

# Consumer capitalism Is this as good as it gets?

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Clive Hamilton  
Executive Director, The Australia Institute

Until recently, there has never been a time in human history when each of us could hope to live a truly fulfilling life. From the earliest days, the hopes of ordinary men and women were severely constrained by their cultural and material circumstances. For ordinary people the binding constraint was economic and the most they could reasonably hope for was to achieve a modest but secure existence in the company of their families. For almost all, cultural and social limits imposed at birth were also binding; one's life course was conditioned by one's class, gender and race.

There were two dreams of liberation. Religious ecstasy in another life seemed attainable for everyone. Political authority was comfortable with this opium of the masses. The second dream, a society of equals, was much more threatening. Socialism promised prosperity in a classless society; by means of revolution it would abolish both the material and the social constraints on the full realisation of ordinary men and women.

In the end, it was not socialism that broke down the barriers of poverty and class, it was capitalism itself. In recent decades, in the rich countries of the world, the forces that held in check the hopes of the masses have for the most part fallen away. Despite pervasive money-hunger, most people in rich countries live lives of abundance in conditions that their grandparents would have regarded as luxurious. In the post-War decades, not only did incomes treble but mass education saw class barriers crumble. And the liberation movements of the sixties and seventies tore down the oppressive structures that confined the aspirations of women and minorities. The sexual revolution freed us from our Victorian inhibitions; the women's movement freed women from role stereotyping; gay

liberation allowed free expression of sexual preference; and the civil rights movement eliminated institutionalized racism.

The rejection of traditional standards, expectations and stereotypes was a manifestation of the deeper human longing for self-determination. Democracy, combined with the arrival of widespread material abundance in the West, for the first time provided the opportunity for the mass of ordinary people to pursue self-realisation. The political demand for democracy of earlier generations became a personal demand for freedom to find one's own path, to 'write one's own biography'. The constraints of socially imposed roles have weakened, oppression based on gender and race became untenable, and the daily struggle for survival has for most people disappeared.

The democratic impulse – which until the seventies took the form of collective struggles to be free of political and social oppression – has segued into something else, a search for authentic identity, for self-actualization, for the achievement of true individuality. At last, here was the opportunity for people to aspire to something beyond material security and freedom from political oppression.

But it was not to be. Before we had an opportunity to reflect on our new-found freedom, and to answer the question 'How should I live?', the marketers arrived with their own answer to the quest for true identity. Over the last two or three decades, the agents of the marketing society have seized on the primal search for authentic identity to sell more gym shoes, cars, mobile phones and home furnishings. And what happened at the level of the individual translated into society's preoccupation with economic growth, an autistic behavioural pattern reinforced daily by the platitudes of the commentators and the politicians.

Today, most people in rich countries seek proxy identities in the form of commodity consumption, consumer capitalism's answer to the search for meaning. The hope for a meaningful life has been diverted into the desire for higher incomes and more consumption. Why do we succumb? We continue to pursue more wealth and consume at ever-higher levels because we are afraid of the alternative. The yearning that we feel for an authentic sense of self is pursued by way of substitute gratifications, external rewards

and especially money and material consumption. That attaining these goals can never satisfy our yearning leads us only to set higher goals – more money, a bigger house, another promotion. As Marilyn Manson declared: ‘Keep them afraid and they will consume. Fear and consumption.’<sup>1</sup>

As the values and conventions of the past were undermined by the liberation movements of the sixties and seventies, the values of the marketplace spread in their stead. The counter-culture tore down the social structures of conservatism that, for all their stultifying oppressiveness, held the market in check. Now many of the cultural leaders of the protest generation work for advertising agencies and major corporations for the benefit of capital. There is even a name for them – bobos, or bourgeois bohemians. The women’s movement sought liberation but settled for equality. Gender equality has meant, above all, unfettered opportunity for women to create themselves in the images invented for them by the marketers. Whether a woman is a dutiful housewife or a kick-arse careerist is a matter of indifference to the marketers, as long as she continues to spend.

