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Product Obsolescence: the Ecological Impact

Éric Vidalenc and Laurent Meunier

Faced with the limitations set by our planet (raw materials, energy etc.), with climate change and with the need to keep down waste emissions of all kinds, our societies are necessarily going to have to effect a major transition—the so-called “ecological transition”. With this in mind, and with a more sustainable model of production and consumption as the goal, the fight against the so-called “built-in” obsolescence of products has a major part to play. And yet, are we able to assess the real ecological impact of the products concerned, from the point of manufacture to the end of their life?

Éric Vidalenc and Laurent Meunier, who have studied this question at the French Environment and Energy Management Agency (ADEME), provide some valuable keys to an answer in this article. They begin by reminding us what is meant by “built-in obsolescence” (showing the pertinence and limits of the concept), as well as covering product innovation strategies and the crucial role of the consumer. Drawing on life-cycle analyses, they then examine the ecological impact of the goods most traditionally affected by obsolescence (domestic electrical goods, cars, computers and smartphones) and the underlying causes of the phenomenon. They go on to propose a variety of avenues and strategies whereby that impact can be reduced, depending on whether it is caused by the use of the item or its manufacture. What is, ultimately, important is to make both manufacturers and consumers act responsibly, the former by encouraging a move towards the “circular” or “functional” economy and towards recycling, eco-design etc. and the latter by providing them with better information and *ad hoc* incentives.

The “Greater Paris” Metro Project: An Evaluation

Émile Quinet

In this September issue of *Futuribles*, we continue the “Greater Paris” theme that was addressed in July by Mario Polèse and Jean-

Claude Prager (issue no. 401). Here Émile Quinet outlines the lessons to be learned from the evaluation of the proposed Greater Paris Metro, which he has studied closely as a member of the independent committee set up by the “Société du Grand Paris” to subject the project to scientific scrutiny.

Quinet first goes over the content and anticipated cost of the project. Then, deploying various different scenarios, he offers a socio-economic evaluation of its effects, as traditionally estimated in the transport field: in terms of time saved, environmental and demographic impacts, and effects on employment (volume of jobs, location etc.). He rounds off his analysis by examining the possible impact on the regional economy of the gains achieved in the transport field, estimated using specific models (particularly the Pirandello model): changes to economic activity, increases in income, productivity etc. The result is a positive impact in all three of the scenarios considered (“low”, “central” and “high”). Lastly, Quinet undertakes an evaluation of this evaluation, facilitating a better grasp of the method used and the lessons to be drawn from it, and enabling emphasis to be placed on the necessary integration of the Greater Paris project into the regional economic development strategy. This implies, among other things, that the project should be linked to housing and transport policies in the Île-de-France region.

The “Greater Paris” Metro: a Questionable Choice

Jean-Pierre Orfeuil

In this other article in the Greater Paris dossier, which was begun in our previous issue and continues this month, Jean-Pierre Orfeuil re-examines how the project that led to the choice of the “New Greater Paris” option unfolded, with its potential role in the building of the Paris region into a metropolitan entity featuring as a backdrop.

Orfeuil first goes over the aspects that have to be taken into account in the development of a metropolis, then examines the possible role of the various types of transport in the precise case of the Île-de-France

region and outlines the various rival initial projects (“Arc Express”, “Grand Huit” etc.), which ultimately culminated in the New Greater Paris metro project. He particularly stresses the power struggles, both local and national, that surrounded the choice and development of the project. He then recaps the criticisms of the initial plans and shows how the compromise reached developed in response to a number of these. He highlights the problems and questions that remain unresolved (particularly regarding the evaluation of the project, its grandiose character, the risk of spiralling costs etc.) and bemoans the “collateral damage” caused by the project and by the state’s intervention in it. Lastly, Orfeuill shows what alternative or complementary paths could have been followed, before drawing conclusions on the various lessons to be learned from this “venture” with regard to governance and —local and national— political decision-making.

What Future for Utility Cycling in France?

