

Excess: An Obituary

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It is not so much by the things that each day are manufactured, sold, bought, that you can measure Leonia's opulence, but rather by the things that each day are thrown out to make room for the new. So you begin to wonder if Leonia's true passion is really, as they say, the enjoyment of new and different things, and not, instead, the joy of expelling, discarding, cleansing itself of recurrent impurity.

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

To be 'in excess' means to be too many, or too much: too hot or too cold, too spicy or too bland, too tall or too short, too bold or too meek, too hard or too soft, too light or too dark, too frequent or too rare, too crowded or too empty... 'Too' signals that something is not really necessary, desirable or pleasing. 'Too' means *redundancy*; uselessness; waste.

The opposite of 'too' is 'just right'. Whenever the word 'too' is spoken an oblique tribute is tacitly paid to a standard, a norm, a just and proper measure. 'Too' signals disturbance, deviance or blunder, but just like the exceptions that prove the rule, the fact of redundancy reaffirms that things have their natural measures which fit them well. 'Too' says more than that, however. It seems to ask or command: 'take the excess away, and things will be as they should have been: comfortable, palatable, pleasing'. 'Too' is a call to restore order by passing the sentence of expulsion and banishment on whatever departs from the norm and spoils the preordained harmony. 'Too' is a call to action, with a promise of rest as the reward.

Excess can do what it does thanks to the pretence of being a marked member of the opposition: an 'abnormality' against the well-measured, balanced and equilibrated normality. The verdict of 'too much' or 'too many' derives its authority from the norm, which the excess ostensibly violates. If not for the norm, the sentence would sound hollow; neither would it stand in court. Norm is the foundation of excess; thanks to the excess invoking the norm as its foundation, the question of the foundation of the norm may be skipped or never asked. Excess needs a norm to make sense; norm, however, needs excess to exist (if only as an apparition).

More to the point: rather than stating the obvious – that the idea of excess would be meaningless unless there was a norm – one should say that the idea of norm would never occur and would have no content were it not for the experience of excess. In the opposition between things excessive and things ‘just right’, excess, contrary to its pretences, is the prior, the un-marked member. The idea of ‘norm’ can solidify only as a sediment of excess. Were there no redundancy, the idea of usefulness would hardly be born. ‘Too’ is lying, when it says that were the ‘excessive’ taken away, the norm would be restored. The truth is that were the excesses out of the way, the void would yawn where the norms were supposed to reside.

Norm needs a repeated experience of excess particularly badly when its own legs are too weak or wobbly to stand on. Amidst the gaudy, colourful cavalcade of excesses, the ghost-like frailty of norm escapes notice. When norms lose their grip, order can rely only on excess for its continuing phantom-like existence. The order is a battlefield imagined beneath the graveyard of excesses; while ‘excess’ is the fleshy reincarnation of the deceased or unborn norm: the norm’s life after death.

The death verdict on norms was never officially passed nor has ever reached the headlines, but the fate of the norm was sealed once from the chrysalis of the capitalist society of producers emerged the butterfly of society of consumers. This metaphor is faulty, though, since the passage in question was far from being as abrupt as the birth of a butterfly. It took a long time to notice that too much had changed for the emergent state of affairs to be viewed as a new and improved version of the old, and that the game was distinct enough to deserve a name of its own; but one can roughly locate the passage at the last quarter of the previous century, when Smith/Ricardo/Marx/Mill labour theory of value was challenged by Menger/Jevons/Walras marginal utility theory: when it had been said loud and clear that what endows things with value is not sweat needed to produce them nor self-renunciation necessary to obtain them, but a desire seeking satisfaction; when the ancient disagreement on who is the best judge of the value of things, the maker or the user, has been resolved in no ambiguous terms in favour of the user, and the question of the right to judge was blended with the issue of the value-authorship rights. Once that happened, it became clear that (as Jean-Joseph Goux put it) ‘to create value, all that is necessary is, by whatever means possible, to create a sufficient intensity of desire’ and that ‘what ultimately creates surplus value is the manipulation of surplus desire’.¹

Let us beware, though, of putting the cart before the horse. It would be silly to lay the blame for the wondrous producer-into-consumer trans-substantiation at the door of serene and detached Viennese, Liverpoolian and Lausannian scholars (one of whom was twice failed at his entry examinations to a Paris school because of innumeracy, and got himself a university job only thanks to private connections). Associating the birthday of consumer society with the publication dates of scholarly books is a matter of convenience, though not entirely unwarranted: these books did signal the belated or anticipatory, yet imminent awakening to the new reality. What these books did above all was to supply a language in which one could enclose and spell out the new rules of a new game by that time already well advanced and bound to grow and spread by its own momentum.