The demands of the baby boomers for freedom in private life, for freedom from the fetters of social convention, and for freedom of sexual expression were noble in themselves, but it is now evident that demolition of the social customs and moral rules did not create a society of free individuals. Instead, it created an opportunity for the marketers to substitute material consumption and manufactured lifestyles for the ties of social tradition. In the face of revolutionary changes in social attitudes in the West, consumer capitalism has remained unruffled. Indeed, each new social revolution has provided an opportunity for it to rejuvenate itself.

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The economics profession has a lot to answer for. It has provided the intellectual cover for the penetration of market values into areas of social and personal life where they do not belong. When market values rule calculation drives out trust, self-centeredness displaces mutuality, superficiality prevails over depth and our relationships with others are conditioned by external reward and, above all, by money. In a world of ruthless

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<sup>1</sup> In Mike Moore’s film *Bowling For Columbine*.

competition where market values prevail, playing fair seems naïve. When a cricketer walks or a mountaineer sacrifices the summit to help another, our admiration betrays our despair at the usual state we have descended to. Let's consider some examples of how market values and the spread of economic thinking has corrupted much that is decent in us.

One of the earliest and most aggressive exponents of this economic imperialism was Gary Becker, the Chicago economist *par excellence*, who in an article published in one of the profession's most prestigious journals applied the principles of microeconomics and consumer behaviour to what he called the market for marriage. Becker defined marriage as an arrangement to secure the mutual benefit of exchange between two agents of different endowments. In other words, people marry in order more efficiently to produce 'household commodities', including 'the quality of meals, the quality and quantity of children, prestige, recreation, companionship, love, and health status'. The rational person will base any marriage decision on quantifiable costs and benefits. The gain from marriage has to be balanced against the losses – including legal fees and the costs of searching for a mate – to determine whether marriage is worthwhile.

Becker went on to analyse the effect of 'love and caring' on the nature of the 'equilibrium in the marriage market'. To do so he defined love as 'a non-marketable household commodity', noting that more love between potential partners increases the amount of caring and that this in turn reduces the costs of 'policing' the marriage. Policing, of course, is needed 'in any partnership or corporation' because it 'reduces the probability that a mate shirks duties or appropriates more output than is mandated by the equilibrium in the marriage market'. There's no need to put a padlock on the fridge if your partner loves you. After pages of differential calculus, Becker reaches a triumphant conclusion: since love produces more efficient marriages, 'love and caring between two persons increase their chances of being married to each other'. What Becker's wife thought about this analysis is not recorded, but in 1992 the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences was sufficiently impressed to award him the Nobel Prize for Economics for this and related work.

We gasp, but are not pre-nuptial agreements a reflection of the economic approach to marriage? Has not the decision to become a parent for many young men and women become a 'lifestyle' choice': what's it to be, a baby or a beamer? Have not the economists and the accountants managed to insinuate their ideas into the way we form and conduct our relationships? If Gary Becker's barmy ideas infected only the thinking of academic economists then we would not have too much to worry about. But, driven by growth fetishism, over the last twenty years the economic way of thinking has, like a virus, invaded public and private spheres where previously it was alien. Let me give another illustration almost as disturbing as Becker's analysis of marriage.

In the early 1990s the chief economist at the World Bank was a man named Lawrence Summers. He was later appointed by President Clinton to be the Secretary of the Treasury. At the time the World Bank was taking an intense interest in global environmental problems and was proffering advice to developing countries. In a leaked internal memo, Summers argued that rich countries should ship their toxic wastes to poor countries, writing that 'the economic logic behind dumping a load of toxic waste in the lowest wage country is impeccable' and that 'under-populated countries in Africa are vastly UNDER-polluted'. How do we know this? Because in poor countries, Dr Summers wrote, the forgone wages from illness and early death are so much less than in rich countries. In other words, the life of an African is worth much less than the life of an American. It must be conceded that, economically speaking, Summers' logic is impeccable; it's just that we should not think about these things economically.

