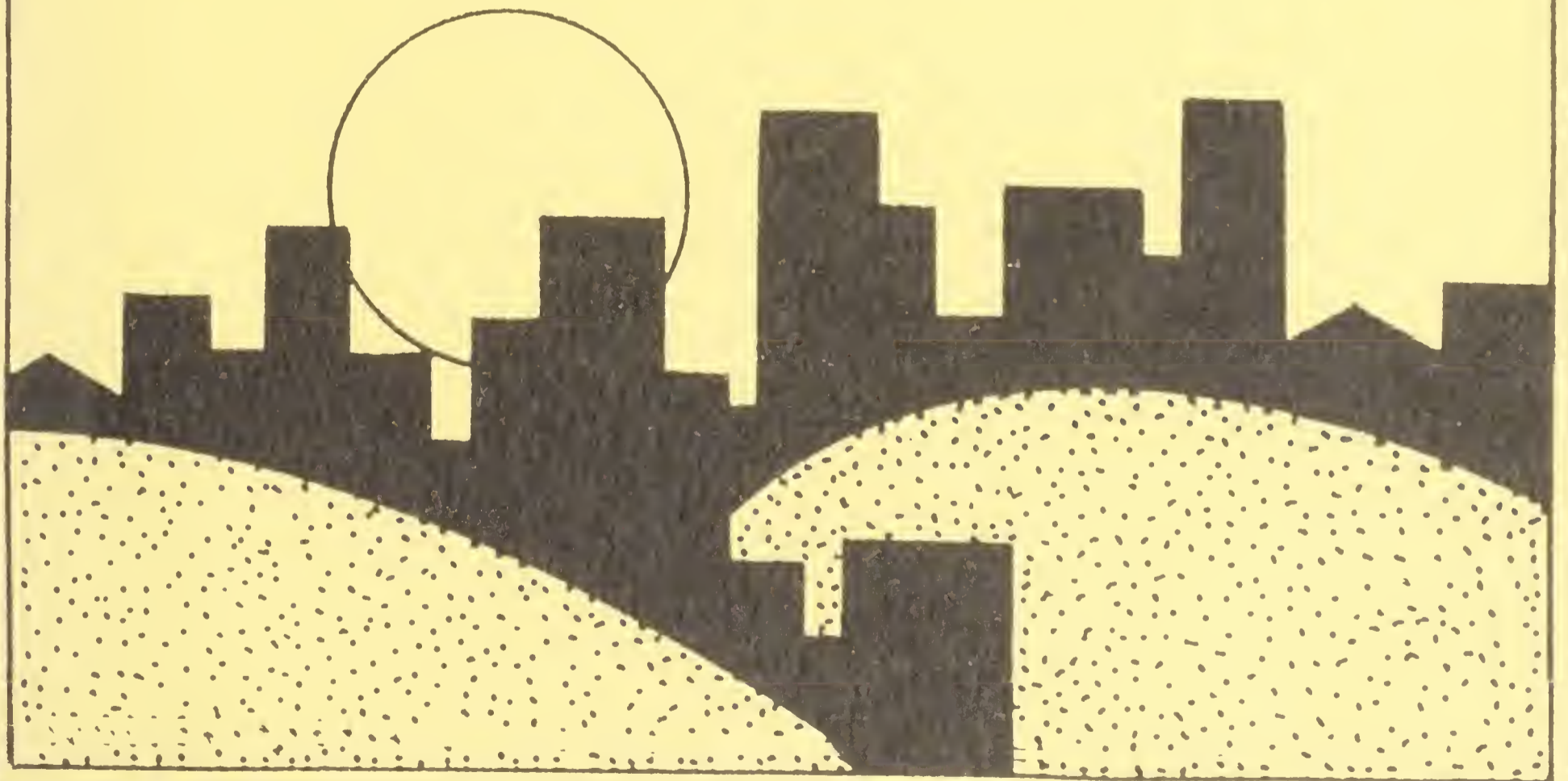


**‘The (Im)possibility of Sustainable Lifestyles —
Can We Trust the Public Opinion and
Plan for Reduced Consumption?’**

Christer Sanne

Urban Research Program
Working Paper No.63
August 1998



**RESEARCH SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY**

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‘The (Im)possibility of Sustainable Lifestyles — Can We Trust the Public Opinion and Plan for Reduced Consumption?’

Christer Sanne*

Environmentalists hold that in order to achieve sustainability, the Western lifestyle must change – all the more so since it is also a model for people in other countries aspiring to a fast economic growth. But others claim that Westerners are so materialistic that reduced consumption is ruled out. To escape this impasse, we need a better understanding of consumption: the attitudes to it, its cultural meaning in the rich Western countries and the role of consumption in the political and economic fields.

This paper starts with a model of three principal actors which are crucial for future changes towards sustainability: people, business and the political class. It is noted that the demand to reduce consumption challenges fundamental interests. But there are, on the other hand, attitude surveys from rich countries which seem to contradict the materialistic attitude. They rather indicate a composed attitude to material consumption and a corresponding preference for shorter hours and more leisure. The relevance of these surveys is discussed, including some objections which can be raised against them. One point made is that such objections are part of the problem if they serve to explain away findings that do not fit into the ruling paradigm.

All of this implies that political infeasibility to change lifestyle and reduce consumption may not be due to failing public response as much as to structural factors in society. Planning may have to shift focus from assumed citizen resistance to the institutions which thrive on present consumption patterns.

The last section hints at some perspectives of overconsumption which lead to various demands on the political decision process. A conclusion is that a sustainable development in the end would best be served by a continued reduction of the working hours.

1 The Map : Heading for a Steep Hill

The notion of a ‘green’ and sustainable society has strong support in public opinion. After three decades of attention – *Silent Spring* was published in the early 1960s – more than a generation has been influenced by environmental ideas. In politics, green issues can no longer be dismissed – certainly not in a country like Sweden where nature plays a significant role in people’s minds.

But what has been achieved by this greening of opinion? And what is lying ahead? I will outline three (possibly overlapping) phases using a crude model of three interacting types of actors: CAPITAL (business), PEOPLE (the

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public), and THE POLITICAL CLASS, each with its interests and mindsets. The mass media is regarded as a powerful intermediary between the actors, capable of creating a dominant world view, a perception of reality to which the actors react.¹

To characterise the actors briefly, CAPITAL is the main organiser of production. It is profit-oriented but basically indifferent to what is being produced (but may be sensitive to what the consumers think of its action). CAPITAL is also mobile, compared to PEOPLE, possessing the obvious power to withdraw. PEOPLE appear, to the other actors, as employees, consumers and voters/members. PEOPLE strive for well-being; what this implies is strongly influenced by cultural values. THE POLITICAL CLASS is basically concerned with continuity and legitimisation; it is composed of politicians and leaders of the many-faceted organisations which – supposedly – represent people in the political arena, but also of administrators, ‘bureaucrats’ and many researchers who work in conjunction with the government and organisations.

The model implies that change will not necessarily follow when and because ‘we’ (all actors) get informed and begin to act rationally and morally ‘right’. The different interests will lead to controversies and alliances of another nature than we normally assume. The simple assumption about ‘PEOPLE’ as one of the actors is confounded by the fact that human beings constitute all the actors, picking up prescribed roles in their particular position, but also alternating between positions. CAPITAL and, possibly to a lesser degree, THE POLITICAL CLASS are likely to follow an instrumental rationality while PEOPLE may be more apt to follow a ‘communicative rationality’ with a broader set of deliberations.

Phase 1: walking the plains

In the West, ecological awareness – paired with democratic institutions – has been instrumental in bringing about changes in production and products. It has curbed – but no more – the previous tremendous waste in manufacturing, marketing and usage of the products. Smoke-stacks and sewage pipes emit less dirt. Normally fewer resources (and less energy) will go into each product or be required for its use.²

People have, by and large, accepted these changes. Many consumers demonstrate their willingness to contribute even if the products have become more costly; eco-friendliness has become a sales argument. One example is catalytic converters for cars which in economic terms give an extra cost or a lower efficiency (higher price per mile). The manufacturers have grudgingly

¹ Media – with the exception of the diminishing public service share – is in fact in a very ambivalent situation. It is part of Business or dependant on the benevolence of Business (as advertisers) but still retains an ambition to scrutinise Business and the Political Class in the public interest.

