Reboot America: Lessons from Post-Consumerist Cuba

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A local income tax prep company has ads on TV showing a family wearing sweaters and cozying up around the fireplace to stay warm, and a man dressed up in a business suit grabbing his briefcase and mounting his bike to head off to work. The narrator reassures us that no, we wouldn’t have to “go to extremes” to save money, like wearing sweaters in the winter or riding a bike to work. We could instead save cash by letting them prepare our tax returns. My spouse called my attention to the ad, saying, “Hey, that’s us,” minus the suit, of course.

So here are my questions: Are we really an aberration? Are we freaks for riding our bikes to work and keeping our house comfortably cool in the winter? What’s normal, really? Should we bring our 3,000-pound machines to work and struggle for a place to park them when we’d just as soon spend the same time riding our bikes? Should we heat our house to feel like we live in Miami, just so we can wear summer clothing in the winter? Are we freaks for not buying into this weirdness? Are we really an aberration?

The new economy is ushering in a new reality. Factory output is down. Consumption is down. This means resource depletion and waste production are consequently down as well. Big boxes are closing their doors and, get this, the national savings rate has moved from the negative numbers (meaning the average American was falling deeper into debt spending more than she or he was earning) to a more sane five percent of household income. It turns out we really didn’t need all that shit after all.

Deep ecologists and credit counselors have been trying for quite some time to get us to stop buying our way into ecocide and bankruptcy. It seems that both the planet and our wallets couldn’t take it. It sucks that it took a depression to get us here, but historians might just look back on this depression as the event that saved the ecosystem just when we were on the brink of flopping over a climatic tipping point. Maybe there’s a silver lining to a plummeting Dow. Maybe it’s not just our environment that may have gotten a reprieve. Perhaps our collective soul as a culture may have gotten a breather as well. Enough was enough. We clearly weren’t shopping our way into happiness.

I’ve seen the aftermath of a consumerist apocalypse. That was Havana. By the time I showed up on the scene, first as a grad student in the late 1980s and later in 1999 and 2000 after the collapse of Cuba’s Soviet benefactor, the skeletons of the hedonistic 1950s were lying as well preserved but lifeless ruins.

Havana’s downtown shopping district
On the road, Cubans are still driving around in 60- and 70-year-old cars. The inability to afford new ones forced them to figure out how to keep the old ones on the road forever... We don't need to replace everything all the time. Things can be fixed. People can be employed fixing things.

Last month, with reports of collapsing consumer confidence and freefalling housing and stock markets here in the US, I dove into the task of scanning my old Cuba negatives into digital files. As I manipulated the newborn digits on these photos, I looked once again at the faces of the Cubans navigating through post-consumerist ruins. Their world appears crazy, but there’s laughter, smiles, and healthy human interaction. They’re sitting on benches talking, playing chess and dominos, and watching their kids run about. Their conversation isn’t dominated by “things.”

I recall how goods would occasionally trickle into the stores, and folks would line up for a chance to spend worthless pesos on the item du jour. When I was there, it was colorful striped spandex stretch pants – worthless to us, but cherished by Cuban consumers with little else to buy. This is old-time consumerism: You don’t have much, but you value the little that you do have. And you enjoy and appreciate having it. Think of a poor kid whose family saves for a year to buy him or her that special Christmas present. And think about the months spent anticipating its arrival. And how it was cherished once it came. Then think about the spoiled rich kid with his or her little warehouse of unused and unappreciated toys. Life is not about the quantity of what you own, but about the quality of your experiences, both with things and without.

Two generations of life without consumerism has given Cuba one of the smallest per capita ecological footprints in the world. The US embargo and Cuba’s dearth of hard currency meant that they couldn’t afford pesticides and patented genetically modified organisms. The result is that Cuba moved ahead in research on pesticide- and Frankenfood-free agriculture. Today, they are a global leader in sustainable organic farming. On the road, Cubans are still driving around in 60- and 70-year-old cars. The inability to afford new ones forced them to figure out how to keep the old ones on the road forever. It turns out that junkyards, which, like massive garbage dumps, are among the topographic blisters of consumerism, are actually just culture-bound syndromes. We don’t need to replace everything all the time. Things can be fixed. People can be employed fixing things.

This is not to say that poverty is fun. And as a well-off American I don’t want to romanticize a poverty I’m not forced to experience. And as someone with the free-

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