We marvel at Lawrence Summers' chutzpah, but what's the moral difference between dumping our toxic wastes in Africa and refusing, as the Howard Government has, to ratify the Kyoto Protocol and reduce our greenhouse gases unless poor countries do likewise? In the lead-up to the Kyoto conference in 1997, small island states in the Pacific expressed their alarm at scientific projections indicating that several of them would be flooded by rising seas. The Australian Government's chief adviser on climate change told a conference in London that it might be more efficient to evacuate small

island states subject to inundation rather than require industrialised countries like Australia to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>2</sup>

The values of the market have colonized our universities too. In the 1850s Cardinal Newman affirmed that knowledge is capable of being its own reward, and wrote of the attributes of mind that arise from a liberal education as ‘freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom’. Few would challenge this view in principle, yet all around us we see the idea undermined by the commercialisation of universities, the commodification of knowledge and the transformation of academics into industrial drones. The intrinsic rewards of knowledge are today belittled and mocked.

I received a letter from a student who, after gaining a TER or ENTER score of 98.9, decided to study Classical Greek at the University of Sydney. She wrote that through her studies she is exploring what it is to be human. But she has been told by friends and family that she is wasting her time, that while ‘it’s all very well to indulge in the humanities while [you are] young’ sooner or later she will have to do something ‘practical’. In other words, the purpose of a university education is to obtain the highest paid job one can. As more students than ever crowd onto our campuses, the reorientation of our universities to vocational and commercial demands promises to produce a nation of highly educated fools.

In a survey by the Australia Institute of academics in the social sciences, we were told repeatedly that university teachers feel compelled to make their courses more vocational, that is, more market-oriented. The changes have generally diluted their intellectual content. Nearly ninety per cent said their universities place greater value on courses that attract full fee-paying students than on other courses. The preference for money-spinning courses is at the expense of courses of a critical or speculative nature, that is, those that contribute more to social and cultural values. Many said that, increasingly, the ability to pay is more important than the ability to pass. Wrote one:

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<sup>2</sup> See Clive Hamilton, *Running From the Storm: The development of climate change policy in Australia* (UNSW Press, Sydney, 2001) p. 79.

... the universities are no longer communities of scholars but institutions which are aiming to satisfy rather undefined and unexplored market needs. This will inevitably constrain freedom of inquiry often in non-transparent and non-coercive ways.

The spread of cheating and plagiarism is entirely consistent with the instrumentalist approach to education of the new enterprise university promoted by the economic rationalists. Perhaps the universities should be honest about it and discard noble mottos such as 'First, to learn the nature of things' (ANU), 'Although the constellations change the mind is constant' (University of Sydney) and, 'Seek wisdom' (UWA), and replace them with Shakespeare's observation in *Timon of Athens*: 'The learned pate ducks to the golden fool'.<sup>3</sup>

Some academics have resisted and for their troubles have been accused by Alan Gilbert, the campaigning former Vice Chancellor of the University of Melbourne, of being Luddites. If, in the face of rapid change, academics are behaving like 18th century handloom weavers, it is because the managers of the enterprise universities are behaving like Lancashire mill owners.

The values of the market are transforming not just our minds but our physical bodies too. Huge industries are devoted to changing our shapes, our visages and our life-spans, all in pursuit of the notion of happiness that the market has given us. In the USA, in what is described as 'the latest vanity craze sweeping the nation', Botox parties provide a congenial environment at which the guests drink champagne and take it in turns to have Botox injections to paralyze facial muscles. Botox is described as 'the wrinkle-free fountain of youth'.

