

Sustainable Lifestyles and the Quest for Plenitude

Case Studies of the New Economy

Edited by Juliet B. Schor and Craig J. Thompson

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Introduction: Practicing Plenitude

Juliet B. Schor and Craig J. Thompson

Two thousand twelve was a frightening year for the planet. In March, fifteen thousand temperature records were broken in the United States, and large parts of the country suffered their worst drought in fifty years (NOAA 2012). In July, 94 percent of Greenland's summer ice disappeared in four days (Slivka 2012). Two months later, the rate of Arctic ice melt hit a new high, putting the predicted date for an ice-free Arctic within a decade, rather than the hundred-year timeline originally expected by scientists (Gillis 2012). In October, Hurricane Sandy, possibly the worst storm ever to hit the Northeast, devastated the region, depositing a down payment on a future of rising sea levels and increased vulnerability. By December, it was settled that 2012 would rank as the hottest year in U.S. history, by an astonishing full degree Fahrenheit (Gillis 2013). As British journalist George Monbiot noted, repurposing Queen Elizabeth's memorable quip, it was truly an *annus horribilis* (2012).

Monbiot is not alone in his pessimism. Scientists and policy makers are trying to come to terms with the failure of the global community to limit climate change to two degrees of warming and contemplating

the catastrophic consequences of four or even six degrees. Environmental journalist and activist Bill McKibben (2012) rang in the New Year by noting that we are fighting the “laws of physics.”

Exhibit 1 is the continued rise in global emissions. Not only are emissions 58 percent higher than they were in 1990, the benchmark year enshrined in the Kyoto Protocol, they are rising faster with each decade. The years 2011 and 2012 saw annual increases of more than 2.5 percent, and atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases now exceed 390 parts per million (ppm), considerably above the 350 ppm that many scientists say is a safe limit.¹ Modest emissions declines in wealthy countries have been insufficient to counterbalance the large increases in the Global South, especially from China and India. And some of what is easing emissions in the United States, such as the shift from coal to hydraulic fracturing for natural gas, has its own unpredictable impacts: the climate impacts of gas flaring and methane release may turn out to be worse than what they are replacing.²

What McKibben has called the “terrifying new math of global warming” makes clear that we need to find alternatives to fossil fuel–driven economies as fast as we can (2012). Using even the most forgiving climate change scenarios being modeled by researchers, the scientific consensus is clear: the window of opportunity for averting devastating climate impacts is closing rapidly (Peters et al. 2012). For those of us in the Global North, and especially the United States, the high emissions of the past as well as the present make it imperative that we decarbonize rapidly.

But how to do it? The economic, political, and cultural conditions necessary for a wholesale shift out of fossil fuels are formidable. The 2012 presidential election provided a hint of just how large the political obstacles may be. Romney mocked fear of rising sea levels, just a few short months before the storm surges of Sandy took lives and cost billions. Obama continued to avoid political risk by espousing his characteristically centrist “all of the above” energy stance, conveniently ignoring that the rationale for shifting to renewables was in direct contradiction to any mandates for expanded fossil fuel production. Climate change was apparently such a fearsome issue that candidates treated it as “that which shall not be named,” maintaining near-total silence throughout the campaign. Globally, the failure of the Rio+20 summit to produce anything but meaningless platitudes and the utter lack of progress at the Doha round of UN talks were further indication that elites are not yet ready to get serious about climate. Media coverage of climate change issues and debates—excluding the attention-grabbing reports on the damage and

human suffering wrought by superstorms—seldom broke into the mainstream news cycle. According to the nonpartisan Media Matters for America, in all of 2012, less than one hour of coverage was given to climate issues by all the major nightly new shows, and of that less than ten minutes addressed scientific findings (Fitzsimmons 2013).

This lack of urgency, or even expression of serious concern, on the part of political leaders, the corporate-dominated news media, and much of the corporate sector at large seems to be propelling action at the grass roots. Undaunted by the paralysis of the powerful, members of a group we call plenitude practitioners are taking matters into their own hands. Convinced of the need for a radical new way of living, they are transforming their lifestyles, organizing in their communities, and building a localized, alternative economy that is capable of meeting human needs with a dramatically reduced energy footprint. They are organizing themselves into Transition initiatives, community groups that work on “energy-descent plans” to manage the shift into low-carbon lifestyles. They are constructing local food economies built on farmers’ markets, community-supported agriculture (CSA), urban agriculture, seasonal eating, and a farm-to-table restaurant culture, believing that these activities are the foundation of a small-scale alternative to the carbon-intensive, industrialized, fast food system that currently dominates food production and consumption. They are joining the “maker” movement, which is dedicated to expanding the art of fabrication, both with simple tools and with high-tech machinery. Plenitude practitioners are downsizing their spending and looking for new ways of accessing goods and services, such as the many online opportunities for swapping, bartering, reselling, gifting, or repurposing.

