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The New Normal[1]

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The Great Recession has caused many Americans to reevaluate their consumption-rich way of life. In response to the shrinking economy, they have spent less, saved more, and simplified their lives. This essay asks whether people will seek a return to their prerecession lifestyles—in particular a return to making the acquisition and consumption of consumer goods a major source of meaning and contentment—as soon as their economic condition allows or whether they will make their more austere lives their "new normal." It evaluates existing research on contentment and suggests that if instead of choosing to return to their "old normal," Americans learn to derive satisfaction from nonconsumerist sources, in particular social relations and transcendental activities (i.e., religious, contemplative, and cultural activities), they may find the new normal quite acceptable.

KEY WORDS: consumerism; contentment; economy; happiness; social relations; transcendental activities.

INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of 2008, the majority of Americans have faced a threat to their standard of living. They can no longer take for granted that they will do better year in and year out, and that their children will do better than they did. For instance, an October–November 2009 survey found that 54% of Americans felt more anxious in general compared with a few years ago, and 57% worried about their future or their family's future more than they used to (Euro RSCG Worldwide, 2010).

This essay asks, to put it first in very elementary terms: Will people seek a return to their prerecession lifestyles—in particular a return to making the acquisition and consumption of consumer goods a major source of meaning and contentment—as soon as their economic condition will allow them to proceed, or will they consider their diminished economic condition the "new normal" and see in it new sources of contentment, a different yet fulfilling

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characterization of the good life, say, in which much more contentment is derived from relationships and cultural and spiritual pursuits?

Earlier periods in which variants of this question were faced are not studied here. Suffice it to note that (1) after milder recessions, such as those in 1990–1991 and 2002, it seems that most Americans returned to the anteceding normal, as reflected, for instance, in shopping. The same was true after the 2001 attacks on the U.S. homeland—even flying returned to preattack levels within a few years (Etzioni, 2004). And (2) throughout the history of the mass-consumption society, which arose in the United States after World War II, and even to some extent before, there were numerous religious orders, secular sects, and ideologies that called for either dropping out of the consumerist project (e.g., the counterculture of the 1960s) or scaling it back and finding other sources of contentment—voluntary simplifiers (Craig-Lees and Hill, 2002). Here, the focus is on the current downturn and the reaction to it.

CHANGED BEHAVIOR DURING THE GREAT RECESSION (2008–2010)

The new economic reality has prompted Americans to cut back in a number of areas. Sales data show that people spent less on average during the recession. The decline in spending seems to be fairly widespread, albeit far from universal. An April 2009 poll found that 53% of Americans were spending less in recent months than they used to (Newport, 2009). A May 2010 Pew Research study found that 62% of consumers reported having cut back on spending (Pew Research Center, 2010).

A great majority of Americans have "simplified": more than seven in ten reported in May 2010 that they had bought less expensive brands (Pew Research Center, 2010). Three in ten said they had cut back on alcohol or cigarettes. Fifty-seven percent either cut back or canceled vacation plans. Others opted to go to the hairdresser less often (38%) or cut down on dry cleaning (24%) (Corso, 2010). One in five Americans cancelled or cut back cable television service. Fifteen percent changed or cancelled cell service to save money. One in five Americans stopped purchasing coffee in the morning. In addition, many Americans have also changed their dining habits. An August 2010 survey found that 44% of adults were going out to eat less often than they did six months previously, while only 8% were eating out more often (Rassmussen, 2010).

The Great Recession, in contrast with previous recessions, coincided with a burgeoning environmental consciousness, concern about carbon footprints, and a corresponding rise in "conspicuous conservation" (Griskevicius et al., 2010). In her book, *Plenitude: The New Economics of True Wealth*, economist Juliet Schor argued that many Americans found ways to reduce their consumption and their environmental impact at the same time (Schor, 2010). An August 2010 poll found that more Americans were brown-bagging lunch instead of purchasing it (48%), using refillable water bottles rather than purchasing bottles of water (39%), and canceling one or more magazine (31%) and newspaper (17%) subscriptions (Corso, 2010). Twelve percent of Americans who previously drove to work began carpooling or using mass transit.