But this is child's play compared to the plot of a new US television program called *Extreme Makeovers*, which has now made the inevitable journey across the Pacific. Seven thousand people applied to win the chance to have their physiognomy remade. While millions watch, the renovation is carried out by an 'extreme team' of plastic surgeons, dentists, personal trainers, and hair, makeup and wardrobe stylists. One of the

winner, Melissa, had a nose job, breast implants, brow lift, tummy tuck, ears pinned and Lasik surgery. She had her teeth whitened and straightened too. The other winner, David, a 38-year-old member of the National Guard who believed his appearance has barred him from promotion, had a nose job, chin augmentation, neck lift, brow lift, upper and lower-eye lifts, teeth whitening and porcelain veneers.<sup>4</sup>

The millions who watched thought ‘Wow, why not?’. The tragic answer, of course, is that these extreme measures don’t work. An Australian study has found that women who have had cosmetic surgery are also more likely to have chronic illnesses and use medication for anxiety and sleep disorders.<sup>5</sup> A Swedish study found that women with cosmetic breast implants are three times more likely than the general population to commit suicide.<sup>6</sup> It’s not clear whether the psychological disorders lead people to cosmetic surgery or whether cosmetic surgery brings on psychological disorders, although the Swedish researchers refer to ‘the well-documented link between psychiatric disorders and a desire for cosmetic surgery’. Cosmetic surgeons are sometimes described as psychiatrists with knives.

The chances are that those who seek radical transformation of their bodies developed the basic yearning as children. Childhood, of course, has become a marketing free-fire zone, and the lounge room is the kindergarten of consumerism. We all know of the extraordinary pressures placed on children to consume; what is less understood is how the thick fog of commercial messages in which children now grow up conditions their understanding of the world and themselves.

While teenagers with pocket money were once the target, marketers are increasingly targeting tweens, children aged 8-14, not because they buy many of the goods marketed to them but because they hope to build life-long brand loyalty that will pay off for decades. According to the recently published and definitive marketing manual titled *BrandChild*:

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<sup>3</sup> Timon of Athens, Act IV, Scene III

<sup>4</sup> [www.entertainmenttonight.com/celebrity/a15483.htm](http://www.entertainmenttonight.com/celebrity/a15483.htm) Accessed July 3, 2003

<sup>5</sup> ABC News in Science [www.abc.net.au/science/news](http://www.abc.net.au/science/news) 17 June 2002

<sup>6</sup> ABC News in Science [www.abc.net.au/science/news](http://www.abc.net.au/science/news) 11 March 2003

...car companies, airlines, hotels and financial services are competing with traditional kid marketers to establish a relationship with young consumers. Initially targeted at teens, research and marketing programs are now seeking to understand and develop a relationship with younger consumers in the hope that their predisposition towards their brand will sway their purchasing decisions in the years to come. The result has been a dramatic increase in the number of advertising messages targeted at tweens ...<sup>7</sup>

Brands have become an inseparable part of children's maturing consciousness. Nearly half of the world's urban tweens state that the clothes and brands they wear describe who they are and define their social status.<sup>8</sup> The manual notes that tweens are exposed to more than 8,000 brands a day and that tweens influence close to 60 per cent of all brand decisions taken by their parents.<sup>9</sup>

What has become clear is that more and more tweens define their worth, their role in the social hierarchy, their popularity, and their success by the brands they wear, eat and live with. ... functionality takes a back seat to the belief that along with ownership of a brand comes success and admiration. ... [T]ween tribes ... have become active advocates for the brand.

The dramatic change in the role of brands has been part of the advertising agencies' long-term goals. It was initially the advertisers who envisioned turning brand into a form of religion, to increase their sales. And it has worked.<sup>10</sup>

Most children want to transcend the limitations of lifestyles manufactured by brands and available to everyone. They want to achieve the new pinnacle of social success – celebrity. Children do not see fame as the reward for achievement but simply as a state in itself. And with the proliferation of celebrities whose fame owes nothing to any talent or achievement, this is an accurate judgement. The worldwide survey of tweens for

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Lindstrom, *BRANDChild: Remarkable insights into the minds of today's global kids and their relationship with brands* (Kogan Page, London, 2003) p. 46

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p. 77

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. pp. 6 & 23

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 82

BRANDChild found that more than half say they want to be famous, with Indian children (90%) and American (61%) children topping the list (and with Japanese kids at the bottom (28%)). In Australia, when a talent hunt for Popstars was launched more than 120,000 young people put their names forward.<sup>11</sup>

