly matters
- Two-thirds believe they would be better off if they lived more simply, and a quarter say they would be happier if they owned fewer things
- Half of Americans surveyed get a sense of satisfaction from reducing their purchases during the downturn, and three-quarters feel good about cutting back on the amount of waste they create
- A majority of Americans have no intention of going back to their old shopping patterns, even when the economy rebounds.

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<sup>10</sup> *Over The Top; Fred Pearce; New Scientist; 16th June 2012; p. 38-43*

<sup>11</sup> *Andrew Benett & Ann O’Reilly (2010) Consumed-rethinking business in the era of mindful spending; Inside Flap*  
<http://www.thenewconsumer.com/>  
<http://www.thenewconsumer.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Time-Magazine-QA-on-Consumed.pdf>

Some observers argue that any current trends towards downsizing and sustainable shopping are no more than temporary aberrations brought on by the downturn. Benett and O'Reilly strongly disagree with this. They feel the changes are permanent, and state that they had already been reporting signs of a major shift in values well before the economy crashed. They say that many people in developed markets have been burned out and turned off by their own vulgar habits for quite some time. The recession simply served to exacerbate these feelings and provide the added impetus to turn doubts into actions and vague resolutions into concrete change. And they reckon that people are getting unexpected pleasure hits from cutting back and making more considered consumption choices - reconsidering everything from their personal definitions of value to the purity of product ingredients, from environmental impacts to provenance, from design and packaging preferences to brand integrity.

The new consumer movement they are seeing points to an emerging set of pleasures that are not tied into "instant everything" - pleasures that promise real delights without the instability and insubstantiality of the old ways. They are rooted in 3 basic trends - embracing substance (from mindless consumption to something more meaningful and sustainable, rightsizing (aiming to consume neither too much or too little, but to find a harmonious balance) and growing up (re-embracing personal responsibility, and accountability to the wide community)<sup>12</sup>

In their study, Benett and O'Reilly identify a group which they call Prosumers, who make up about 15 - 20% of any market. These, they say, are the most influential consumers – they embrace innovation, new challenges and experiences; they are early adopters of novel technologies, they have a keen interest in gadgets; they readily transport new attitudes, ideas and behaviours; they expect top-notch customer service and ongoing access to information; they are marketing savvy, plugged into multiple media sources; they seek to maximise control over their lives through the smart use of information and communications; and they are consulted by their peers for opinions and advice. What prosumers are doing today, mainstream consumers are likely to be doing six to eighteen months from now. They are the ones to watch.

Malcolm Gladwell<sup>13</sup> talks about the importance of Salesmen in any social change. Salesmen have the skills to persuade us when we are unconvinced of what we are hearing. As people, they have charisma, charm, energy and enthusiasm. Persuasion works in subtle, hidden and unspoken ways. Salespeople have powerful negotiation skills. They tend to have an indefinable trait that goes beyond what they say, which makes others want to agree with them.

They are the ones to target.

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## COLLABORATIVE CONSUMPTION

In 2011, Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers<sup>14</sup> introduced the term Collaborative Consumption. Over the past couple of years, they say they have noticed that, at dinner parties, instead of bragging about their new Prius, friends are boasting how they have given up their wheels altogether by joining the car sharing service Zipcar. More and more of their friends are selling stuff on eBay and Craglist; swapping books, DVDs and games on sites like Swap and OurSwaps, and giving away unwanted items on Freecycle and ReUseIt. Bike sharing schemes like the ones in Dublin and Paris are proving to be a resounding success (despite dire predictions, only two bikes were pilfered in the first six months of Dublinbike's operation and none were vandalised)<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Andrew Benett & Ann O'Reilly (2010) *Consumed-rethinking business in the era of mindful spending*; p. 116

<sup>13</sup> Malcolm Gladwell (2000) *The Tipping Point- how little things can make a big difference*

<sup>14</sup> Rachel Botsman & Roo Rogers (2010/11) *What's Mine Is Yours-how collaborative consumption is changing the way we live*  
<http://www.collaborativeconsumption.com/buzz-and-press/>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zpv6aGTcCl8>  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/money/2011/jun/14/collaborative-consumption>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.good.is/post/dublin-s-bike-sharing-system-might-be-the-most-successful-in-the-world/>

Every day, 3 million Flickr images are uploaded; 700,000 new members join Facebook; 50 million people Tweet and 900,000 blogs are posted.

According to Botsman and Rogers, collaboration has become the buzzword with economists, philosophers, business analysts, trend spotters, marketers and entrepreneurs. And this collaboration may be local and face-to-face or it may use the Internet to connect, combine, form groups and find someone or something to create “many to many” peer-to-peer interactions. This sharing and collaboration, the bartering, lending, renting, gifting and swapping, are happening in ways, and at a scale never before possible, thanks to new technologies.