REFRAMING THE GOOD LIFE

The Great Recession has prompted attitudinal changes and not merely behavioral ones. The October–November 2009 survey found that nearly eight out of ten Americans (79%) worried that society has become too shallow (Euro RSGC Worldwide, 2010). Seventy-six percent believed that society has grown intellectually lazy, while 85% said society has grown physically lazy. Sixty percent worried that people have become too disconnected from the natural world. Fifty-seven percent want to be part of a truly important cause.

At the same time, a large number of Americans found a silver lining in difficult economic times. The same survey also found that 67% of Americans felt the recession had served to remind people of what is really important in life (Euro RSCG Worldwide, 2010). Forty-eight percent said they were actively trying to figure out what made them happy. Seventy-eight percent were making an effort to improve the way they lived and were trying to improve themselves as individuals, although the data do not allow one to determine what form these "improvements" would take.

Moreover, majorities of Americans discovered new sources of contentment. The April 2009 poll found that 59% of Americans said they enjoyed saving money more than spending it, compared to 37% who enjoy spending money more than saving (Newport, 2009). The October–November 2009 survey found that 87% of Americans said that saving money made them feel good about themselves. Forty-nine percent derived satisfaction from reducing their purchases (Euro RSCG Worldwide, 2010).

The same survey found that 79% of Americans respected or admired people who lived simply (with minimal purchases, no debt, etc.), while only 15% felt the same way about people who had high-luxury lifestyles (Euro RSCG Worldwide, 2010). Seventy-eight percent said that most of us would be better off if we lived more simply. Sixty-six percent said they no longer want a lot of bells and whistles on the products they purchased; they would rather just have the functions they really needed.

It remains to be seen whether Americans will exhibit permanent lifestyle changes after the economy rebounds. For now, poll numbers demonstrate that large segments of the U.S. population at least *aspire* to turn their recession-era behavior into the "new normal." An April 2009 poll found that about a third of Americans, 32%, had spent less in recent months and intended to solidify this behavior as their "new, normal" pattern in the years ahead (Newport, 2009). An additional 27% were saving more and intended to make *this* their new, normal pattern in the years ahead. Overall, 51% of Americans projected that they would settle into a new normal pattern relating to *either* spending less or saving more. Asked in the May 2010 Pew study to predict their financial behaviors once the economy recovers, 48% of Americans planned to save more, 31% planned to spend less, and 30% planned to borrow less (Pew Research Center, 2010). An October–November 2009 survey found that 52% of Americans were determined not to go back to their old shopping patterns after the economy rebounded, and almost two-thirds (60%) were committed to reducing their use of credit cards over the long term (Euro RSCG Worldwide, 2010).

In short, large numbers of Americans are aware of a different type of lifestyle than one centered on consumerism, living on credit, and drawing happiness from material goods. These Americans seem to see the austere life not as a deprivation, but as an opportunity to redefine what makes a good life, although the evidence to this effect is rather limited.

There seems to be no compelling evidence that would allow one to predict how Americans will respond when the economy recovers. They may choose to return to the "old normal" of seeking to maximize consumption and defining a good part of their self-worth by what and how much they consume, or continue to enjoy the new sources of contentment they found during the austere times that are not consumption based. Nor can one predict whether Americans forced to live for an extended period of time under austere conditions will lash out in anger or find new sources of contentment.

Here follows two bodies of data that suggest that—especially if these are made better known to the public—it is *possible* that Americans will center their lives around projects other than consumerism. One concerns the relationship between income (and thus the capacity to consume) and happiness; the other, sources of contentment that do not require high levels of expenditure, such as intensified social relations and transcendental activities (e.g., some kinds of religious, contemplative, and cultural activities).

INCOME AND HAPPINESS

Data suggest that after a certain level of income, additional income (and hence the capacity to spend and consume) creates little additional contentment. Social science findings, which do not all run in the same direction and have other well-known limitations, on the whole seem to lend support to the notion that higher income does not significantly raise people's contentment—with the important exception of the poor. Frank M. Andrews and Stephen B. Withey found that one's socioeconomic status had meager effects on one's "sense of well-being" and no significant effect on "satisfaction with life-as-a-whole" (Andrews and Withey, 1976). Over 1,000 participants rated their sense of satisfaction and happiness on a 7-point scale and a 3-point scale. There was no correlation between socioeconomic status and happiness; in fact, the second-highest socioeconomic group was consistently among the least happy of all seven brackets measured. Jonathan Freedman discovered that levels of reported happiness did not vary greatly among the members of different economic classes, with the exception of the very poor who tended to be less happy than others (Freedman, 1978).