² But we may have too rosy a picture of this. New cars in Sweden in the last 15 years do not use less petrol, contrary to common belief. Also American cars are said to use more petrol now than in the 1970s.

accepted the measures as well as many safety-improving devices and rules (and passed the increased costs of their products on to the customers). Cars also illustrate how improvements are incorporated in the continuous development of products.

The general picture is that behind superficial tugs-of-war, industry and government have co-operated in the gradual changes, acting with public consent. In terms of lifestyle changes, very little has been called for – mainly a bit of ‘eco-cycling’ household garbage. Thus government agencies handle environmental issues with a two-fold message to the public. The manifest one is to act green. But the latent one is that the situation is under control, no need to worry. In line with this economists have been claiming that economic growth is compatible with, or even a condition for, environmental improvements.

Phase 2: facing the hill

The leaner and cleaner production is, however, not taking us any closer to sustainability. Too little is being done and the growing volume of production has offset the improvements of each product. International treaties on environmental issues are insufficient. Renewed estimates by independent researchers and ecological pressure groups indicate the need for more fundamental changes in production/consumption and thus in lifestyle.³

This is how I perceive the present situation. Government agencies are at work to improve the situation but with the tacit instruction that changes must not disrupt other processes in society which are judged to be equally, or more, important – foremost perhaps the efforts to alleviate unemployment by way of economic growth. Meanwhile the public must rest assured that the problems are under control and can be solved with available means – the ‘technical fix’.

But the public understanding is also formed by reports of the ‘alarmists’ and its own observations. The Rio Conference in 1992 brought many controversies to the surface, not only between North and South but also between GROWTH and GREEN and between governments and non-government organisations (NGOs).⁴

³ The Friends of the Earth use the concept of ‘environmental space’ allotting each human being an equal share in the use and depletion of the resources of the world. Energy use is limited by the CO₂ -emission and they suggest a reduction to 40% by 2010 – to be achieved mainly by an ‘efficiency revolution’ – and to 15% by the year 2030, mainly by converting to energy sources not available today. This way, the FoE try to play down the need for changes in lifestyle.

The Swedish EPA, in a scenario study, makes the point clear that even if international treaties were to be followed, this would not suffice to create a satisfactory situation (Naturvårdsverket 1993). The message of the second generation book on the ‘limits to growth’ is equally pessimistic (Meadows, Meadows & Randers 1992).

⁴ Compare the description of the different world views of ‘hierarchists’ and ‘egalitarians’ in (Thompson, Ellis & Wildavsky 1990).

Phase 3: starting uphill

The progression so far must be considered to have been rather easy. Ecological improvement and better efficiency have often gone together. Much remains to be done – and is quite possible – along these lines.⁵

So far, the (small) sacrifices and the participation demanded from the public have also been met with fair understanding. The situation ahead may not be so smooth. ‘Dematerialisation’ in production is not enough. To make real progress towards sustainability, the wasteful lifestyles must be curtailed. It will mean going beyond choosing the ecologically correct goods and rather settling for less. Buy less and consume less. This is a fourfold challenge:

1. It will challenge business at large. Buying eco-friendly may even have been advantageous to business but buying less is a threat.
2. Reduced – or even levelled-off – consumption and economic activity will also threaten economic growth with repercussions for state finances and in the end the legitimisation of the government (and the political class) which rests upon its ability to collect taxes and deliver the services expected. It would certainly challenge ingrained ideas of Progress and Development as continuous material growth.
3. It will challenge the secondary aims of consumption: the satisfaction of wants and whims beyond needs as well as the social stratification that is expressed by means of a ‘distinctive’ consumption. Social interchange has become geared to consumption as we:
 - *buy (consume) to gain satisfaction – getting new clothes for a change in appearance – and
 - *express social affiliation or distance – buying the right things for the group we want to belong to – and
 - *remunerate, reward or felicitate by offering (purchased) gifts.⁶
4. It will in particular challenge resource consuming habits which constitute much of the distinction of high income groups. Estimates indicate that a high-consumer household would use 4 to 5 times more energy than a thrifty one, which is more than the income differential. The skewed distribution of travelling, a markedly energy-dense activity, is also illustrated by the report that more than 50% of all travelling is done by just 10% of the population.⁷

⁵ This is the ‘Faktor 4’-idea and the *first* message of that book before it goes on to establish that more profound changes are inevitable. (Lovins, Lovins & Weizsäcker 1995)

⁶ As discussed by a number of prominent writers, e.g. Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu and others mentioned below. Also see Featherstone (Featherstone 1991). Still another derived function of consumption is to support our memories – ‘souvenirs’ have become an integral part of touring as well as many other events.

⁷ Calculations presented in the daily paper Dagens Nyheter 96-03-11 and (Vilhelmsson 1990). Two worlds intersect here: family Jones’ weekly trip to the country-house and their annual vacation flight to the Mediterranean must somehow be made comparable to Mr Businessman’s weekly trips to customers far and wide. Unless both parties agree to a reduction, there is an obvious risk for a stalemate blocking any progress

A note on the history of ideas:

It is illuminating to trace the ideas of a consumer society and of the environmental issue side by side. In both cases, intellectual prediction preceded reality. Abundant consumption and its consequences to society was anticipated by many turn-of-the-century writers – e.g. Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin and Thorstein Veblen – long before it became an economic and social reality (in the US in the 1920s, in Europe after WW II). Likewise, environmental degradation from industry was anticipated in the 19th century but became a public concern in the last decades. Thus the two ideas intersected in the early 1970s when basic consumption needs were met (in the rich countries) and the environmental harm became obvious.⁸

In terms of public acceptance, green ideas can be compared to ideas of gender equality. Both have been promoted from above (as well as from the grassroots) and have made great progress in the last decades. It is of great importance for the future that children (and adults) are aware of nature's condition and that we are prepared to sort garbage and set composts. Likewise it is important that boys and men share in household work and that men occasionally take time off work to care for the children. But for green ideas as well as for gender equality ideas, it is obvious that these are only first steps, the sign of recognition that is a prerequisite for a general adoption of possible future practices.

2 What People Say...

Is our society prepared for changes in activities and consumption patterns which challenge these interests, ideas and habits? This section presents some survey results which do indicate a degree of readiness among People in their capacity as customers and employees. In the first place, they are counter-evidence to the prevailing 'economic wisdom' about the insatiable consumer which guides politics. A discussion of the results follows in the next section. Four kinds of evidence will be used:

- attitudes to consumption and needs,
- preferences for free time versus paid work,
- views of life changes over the last generation and
- declarations of concern for the environmental effects of present lifestyles.

It applies to the situation in rich welfare countries in general but by choosing material from different countries – here mainly the US and Sweden – we can also compare what differences in culture and politics mean.

⁸ (Sörlin 1991; Sanne 1995)

How much is needed?

The well-known 'income paradox' claims that happiness is hardly related to income, either in longitudinal or in cross comparisons. It is supported by a Swedish survey where a majority state that they are satisfied (completely or fairly) with their income. Likewise 70% in a recent US survey claim to be satisfied with their personal economic situation.⁹

In the US survey 88% agree (or even 'strongly agree') that 'most of us buy and consume far more than we need' and 77% state that they could choose to buy and consume less than they do. But the study also reveals a strong ambivalence to consumption. While most people condemn 'materialism' in their society as an important factor behind the erosion of good American features like commitment to the family and the community, they also accept the benefits of consumption and value material abundance in their life. A third – and intervening – factor is the importance attached to freedom which leads to a reluctance to interfere with other people's choice of lifestyle.

A Swedish survey fills out such broad statements. It was initially conducted in order to map 'consensual poverty' in terms of necessities for a normal life. Thus it avoids the problems of defining and delimiting the elusive concept of NEED but allows us to study people's attitudes to goods and services.

The most relevant information stems from the survey's mapping of the occurrence of certain belongings and habits of consumption and people's perceived need for them. This created four categories out of the alternatives HAVE/HAVE NOT and NEED/NEED NOT (see Figure 1).