Celebrity is a magic potion to be taken as an antidote to the affliction most feared by tweens, rejection and social isolation. To attain acceptance they will go to extreme lengths. A 1999 survey of tween and teenage girls found that 46 per cent say they are unhappy with their bodies and 35 per cent say they would consider plastic surgery.<sup>12</sup> Being sexy is being cool and that's why even pre-pubescent girls are being sexualised. A year or so ago the Olsen twins visited Australia promoting their brands of lingerie, including padded bras, to their 6-12 year old fans. If adults sexually attracted to children are called pedophiles, what do we call adults who set out to make children sexually attractive? Advertising executives.

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Sigmund Freud used to complain that his American acolytes had interpreted his psychotherapeutic ideas as a technique for making people happy. Steeped in European philosophical tradition, Freud believed this to be a trivialization of a movement whose purpose was to understand the meaning of what people do and what their behaviour tells us about the human condition. The purpose of life is not to be happy; it is to understand ourselves so that we can achieve personal integration or reconciliation with our selves. It is a process rather than a final state.

The marketers have not only sought to persuade us that they can provide us with happy lives, consumer capitalism has redefined happiness itself. People have come to believe that happiness can be achieved by maximising the number of emotional and physical highs. The pursuit of short-term emotional highs swamps the longer-term and deeper need to fulfill one's potential and realize one's life purpose. Twentieth-century consumer capitalism has seen a progressive substitution of activities and desires that result in

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 81

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 196

immediate stimulation in place of the more challenging and potentially more fulfilling demands of realizing one's true potential. There is a trade-off that must be made between short-term gratification and attaining deeper goals of self-realisation.

Yet it is in the superficial form of happiness that we are told to invest our hopes. Today, the pursuit of happiness promotes a hedonistic, shallow approach to life. We don't need the psychological studies to confirm what our intuitive knowledge and folk wisdom tell us – that a worthwhile life is one of inner contentment marked by self-acceptance, the ability to maintain warm and trusting relationships, living in accord with personal standards, having a clear sense of direction in life and realizing one's potential.

This idea of happiness is hostile to the market because it cannot be provided by the market and recognises that the market constantly conspires to corrupt it. Yet it is the market's superficial idea of happiness that finds a theoretical rationale in the economics texts and that is reinforced every time a political leader offers us a fistful of dollars.

The market's definition of happiness changes our values and thus the way we behave. If I believe in the market's idea of life's goals then external rewards take precedence over intrinsic goals. In that case, I would go to the marriage market to pick out a mate who can best satisfy my own emotional and physical needs; I would never follow a passion to study Classical Greek; I would not understand why it's offensive to argue that Africa is vastly under-polluted and that it's cheaper to evacuate islands that will be inundated because we refuse to cut our greenhouse gases; I would genetically select perfect children and keep them happy by showering them with whatever goods they demand from me; I would walk over others to achieve my career goals; I would respond to life's vicissitudes with drugs; and, I would hire cosmetic surgeons to put on display the best body money could buy.

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All of these forces coalesce in the idea of growth fetishism. Nothing more preoccupies the modern political process than economic growth. As never before, it is the touchstone of political success. Countries rate their progress against others by their income per

person, which can rise only through faster growth. High growth is a cause of national pride; low growth attracts accusations of incompetence in the case of rich countries and pity in the case of poor countries. A country that experiences a period of low growth goes through an agony of national soul-searching, in which pundits of the left and right expostulate about ‘where we went wrong’ and whether there is some fault in the national character. Throughout history national leaders have promised freedom, equality, mass education, moral invigoration and the restoration of national pride; now they promise more economic growth. Citizens once hoped for a more equal society, a classless society, a more compassionate society and a more democratic society; now they can hope for nothing more than higher incomes.

