

A Peep behind the Mask of Ruthless Consumption at the Second Law of Thermodynamics

By Emanuel Pastreich

The destruction of the environment by corporations controlled by banks of supercomputers that ruthlessly and single-mindedly calculate short-term profit has reached a stage not unlike a war. A large section of the global economy is based on this process of stripping resources from the Earth without regards to long term impact and producing one-time use products, often unnecessary, for the consumption of the wealthier citizens of our Earth. But that destruction of the environment, whether the burning of jungles, the cutting down of forests or the pollution of oceans and skies, is paralleled by real wars as well which the generate similarly real profits for the few, or more importantly, for those same banks of supercomputers.

In a nutshell, the fate of our world lies in the hands of a tiny number of people and those people also are giving over all agency to the machines that offer such convenience.

We do not have to wait for supercomputers to achieve consciousness for us to lose control of our civilization. All we need is for computers to set the priorities of our society on the basis of profit, without any consideration for the needs of the ecosystem, or of humanity itself. And if social networks, videos and games remap the neural networks of in our brains, encouraging dopamine-driven short-term thinking, we will no longer be capable of "global governance" and the computers will take over, ready or not. Perhaps they will have no choice but to take over, long before they have developed any consciousness.

We humans have not lost our minds completely, but we have delegated the dirty work of calculating profit, and by extension, of setting priorities, to supercomputers without even noticing it. In this land, the one-eyed are being led to the precipice by a massively-parallel blind man.

For those who stop and consider what is happening to our society, the immediate conclusion that comes to mind is that a shallow consumer culture has taken over and a new narcissism and selfishness has taken over, transforming citizens into consumers. The phenomenon of blind consumption is undeniable, and the damage that it does the ecosystem and to humanity itself is the primary threat we face. Yet the question remains, what is the ultimate cause that lies behind such a consumption mania?

That is not to say that there is but one cause for the insanity we see. Simple trends can be generated by multiple factors.

The general tendency is to label the inhuman and destructive system that confronts us as "capitalism". Over the last hundred and fifty years "capitalism" has become the catchphrase to describe the ruthlessness of a capital-driven consumer-centric society.

Yet the word "capitalism" remains ambiguous, overly vague. At times it seems to be a term applied to all the elements of society that you do not like without a rigorous consideration of the casual relationship between those elements. The use of the term "capitalism" often obscures as much as it illuminates because it ends systematic investigation of the discrete phenomena.

Pulling out the big term "capitalism" to describe the myriad problems that we face today, from climate change to the destabilization of markets, the replacement of workers with machines, the addiction of youth to computer games and the disruption and destruction of local economic systems by dint of the globalization of production and of distribution, all phenomenon that are simply a repeat of what happened to capital and production after the industrial revolution, that we are facing but a variation of the characteristics of society and economy that socialists and communists denounced as "capitalism" in the nineteenth century.

Yet, although there are some similarities between what happened in the 19th century, the process today is quite different from the industrialization of that era. One must wonder whether the spread of consumption that we see is the result of a decline of virtue among citizens, and a resulting increase in greed and selfishness, or whether it is the result of a fundamental shift in human society.

That is to say, could it be that the advancement of a society founded on consumption is driven in part by technology itself?

As computer power increases exponentially, we find ourselves trapped in constant race to produce devices that are faster and faster. Such a race seems natural, but is it really driven by consumer demand, or by market forces, or for that matter, by capitalism?

Why do we assume that there is a need among consumers for faster and faster smart phones and computers that compels us to make them? I am so convinced that people demand products that are faster, or even that the desire of stockholders and investment banks for greater profits through consumption explains what we are witnessing.

It is a critical point. If technologies evolve following some hidden order rooted in their nature, and that hidden order has little or nothing to do with consumer demands or contradictions in society, it could be that we are misinterpreting the driving forces behind the serious problems that we face. It is possible that there is some other force other than the greed and selfishness of the rich that lies behind the scenes.

Could it be rather that Moore's Law, which suggests that the number of microprocessors that can be placed on a chip economically will increase exponentially every 18 months (with some variation) is in itself a force that drives the human economy and which demands that consumption be pushed far beyond the needs of people at this moment of economic disaster?

The exponential increase in computer capability that is dictated by Moore's Law does not by itself drive the economy, or transform human society. But its influence should not be underestimated. The increasing automation of our economy is made easier by computers, and supercomputers and the drive for automation transforms human relations – resulting in a larger and larger part of the economy, or at least the calculation of the economy, taking place in a manner that is detached from human experience.

The increasing use of computers increases the consumption of energy globally (and consumption of materials by human or machines). Much of the consumption of energy and materials takes place without any humans involved in the process at all. The increasing use of drones and computers has even opened the door up to a dystopia in which an automated economy continuous on even after humans are extinct, something not unlike the closing scene of the movie "Silent Running".

Could it also be that the machine, the computer, has become the true consumer for products, rather than the human who is increasingly a passive actor?

The expansion of computer networks could be the result of the desires of computers, rather than the desires of humans. Such a statement may sound ludicrous, but it is not at all if we think a bit more deeply about what is meant by desire. Computers do not have to think with the same nuance and complexity as humans in order to develop wants and desires. All that computers need to do is to simply to desire to increase the amount of electricity circulating through them and around them. The word "desire" perhaps suggests an unwarranted personification. Let us then say that the "desire" is a tendency in a system. The larger system of circulating electrons in the banks of computers and supercomputers around the world has a tendency to increase the number of electrons.

That "robot desire" is the product of the Second Law of Thermodynamics which proposes that an increase in entropy be the result of all natural processes. That Second Law of thermodynamics animates the circulation electrons making up computers and provides a hidden desire, an id within the computer and computer network that desires more electrons in circulation and greater entropy. Such a desire for entropy exists in the individual computer (which effects those who use it) in computer systems, in banks of super computers (that control investments in the Earth's economy), and in the global internet itself.

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Ideology, markets, human greed and capital are all legitimate subjects for analysis in our attempts to understand the forces that work beneath the surface. But the use of the vague term "capitalism" obscures more than it illuminates about the complex process by which human nature and technological evolution shape our society and our economy. If analysis based on the observation of "capitalism" is so dominant as to keep us from perceiving the impact of technology, it may keep us from formulating an appropriate solution.