

# The *Homo Energeticus*: maturity, inheritance, identity

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## Abstract

In this letter, modern society's intimate bond to the convenience and reliability of delivered energy services results in a form of identification I call the *Homo Energeticus*. The *Homo Energeticus* relies upon a mature system of services for achieving an equivalency of status and prestige that is historically similar to the morality of a noble class. I describe the uniqueness of this identity by its imperative for acquiring experience through an invisibility of energy expenditures. In this way, the *Homo Energeticus* cultivates a highly individualized life whose ambience of perfection, while created personally, is only successful insofar as it conceals energy expenditures in labor and supply.

**Keywords:** identity, consumption, energy transition

## 1. Maturity and inheritance

In *Cherry Orchard*, the Russian playwright Anton Chekhov describes the fate of an aristocratic family that loses its fortune because of an inability to adapt to the increasingly capitalist organization of society. It is a dominant theme in literary writings of late nineteenth-century Russia. Unable to identify themselves in the role of wage laborer, nobles such as Stepan Oblonsky of *Anna Karenina* become listless over the idea that economic security depends on taking up a salaried position. Aristocracy is a system of social positions secured through inheritance, but also a mature system of dependency from which elite members of society accumulate status and privilege based upon an established hierarchy.

The pathos in Chekhov's play is that toward the end of the nineteenth century, aristocratic lifestyle is both exhausted financially and untenable socially given the new positions of professionalized labor emerging under a system of capitalism. Also, at nearly the same time as the waning of this noble class, an entirely new system of delivered services arises that is

erected upon the foundation of capitalist hydrocarbon energy production. After only one hundred years the social form of this new system of services is beginning to appear curiously analogous to the maturity, inheritance, and identity of late nineteenth-century aristocracy.

In the case of the nobles, centuries of aristocratic rule results in a privileged class whose social existence as elites gives them direction and purpose in their own eyes. Their aloofness from all else and their prestige are the center of their self-image, spiritual salvation, and personal identity. Nevertheless, distance from scarcity and needs eventually cripples the noble class from effectively identifying with capitalism and the new structural position of wage labor into which all members of society become assimilated (Elias 1983).

In the case of modern society, the nine decades between 1882 and 1973, from Edison's electric systems to OPEC's first oil price rise, results in a distinct energy era of progressively cheaper fuel supply and mass diffusion of late nineteenth-century inventions (steam turbine, electric motor, fuel engine). With the post-1973 response to OPEC's high prices, the late twentieth-century energy system results in a class of consumer that can best be described by its reliance upon a 'high-energy civilization' (Smil 2000). Our self-image, spiritual salvation, and personal identity are intimately bound



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to the convenience, versatility, flexibility, and reliability of delivered energy services. As with a previous century of aristocrats, we are the inheritors of a mature system of services from which we accumulate status and prestige at an equivalent structural level of morality to a noble class.

In this letter, I outline a relationship between modern energy systems and self-identification in order to call attention to the image that we cultivate for ourselves through delivered energy services. For analytical purposes, I refer to this personal image as the *Homo Energeticus*. The *Homo Energeticus* focuses on relations of self-identification that are made, unmade, and remade through personal interactions that rely on conspicuous expenditures of energy, which are necessary to secure symbolic recognition. In this way, self-identification in a post-capitalist society rests upon pre-capitalist modes of spectacle, charisma, and enchantment. Through elaborate energy expenditures, today's high-energy consumer achieves an equivalency with the morality of the aristocrat whose elaborate cultivation of outward appearance served as an instrument of social differentiation and the display of rank through outward form.

In the mouths of politicians, economists, and energy scientists, the term conservation, meaning the subordination of energy expenditures to sustainable models and a systematic limitation of consumption in the interests of saving the planet, has a somewhat contemptuous nuance. It symbolizes the virtue of small people. Is it no wonder that energy concerns for achieving low carbon futures are without any discussion of altering the 'American way of life' (cf Drakulic 1991, Kolbert 2009)?