The early, 'heavy', production-obsessed capitalism was a civilisation of norms: the proverbial melting of solids was not carried out to make the world liquid, but in order to replace the old, worn-out and decaying frames with new ones – thoughtfully designed and cast in iron. Human 'needs' were seen after the image of norms: the right-and-proper state, any departure of which, whether upwards or downwards, should be promptly and at all costs repaired and best of all prevented; in a civilisation of norms, want is resented no less, but no more either than over-indulgence and luxury.

Bearing the character of norms, the needs could be measured and their 'sum total' computed. And once this had been done, the remaining trick was to produce goods in the quantity sufficient for the full satisfaction of needs; once needs are satisfied, economy will arrive at the 'steady state' and if properly managed will stay there. In the economic equation, needs were the constants and goods were the variable quantities; needs also *preceded* consumption, demand measured by needs was given before the supply of goods started, and so the volume of necessary goods could be defined precisely in advance. The boundary between the 'right amount' and excess could be clearly drawn. Towards the end of 'solid' capitalism era, Seeböhm-Rowntree calculated scientifically the volume of poverty with the help of the basket of life-necessities. For tea (or, as Peter Townsend was to point out in a later and quite different era, for Christmas cards) there was no room in that basket. Tea has no nutritional value, and one can survive without exchanging Christmas cards with friends and the family; if economy is about churning out goods meant to satisfy the given needs and if the volume of needs is determined objectively, by the demands of survival, such things have no 'economic meaning'.

Reminding his readers that capitalism was also (perhaps first and foremost) a *bourgeois* civilisation, Jacques Ellul proceeds to define the 'bourgeois' by its paramount attribute: the ideology of *happiness*, a novelty in human history in as far as it entailed the idea of happiness as a universal human right, realistic purpose of life and main precept of life strategy. Happiness, Ellul points out, is 'typically individual, individualised, it rests in sensations, perceptions, emotions, desires of the individual'.² Happiness, let us note, is not a mere survival; as the guiding principle of life, it may even clash with the precepts of survival; survival would often advise abstinence and self-restraint, while the desire for happiness may resent bounds and limits. Time and again happiness and survival find themselves at cross-purposes. If survival is a bridle, happiness is a spur. It prompts constant rebellion against the *status quo*. The paradox of happiness as life strategy is that this idea of ultimate satisfaction breeds perpetual disaffection with any 'has been' and constant rebellion against status quo. Survival is about sticking to the norm; happiness is an inherently anti-normative power. Survival dreams of ultimate rest and finds its fulfilment in standing still. But the moment of rest is the agony of happiness.

The three-centuries old history of the bourgeois civilisation called 'modern society' could be viewed as the story of gradual emancipation of happiness from the constraints of survival: both imaginative and normative constraints. But for the first half of modern history the energy generated by the urge of happiness poured into the mould designed by the norm of survival, and the imagery of happy life was

shaped after the pattern of survival: the dream of happiness took the form of longings after a *happy state*, a *steady* state of happiness; after a society at peace with itself because, finally, true to its potential of happiness production. A happy life looked as, first and foremost, a secure life, solidly founded and so durable, free from surprise and immune to accident; as a condition one could arrive at and stay in once arrived. Sigmund Freud's verdict that the 'state of happiness' is a pipe-dream, an impossibility or a contradiction in terms (an incongruence, which in Freud's view was bound to the immutable human constitution rather than being an idiosyncrasy of the wrong-footed civilisation) summarised the outcome of the war of emancipation aimed at apparently mistaken and misleading purposes. As life-guides, happiness and survival are incompatible. Survival, Freud pointed out, is about duration, while happiness needs transience. There is no such thing as a 'state of happiness'. There are only moments of happiness, and a life dedicated to the pursuit of happiness may be only a succession of happy moments.

Harvie Ferguson substitutes 'pleasure' for Ellul's 'happiness'. In his reading, 'Freud's patients suffered from the diseases of consumption'. The neurotics were excessively excitable; the psychotic, on the contrary, not excitable enough. Together, they 'serve to define a model of regulated insatiability; the ideal modern consumer or, better, the ideal consumer of modernity. In their open acceptance of the ephemeral and insubstantial, they celebrate the "arbitrary, fleeting and transitory" as the accidental relationship of selfhood'. This discovery, though, could only come as a hindsight wisdom: 'The bourgeois world believed itself, for a time, to be in possession of a uniquely "rationalizing" power . . . today, we are only too ready to congratulate ourselves upon outgrowing such rash optimism'.³ We now celebrate what Freud still, sadly, diagnosed as morbid disease calling for therapy. We, for a change, celebrate what, deep down, we suffer from. We hope that the celebration will hush and stifle the pain. And the more we celebrate, the more pain there is clamouring to be silenced.