Growth has annexed the very idea of progress. While once powered by belief in technological advance, evolutionary biology or the ethical perfectibility of humankind, from the 1950s material expansion became the driving force of progress and the measure of success became growth of GDP. That is why we consult the quarterly national accounts so closely, to know how well we are doing. This is convenient, for capitalist firms became the central agency of progress and the entrepreneurs brought their own thinkers to explain their role – the neoclassical economists.

The belief in progress is the counterpart in society of personal hopes for a better life. As Charles Rycroft observed:

...all societies of any complexity seem to have a tendency to divide themselves into purveyors and recipients of hope, the purveyors being special people – shamans, gurus, priests, psychoanalysts – who receive an esoteric training and are endowed with some sort of ‘mana’ or charisma by the others ...<sup>13</sup>

The economists are the modern purveyors of hope; they are the priests who hold the secret to attaining manna. The transformation of the idea of progress into the pursuit of a higher growth rate has meant the hijacking of hope itself. The neoliberal revolution of the last two decades has robbed us of hope because all it can promise is more growth and

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Rycroft, ‘Steps to an ecology of hope’ in Ross Fitzgerald, *The Sources of Hope* (Pergamon Press, Rushcutters Bay, 1979) p. 17

higher incomes. For those surrounded by abundance, more growth is nothing to look forward to; it cannot give us a better society and so the economists are the thieves of hope.

While economic growth is said to be the process whereby our wants are satisfied, in reality growth is sustained only so long as we remain discontented. Economic growth does not create happiness; unhappiness sustains economic growth. The vast financial and creative resources of the marketing industry are devoted to a single purpose, to manufacturing discontent and to persuading us to invest our hopes for the future in greater material consumption. That is its historical task. It is a wonderful scheme: persuade people to commit their hopes for a better life to higher incomes, but don't let on that achieving those goals cannot provide better lives, so that the only apparent response is to wish for even higher incomes.

Consumer capitalism has thus redefined what it means to live a successful life, and it has done so in a way that ensures the vast majority will fail. If success is judged by material reward then the success of the few is purchased by the failure of the many. 'Hence, of course, the pleasure many people take in the misfortunes, scandals and downfalls of the famous'.<sup>14</sup> The tall poppy syndrome is a legitimate and healthy defence mechanism in a world that consigns most people to failure.

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One cannot have hope without a vision. For a poor person, a practical vision is to be free of the material constraints that poverty imposes and to live a comfortable existence. The Republican candidate in the 1928 Presidential election, Herbert Hoover, famously pledged 'A chicken in every pot and two cars in every garage', a vision with appeal to a generation where, even before the Depression, deprivation was the lot of most. But in a post-scarcity society what can the vision be other than more of the same? George Bush knows, subliminally at least, that promising 'a nose job for everyone and two home theatres in every house' is unlikely to capture the public imagination, so he seizes on a

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 8

war on terror – a dark but visionary project in the bleakness of American consumer society. Pity about the innocents.

The hope held out by growth fetishism and consumerism is a false hope. Under modern consumer capitalism, hope is dead, and in Mary Zournazi's words:

Without hope what is left is death – the death of the spirit, the death of life – where there is no longer any sense of regeneration and renewal.<sup>15</sup>

We live in an era where the opportunities to live fulfilling lives have never been better and yet where the danger of disappointment has never been greater. When the market hijacks hope but cannot deliver what we need for fulfilled lives it no surprise that we see so much social and personal distress. In a world of abundance, this fact is inexplicable for those who are the prisoners of growth fetishism.

The epidemics of mental illness that have grown with affluence are a natural response to the serial disappointments and dashed hopes of the market. According to one study, depression has increased tenfold among Americans born since the Second World War.<sup>16</sup> Young people, the principal beneficiaries of super-affluence, are most prone to clinical depression, evidenced in record rates of teenage suicide and other social pathologies such as self-destructive drug taking.