We find that almost all households have-and-need a number of basic welfare means such as health care and proper housing. 73% also have-and-need a car (as compared to a mere 47% who consider it NECESSARY, a thought-provoking discrepancy¹⁰). Some household appliances are also very common and considered essential. But as one moves down the list, the categories 'has, no need' and 'has not, no need' become dominant.

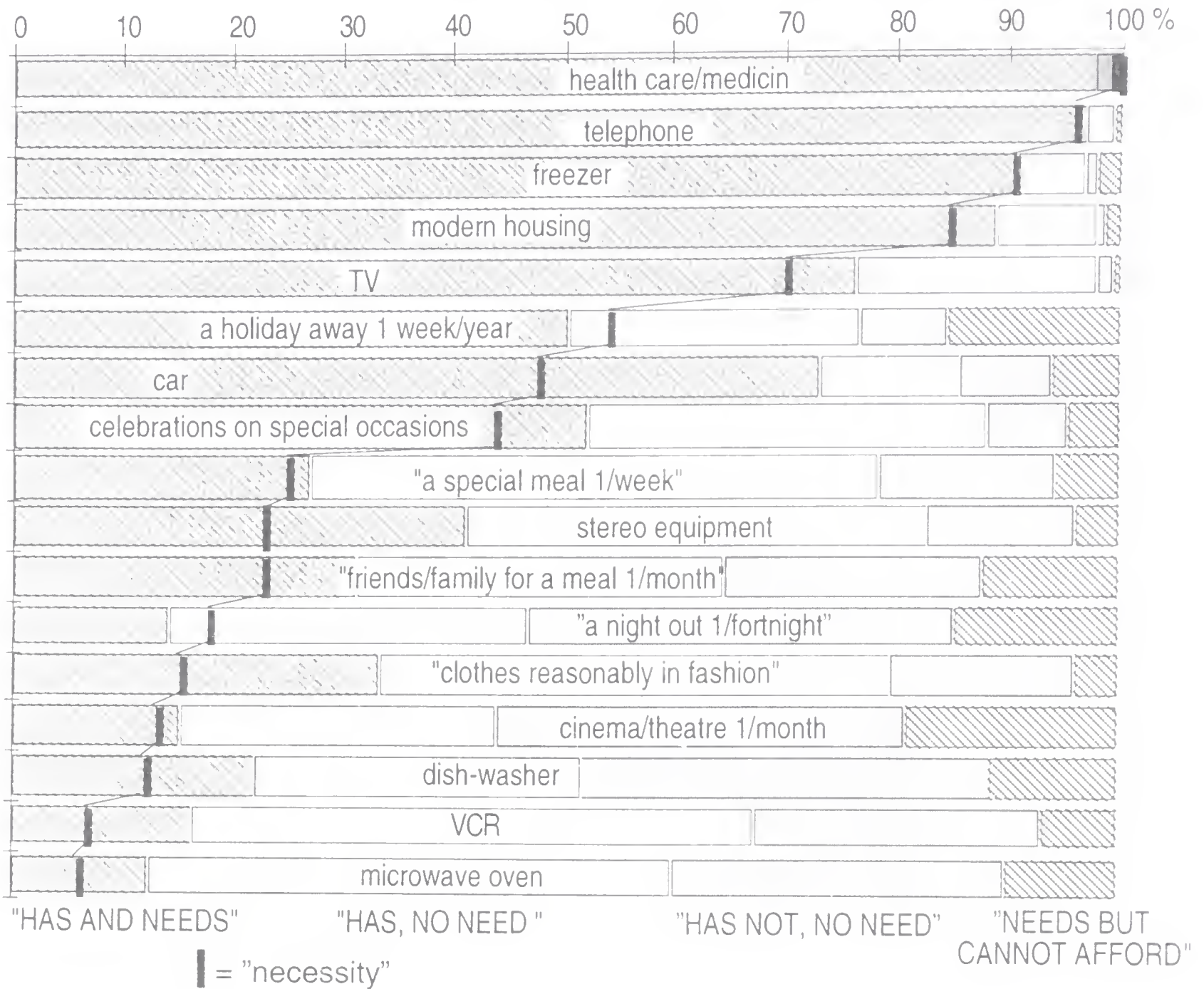
The smallest category is those deprived (to the right in the diagram). Approximately 15% claim that they cannot take holidays away from home or devote themselves to activities like going to the cinema or a night out.¹¹

⁹ This has been discussed by a great number of researchers, (e.g. Easterlin 1973; Allardt 1975; Scitovsky 1976; Lane 1978; Thurow 1983). For data from Sweden see Sanne 1995, which also contains a review of the literature on NEED. For this section I have chosen as my main sources of data for the US, Harwood Group (1995) and for Sweden, Halleröd (1994). The last survey is modelled on a British one by Mack & Lansley (1985) which gives very similar information (but uses it to describe and discuss the development in 'Poor Britain').

¹⁰ In addition to the 73%, another 6% consider themselves deprived of a car. Is the big difference between 73% (or 79) and 47% an example of a cognitive dissonance due to the awareness of environmental problems of the car?

¹¹ The issue of vacations is often pointed to by the trade unions. As for the other activities, could a contributing factor be lack of initiative?

Figure 1 What do you have and what do you need? Examples from a survey.



Source: Halleröd 1994, Poverty in Sweden: a New Approach to the Direct measurement of Consensual Poverty, Umeå, Umeå Studies in Sociology No 106

Note: Thick vertical lines indicate how many consider it 'necessary for a normal life' (in reply to a general question).

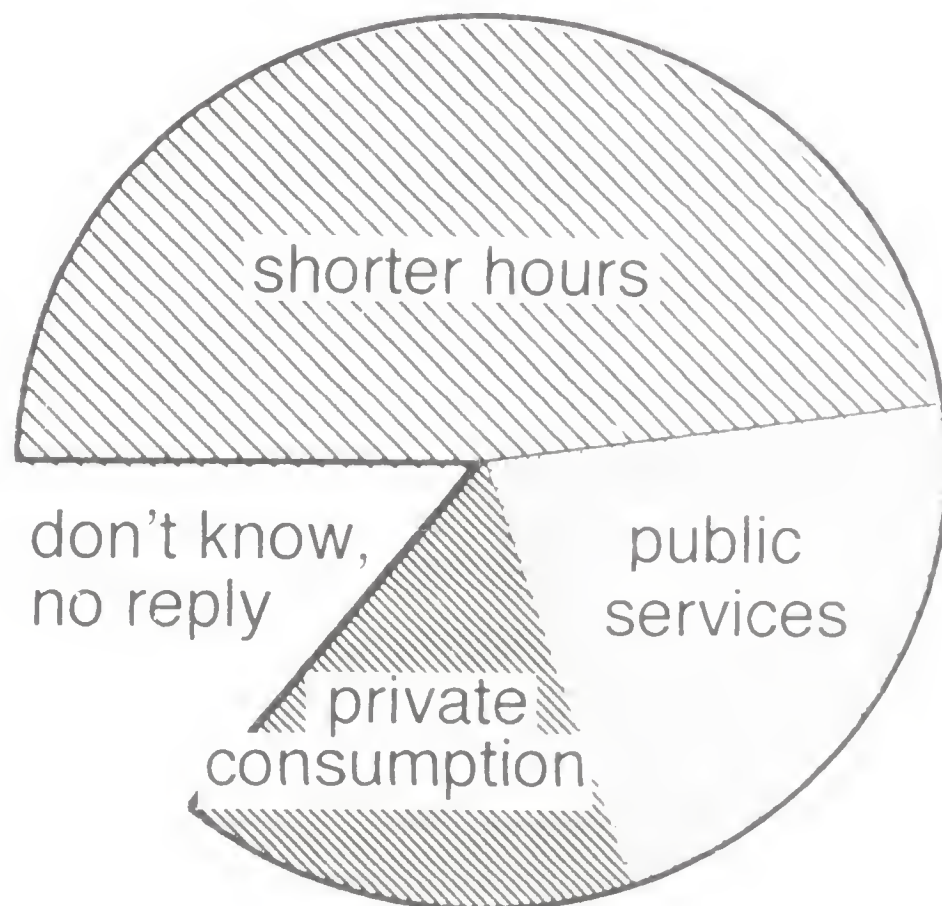
The most relevant feature however is that respondents were able (and willing) to distinguish between essential and non-essential consumption. In many cases the latter comprises the largest part: there are many VCRs, microwave ovens and other gear in the homes which are not deemed 'needed'. This indicates a 'rational' approach to consumption. The reasons for acquisition may have been curiosity, status, comfort or wish for distinction. It indicates that if given good arguments, one might refrain from such purchases.¹²

¹² Evidently, these replies do not mean that needs are defined for ever: the perception is most likely to change over time as new habits are formed.