These alternative practices of plenitude are creating new ways for people to meet their needs by sidestepping malls, big box stores, and professionalized services. Engaging with locals in peer-to-peer initiatives, people are creatively reinventing their everyday consumer practices to save cash, build social ties, and reduce their ecological footprints. While plenitude practitioners are by no means politically monolithic, many share a lack of faith in the ability of large institutions, be they governments or corporations, to successfully address the ecological and economic challenges we face. Instead, they are taking on the task of building another kind of economy in the shadow of what increasingly looks like a declining system.

In the pages that follow, we will explore the worlds of these plenitude practitioners by highlighting a series of in-depth cases. Through an ethnographic approach we will watch them as they join CSAs and time banks, plan for

peak oil and climate change, teach skills to impoverished inner-city youths, and defy the state in their quest to reconstruct preindustrial food chains. While our cases are mostly situated in the United States, we also recognize that this movement is global. We will look at a region of France that has been practicing a version of plenitude since the 1960s, where *alternatifs* have established high levels of community connection through barter, self-provisioning, and an oppositional ideology to the normative lifestyles of “work and spend.” We will also see that this movement is diverse. While it is often thought to be exclusively the domain of the white, highly educated middle class, we find that plenitude practitioners are a more varied group. Our case studies cover a broad demographic and geographic range, testament to the mainstreaming of these practices. Trendy New Yorkers and degree-rich Cantabridgians are represented, but so too are middle-class folks from central Pennsylvania and African American youth from the South Side of Chicago. However, as we shall see, a cultural chasm also exists between rationales and cultural messages used to promote plenitudinous lifestyles and the growing ranks of Americans who are grappling with the dilemmas posed by economic insecurity, declining real incomes, and other forms of economic disenfranchisement. Any chance of mobilizing a broad-based social movement to the cause of transforming the “business-as-usual” (BAU) economy may well hinge on finding ways to bridge this gap between plenitude ideals and the everyday lives of the struggling middle class. But before we delve further into these complexities and challenges, it will be useful to situate the plenitude model within its economic and social context.

BEYOND BUSINESS AS USUAL

In 2010, Juliet published *Plenitude: The New Economics of True Wealth*.³ The book addressed the urgency of ecological overshoot and the failures of the existing “business-as-usual” economy. Set in the context of the 2008 global financial collapse and the worldwide recession that followed, it argued that the challenges of addressing climate change and ecological overshoot during an economic downturn require going beyond conventional approaches. A new energy paradigm, though desperately needed, will not suffice. We also need a new kind of economics.

What exactly do we mean by the BAU economy? The term itself comes from the climate literature, where business as usual means staying on the current path of emissions. It is now widely recognized that for climate, BAU

Chapter 3 New Cultures of Connection in a Boston Time Bank

Emilie A. Dubois, Juliet B. Schor, and Lindsey B. Carfagna

If the watchword of global capitalism is greed, as declared by *Wall Street*'s Gordon Gecko, the mantra of the plenitude economy is share—as in sharing one's car, one's home, one's food, and one's time. These practices, once unthinkable in a middle-class America obsessed with privacy, acquisition, and protection of property, create what *Forbes* magazine called “an economic revolution” (Geron 2013) as millions of people are learning new ways to access goods and services as well as deploy the assets and skills they already possess. The sharing economy is growing at an estimated 25 percent annually and is predicted to exceed \$3.5 billion in 2013. It's an opportunity for changing how people spend, earn, and live that should enable the expansion of plenitude lifestyles.

The sharing economy is conventionally defined as including a wide range of initiatives, from those that represent marginal twists on business-as-usual offerings to radical alternatives.¹ Zipcar, an early example of car sharing, has evolved into a conventional car rental that offers services by the hour rather than the day. Owned by Avis now, it is not a true example of sharing. By contrast, another early

initiative, couchsurfing, is a network of couch lenders and the travelers who stay with them (without payment) that has remained closer to its origins. Couchsurfing is one example of what anthropologists call a gift economy—there's no price or formal market involved. People offer their homes to strangers—that is, they share them—mostly for the purposes of meeting them and doing them a good turn. It's a stark alternative to a conventional market exchange.

