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Redefining consumption. Part three: towards a “new prosperity”

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This final part of a series of three blog posts^{[1](#)} exploring consumption and lifestyles analyses the capacity of consumption, if redefined, to contribute to a new kind of prosperity.^{[2](#)}

FRANK TRENTMANN

Empire of Things

How We
Became
a World of
Consumers,
from the
15th century
to the 21st



**'Magnificent ...
groundbreaking
... a triumph'**

PETER FRANKOPAN,
AUTHOR OF
THE SILK ROADS

The promise of material prosperity

With growing calls to change our consumption habits in favour of greater moderation, it is important to resist this tendency to place the responsibility for reinventing consumption squarely on the shoulders of individuals. Indeed, current patterns of consumption are the product of our economy, technical systems and political narratives, etc. It is a promise at the heart of our model of society, but also an imperative for our economies to function.³ "Simplistic exhortations for people to resist consumerism are destined to failure", writes T. Jackson. Acting upstream and saying "change your consumption" is not sufficient; we need to understand downstream how to change this promise.

Consumption is no longer synonymous with social progress

If material consumption is a promise at the heart of our social models, this is because it has been a powerful driver of social progress, helping to raise standards of living and bringing prosperity. But is this still the case in the developed countries?

T. Jackson shows that a certain number of signs indicate that this rationale is losing momentum in the developed countries: consumption is no longer the driver of social development and of participation in society, or at least is no longer sufficient, especially faced with the pressure exerted by the job market on individuals and social structures. This rationale is also undermined by the negative impacts of inequalities. While material consumption is still aligned with the functional requirements of our economy, it is no longer fully aligned with social progress in the strict sense.⁴

The analysis by D. Guilbaud, published in the midst of the Yellow Vests crisis in France, reformulates the promise identified by F. Trentmann, and adds a political dimension to this observation: "Our system of government is based on a tacit pact, through which the majority of citizens agreed to not play an active part in the policymaking process, which was de facto the preserve of the wealthiest social categories, in exchange for which the latter undertook to work to increase the material comfort of these passive citizens, while creating the conditions for social mobility that would enable their children to fare better than themselves. That pact is now broken."⁵

It is therefore time to change this promise of growing material prosperity, as the era of the citizen-consumer and the political pact built on it might have shown its limitations, from a social, political and environmental point of view. But is this promise essential to the stability of our economies and our jobs?

Consumption to ensure collective prosperity: what are the ways out?

T. Jackson builds his reasoning around a central dilemma of ecological thinking: it is necessary to both reduce consumption to stay within planetary boundaries and to increase our consumption to maintain our economic stability. The traditional, most widespread response to this dilemma is decoupling:⁶ the idea that our economic growth is less and less based on resource consumption. But analysis of the data and mechanisms of our economy lead him to say that "in our kind of society, in this kind of economy, it is highly unlikely that we will be able to decouple fast enough to remain within environmental limits". To break this deadlock, his exploration indicates that we could redirect our economy towards the production of services of all types (e.g. circular economy, culture, education, care, etc.), which are highly immaterial, and reduce material production. This would result in an economy without growth, but which could nevertheless prove stable from a macroeconomic viewpoint. The possibility of organising a welfare state without growth has been the subject of important debates that we cannot directly address here, but IDDRI's research ⁷ on the subject shows that beyond the ecological imperative, several factors (tertiarisation, ageing, demography) are already tending to reduce our prospects for future growth, and that it is therefore the responsibility of policymakers to prepare for this. Indeed, a post-growth but prosperous society will need a positive political narrative as well as substantial reforms of social protection policies, which can already be identified.

In short, material consumption is perhaps no longer a driver of social progress, but it fuels our economic system and maintains our employment and social protection systems. Changing our consumption and reducing our impact on resources therefore implies rethinking the way in which we provide these vital elements of our prosperity. Moreover, this has the potential to make us more prosperous, because "once a certain standard of living has been achieved, equality policies are a powerful force for progress, not growth).⁸

A project to reinvent our consumption requires the creation of a new pact.

First, steps must be taken to reduce material consumption. One key course of action is to foster eco-design, to reduce obsolescence, and to legislate on recyclability: public policies already exist in this direction, but need to be far more ambitious.⁹ IDDRI, with its partners, has for example delivered strong proposals in the field of digital technology.¹⁰ This must, of course, be combined with making sustainable and repairable goods more attractive to consumers. Finally, discussions on the place of advertising in our lives and its role in terms of the transition are essential, as its omnipresent incitement to consume is increasingly at odds with all those who are gradually gaining awareness of environmental issues and of the impact of our consumption.