The authors say that collaborative consumption is not a niche trend, or a reactionary blip to the 2008 crash. Rather it is a movement that is driven by consumer motivations that extend far deeper than simple cost savings and the habits had started to stick and spread before the recession. Economic necessity has just made people more open to joining up. And the figures are impressive. Freecycle - a worldwide online registry that circulates free items for reuse and recycling - has more than 5.7 million members across eighty five countries. U-Exchange, one of the most successful swap sites, saw a 70% increase in new members in 2008, and the membership of the trading Swap grew tenfold in 2009 over the previous year. On thredUp, a clothing exchange for children’s clothes, approx. twelve thousand items were exchanged within eight days of its launch in April 2010. Landshare, a site that connects gardenless would-be growers with unused spare land, has more than 55,000 members of the UK. Couchsurfing, a global website that connects travellers with locals in more than 235 countries and territories, is currently the most visited “hospitality service” on the Internet.<sup>16</sup>

This convergence of social networks, a renewed belief in the importance of community, pressing environmental concerns and cost consciousness are moving us away from top-heavy, centralised and controlled forms of consumerism towards one of sharing, aggregation, openness and cooperation. And Botsman and Rogers stress that collaborative consumption has the benefit of being in the user’s self-interest, without emphasising guilt or personal sacrifice. When a new behaviour yields strong rewards, it is more likely to stick.

### **Collaborative Consumption relies on four underlying principles**<sup>17</sup>

- 1 Critical mass** there needs to be enough momentum in a system to make it self-sustaining, choice and convenience, and a core group of loyal and frequent users.

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- 2 The power of idling capacity** tools, cars, appliances, spend most their time in the shed, garage or cupboard. This unused potential is a resource to be tapped.

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- 3 Belief in the commons** by providing value to the community, we enable our own social value to expand in return. We need to give to get.

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- 4 Trust between strangers** when personal relationships and social capital return to the centre of the exchanges, peer-to-peer trust is relatively easy to create and manage, and most of the time the trust is strengthened not broken.

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<sup>16</sup> Rachel Botsman & Roo Rogers(2010/11)

*What’s Mine Is Yours-how collaborative consumption is changing the way we live; p. xvii*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid; P. 75*

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## CRADLE TO CRADLE

William McDonough and Michael Braungart<sup>18</sup> have come up with an interesting concept which they call “*cradle to cradle*”. They don’t think we need to tackle how much people are buying, but they say instead that we need to look at *what* they are buying.

The pair, who have worked for the Mayor of Chicago and companies like Herman Miller, the Ford Company, and the Steelcase Corporation, espouse working with nature’s laws.

They believe that in the long run, humans do not have to produce any waste. All products could be made from materials that are either biodegradable or completely recyclable. To illustrate their point, their book *Cradle to Cradle* is printed on a synthetic type of paper, made from plastic resins and inorganic fillers. This material is not only waterproof, extremely durable and (in many localities) recyclable by conventional means, it is also a prototype for a book which is a “technical nutrient” - a product that can be broken down and circulated infinitely in industrial cycles - made and remade as “paper” or other products. They say that such a book has the potential to be upcycled: dissolved and remade as a polymer of high quality and usefulness (It is fairly heavy though).

“Cradle to grave” designs dominate manufacturing. According to the authors, more than 90% of materials extracted to make durable goods in the US become waste almost immediately. Sometimes the product itself scarcely lasts longer. It is often cheaper to buy a replacement for even the most expensive appliance than to find someone to repair it. Many products are designed to last only a certain period so that we will have to then go out and buy another one.

And recycling, according to McDonough and Braungart isn’t the answer. They call most recycling “downcycling” - the quality of the material is reduced over time. And downcycling can also increase pollution and waste energy. Furnaces that recycle secondary steel for building materials are now a large source of dioxin emissions.

And regulation may not be the answer, either. The authors assert that in a world where designs are unintelligent and destructive, regulations can reduce immediate negative effects. But ultimately, they are signals of design failure, and should be seen as *licenses to harm*.

Similarly, eco-efficiency is not a strategy for success over the long term, as it involves working within, and merely slowing down, the same system that caused the problem in the first place.

McDonough and Braungart propose an *eco-effective approach* where products are designed from the outset to be safely and effectively recycled, reused or composted. Taking an eco-effective approach might “*result in an innovation so extreme that it resembles nothing we know, or it might merely show us how to optimise a system already in place. It’s not the solution itself that is necessarily radical but the shift in perspective with which we begin, from the old view of nature as something to be controlled to a stance of engagement*”.<sup>19</sup>

The goal is zero waste, zero emissions, and zero “ecological footprint”. The new design assessment will create a world of abundance, not one of limits, pollution and waste. And to eliminate the concept of waste means to design things – products, packaging, and systems – from the very beginning on the understanding that waste cannot exist. Under this scenario, people could indulge their hunger for new products as often as they wish, without guilt, and industry could encourage them to do so with impunity, knowing that both sides are supporting the technical metabolism in the process.

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.mbdc.com/> & <http://www.mcdonough.com/>

William McDonough & Michael Braungart(2002) *Cradle to Cradle- remaking the way we make things*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*; p. 84