The sharing economy includes traditional cases in which assets or goods are literally shared among peers, such as land sharing (which matches land-owners with prospective gardeners) or neighborhood sharing, in which people lend the proverbial “cup of sugar” in whatever form is needed, such as lawn mowers or photographic equipment. It also refers to shared ownership of goods, a less common but expanding practice, which usually involves peer-to-peer relationships. The Internet has been key in the rise of peer-to-peer economies because it simplifies the logistics of sharing goods and ownership and provides mechanisms such as ratings systems that help build trust and reputation among strangers. Craigslist and eBay are early examples of online peer-to-peer initiatives that specialize in the resale of used goods. Couchsurfing uses a peer-to-peer structure, as do AirBnB (a for-profit lodging service), Relay Rides (people rent out their own cars), and Sidecar (people offer rides in their cars, donations suggested). The sharing economy also emphasizes reuse of goods rather than buying new, and it is remaking modes of service delivery. The options range from low-cost concierge-style services such as Zaarly and TaskRabbit, which facilitate errands or other services done by nonprofessionals (peers), to time banks, which are service-exchange communities that operate without money according to principles of equal time exchange. Members trade equal hours of work deployed for different tasks in time banks.

We use the term *connected consumption* to describe many of the initiatives in the sharing economy from the consumer's side. Connectedness refers to both the digital and the social aspects of these practices. For consumers, these practices make it possible to access a wide range of quality goods and services much more cheaply than in the BAU economy. They also facilitate local, face-to-face connected relationships. From the provider's side, these innovations open up a variety of ways to earn cash income or access to goods or services through barter. People are renting out their cars, homes, and other assets to make ends meet. They are selling and trading their time for cash and services. They are swapping food and used goods. They are saving money by

Chapter 6 Sustainable Pleasure and Pleasurable Sustainability at Chicago's Experimental Station

Robert Wengronowitz

OUT OF THE ASHES, AN EXPERIMENT

In 2001, Connie Spreen stood helplessly by, watching as years of labor and resources poured out from the scorched building, much like the water used to extinguish the fire. When the Chicago Fire Department departed from the scene of what was declared an electrical fire, Spreen felt as though the firefighters took with them the coherence of this community space. Still dazed, she noticed Justin, a nine-year-old boy who was a regular at the bike shop, standing beside her. "Boy, Connie," Justin sighed, "I'm sure glad you and Dan [Peterman, Spreen's partner] aren't the kind of people that just pack up and go away."

Ten years later, Spreen now laughs at the memory of her reply: "Geez, Justin, I thought I might be until, like, right now. But if we're not, I guess we're going to have to go in and clean up." Spreen and Peterman would go to court sixteen times after the fire to secure the building's mixed-use status. Citing possible structural instability of the remaining walls, city officials required twenty-four-hour guard

at the building throughout the first month of a lengthy clean-up process. The requirement seemed like an additional and potentially impossible burden; however, it became the catalyst for community celebration and affirmation. Neighborhood barbecues became a near-daily occurrence. "People came from all over the place, people we didn't know. At three in the morning, people were playing backgammon out in the street," Spreen explained. "It was a wonderful outpouring of support that fed the desire to rebuild it."

INTRODUCTION

Located on the border of two demographically divergent neighborhoods on the South Side of Chicago, the Experimental Station is a multifaceted, community-oriented venture that aims to repair and construct new social and ecological relationships. The Station seeks to be "a place where people and ideas feel welcome, where individuals matter, and where encounters and conversations are fostered that cannot or are unlikely to happen elsewhere" (Experimental Station 2012a). Re-formed as a nonprofit organization in 2006, Experimental Station's name comes from a Frank Lloyd Wright speech in which he envisioned the productive melding of art and technology under the same roof. The Station creatively sourced construction material—reused bowling alley flooring, for example—to reflect this integrative vision: a blend of the industrial and the organic, with tree trunks rising through its exposed concrete interior to shelter a number of grassroots projects.

Station initiatives range from Blackstone Bicycle Works (BBW), a program in which local girls and boys earn bicycles by accumulating credit hours practicing bicycle mechanics and repair, to reviving local food cultures and increasing food access through the 61st Street Farmers Market. The Station also hosts a team of independent journalists, cooking classes for those with limited financial resources, an on-site wood-fired oven for community bread-baking events, and an assortment of cultural events. Spreen explained the Station's holistic approach: "We seek to build an ecology" through which diverse initiatives function as "inter-related organisms in a living system that, over time, grows richer as it matures" (2010).

The Station "experiments" with cooperative ventures and local forms of provisioning that deviate from business-as-usual (BAU) economics to address social, cultural, and ecological concerns in an interconnected way. Located in Woodlawn—a food desert that ranks seventy-first out of seventy-seven