Additional evidence suggests that economic growth does not significantly affect happiness (though at any given time the people of poor countries are generally less happy than those of wealthy ones). David G. Myers and Ed Diener reported that while per-capita disposable (after-tax) income in inflation-adjusted dollars almost exactly doubled between 1960 and 1990, almost the same proportion of Americans reported that they were "very happy" in 1993 (32%) as they did in 1957 (35%) (Myers and Diener, 1995). Although economic growth has slowed since the mid-1970s, Americans' reported happiness has been remarkably stable (nearly always between 30% and 35%) across both high-growth and low-growth periods. Moreover, in the same period (1960–1990), rates of depression, violent crime, divorce, and teen suicide have all risen dramatically.

In a 1974 study (Easterlin, 1974), Richard Easterlin reported on a phenomenon that has since been labeled the "Easterlin paradox": although at a given point in time, higher income generates more happiness, over the longer run (10 years or more), happiness does not increase as a country's income increases. In other words, a country's long-term economic growth does not improve the overall happiness of its citizens. Japan is an often-cited example of Easterlin's paradox. Between 1962 and 1987, Japan's economy grew at an unprecedented rate, more than tripling its GNP per capita. Yet Japan's overall happiness remained constant over that period (Easterlin, 2005). In 1970, Americans' average income could buy over 60% more than it could in the 1940s, yet the average happiness had not increased (Easterlin, 1973).

The explanation Easterlin offered is that individuals' happiness seems to be determined by their income relative to others, rather than the absolute value of how much they earn. Another explanation is that as individuals' incomes rise, so do their aspirations; as they earn more, they seek to consume even more. This effect is sometimes described as a "hedonic treadmill" (Stevenson and Wolfers, 2008).

Interest in the Easterlin paradox was revived in the late 1990s and early 2000s with the publication of a number of scholarly articles that called Easterlin's findings into question. A 2006 paper by Ruut Veenhoven and Michael Hagerty explained some of the reasons for the discrepancy among happiness researchers (Veenhoven and Hagerty, 2006). First, while changes in happiness tend to be small and must be measured in aggregate over long periods of time, very few data span more than a few decades, leaving their significance open to interpretation. Average happiness also tends to fluctuate, so it can be difficult to determine which fluctuations are part of an overall trend and which are a temporary change. Furthermore, the surveys used to measure happiness are not identical, and the order of questions and methods of survey-takers have changed over time, which may alter the results. Social scientists may choose to limit their data to only identical surveys (as Easterlin did) or take into account additional data from a variety of other surveys that may skew in one direction or another (as Veenhoven and Hagerty did).

The issues raised so far can be raised about most social science studies of this kind, especially longitudinal studies; however, a more serious challenge is Veenhoven and Hagerty's finding that both happiness and income increased in second half of the twentieth century, indicating a correlation between the two. A 2008 paper by Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers similarly found a correlation between income growth and happiness (Stevenson and Wolfers, 2008).

In December 2010, Easterlin and his associates published a response (Easterlin et al., 2010). They showed that much of the data from Stevenson and Wolfers's paper focused on a short period (six years instead of ten) and argued that the trends from their longer-term data were attributable to factors other than economic growth. They also added data from a number of non-Western, developing countries and found renewed support for the Easterlin paradox. They cited the examples of China, South Korea, and Chile to contradict claims of a positive correlation between long-term GDP growth and happiness. All three countries have very high growth rates. China's growth rate implies a doubling of per-capital income in less than 10 years; South Korea's in 13; and Chile's in 18 years. Yet none of these countries have shown a statistically significant increase in happiness. The authors wrote:

> With incomes rising so rapidly in these three different countries, it seems extraordinary that there are no surveys that register the marked improvement in subjective well-being that mainstream economists and policy makers worldwide would expect to find. (Easterlin et al., 2010)

Nobel laureate Amartya Sen showed that people who live in poorer countries often have a better quality of life than those who live in more affluent societies (Sen, 1999). He joined others who questioned whether the GDP was a sound measurement of well-being and suggested the need for a much more encompassing measure.