According to the World Health Organization and the World Bank, the burden of psychiatric conditions has been greatly underestimated. Of the ten leading causes of disability worldwide in 1990 (measured in years lived with a disability), five were psychiatric disorders – major depression (the number one cause), alcohol use (fourth), bipolar disorder (sixth), schizophrenia (ninth) and obsessive-compulsive disorders (tenth). Major depression is responsible for more than one in ten of all years lived with a disability. While major depression is already the leading cause of disability worldwide, when measured in terms of disability-adjusted life-years it is expected to leap from being the fourth most burdensome disease in the world in 1990 to second place in 2020. Lat

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<sup>15</sup> Mary Zournazi, *Hope: New philosophies for change* (Routledge, New York 2002) p. 16

<sup>16</sup> For references see my book *Growth Fetish* (Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2003)

year, The Australia Institute released a report showing that nearly a third of Australian adults depend on medications, alcohol or other substances for their mental wellbeing.

For decades now, the politicians and economists have told us that maximising economic growth will take us on the path to a better society, yet we are now in the grip of an epidemic of mental disorders and alienation. What does this reflect if not an endemic sense of hopelessness? For if we can discern no light to draw us on, no way out of our despond, then what else do we do? Mental illness is a natural response to the hopelessness of modern consumer life.

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The first step in the counselling process is to give the patient or client hope. To be cured one must believe that life can be better, that there is hope. To achieve this the counsellor helps the client to externalize the problem, to understand its causes, to enable some objective understanding of it. In the parlance of the religious healers of old, we must name the beast. That is what *Growth Fetish* does; in that sense, it is a remedy for hopelessness.<sup>17</sup>

In *Growth Fetish* I describe a post-growth society, one that is grounded in promoting the things that truly can provide for more fulfilling lives. A post-growth society will go beyond our obsession with growth and income and endless consumption. It will redefine progress in a way that puts at the centre the contentment of all of its citizens, in which everyone can become reconciled with themselves and find fulfilment in their vocations and their relationships.

We can imagine a society in which education is devoted to creating more rounded humans, where the purpose of jobs is first to provide fulfillment and meaningful activity, where we take poverty, unemployment and disadvantage seriously once again, and where we deal with the rest of the world on the basis of ethics rather than economics.

Radical as it might sound, the case for a transition to a post-growth society is by no means far-fetched or utopian. Many people in Western countries have already made a

decision to reduce their work, incomes and consumption, a phenomenon known as downshifting. Most downshiffters are ordinary people who have decided it is in their interests to step off the materialist treadmill and take up a more balanced and rewarding life. A survey by The Australia Institute found that 23 per cent of 30-60 year olds have downshifted, citing as their reasons a desire for more balance and control in their lives, more time with their families and more personal fulfilment. The downshiffters, often people with no more than average incomes, expressed a desire to do something more meaningful with their lives, and to achieve this aim they considered it was necessary to consume less, work less and slow down.

The downshiffters are the standard bearers in the revolt against consumerism, but the social revolution required to make the transition to a post-growth society will not come about solely through the personal decisions of determined individuals. The forces devoted to buttressing the ideology of growth fetishism and obsessive consumption are difficult to resist, and they are boosted immeasurably by governments' obsession with growth at all costs. Making the transition to the new dispensation demands a politics of downshifting. A politics of downshifting promises a return to human values to replace those of the market and provides a vision for a better world for, as Rycroft observes of us all:

... so long as they have some ideal, be it for wisdom, self-realization, understanding, acceptance or truth, they will be able to transcend and survive adversities and disappointments.<sup>18</sup>

We need a new politics, one that transcends growth fetishism, a politics that once again takes our wellbeing seriously rather than fobbing us off with promises of more money. We need a new politics that creates the circumstances in which we, individually and collectively, can pursue fulfilment in our lives in place of an endless and futile scramble for more material goods. We need a new politics that promotes a rich life in place of a life of riches; a politics that can allow us once more to hope.

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<sup>17</sup> Clive Hamilton, *Growth Fetish* (Allen & Unwin 2003)

<sup>18</sup> Rycroft, *op. cit.* p. 9