Use of time: opting for time over money?

The idea that time is too short is a recurring theme in the popular debate. It is often combined with complaints about 'stress' in everyday life (see below). This is also apparent in many surveys. People regret the lack of time for what they consider important: to spend time with family and friends. This is also a theme in the American study: while very few people say that they would be more satisfied with a nicer car and other consumption, a majority expect to gain satisfaction from more social time, less stress and more community participation. Swedes are likely to stress family, leisure pursuits, learning something new and friends.¹³

Figure 2 Preferred use of increasing resources in society 1989



Source: Survey presented by government report on working time 1989

There is an obvious link between material consumption, income and the duration of work. Attitudes to working hours also reflect the attitudes to consumption and needs. Desired working hours has been the object of a great number of surveys. In Swedish surveys, and if the question is phrased as a matter of a choice for the future, a majority of 50-60% favour shorter hours *instead of a higher income*. Likewise about half of the respondents suggest that additional resources in society should be used for shorter hours and

¹³ See Sanne 1995; for the US (Harwood Group 1995). Similar information is given in an article entitled 'The Great American Slowdown' which is a real misnomer: the thrust of the article is the increasing 'time famine' over the last decades although the authors claim that it might have levelled off in the mid-1990s (Robinson & Godbey 1996).

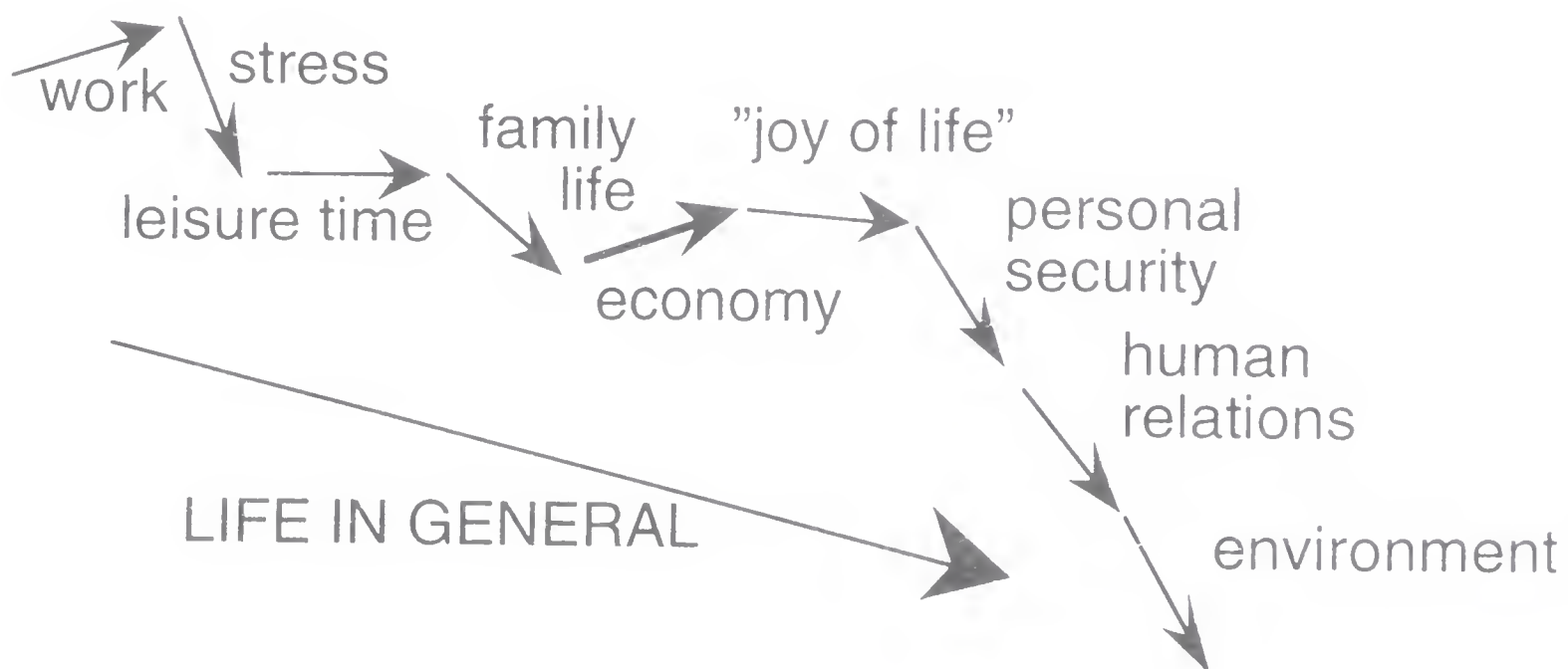
only a small minority prefer 'increased private consumption' (see Figure 2). Meanwhile only a minority – 15-20% – is prepared to *forgo income* for shorter hours. In these surveys, very few want increased work hours.¹⁴

A general conclusion would be that the shortage of time is an undervalued aspect of modern life. When basic needs are satisfied people do seem to opt for time over money. This may be more so in Sweden than many other countries.¹⁵ But André Gorz (in several texts) has also emphasised this attitude of 'we have enough' or 'we can make do' as a general trait in the rich West.

Has life become better?

In brief, these surveys give a picture of contentment with the material standard achieved. Other issues are brought forward in a survey which asked people to consider the changes of life over the past 30 years (see Figure 3 where arrows indicate positive or negative factors (and an overall assessment)).¹⁶

Figure 3 How has life changed in the past 30 years and what do you expect for the next 30 years?



Source: (see footnote 16)

¹⁴ The general pattern has been consistent for many years but there is evidence that part-timers increasingly request more hours. There is no indication that the present economic crisis should have weakened the general quest for shorter hours but it may increasingly be regarded as a means to alleviate the mass unemployment (which is a rather recent phenomenon in Sweden).

Note the different nature of the questions: the first one is future-directed and concerns a common action, the second one assumes individual and immediate action which is also in defiance of a social norm; see further discussion in section 3.

¹⁵ Attitudes to shorter hours differ in European countries with Swedes at the most sympathetic end.

¹⁶ The survey was done in 1995 in Sweden by TEMO with altogether 21 questions to 2200 respondents. The arrows indicate trends with a gradient roughly corresponding to the net of positive over negative answers (but the picture is blurred by the varying frequency of the answers 'same' or 'don't know').

The improved working conditions and economy are duly appreciated. But they stand out as exceptions. In most respects, things seem to have changed for the worse. There is much more stress (even if leisure time is unchanged), family life has deteriorated as have personal security and human relations. This is an almost unanimous view (compared to the opinion about the economy which is composed of diverging views). The same goes for environmental degradation.

More people say that life, all in all, was better before. The answers as a whole could be taken as a declaration of how WELL-BEING is perceived. The better economy (higher income and consumption) is not at all as predominant as the general political debate – mirrored in mass media – implies.

The survey also asked about expectations for the coming 30 years. This seems to confirm the limited impact of the economy by an inversion of the expectations: the economic outlooks appear very bleak but overall life is still expected to turn out better! Contrary to a common notion, respondents do not foresee a further degradation of the environment. Neither are people so pessimistic about human relations or family life.¹⁷

Views on the interplay of environment, living standards and working patterns

The American survey reveals a high environmental awareness connected with an abundant consumption. Almost everyone agrees that 'the way we live produces too much waste' (93%) and that major changes in lifestyle will be needed to protect the environment (88%). This is particularly deeply felt with regard to the prospects for the children and future generations. A majority supports ideas for action like increased lifetime of products, less spending and less driving. Similarly most Swedes declare themselves willing to sacrifice material standards for a better environment (close to 90% agree 'absolutely' or 'probably').¹⁸

But public opinion may sometimes appear contradictory. Only 51% of the Americans were ready to admit that their own buying habits have a ne-

¹⁷ Those with a positive view in general on the past development tend to point at the better economy (and economic equality), security, housing conditions and schooling. Those critical are likely to stress deterioration of family life and intergenerational contacts and the worsening prospects of peace. Both categories record more stress and degradation of human relations and of the environment.