There is one important exception to these findings, namely, when the income of poor people is increased, it does contribute significantly to their happiness. This is important because otherwise the data cited could be used to argue that seeking to improve the lot of the poor is pointless because it would not contribute to their happiness. Thus, as Richard Layard's 2005 book *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* shows, when a country's average income exceeds $20,000 a year per person, it does add significantly to contentment (Layard, 2005). Layard uses happiness data from three major long-term public opinion surveys (the Eurobarometer for Western Europe, the General Social Survey for the United States, and the World Values Survey for Eastern Europe and developing nations) to calculate an average happiness measure for each country, which is compared to its average income per person. Critics of these data argue that it uses absolute rather than proportional measurements (Economist, 2010).

A later study came up with a cut-off point for the correlations between individual income and happiness. A 2010 study identified the level of income after which additional income produces little additional happiness as $75,000 (Kahneman and Deaton, 2010). The study's authors found that high income improved individuals' life evaluation (their thoughts about their life) but not their emotional well-being, defined as "the frequency and intensity of experiences of joy, stress, sadness, anger, and affection that make one's life pleasant or unpleasant." Whereas life evaluation rises steadily with increases in income, emotional well-being does not progress once an annual income of $75,000 is reached.[3]

HAPPINESS FROM SOCIAL RELATIONS

Some Americans responded to lack of income-producing work and their inability to spend time shopping by spending more time with their children, spouses, and friends, and in increasing their community activities. What do the data reveal about these activities as sources of contentment?

Robert Lane summarizes the results of several studies as follows:

> Most studies agree that a satisfying family life is the most important contributor to well-being … The joys of friendship often rank second. Indeed, according to one study, an individual's number of friends is a better predictor of his well-being than is the size of his income. Satisfying work and leisure often rank third or fourth but, strangely, neither is closely related to actual income. (Lane, 1993)

Several studies found that people derive more satisfaction from experiential "purchases," such as a trip to the zoo or a family vacation, than from material purchases. One study attributed this difference to the fact that experiences are harder to compare to each other than material possessions, which means that someone who spent money on an experience would be less likely to think about what they could have bought instead or compare their purchases to those of others (Carter and Gilovich, 2010). Another study provided evidence that "experiential purchases represented money better spent, brought more happiness to themselves, and brought more happiness to others" (Howell and Hill, 2009). This happiness resulted from both "increased relatedness" and "decreased social comparison." A similar study found that only one component of consumption—leisure consumption—was positively related to happiness, while consumption of "durables, charity, personal care, food, health care, vehicles, and housing [were] not significantly associated with happiness" (DeLeire and Kalil, 2010). Leisure consumption may lead to higher levels of happiness in part because of its "effect on social connectedness, as indexed by measures of loneliness and embeddedness in social networks."

[3] The two figures ($20,000 per year and $75,000 per year) are not directly comparable. The first measures a nation's average income; the second comments on individual income.

Still other studies found that social relationships contribute to health and longevity, which are assumed to be related to contentment. One meta-analysis found that individuals with stronger social relationships exhibited a 50% increased likelihood of survival (Hold-Lunstad et al., 2010). The researchers compiled data from 148 studies that examined social relationships and mortality, creating a data pool of over 300,000 participants, and found that the 50% figure was "consistent across age, sex, initial health status, cause of death, and follow-up period." Both introverts and extroverts report feeling happier when they are with other people (Bok, 2010). Derek Bok writes that "several researchers have concluded that human relationships and connections of all kinds contribute more to happiness than anything else." Conversely, people who are socially isolated are less happy than those who have strong social relationships. As one study put it: "Adults who feel socially isolated are also characterized by higher levels of anxiety, negative mood, dejection, hostility, fear of negative evaluation, and perceived stress, and by lower levels of optimism, happiness, and life satisfaction" (Cacioppo and Hawkley, 2003).

Research has shown that married people are the happiest of people who are single, divorced, widowed, separated, or cohabiting (Bok, 2010). Some evidence indicates that cohabitation may have similar benefits to marriage if the partnership is long term and stable (Dolan et al., 2008). However, since most research groups cohabiters together regardless of the longevity of their relationships, cohabiting is associated with a moderate increase in happiness, but not to the same extent as marriage. For example, one study showed that married people experienced a 4.5-point bump in happiness (on a 100-point scale) over single people who have never been married, and cohabitation was associated with a gain of 2.5 points (Layard, 2005). The presence of close friendships can have nearly as strong an impact on happiness as a successful marriage.

