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From the Consumer Society to Satisfaction Societies

Jean Haëntjens

While the French were slowly coming out of the lockdown introduced in spring 2020 to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic, our colleague Jean Haëntjens was bringing out a new book arguing for 'a satisfaction economy'. Striking a particular chord with the spirit of this period, in which many have once again learned to take time and to consume less and differently, the book advocates a changed frame of reference, in which we abandon the dominant principle of 'all-out consumption' that is currently dominant in developed societies.

In this article, Haëntjens shows how the currently emerging propensity among our fellow citizens to move from a consumer society to a satisfaction society might be helped along. This is because reasoning in terms of satisfaction — rather than consumption at all costs or the accumulation of wealth — represents a way of incorporating the changes that have become essential for paying heed to the resource limitations of our planet. Societies seem increasingly inclined to go in this direction. It is now down to politicians to get on board with this change and give them the means to move to a 'satisfaction economy'.

The Situation of the Middle Classes in the USA

A Review of the Recent Literature

Julien Damon

On 3 November 2020, a few days after this issue of *Futuribles* appears, the US presidential election will take place against a background of great communal tensions in the country and an economic crisis relating to the Covid-19 pandemic. As in many developed countries, one of the keys to the electoral outcome lies in the vote of the middle classes. As Julien Damon shows here, their situation has been growing gloomier for several decades now: the gap is growing between the middle classes and the affluent; inequality is increasing; and the reality of upward social mobility is in doubt. This article offers a review of the main American studies of the US middle classes over a dozen years, describing the reality of their development and also, at times, their failure to advance and fulfil their aspirations. He also stresses the risks, in terms of social cohesion, of the emergence of a *de facto* plutocracy in that country.

The Growing Diversity of the US Population

Trends Seen in the 2020 Census

William H. Frey

While Americans are preparing to elect their new president on 3 No-

vember, the country has been in a particularly tense situation for several months, since the resurgence of the 'Black Lives Matter' movement. A number of controversial deaths of black Americans at the hands of police officers have prompted a string of protests and riots since spring 2020, condemning the persistence of racism within the police force, if not indeed within American society in general. The United States, the land of the 'melting-pot', is struggling to achieve peaceful social relations between the various ethnic groups that make up its population. However, given what we learn from the 2020 census, it is becoming more than necessary for them to work on that social cohesion: for the first time in US history, white population numbers fell during the 2010s and the overall demographic growth of the country is now down largely to ethnic minorities.

In this article William H. Frey outlines this accelerating trend toward a more diverse population in the USA, drawing on the latest data published by the Census Bureau. The United States actually collects quite detailed ethnic statistics, questioning the population on which 'race or ethnic group' they feel they belong to, a formulation unfamiliar to us in France. And the most recent results clearly show the driving role of ethnic minorities in the country's demographic dynamism.

USA: the Rise of Identity Politics

As seen by Mike Gonzalez, Author of *The Plot to Change America*

Michèle Tribalat

Continuing this issue's focus on the United States, in this article Michèle

Tribalat outlines the argument of a book that was published in the USA this summer: *The Plot to Change America* by Mike Gonzalez. The author sounds the alarm about the risks that proliferating forms of identity politics pose for American society. While, historically, the pursuit of such politics was aimed at asserting the rights of communities which, by dint of their ethnic origins, did not have the same opportunities within society as whites, expanding the scope of such politics to multiple groups by way of the national census's introduction of ever more ethnic categories is tending to become counterproductive. According to Gonzalez, the pressure by some American intellectuals to accredit a form of 'generalized victimhood' for minority groups, and the fact of resorting to that 'minority' notion for all kinds of demands on the public authorities, run counter to the freedom of citizens and the plurality of ideas. Fearing for the survival of liberal ideology in his country, he expects to see a reaction. This is a book that confirms the sensitivities and tensions within American society, examined from the Conservative standpoint.

Water – Going down the Drain?