In my understanding, the negative views on 'human' aspects of the past indicate a disappointment. Promises of a better life have not been fulfilled (and many observers, within and outside the academic field, have predicted consumption's inability to provide satisfaction).

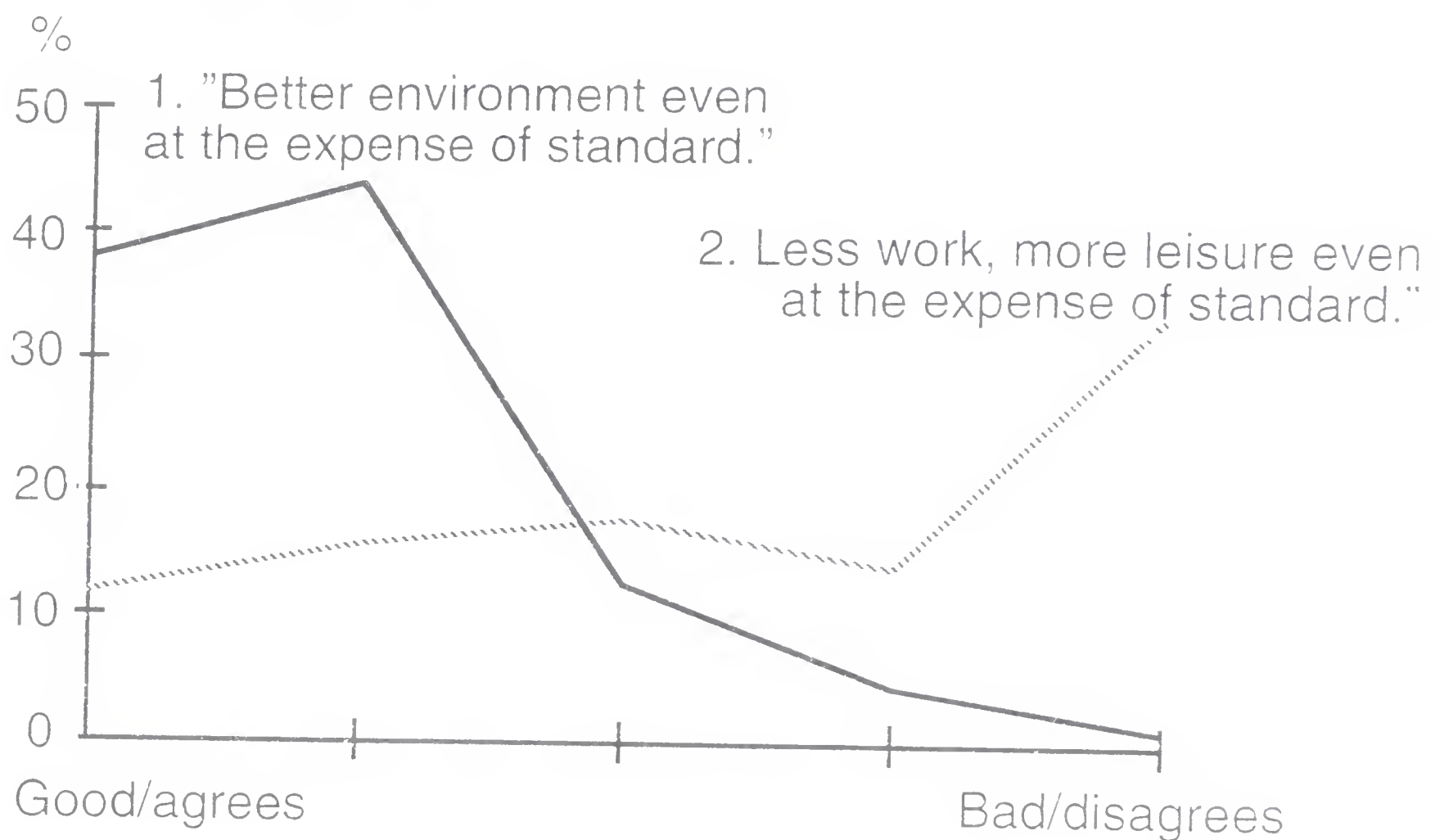
As would be expected, views on the future are generally more uncertain. While the poor prospects for the economy have been widely discussed, there is little to validate the relative optimism about the 'human' categories for the future. It bears witness to an inherent but possibly unjustified human optimism: things may have changed for the worse but one is reluctant to admit that they may turn even worse. As for the environment, most experts in the field seem to hold that it will deteriorate but this view is not shared by these respondents.

¹⁸ SIFO, (see Sanne 1995)

gative effect on the environment (although 88% saw the need for changes in lifestyle). At times this causes cynical comments (see further below) – but it may also be explicable (in other ways than as inconsistent thinking).

Figure 4 describes reactions to some statements on a desirable society. The first statement shows the very strong majority in favour of a better environment, even at the expense of material standards. The second statement shows that shorter hours at the expense of living standards have moderate support. A substantial group even disapproves outright of the idea of ‘down-shifting’ work.

Figure 4 Acceptance of proposals about environment, living standards and working hours.



Source: Attitude surveys in Sweden¹⁹

The two statements give a picture of the public understanding of these issues. Environmental concern has been boosted for decades with information about the risks for ourselves, our children and nature. But we have also grown accustomed to economic growth and learnt to look at it as ‘normal’, beneficial and a panacea for all problems. As mentioned above, the conflict between growth and environment has seldom been stressed.

¹⁹ [Personal communication from investigators (LNU 1991 and Umeå 1993)]. Unweighted responses. The statements are not entirely comparable as latter refers to the present situation, not the future

Thus people seem to associate environmental hazards with their own living standards but not – or not to the same degree – with economic growth. It obviously takes time to switch perspectives and begin to regard economic growth (or their own work!) as a problem.

In addition to this, work and diligence are still held to be virtuous. More leisure may be appealing but does not exert the same pressure for change as does the environmental threat. That makes the idea of ‘downshifting’ – working and earning less – ambiguous. Many more Swedes are prepared (mentally) to sacrifice living standards for the sake of the environment. According to the American study, a majority would endorse a list of changes for their consumption. But although both groups express that they have enough and that non-material aspects of life were the most important, ‘downshifting’ appears too radical a change.

3 ... and What the Opinions Mean – a Discussion

At this stage, it may be sensible to forgo the intuitive quest to untangle the issue further. The authors of the American study make a point of the fact that their respondents seemed eager to discuss these matters but were unprepared and lacked an adequate vocabulary to do so. It could also be a scientific as well as a political mistake to press ahead trying to uncover preferences which are still under formation. It may be more relevant to observe how opinions are formed by a public discussion in a society.²⁰

The basic question of what the attitudes mean for the greening of politics, remains. Is there a line from public awareness to public acceptance and onwards to political action? But let us first discuss whether the attitudes can be trusted. Objections may be raised – but it is also essential to turn the light on them and examine their ideological base. I will also suggest how the survey results may be interpreted in the social setting and discuss if they may be relevant under present conditions.

Objections ...

Apart from limitations due to the survey design there are three main objections:

- the satisfaction (contentment) with consumption and income may be influenced by a downwards adaptation of preferences, the so called “sour grapes” reaction’.²¹
- the replies mirror an ‘instilled needlessness’ created by the dominating social forces. This objection, which is closely related to the one about

²⁰ The investigators stress that these questions appear so big that they escape scrutiny, it is ‘the elephant in the living room of American life’: its presence is undeniable but it is too big (or close up) to be properly described.