Nevertheless, the need for energy system change if national and global goals for justice and sustainability are to be met, suggests that the expected transformation will result in a shift in self-identification not experienced since the disintegration of the Ancien Régime.

## 2. Identity

The visibility of energy services is far more widespread in American life than are the artifacts of energy supply. Frozen French fries and frozen orange juice, for example, can be taken for symbols in miniature that mask vast technologies based on electric power and the internal combustion engine which have resulted in the widespread use of refrigeration and modern transport systems including the development of an imperial valley, expanded regional production of crops at increasingly larger farms and at desert locations with higher natural levels of evapotranspiration.

This was not always the case. Early in the twentieth century, the interdependence of conspicuous forms of labor power and consumption remained tightly bound within the collective imagination. Barry Island in the western part of the United Kingdom and Coney Island on the Eastern American seaboard are leftovers of a period when the symbols of leisure lay in close proximity to the visible signature of coal mines, factories, wage labor, and row houses. Today, by contrast, the hinterland of labor and energy supply is conspicuously absent

from Disneyland and Disney World, or the theme city, Las Vegas and its apotheosis, the cruise ship.

In recent history, various American writers and artists have laid bare the effort with which our society separates embodiments of energy use from any visible artifacts of energy supply. As early as the 1940s, Henry Miller (1945) summed up his reflection on the American trajectory in the somewhat humorous phrase *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*. American restaurant perfection, he observed, embodies energy services in such a manner that food carries the appearance of something prepared without having been touched by human hands, in invisible odorless kitchens discretely hidden away, while water glasses at all times must be kept 'choked with ice'. The postwar era, according to Miller, will come to represent the erosion of our capacity to 'think of food as being made of such crude, coarse things as parts of animals or vegetables buried in the filthy earth' (pp 64–5).

Indeed, since Miller's writing, the commercial propagation of perfection in food has become defined by a lack of bruising, and other signs of human handling more generally. The farmed fillet of Atlantic salmon, for example, has transformed the wildness of salmon from quite distinct timescapes found in nature to those fostered by industrial aquaculture. As industry experts explain, quality salmon must appear as having moved unmediated from ocean to plate. The job of the fisher and all the counter-personnel in the chain of delivery is to ensure that fish appear in the form of a product ready for consumption, as human food rather than a dead animal, but one that seems to spring effortlessly from pristine waters (Hebert 2008).

The meticulous manipulation of labor and nature that produce such untouched-looking meats and vegetables are successful insofar as they conceal energy expenditures in labor and supply. But the image of perfection that we have cultivated, while making energy expenditures invisible, is also accompanied by the hyper-visibility of consumers ourselves as analytically privileged endpoints of commodity chains. In making and marketing the singular salmon commodity, which requires the intensive individuation of fish, 'fishers must carefully handle each delicate organism, which is later thoroughly inspected for quality and positioned as unique within the larger salmon landscape', all for the purpose of celebrating the individuality of the American consumer as a buyer of a product that seems to have been made for him or her personally by producers whose identity is in fact a point of sale (p 322).

By the mid-1960s, another artist, Andy Warhol, would also foresee an elaborate design of American life, one that would lead, on the one hand, toward embodying energy services into visible artifacts of energy production and, on the other hand, to ensuring that these services go unrecognized as momentary distractions and thus summarily discarded as refuse. This was evident in a series of art installations in which Warhol exhibited imitations of consumable products such as the packaging of Brillo boxes. The result was to transform the art gallery so that it would mimic the reality of the supermarket. Through this inverse calculation, Warhol

demonstrated how the supermarket performs itself as an art gallery, populated by art objects that are produced by real artists who have higher education degrees in art and graphics design. The event should have been a warning shot across our consciousness about the danger of allowing market advertising to intervene into every recess of our imagination. Yet, the end result has led to the opposite effect. Today, we live among a forest of instantly disposable artistic creations that are now commonplace in the aisles of even the most conscientious of low-carbon footprint retail outlets.