Researchers who examined the effect of community involvement (as opposed to simply seeing friends or family) also found a strong correlation with happiness. One study, which evaluated survey data from 49 countries, found that membership in (nonchurch) organizations has a significant positive correlation with happiness (Helliwell, 2003). Bok notes: "Some researchers have found that merely attending monthly club meetings or volunteering once a month is associated with a change in well-being equivalent to a doubling of income." Other studies have found that individuals who devote substantial amounts of time to volunteer work have greater life satisfaction (Bok, 2010).

It should be noted that it is typically difficult to prove the direction of causality. Is someone happier because they volunteer, or do happier people choose to volunteer? For the sake of this discussion, however, it is sufficient to note the correlation and to suggest that perhaps the positive effects work in both directions.

RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL PURSUITS

Extensive evidence indicates that people who consider themselves religious, express a belief in God, or regularly attend religious services are happier than those who do not. According to one study, agreement with the statement "God is important in my life" was associated with a gain of 3.5 points on a 100-point scale of happiness (Layard, 2005). (For comparison, unemployment is associated with a 6-point drop on the same scale). Other studies have shown that Americans with a deep religious faith are healthier, live longer, and have lower rates of divorce, crime, and suicide (Bok, 2010). In their book *American Grace*, Robert Putnam and David Campbell reported that "a common finding [of happiness researchers] is that religiosity is among the closest correlates of life satisfaction, at least as strong as income" (Putnam and Campbell, 2010). They found that the difference in happiness between a person who goes to church once a week and someone who does not attend church was "slightly larger than the difference between someone who earns $10,000 a year and his demographic twin who earns $100,000 a year."

There is some debate as to whether the effect of religiosity on happiness is attributable to participation in religious activities (attending church services, involvement with a religious community) or religious belief. Layard characterizes the correlation between belief in God and life satisfaction as "one of the most robust findings of happiness research," whereas Putnam and Campbell argue: "The religious edge in life satisfaction has less to do with faith itself than with communities of faith." Whichever is correct, one still learns that religious life is positively correlated with happiness.

There is little research on transcendental activities other than religious pursuits; however, the evidence that exists indicates that participation in activities that have deep meaning to the individual is associated with happiness. For example, "two studies that examined groups that chose to change their lifestyle to achieve personal values such as 'environmental friendliness' and 'voluntary simplicity' found that both experienced higher levels of well-being" (Bok, 2010). One study used a sample of 200 self-identified voluntary simplifiers and 200 mainstream individuals and arrived at measurements of participants' sense of well-being and of their ecologically responsible behavior through survey data (Brown and Kasser, 2005). The researchers found a correlation between ecologically responsible behavior and well-being. A different study used survey data from over 500 subscribers of a back-to-the-land magazine to measure participants' sense of well-being and determine whether they lived up to their sustainability values. The researchers found that those who were able to put their values into practice (live in a sustainable, ecologically friendly manner) were more satisfied with their lives (Jacob and Brinkerhoff, 1997).

A three-year government-funded study at Manchester Metropolitan University in the United Kingdom found that engaging in activities like painting, dance, music, and story-telling was associated with increased psychological well-being and lower levels of anxiety and depression (Parkinson, 2009). Over 100 participants took surveys to assess their sense of well-being immediately before and after engaging in arts activities. After completing the arts activities, participants scored higher on all six indicators measured (''purpose in life,'' ''self acceptance,'' ''personal growth,'' etc.).

CONCLUSION

Social critics have long characterized consumerism—making the acquisition of status goods a major life project—as inherently unsatisfying, ''shallow,'' and ''empty.'' It is also viewed as Sisyphean, as whatever level of consumption one attains, there are always others who have attained a higher level, and there is no end point at which once reached, one can be content. A small minority of Americans have long accepted one version or another of this criticism and sought to opt out of this project and engage in others. They are sometimes referred to as those engaged in voluntary simplicity. Concerns for the environment further supported such a quest for other projects than consumerism.

The Great Recession has forced a much large number of Americans to face the question of whether they can adapt to a more austere life and whether they can find other sources of contentment. Data show that this is possible but there seems no way to predict which course Americans will follow, unless these data are much more widely available and the social forces that promote consumerism are restrained.

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