²¹ (Elster 1983). The researchers do point to such an adaptation but only for respondents with the lowest income. Note that this is an inversion of the taken-for-granted upward adaptation of ‘needs’ with rising standard.

adapted preferences, had a special bearing in the times of the early labour movement in Sweden which had to confront such a submissive attitude in order to organise the workers.²²

- the replies given do not match actual behaviour. Stated preferences are not supported by revealed preferences. This would be an economist's standard objection (while the previous ones are typically sociological approaches)

The technical and sociological objections are not, in my view, strong enough to disqualify the results. As the dean of opinion polls, Daniel Yankelovich, suggests: the essence of quality in public opinion (in contrast to a volatile mass opinion) is that people understand the consequences and take responsibility for their attitudes (Yankelovich 1991). This condition seems to be well satisfied, especially in the choice of time-or-money – a true ‘wallet-issue’ where people are likely to be knowing and realistic.²³

... and rebuttals

It is even more important to realise that the two first objections fit within a particular frame of thinking, the paradigm of the insatiable consumer in standard economics. This means that a scientific explanation of people's opinions (in the latter case with a tint of political agitation) also might serve to deny them the right to express a justified judgment. There is an obvious risk here that science, embedded in an ideology, is used to *explain away* such statements in favour of a ‘politically correct’ understanding.²⁴

In contrast to this, the relaxed or composed attitude to consumption may obviously be construed as a statement of ‘true’ contentment (in a positive sense of that word²⁵). This interpretation could – if given a chance –

²² The words of the Greek philosopher Epicurus illustrate the two sides of the coin:

‘If you want Pythokles to be rich – then do not expand his resources but reduce rather his demands.’

This statement can obviously be regarded in two ways. In one perspective it expresses the wise insight of contentment as expressed by many philosophers of welfare and good life from Aristotle and onwards, (see Nussbaum & Sen 1990). But given the social stratification of ancient Greece, it could also be seen as a way of instilling the principle of graded needs which characterises a hierarchical society.

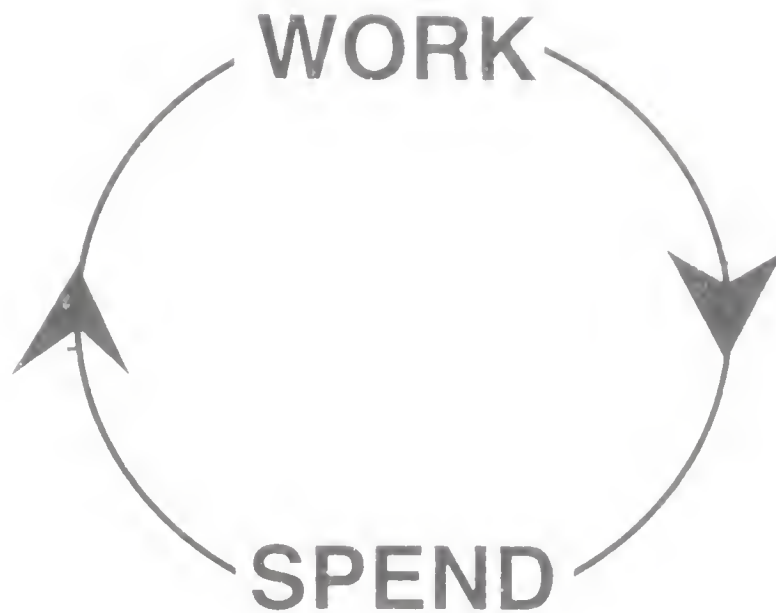
²³ Economists may claim that the system gives a false signal due to the ‘tax wedge’ caused by the taxes levied on work time (but not on leisure time). Thus the individual would choose without regard to the consequences for the government, the availability of public services etc. This is correct in principle. But there has always been a tax wedge and it seems reasonable to assume that people include the wider consequences as a background to their attitudes.

²⁴ Yankelovich adds that experts compile and interpret what people do and say but that they – as well as media – prefer to think of people as ignorant and ineducable. It resembles what Dryzek calls a common notion in policy science to regard voters as ignorant and at most casually interested in political matters. (Dryzek 1990)

²⁵ It is difficult – in English as well as in Swedish – to express the attitude of being satisfied with one's circumstances without conveying a patronising tone. This is not my intention. Thus I prefer CONTENTMENT over COMPLACENCY; the term FRUGAL points in another direction. To speak of a COMPOSED attitude is my present choice; comments are welcome.

open the way for a reduction (or levelling off) of consumption and promotion of other aspects of a good life (and a healthier environment).

Figure 5 Work and Spend Circle

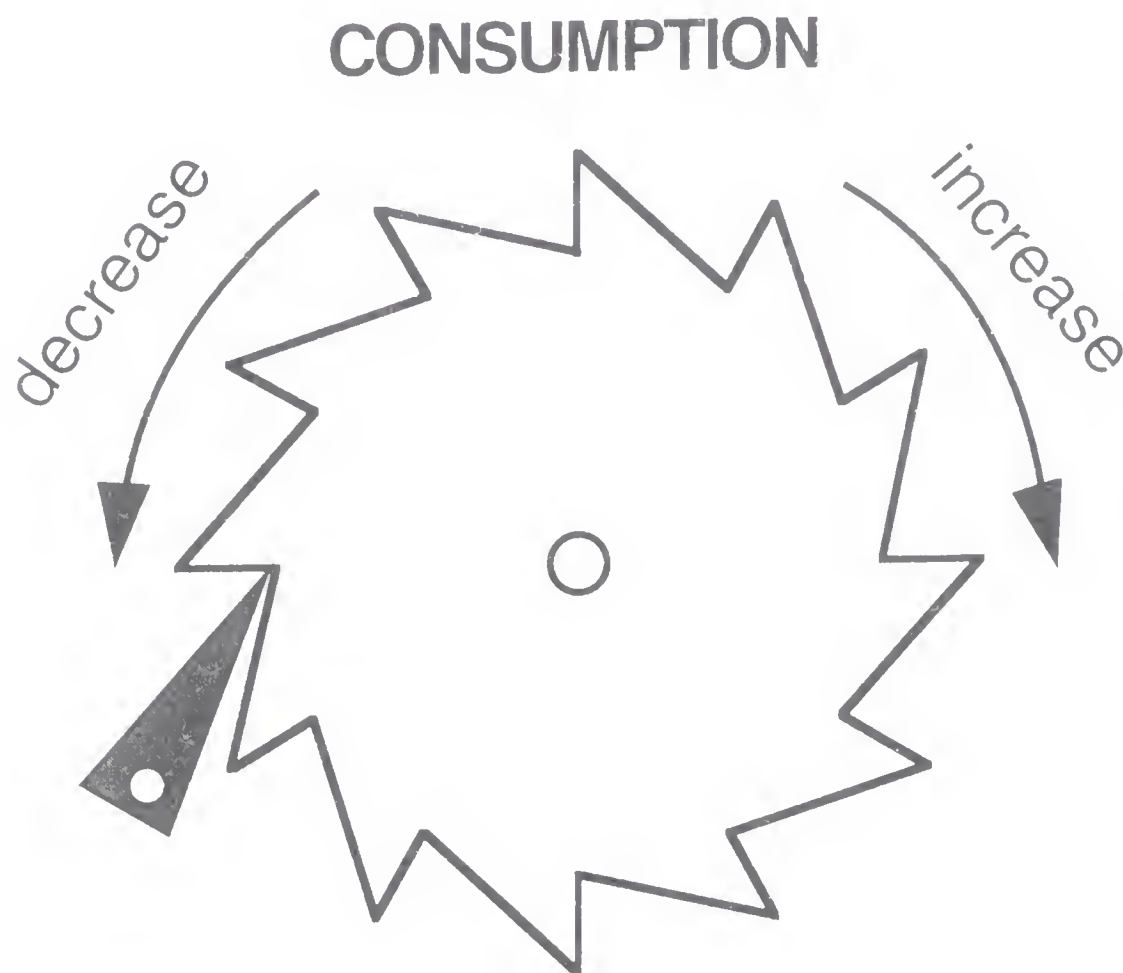


As for the objection against stated – versus revealed – preferences, a counter argument is that the situation is wrongly conceived. The household is not in a real ‘market’ position where behaviour reflects preferences. The social order means that what the household does – e.g. in terms of working hours and consumption – is not freely chosen but rather institutionally determined or guided. Most jobs are obviously offered in a standard package: full-day, every day and life-long. This can be depicted with a ‘work-and-spend’ circle (developed following Schor 1991) – (see Figure 5). The traditional economic view is that demand to spend leads to work (upward arrow). But this is matched by an inverted, more institutionalist, view: work done (and income earned), as the standard package prescribes, leads to spending (downward arrow). In this perspective, consuming to the limit of your earnings from work is a rational response – especially in view of the important social role of consumption.