As Pierre Bourdieu famously put it, temptation and seduction have come to replace normative regulation and obtrusive policing as the principal means of system-construction and social integration. It is the norm-breaking (or rather the perpetual transcendence of norm, with a haste which denies the habits of the day time needed to congeal into norms) which is the main effect of temptation and the essence of seduction. And in the absence of norm, excess is life's only hope. Excess was born as a disease of life-towards-norm (a terminal disease, as it transpired); in the world devoid of norms, excess is the medicine for life-illnesses; perhaps the sole life-support available. Excess, that sworn enemy of the norm, has itself become the norm; perhaps the only norm there is. A curious norm to be sure, one escaping all definition. Having shattered normative fetters, excess lost its meaning. Nothing is excessive once excess is the norm.

Excess is what keeps the dream of happiness alive, and the dream of happiness is the flying-wheel of excess. This is because the pursuit of happiness, now as before the trade-mark of modernity, has no more a finishing line; no more a dream of arrival, but the urge to be forever on the move. The image of happiness is shaped in the likeness of a road-movie: a picaresque string of adventures, each new and exciting for its novelty, and novel and exciting because un-experienced, un-tested

and un-predicted; but each one wearing off quickly, shedding its charm the moment it has been tried and tasted. Fortunately, there is a bike, hopefully with a tankful of petrol, to move on. Excess is a promise that as long as the petrol lasts the string of new sensations will never run short of beads.

Each model of happiness has its own model discontents.

The bane of the first, now forsaken or forfeited model, was the irritating length of delay: the dreamed of bliss being a long distance away, time needed to reach it was unbearably long. That time was to be filled with labour, sweat and blood, self-denial and self-sacrifice; for all that suffering, the belief that the remaining stretch of the road gets shorter was the only reward. Well signed tracks, with the numbers of miles passed and those yet to be negotiated carved in heavy stones, were needed to make that belief credible and the reward comforting. Such tracks gave reassurance: but they offered no room for fantasy and denied both adventure and respite. This was a trade-off; it made the travellers parade each day with pride their confidence derived from secure itinerary – and bewail at night their forlorn freedom.

The new model of happiness is cursed with quite different torments. Time is no more a burden – it has shrunk to the non-dimensionality of moments. Reward comes instantaneously, if it comes at all. Gratification needs no more be delayed. But, curiously, with the waiting taken out of the wanting (as the advertising slogan of credit cards promised), wanting is all but impossible to gratify. What was hoped to bring gratification and made wanting so pleasurable, brings disappointment the moment it comes within grasp and is savoured, or shortly afterwards. After all, it is the excess of allurements that keeps the seeker of the ‘arbitrary, fleeting and transitory’ sensations going; excess is the sole ground on which, through a simple calculation of probability, one may safely rest the hope of the fount of pleasures never drying up. But the same excess portends perpetual and incurable anguish. In the words of Jacques Ellul, fear and anguish are nowadays the ‘essential characteristics’ of the ‘Western man’, as they are rooted in the ‘impossibility to reflect on such an enormous multiplicity of options’.⁴ Roads change directions, inflows, exits and directions of permitted traffic keep changing places, and newly fashionable land-rovers (those on four wheels, and even more so those composed of electric signals) have made beaten tracks and signed roads altogether redundant. New trade-off makes the wanderers cherish daily their freedom of movement and display proudly their speed and power of acceleration – and dream at nights of more security and self-confidence when it comes to deciding which turn to take and at what destination to aim.

Nowadays, wanderers must *experiment*; that is, whatever they do, cannot but be an experimentation. This is not the ‘experiment’ in its classic, by now old-fashioned sense: submitting one’s reasoning to test of practice, finding out whether the hypothesis was right, and proving (or disproving, as the case may be) that a part of reality is indeed ruled by the regularities one supposed it to be ruled by. In the daily experimentation of the present-day wanderers nothing is to be proved (or disproved, as the case may be) except the wit and cunning of the experimenter, and there is no hypothesis to test. The substance of the trial is find out what can one do, given the tools, the raw stuff and the skills at one’s disposal: nets are cast at random, hoping

for pleasant surprise of a yet unknown catch, and the more often the nets are cast the greater the chance of luck.

For the fate of excess this has far-reaching consequences. In the old-style experimenting one could calculate and budget the equipment and supplies of the laboratory: their kind and quantity were determined by the hypothesis one wished to test. No such budgeting makes much sense in the life of experimentation, since the larger is the supply and the more generously it is spent, the more likely it is that a promising spot, perhaps a goldmine, will be accidentally hit. Much of the supply, perhaps most of it, will bring no profit; but if not for the prodigality of expenditure, no win at all could be reasonably hoped for. When the ends are given and the task is to select the right means, one can calculate, economise, exercise prudence and self-restraint. What for instrumental-rational action was a merit, turns into vice or blunder when the ends themselves are the prime objective of experimentation.

