



**Environment at the crossroads.
Aiming for a sustainable future.**
Gulbenkian Conference 2009
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Happiness in a Hyperconsumption Society

Gilles Lipovetsky

We are not in the “consumption society” anymore, but in times of hyper-consumption, which is the third historical phase of the consumption capitalism.

From now on, it is essential a kind of mobile and flexible “turbo-consumption”, largely freed from the ancient cultures of class, unpredictable as regards tastes and purchase. From a buyer subject to the constraints of social class, we switched to a hyper-consumer searching for emotional experiences, quality of life and health, brands and authenticity, immediacy and unlimited communication. Intimate consumption replaced the honorific consumption in a system wherein the buyer is better informed, more unfaithful and reflexive, as well as “aesthetic”.

Whatever the criticism may be against the hyper-consumption society, the latter is only in its beginning, and the most probable scenario is that it will expand at a planetary rate in a time wherein any other credible alternative system does not exist. Neither the ecologist protests, nor the new and more sober forms of consumption, nor even “alter-consumers” will be enough to stop or slow down the escape forward of the mercantilization of experiences and lifestyles.

The hyper-consumption society is the society of “paradoxal happiness”. We consume three times more energy than in the 1960s, yet no one can sustain that we are three times happier. The more private pleasures multiply, the more are created frustrations in intimate life, anxieties and depressions, as well as emotional and professional disappointments. Self dissatisfactions grow in proportion to the satisfactions provided by the market.

The “tragedy” of our times has its origins in the dynamics of individualisation and the new aspirations for a happy life: the more the requirements of private happiness are affirmed, the more, inevitably, all kinds of dissatisfactions and disappointments increase.

It is important to notice that: our power over “things” follows an exponential curve, but the power that we have over the joy of living remains extremely weak. The keys that open the doors of happiness do



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not progress; and happiness stubbornly escapes the control of men. The project of unlimited power of the Modern obviously reaches here its limitations.

Neither pessimism, nor radical optimism: we just have to live our lives bearing in mind that happiness is the uncontrollable, unpredictable, unsurpassable enigma of today and tomorrow.



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Born in France in 1944, Gilles Lipovetsky is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Grenoble and as an essayist he analyses how regulations, values and behaviours evolve in the European developed societies. He is Doctor *honoris causa* both of the University of Sherbrooke (Canada) and New Bulgarian University (Sofia), he is member of two advisory bodies to the French Government, the Programmes National Council - Ministry for National Education and CAS - Conseil d'Analyse de la Société, as well as consultant within APM - Association Progrès du Management. He was awarded France's highest decoration, Knight of the Légion d'Honneur. He published an extensive bibliography, among others: «L'ère du vide» (1983, Gallimard) [The age of emptiness]; «L'empire de l'éphémère» (1987, Gallimard) [The Empire of Fashion]; «Le devoir du crépuscule» (1992, Gallimard); «La troisième femme» (1997, Gallimard); «Métamorphoses de la culture libérale» (2002, Liber, Canada); «Le luxe éternel» (2003, Gallimard); «Les temps hypermodernes» (2004, Grasset) [Hypermodern Times]; «Le bonheur paradoxal. Essai sur la société d'hyperconsommation» (2006, Gallimard); «La société de déception» (2006, Textual); «L'écran global» (2007, Seuil) and lately «La culture-monde. Réponse à une société désorientée» (2008, Odile Jacob). His bibliography is translated or being translated in 18 countries.