From a Gloomy Retrospective to a more Enlightened Future Vision

Pierre-Frédéric Ténière-Buchot

"Water is life", said Saint-Exupéry. No living being on the planet can survive without it. Yet more than two billion people have no access to clean drinking water, more than four billion have no sanitation, and millions of people across the world die every year from illnesses related to a lack of clean

water, sanitation and hygiene. How can this be remedied? This article is written by a man who has devoted his entire career to that question since the time we became aware, towards the end of the post-war boom, of the spectacular deterioration in water quality (and, more generally, of our environment).

First, as the creator of a model which (in the wake of the first French act of parliament on water in 1964) inspired the establishment of river basin agencies, he was called on to manage one such agency, while being closely involved in all the international conferences and negotiations on water. We do not usually publish personal testimony in *Futuribles*, but what he tells us of the progress achieved after half a century of reassuring governmental declarations and international resolutions on sustainable development has much to teach us for the future.

He shows, first, what a major intervention the creation of these river basin agencies was in France — breaking as it did with centuries-old ways, going back to pre-revolutionary times — since they were granted exceptional autonomy to impose charges on the cubic metres of water abstracted and the pollution generated, in order to invest, in close consultation with the parties involved, in sanitation equipment and processes. He shows the advantages, but also the limitations of these agencies, without commenting to any great extent on their fate...

Pending the next World Water Forum in Dakar (2021), he then provides an account of the effort exerted at the international level to convince us of an obvious fact: we have to produce water, distribute it, purify waste water, protect the environment and secure public health — all things which require regulation and have a cost;

which need taxes and charges, a long-term vision and an approach involving a great many actors. So many things, no doubt, that are equally necessary to achieve ecological transition! But, if these things are easier said than done, we should also note that constructive action is possible even where hope is absent.

Covid-19 and Development Is the Worst-Case Scenario Avoidable?

Louis-Charles Viossat

After a summer lull, the Covid-19 pandemic has picked up again across the world and since September measures to contain it or limit its spread have been bolstered in a large number of countries (lockdown, restrictions on travel or on gathering in public places, bars etc.). In view of the socio-economic impact of the actions taken during the first wave, this second surge of the epidemic and the accompanying measures give strong grounds for concern, particularly in the countries of the global South, which are less affected by the pandemic than others for the moment but are paying a high price in terms of economic development.

As Louis-Charles Viossat shows in this forum, the first assessments by international bodies of the impact of the Covid crisis on human development in the South are alarming. Future consequences are already massive in terms of employment, poverty, food supply etc. The positive trend in the progress indicators that we have seen over the last 30 years is beginning to reverse for the first time, and, if firm measures are not taken quickly, a lasting decline in the situation of local populations is to be feared. And, of

the three foreseeable scenarios that Viossat presents at the end of his article, there seems little chance, as he notes, that the most optimistic one will win out and avert the threat of a great leap backward in the countries of the South.

The Grasshopper, the Ant and European Indebtedness

Jean-François Drevet

The hard-won European agreement of 21 July underwriting the principle of a joint debt package is an important event in the history of European construction. In response to the economic crisis produced by the Covid-19 pandemic, the member states eventually agreed to a collective recovery

plan. While politically essential, the agreement nonetheless raises many concerns and questions about the way the joint loan will eventually be repaid.

After decades of tight fiscal discipline, closely overseen by Germany, many EU member states will probably allow their indebtedness to rise, in order to limit the social damage. This is worrying but, re-reading the economic history of the continent, as Jean-François Drevet does in this column, we can see that states (including Germany) have defaulted on their debts for many years now and have always found solutions that averted disaster. This look back at history is meant to be reassuring, but also stimulating: given so much past ingenuity, we should go forward and invest the money in this debt package without too many reservations. ■

Futuribles is a bimonthly independent transdisciplinary policy oriented journal (6 issues a year), also available in electronic form on the Futuribles website.

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