As Heather Hopfl observed a few years ago, supply of excess is turning fast into the major concern of late-modern social life, and coping with excess is what passes in late-modern society for individual freedom – the only form of freedom men and women of our times know of.

‘As the end of the 20th century approaches, there is an increasing preoccupation with the elaborate production, apparently to serve the interests of consumption, and proliferation of excess, of a promising liberating heterogeneity of choice and experience, of the construction and pursuit of sublime objects of desire. The construction of sublime artefacts, objects of desire, personalities, “life styles”, styles of interaction, ways of acting, ways of constructing identity and so on becomes an oppressive drudgery masquerading as ever-extending choice. Matter fills up all space. Choice is bewildering illusion’.⁵

Illusion or not, these are the life conditions in which we have been cast – the one thing which is not for choice. Excess becomes a precept of reason. And so does waste. Excess does not seem excessive any more, nor does waste seem wasteful. The prime meaning of the ‘excessive’ and the ‘wasteful’ and the prime reason to resent them in the sober, coldly calculating mode of instrumental rationality is, after all, uselessness; but in the life of experimentation excess and waste are anything but useless – they are, indeed, the indispensable condition of the rational search of the ends. When excess becomes excessive? When the waste becomes wasteful? There is no obvious way of answering such questions, and most certainly no way to answer them in advance. One may bewail wasted years and excessive expenditures of energy and money, but one cannot tell excess from the right measure nor waste from the necessities before fingers are singed and the time of regret arrives.

When prodigality is the name of the game, the ability not to bother with these sort of questions becomes a most coveted value and the sign of social privilege. No more the ‘ostentatious consumption’ is the status mark of the high and mighty, but unworried and light-hearted waste. Like in *Leonia*, one of Italo Calvino’s ‘invisible cities’, it is not the things produced or consumed, but things thrown each day out that signify genuine opulence.

Consumption is a once-for-all use of a resource; once consumed, the resource can be neither re-used nor recycled – as the asset for future exciting sensations it has been fully and truly *wasted*. Only when amassing things in *excess* of consumption one can keep their usefulness unscathed. Throwing things out confirms retrospectively the wisdom of excess: it helps to build confidence and reaffirms the link between self-assertion and wastefulness. Things thrown away are therefore promptly replaced by another, yet greater, ‘spare potential’, the ‘just in case’ surplus over and above the conceivable potential of consumption. The act of consumption marks the end of the road, while the trick is to keep forever on the move. Throwing things out reassures that one can go a long way yet and that one has enough, more than enough resources to negotiate it.

Waste shows that the capacity to move is the asset more important than the movement itself. As Richard Sennett observed, ‘[p]erfectly viable businesses are gutted and abandoned, capable employees are set adrift rather than rewarded, simply because the organization must prove to the market that it is capable of change’.⁶ The major characterological traits of Bill Gates, commonly seen as the epitome of the new elite that ‘flourishes in the midst of dislocation’, are – Sennett notes – the ‘lack of long-term attachment’ and ‘willingness to destroy what he has made’; Gates himself is keen to point out that the growth of technology business ‘is marked by many experiments, wrong turns, and contradictions’.⁷ Easy to get by, but easier still to get rid of – this seems to be the new formula of gambling-for-success. In the two-speak in which that formula makes sense, excess means right measure and wastefulness means being creative and productive.

In the chase of happiness, long-term is an abomination. Durability of things, and even more the durability of attachment to things, turns to be the true waste, the sole waste that genuinely frightens and repels: waste of opportunities, and above all of the yet-unexplored and un-imagined opportunities. Transience of things and commitments is the asset; long-term engagement a liability. And if this is the case, excess is an empty notion. Nothing is ‘too much’, except the resentment of ‘too much’.

Notes

¹ Jean-Joseph Goux, *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*, Jennifer Curtiss Bage (trans.) (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p.200, p.202.

² Jacques Ellul, *Metamorphose du bourgeois* (Paris: La table ronde, 1998 [1867]), p.79, p.83.

³ Harvie Ferguson, *The Science of Pleasure: Cosmos and Psyche in the Bourgeois World View* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.261, p.247.

⁴ Ellul, *Metamorphose*, p.277.

⁵ Heather Hopfl, ‘The Melancholy of the Black Widow’, in Kevin Hetherington and Rolland Munro (eds.), *Ideas of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp.236–237.

⁶ Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), p.51.

⁷ Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character*, p.62.

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