With aisle upon aisle of professional artistic packaging that requires immediate disposal upon purchase, we have become a population whose closest affinity is King Midas, but instead of translating all things to gold, during our daily routine, quite literally, most everything we touch turns into garbage. From the instant that we place our hands on paper coffee cups, plastic water bottles, and all other assortments of marketed consumables, all invested energy requirements transform into debris. In this way, objects that we come into contact with through the commodity exchange represent a moment of energy sacrifice in the name of entropy. Today, art objects in the form of consumer packaging represent only a fraction of the price paid for gallery objects, but we summarily discard them anyway as if they are mere advertisements for content that purports to be of any significance. Astonishingly, as Warhol's installations imply, we have managed to avoid arriving at the point where we tear off painted canvases from their frames, in order so that we may 'eat' the wood.

Especially subtle has been the effects of energy in the form of electricity since the 1970s. Hollywood and Silicon Valley are the result of a higher share of electricity for providing greater convenience and flexibility of energy uses as well as rising amounts and faster deliveries of information. As such, the organization of capital and labor into a stable system, producing economies of scale, has given way to a new type of organization where information, the main resource, travels along networks of communication fueled by electricity. The accompany of movements of people and things by the accompany of movements of messages suggests a new knowledge-driven economy, one that is fragmented by its reliance on end users as much as on its producers. Instead of the State and the Corporation, as the two main actors in the corresponding domains of Politics and Economics, our new units of operation are networks, projects, and communities of practice. What seemed like stable entities with established identities have come to be regarded as flexible and fluid formations, continuously in the process of transformation.

These decentralized formations draw attention to the role of energy services in sustaining powerful imaginaries that shape perceptions about postindustrial progress and the capitalist way of life. Information passing along communication technologies packaged through music and movies has come to represent time-space experiences that serve as potent emotional markers of our new regime of living. An integral constant of Nick Hornby's 1990s novel, *High Fidelity*, for example, is that in a new century we will become enlightened and aggravated not by the collective memory of historical associations to market evolution and societal progress, but by new systems of communication:

What came first, the music or the misery? People worry about kids playing with guns, or watching violent videos, that some sort of culture of violence will take them over. Nobody worries about kids listening to thousands, literally thousands of songs about heartbreak, rejection, pain, misery and loss. Did I listen to pop music because I was miserable? Or was I miserable because I listened to pop music? (Hornby 1995).

Perhaps the arrival of energy booms in new and unexpected areas, of shale gas exploration on college campuses and along the nation's main streets can snap us out of a system in which the totality of honor makes our energy expenditures magical because they are made to appear invisible.

### 3. Conclusion

The advent of a money economy, we are told, has dissolved traditional bonds associated with bartering and gifts so that monetary exchange is now the real community. By contrast, the *Homo Energeticus* relies neither on money nor on those preferred for intimacy, but instead upon energy flows controlled directly in the course of daily activity. In a high-energy economy, energy is the only community. Equivalent power commanded by today's affluent American household, without the convenience, versatility, flexibility, and reliability of delivered energy services, would have been available 'only to Roman latifundia owner of 6000 slaves, or to a nineteenth-century landlord employing 3000 workers and 400 big draft horses' (Smil 2000, p 48).

Under such circumstances, to expect sensible judgment on issues of justice and sustainability appears impossible (cf Moran 2006 for consumption shifts). Instead of employing a global fleet of readily available cruise ships, with all-you-can-eat shrimp bars, as the most logical means for assisting island communities impacted by extreme events, we would rather create from these ships a shrine oriented toward a thermodynamics of transience and disposability.

But the special image of the *Homo Energeticus* that I portray cannot be explained by way of an accumulation of personal faults and vices of individuals. It does not involve an epidemic of caprice or an impairment of self-control. What we have is a social system of norms and values, whose commands individuals can escape only if we renounce contact with what establishes salvation in our own eyes and in our social milieu. These norms cannot be explained by a secret buried in the hearts of individuals. They are explainable only in the context of the specific figuration formed by each of us and the specific interdependences that bind us together. Why, for example, are nearly all solutions about reductions in carbon about production and not consumption? This is socialization in keeping with a tradition that imprints on the *Homo Energeticus* the duty imposed on his and her rank to be prodigal.

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