

23 april 2012
Judith Merkies

A DEMATERIALIZED SOCIETY

In one of his last works, European historian Tony Judt marvelled how we fail to conceive of “a different set of arrangements to our common advantage”. We seem to be “doomed indefinitely to lurch between a dysfunctional ‘free-market’ and the much-advertised horrors of socialism”. To overcome the severe problems of the globalised world, however, there has to be more on the menu than these two ubiquitous extremes. We have to disrupt, merge and steer narratives, so that we obtain a synthesis between the free-market economy mechanism – and alternative systems apt to illuminate the social and ecological blind spots of the current paradigm. This requires a mindset change.

The key idea is to shift to a dematerialised society, a society where we consume less, enjoy more and guard our scarce raw materials more closely. A ‘lease society’ model should be introduced, in which consumers lease instead of purchase products so that emphasis is not put on the physical good, but on its performance. For instance, rather than buying a lamp, you lease the service ‘light’ and rather than buying a television, you lease ‘television watching hours’. Meanwhile producers retain the ownership of their products, which extends their responsibility over the product with regard to its full lifecycle. Replacing, repairing and removing goods will be on the producer’s account - so that employment shifts to rendering these services. Furthermore, the producer will understand that expenses are minimised when a product delivers a service for its entire leasing period. This creates economic incentive to make goods durable and recyclable for fully closed supply loops – rather than relentlessly launching impermanent devices made of scarce and environment-damaging virgin raw materials.

In a leasing society, economic interest is reversed to be convergent with ecologic interests. Especially for the import dependent EU, this might be a winning model to overcome resource scarcity and expanding Chinese and African protectionism on rare metals. Indeed, this prompts us to sacrifice the notion of ownership. But is it really ownership that makes a man?

In American law, the right of self-defence includes the right to protect property ‘as long as the measures are proportionate’. The underlying assumption is that the right to use physical things to the exclusion of others and the right of inviolability of the body, are equally unalienable. This is in accordance with the old adage of owning your own labour and the fruits thereof. Locke considered this as ‘the natural right of ownership’.

Conversely, Oscar Wilde put eloquently how “the recognition of private property has harmed individualism... by confusing a man with what he owns... So that man thought that the important thing was to have, and did not know that the important thing is to be”. These words still apply to our current property-focused economy. Yet, it is crystal-clear that its polar opposite – socialism – is no viable alternative either. Whereas the former considers the person and his property as coterminous, the latter is obscuring the person and his preferences altogether, for the good of equality. We have to move beyond these pre-imposed flip-sides. In the lease society, men - and women - own less and enjoy more.

Everyone can lease the services that match with their personal tastes, and enable them to be who they want to be. Consumer, producer and society win. Welcome to a social, sustainable and functional free-market system.