Frédéric Héran

In early summer of this year, Ségolène Royal, the French Minister of Ecology, Sustainable Development and Energy, delivered a broad outline of her energy transition bill, opening the question up to consultation before the parliamentary debate that is expected to take place in the autumn. Among the initiatives included in the bill is “the development of clean transport to improve air quality and safeguard the health of French people”. The main measures here relate to the increased use of lower-emission vehicles (electric cars with a dedicated infrastructure) and public transport. The development of bicycle use is mentioned briefly among the local initiatives to be promoted, chiefly with regard to the major urban centres.

Yet, as Frédéric Héran, drawing on a range of experience in other countries, shows here, the potential of utility cycling (as opposed to leisure cycling) is far from negligible in France. Cycles could easily replace other modes of transport for a great many trips that are made, and not just in cities. The development of cycle usage, which harmonizes entirely with current energy and ecological demands, does, however, require the implementation of a genuine “cycle system” (bicycle lanes, dedicated services etc.) that is capable of creating new local dynamics. Héran outlines the prospects for such a “cycle system” and

its possible role in adapting towns and cities to the goal of eco-mobility.

The Distribution of Wealth. When Capital takes Precedence over Labour: On Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*

Geneviève Schméder

Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* was first published in France in late 2013. However, it was not until spring of 2014, after the success of the English-language edition in the USA, that it came to prominence in the French media —though not without sparking controversy among Gallic commentators and economists. This substantial tome of almost a thousand pages, replete with statistical data ranging over long stretches of time, is a continuation of Piketty’s earlier work on high incomes in France (the book which largely made his reputation), but focussed in this instance on historic *international* trends with regard to income from capital.

Geneviève Schméder has read the book for *Futuribles* and outlines some of its major lessons for us here, beginning with its central finding that the distribution of wealth increasingly favours the owners of capital (income from capital is increasing more and quicker than income from work) and, among those who own capital, it is the tiny minority of the “ultra-rich” who have seen their wealth grow the most. In this situation, inequality is increasing and it is hard to see how the trend toward concentration of wealth at the top of the pyramid can be reversed. As Geneviève Schméder points out, above and beyond his economic analysis Thomas Piketty asks two fundamental political questions. What are the dangers for democracy of wealth being monopolized in this way? And at what levels of inequality will citizens feel moved to rebel?

The 2014 World’s Fair seen from 1964 (*Futures of Yesteryear*)

Isaac Asimov

International exhibitions, which began in the mid-19th century as events at which the industrial achievements of the world’s nations could be displayed, provided a technological and industrial shop-window for the companies and countries that took part in them, thus attesting to the progress of the developed societies. It was on the occa-

sion of a visit to the New York World's Fair in 1964 that the famous science fiction writer Isaac Asimov decided to jump forward half a century and imagine what might be on show at the 2014 equivalent.

In that article, published in 1964, Asimov showed astonishing foresight, whether it be about modes of transport, telecommunications, automation, demographic growth or the in-built limitations of our planet. And if at times Asimov was wrong (he thought, for example, that human beings would by now have built under the ground and beneath the oceans), re-reading this piece in the very year when its predictions are set reveals the powers of anticipation he possessed. To undertake a similar exercise today and attempt to forecast technological developments in 2064 would undoubtedly be a risky enterprise —mainly on account of the marked acceleration in the pace of technological advance.

Europe Disarmed in the Face of Russia

Jean-François Drevet

In Eastern Europe, 2014 has been characterized by a remarkable return on the part of

Russia to the lands of the former republics of the Soviet Union. In much the same way as Moscow opposed Georgia in the 2008 South Ossetia crisis, this year it has supported Crimea against Ukraine, paving the way for that region to join the Russian federation. And it continues to stand out against the authorities in Kiev, particularly by supporting rebellion in Ukraine in the crisis that has beset that country since the turn of the year.

In this context, the European Union is in a decidedly uncomfortable position, torn as it is between its principles (respect for sovereignty and international borders) and its energy dependency (on Russian gas). However, though Russo-European relations do pose a problem in the short term, in the long term, as this column shows, they seem set for a bright future. Jean-François Drevet begins by reminding us of the dangers facing relations between Brussels and Moscow in recent days and the inherent causes of that situation, but goes on to show how well the two entities complement each other in the long term, taking the view that the tricky phase they are currently going through ought not to prevent the European Union and Russia from developing fruitful relations in a slightly more distant future. ■

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