The situation fits in well with the social dilemma described by A.O. Hirschman. The preference for shorter hours instead of higher salary (see previous section) is, in his terms the ‘voice’ of the citizens in a situation where there is no ‘exit’ – no real opportunity to act in another manner (such as choosing shorter hours) (Hirschman 1970).

This ‘voice’ also implies that a change must be a social, collective choice, not an individual's departure from a common pattern. The first manner also implies a fair distribution of benefits in society.

Figure 6 The Ratchet Effect in Consumption



It is also instructive to take the households' view on consumption – granted that there is some substance in the attitudes they pronounce (i.e. that greed and insatiability do not reign). There are obviously strong outside incentives to boost consumption. Marketing efforts are ubiquitous and material aspects penetrate social life (see above). At the same time, it may be well-nigh impossible to cut consumption, at least at short notice, since most household budgets are tied up with present commitments, loans or simply habits. Few households will – as we saw – accept working hour cuts if they also mean wage cuts. This creates an asymmetrical ‘ratchet effect’ (Figure 6): social pressure tends to inflate consumption but budget restraints block the – genuine – desire to decrease it: thus different answers to the questions on preferred work hours. A ‘no’ for the present is still compatible with the opinion – held by a majority – that shorter hours are preferable to a higher salary.

Will opinions remain?

In regard to this, will the opinions remain and provide an impetus for change in the way we assume that *democracy* works, as rule by the People?

In the first place I assume that our understanding in these matters derives from a past society of scarcity. Of necessity, it honoured virtues like industriousness and thrift. In contrast to this, current opinions mirror a dawning understanding of sufficiency leading to contentment – amplified by the fear of ecological harm – but also to a disappointment. The first is the case when people distinguish HAVE/NEED from HAVE/NO NEED, the second

the admission that things did not turn out the anticipated way in the 30 year perspective.

If this was all, change might simply follow as 'post-materialism' replaces 'materialism' (to use the vocabulary of Inglehart) in people's minds. But new facts have to be added. We must acknowledge that working hours are longer than they were a decade ago (for those holding a job) while salaries seem to have levelled off. This is quite pronounced in the US where real wages for the average worker have been falling for many years.²⁶

More important is that dual-wage households have become the rule in most countries. Thus the input of paid labour from the *household* (in working age) has increased considerably. The presumption in Sweden is that the dual-wage household is a way of creating equal opportunities for men and women. In the US, the need to make ends meet for the household appears to be more emphasised. I take it that both explanations – the offensive as well as the defensive – are valid in both countries. If this increase in work – which by far offsets the gains in leisure during the past decades – is really a way of mitigating lower compensation, it is necessary to discuss the relevance of the survey questions. The wish (in Swedish surveys) to trade *future* higher earnings for less work raises the question 'what if one can no longer expect pay rises?' Even if the national wealth continues to grow, this may go to non-working groups – as the retired – or to the (already) well-paid?

Against this we may counter that in the case of working hours, there is a long record of very stable opinions, seemingly unaffected by changes in well-being or economic trends. Most surveys are also quite recent and the results should mirror the experiences of turning trends. It may still be that people have not yet grasped that things have changed. I am, however, more inclined to other explanations like a compartmentalisation in thinking or a refusal to accept the present situation as inevitable. This leads to the final question of this paper: what could stop consumption growth, more in line with expressed opinions?

4 Planning for Reduced Consumption

The opinions which people voice in the surveys together with the ecological threat seem to warrant a planning for reducing – or at least reforming – the present consumption. But such ideas, no matter how explicable and rational, obviously do not catch on in mainstream public and political debate. It has been suggested that this is due to the lack of an established (political) vocabulary – these are evidently novel thoughts. But more tangible reasons are the opposed interests of expansion and growth from the other actors. This is amplified by the way the media interacts with the POLITICAL CLASS. Change is also checked by the 'new social inequality'. This last section will briefly consider by what means a reduced consumption might be approached.

²⁶ (Krugman 1994 (1990); Economic Policy Institute 1996). Per capita hours of work have also increased lately in Sweden but at a more moderate rate.

For a start, I focus on the complex role of the media and the recent changes in living conditions.

The media and the lure of consumption

Material contentment runs counter to strong interests. Agnes Heller calls ours a 'dissatisfied society' (Heller 1993). The discourse is dominated by growth-oriented actors – Business and the Political Class – and economic growth thrives on dissatisfaction just as much as economic theory assumes unlimited needs (demand). Many organisations – political parties, trade unions and business organisations and other interest groups – are based on it. Their *raison d'être* is to give voice to what can be found of popular dissatisfaction in a political decision process more and more characterised by lobbying and by deliberately propagated perspectives.

The media plays an important role in propagating this. But it is also in the nature of the media to focus on problems rather than progress and to pay attention to losers and individuals rather than to winners and groups. That is why it abounds with examples underlining discontent. In this way, the media and organisations form a symbiotic relationship which perpetuates and normalises a world view where dissatisfaction with material conditions stands in the way of shifting the political course towards stabilisation and sustainability.²⁷

On the global level, this ties in with the radical political changes in the former 'Second World' and many 'developing countries' where the market economy and more democratic institutions have been promoted or installed hand in hand. Although democratising is welcome, economies all over the world increasingly fall into the hands of transnational corporations which market similar consumer goods and offer standardised information and entertainment world-wide – a trend toward a uniform 'McWorld' of common habits and preferences.²⁸

Vanishing welfare and growing inequality

The 'golden years' after World War II brought a prosperity that was widely distributed in the population. Full (or near full) employment became the rule and the gap in incomes decreased. In addition to that, a welfare safety net bolstered people for life's risks and distributed life chances more fairly.

This development has now been halted and in some respects reversed with mounting unemployment, dismantled welfare provisions and growing income gaps, in many cases the result of hyper-salaries and more or less fraudulent financial activities in the highest social echelons. A growing number of people become hard-pressed to make ends meet, while they see others profit ostentatiously. This may redirect their attention to matters of

²⁷ In addition, media like TV tends to give a simplistic view, often amplifying the wrong signals rather than broadening the views of the spectators.

²⁸ See 'Jihad vs McWorld' (Barber 1995).

social distribution and displace the issue of voluntary 'down-shifting' (and likewise the concern with the widening gulf to the poorest countries). Excessive work zeal, motivated by fear and a perceived need to hoard for the future, may also result, whereas a social setting of security (with pensions and welfare benefits) would allow people to refrain from such exaggerated efforts.

Reduced consumption in a field of forces

Reduced consumption has to come about in a field of forces formed by the three actors — PEOPLE, CAPITAL BUSINESS and The POLITICAL CLASS.

Of the three, the only genuine proponent of a sustainable development seems to be PEOPLE. I have already remarked that BUSINESS is not likely to favour a reduction of the markets. BUSINESS is also exerting pressure on the POLITICAL CLASS to satisfy their interests. But in the end, the POLITICAL CLASS also depends on the acceptance by PEOPLE. And PEOPLE as enlightened consumers are the only ones who can stop the spending spree.