But this must be accompanied by a positive dimension, by a project. T. Jackson sees the capacity to participate in a shared project and in public decisions as a dimension of prosperity, and the Yellow Vests crisis has revealed high demand in this respect. Moreover, a meaningful collective project that generates high-quality jobs is essential for our economy: the proposals of the US Green New Deal have the merit of embodying this in an attractive political narrative.¹¹ Finally, F. Trentmann observes that states have traditionally implemented incentives to save when they had a major project to pursue (modernisation, reconstruction, war), and then progressively abandoned this desire to interfere with savings practices. Could a massive, coherent programme of investment in the ecological transition, including a local dimension that would enable participation in decision-making and implementation, partly financed by redirecting some of the revenue from consumption towards savings¹² and investment, be capable of upholding the different parts of this pact? Could one of the fundamental changes in our consumption also be to promote, for those who can, productive saving¹³ in favour of activity and the transition? Civic energy initiatives¹⁴, and the policies supporting them, show that this is not an illusion and is already functioning in France and in several other European countries, and it would be possible to build on these experiments to replicate them in other sectors.¹⁵ How can we ensure that crowdfunded civic wind turbines or agroecological farms, based on cooperative models, become the new Venetian chapel, a symbol of one's contribution to the community mentioned in the first part of this series on consumption ("Redefining consumption. Part one: elements of definition")?

¹ "Redefining consumption. Part one: elements of definition" (<https://www.iddri.org/en/publications-and-events/blog-post/redefining-consumption-part-one-elements-definition>) and "Redefining consumption. Part two: moving away from consumerism?" (<https://www.iddri.org/en/publications-and-events/blog-post/redefining-consumption-part-two-moving-away-consumerism>).

² This discussion particularly echoes the current debate in the environmental field, as reflected by the recent publication of *Abondance et Liberté* (2019, La Découverte), a book in which Pierre Charbonnier chronicles the long history of linkages between political progress and material progress.

³ Tim Jackson cites two striking speeches encouraging consumption, one by Boris Johnson in the midst of the 2008 crisis, and the other by George Bush further to 11 September 2001: "Mrs Bush and I would like to encourage all Americans [...] to go shopping".

⁴ Here we are speaking globally, but for the poorest households, which are excluded from middle class consumption, access to consumption remains a form of social progress. However, in our opinion, this is more a matter of social justice than one of the consumer society. See IDDRI's blog post (July 2019): "Lifestyle transitions in unequal societies", <https://www.iddri.org/en/publications-and-events/blog-post/lifestyle-transitions-unequal-societies> .

⁵ Guilbaud, D. (2018). AOC, end of quotation: "When the conditions of work and existence deteriorate, when social mobility seizes up, the legitimacy of governors is rapidly called into question because it becomes clear to all that the latter are incapable of respecting the terms of this contract that demanded they work to improve the condition of all those with no say."

6 Relative decoupling: the material intensity of economic production declines. Absolute decoupling: the use of material resources declines in absolute terms, even with growth in economic production. See also the data presented in Akenji, L. et al. (2015). Sustainable consumption and production: a handbook for policymakers, United Nations Environment Programme.

7 https://www.iddri.org/sites/default/files/import/publications/pb0114_dd-lc-hw_post-growth-society.pdf ;
https://www.iddri.org/sites/default/files/import/publications/wp1713_lc-dd_protection-sociale-post-croissance.pdf ;
<https://www.iddri.org/sites/default/files/import/publications/wp0214.pdf> .

8 https://www.iddri.org/sites/default/files/import/publications/study0813_dd-et-al._post-growth-society.pdf .

9 See the discussions underway in the framework of the review of the French "Anti-waste and circular economy" act.

10 See the White Paper on the Digital Economy and the Environment, <https://www.iddri.org/en/publications-and-events/report/white-paper-digital-economy-and-environment> , and all the research by the experts at Greenit.fr <https://www.greenit.fr/>

11 See also discussions on the participatory model that would enable the implementation of this New Deal, which cannot build on the centralised approach of its predecessor: <https://www.metropolitiques.eu/The-Just-Transition-Economic-Democracy-and-the-Green-New-Deal.html>

12 The French savings rate being already at a relatively high level: <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/3676751?sommaire=3696937>

13 This would benefit from being part of a dynamic process to strengthen the co-operative approach in companies, whether as employee-shareholders or as employee-stakeholders. For a more in-depth look at company reform, see Fleurbay et al. (2019). Manifeste pour le progrès social, La Découverte.

14 See IDDRI's study: Rudinger, A. (2019). Les projets participatifs et citoyens d'énergies renouvelables en France - État des lieux et recommandations, Études, IDDRI.

15 See, for example, the MiiMOSA platform for agriculture and food: <https://www.miimosa.com/fr> .

MODES DE VIE**CONSOMMATION**