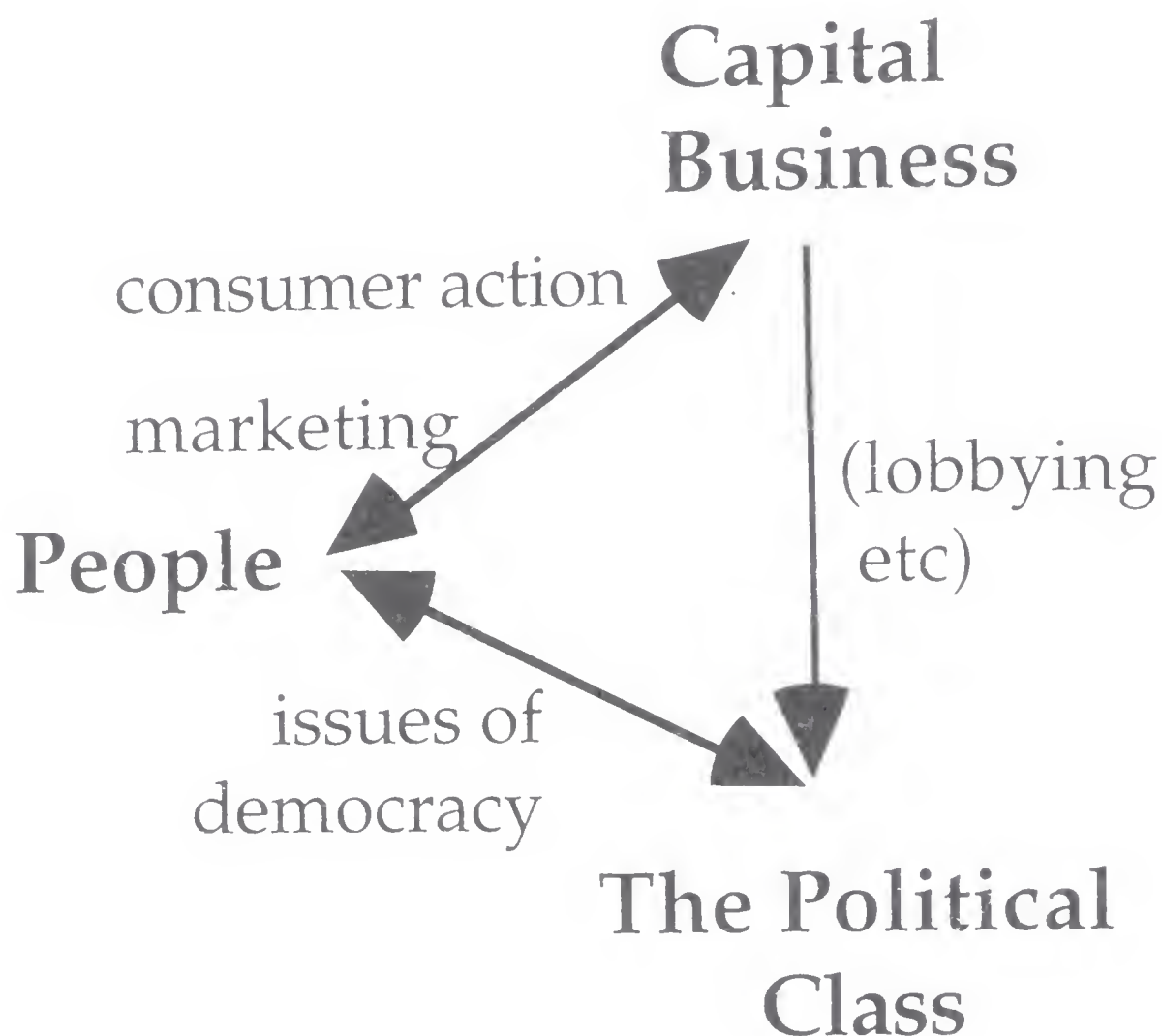
This is evidently a democratic ideal: change emanates from enlightened citizens and consumers. To succeed, it depends on both actors and structure. Many writers emphasise the importance of the individual's commitment, his or her ability to reach beyond greed and selfishness for a common good. Others focus on the efficiency of the state to set the conditions for the activities of the individuals and the corporations: the required 'artificial' prices which would reflect environmental and sustainability considerations and the development of important infrastructural elements which literally lay the course for the future: the urban settlements, the communication arteries, the preserved land and other major elements which will set the frame for people's daily life tomorrow.

Still others question if the dominant model of democracy in the West — the one Yankelovich implicitly refers to and the one 'exported' to other countries as mentioned above — will prove able to handle the situation. This liberal, representative democracy with rights of freedom for individuals and for corporations is a 'thin democracy'. Government remains passive in economic matters, rendering ample room for the market. Politics has in itself market-like features: voters choose between competing parties and sets of opinion. It can be described in terms of negotiation, exchange, strategy and voting. In this view, society is nothing more than the sum of private interests.²⁹

²⁹ Much of the current public resentment to politics seem to be a reaction to this and to the intimate relationship between THE POLITICAL CLASS and BUSINESS (Ferguson & Rogers 1986)

A common view even holds that global capitalism presently serves as a battering ram for democracy while some may counterclaim that imposed democratic institutions open the way for global capitalistic forces. (Barber 1995)

Figure 7 Three-actor model of forces on consumption



Barber contrasts this to a 'strong democracy' and other authors discuss a 'deliberative' or 'discursive' or 'participatory' democracy (Barber 1984, Reich, 1988). The ideas are often based on a communicative rationality (following Habermas and basically referring to Aristotle). But today 'participatory' democracy is mainly an issue on the local level, as civic or grass roots environmentalism and community development (Sirianni & Friedland 1995). However important as such, it is of limited interest here compared to the levels 'below' where personal choices are made and 'above', the structural one.

Clarifying overconsumption – a step forward

Although many of us may scorn consumption habits, we hold on to our lifestyle. I will close this paper with some reflections on what overconsumption implies and how it relates to human aspirations. I regard, for a start, the present overconsumption in three different perspectives, each suggesting how to attack it:

- it is *wasteful* because it is inefficient, spending too many resources for too little benefit
- it is *wasteful* because the lifestyle of the well-to-do is unduly resource demanding
- it is *abundant* because the general living standard is ecologically untenable.

I have examined various proposals for reducing consumption only to find that they share two unfortunate traits: they do not go very far in saving and they are likely to be strongly opposed. Too little social imagination has been used to find practical ways to cut consumption in either of these senses.³⁰

To reduce waste in production and consumption seems perfectly rational – almost trivial. But for this to make ecological sense, it demands that prices – as a major determinant for our choices – are set to reflect environmental effects. The process to achieve this may be underway but it is painfully slow. And to reduce waste may not even match Business' interests: cheap and durable products may be good for the consumer but not for profits.

Sumptuousness is a matter of distribution within society and resembles other aspects of a class struggle. Environmentally 'correct' prices – administered as 'green taxes', tradable emission permits etc – may help to limit the most resource consuming activities such as long distance travelling. But it is likely to encounter fierce resistance from those consumers who have made it their lifestyle (and they are often socially influential) as well as from the producers behind those activities.

Tackling abundance is still another problem since it touches upon central political beliefs like that of the insatiable consumer and the importance of continued economic growth. To secure sustainability requires a commitment to society, setting new societal norms and actions in contradistinction to the prevailing reference to people's 'preferences'. This is a new agenda and takes a political pedagogy and a discourse which puts 'consensus on normative positions' in the centre, a 'reconstruction of private and partial interests into publicly defensible norms through sustained debate' (Dryzek 1990 quoting Barber).

The individual's reaction to the overconsumption issue may take one or the other route. It has been suggested that a way out of the dilemma is that the individual, in his/her action, assumes responsibility for its ecological consequences (Martinez-Alier 1995). It has also been intimated that 'post-materialistic' tendencies, with a rejection of further material consumption will solve (or rather 'dissolve') the problem.

³⁰ I have (in another report, Sanne 1986) discussed the possibility of making (a share of) the 'empty nest' households move into more appropriate housing to allow larger families adequate housing rather than constructing more and more housing. Further I have scrutinised a government report on how households can adapt to greener living and I have calculated the effects of limits on excessively energy consuming leisure activities

An idea that may hold more of a promise is the suggestion by Fred Hirsch that consumption eventually will drift towards 'positional goods' as basic needs are satisfied (Hirsch 1976). Such 'positional goods' are basically undecided in character. That opens an opportunity to guide consumption into a sustainable track. Bluntly worded, it is a call to 'accept people's lust for social distinction but turn it in a harmless direction'.

In the end, a fundamental change would however require that we rethink our organisation of work to match its rising productivity. For a century, working people all over the globe have struggled to shorten their working hours as their material standard allowed it. This urge still holds. But in the wake of neoliberal restructuring of work and globalisation of the economy, the trend has nearly halted. I am convinced that to achieve a sustainable society, the best we can do is to start again along that road. This also has a good chance of success because it coincides with people's interests. To do so, we have to fashion the living conditions for workers and the working conditions for business. These are major political tasks.

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