

# The Problem of Excess

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## Abstract

This article argues for a new branch of theory based not on presumptions of scarcity—which are the foundational presumptions of most existing social theory—but on those of excess. The article first discusses the emergence of scarcity’s dominance in social theory. It then considers and rejects the idea that excess of one thing is simply scarcity of another. It discusses the mechanisms by which excess creates problems, noting three such mechanisms at the individual level (paralysis, habituation, and value contextuality) and two further mechanisms (disruption and misinheritance) at the social level. The article then considers four types of strategies with which we address excess: two reduction strategies (defensive and reactive) and two rescaling strategies (adaptive and creative). It closes with some brief illustrations of how familiar questions can be recast from terms of scarcity into terms of excess.

## Keywords

excess, abundance, scarcity

Many great problems of our era are problems of excess: massive pollution, sprawling suburbs, glut of information. Yet our social theories and normative arguments focus mostly on scarcity. Budget constraints, tradeoffs, impoverishment: these are concepts of scarcity. Confronted with excess, we nevertheless make scarcity the center of our attention.<sup>1</sup>

There are various possible responses to this paradox. One could ask why it arises—an interesting question in the sociology of knowledge. One could turn to the empirical side of it, discussing the origin of problematic excess itself. I make here a third response, turning rather to the theoretical side of the paradox, our focus on scarcity. I want to sketch the foundations of a social theory based on the premise that the central problematic of human affairs is not dealing with scarcity, but dealing with excess.

Such an approach would resolve numerous problems in social theory. First, it would be *ex ante* conformable with the many empirical problems of excess that confront us. Second, it would enable us to see how our scarcity theories might constrain effective analysis of crucial social problems. By rethinking in terms of excess those problems that we usually conceive as problems of scarcity—poverty, domination, and so on—we might find

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completely new approaches to old questions. In this article, to be sure, I shall not fully achieve these desirable goals. Given limited space, I can only undertake the preliminary task of sketching the necessity, the lineage, and the basic internal logic of a sociological theory that rests on a problematic of excess rather than scarcity.

It is useful to begin with definitions. I shall use the words *scarcity*, *abundance*, and *excess* to refer, respectively, to having too little of something, having an unproblematically sufficient amount of something, and having too much of something. These are all relative judgments, of course; the phrases *too little*, *enough*, and *too much* identify not absolute amounts, but amounts relative to a standard. I shall therefore employ other words—*rare*, *common*, and *countless*—when I need words for absolute levels of availability. I shall omit all consideration of whether countlessness is good or bad (*copious* vs. *superfluous*), rareness good or bad (*unique* vs. *meager*), or even commonness good or bad (*ample* vs. *adequate*). But it is important to notice that we have such evaluative vocabularies and, more broadly, that our vocabularies for scarcity, abundance, and excess are both immense and, in general, evaluative. Note in particular that we have such vocabularies for emotions (*severe*, *placid*, *ardent*) and for action (*restrained*, *measured*, *manic*), as well as for cognition (*bare*, *comprehensible*, *complex*). In this article, however, I shall use only the main trichotomy (scarcity, abundance, and excess) for relative difference and, when necessary, the second trichotomy (rare, common, and countless) for absolute amount. (Since *excessive* has considerably stronger negative connotations in English than *excess*, I shall use *superabundant* as the adjectival form for *excess* when I wish to avoid those negative connotations.)

In this terminology, the task of the article is to reconceive social theory around the problem of excess: to argue that the central problematic of social life is not having too little of something, but having too much of it. The article has four main sections. The first reviews the role of excess in classical social theories, tracing the lineage of scarcity and excess as theoretical problematics. The second considers the reasons why excess is not simply the obverse of scarcity. The third describes the mechanisms by which excess creates problems. The fourth examines the strategies we use to deal with excess, in the process reinterpreting—as excess control strategies—such phenomena as markets, hierarchies, and divisions of labor. A brief conclusion mentions how some traditional “scarcity” problems might be recast as “excess” problems.

Any such article must make disclaimers. The most important is that the article aims to sketch a possibility, not to sweep all theories employing scarcity into the dustbin. Indeed, one of the article’s main points is that scarcity and excess are not necessarily conceptual contraries and therefore that studying the one does not preempt studying the other. Second, the article is not about modernity. I do not take excess to be a problem peculiar to modern societies, although one could make an argument, following Keynes ([1930] 1963), that excess has become a particularly urgent problem in modern economic life. But in fact, excess has long been characteristic of human existence, as has been maintained by authors as diverse as Marshall Sahlins (1972) and Georges Bataille (1989). Third, the article is not principally about subjectivity or cultural definitions of excess. There are of course wonderful papers to be written about the subjective sense of excess as well as about the culture of excess. But subjectivity is not my focus. I am here mainly concerned with how people and groups deal with the sense of excess, not with whether that sense has objective or subjective origins. Fourth, I myself have no moral or ethical arguments to make about excess. The ethics of excess are an endless topic, from the ancients to the present. And important social theorists (e.g., Durkheim) have recognized that excess can create moral problems that require attention. But while I will discuss the impact of excess on moral action as on other forms of action, I myself have no brief for this or that moral interpretation of excess. Finally, I am

well aware that some people consider the current epoch to be one of austerity and therefore may find frivolous or even callous an argument that begins from the premise of excess. But I take no position on the question of whether the current epoch evinces scarcity or excess, and more important, I don't think the simple opposition of the two is useful or even valid. Society always contains both, and therefore we need an effective social theory of excess just as much as we need one of scarcity.

Given these disclaimers, let us begin with a short history of the concepts of scarcity and excess in social theory.

## SCARCITY AND EXCESS IN SOCIAL THEORY

It is no secret that scarcity has played a central role in classical theories of society. Western philosophy has long puzzled over whether excess is good or bad. Aristotle thought that abundance gave citizens the freedom to discern the true public interest, while the authors of Deuteronomy thought that only scarcity would keep the Children of Israel on the path to righteousness. Plato's concept of a divine and positive plenitude descended to Leibniz, Schelling, and Bergson (Lovejoy 1936), but Kant and Schiller, by contrast, noted in their work on "the sublime" the perilous quality of our emotional reaction to the excessive force of nature. Novelists also have divided on the issue of excess. In *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and *René*, Goethe ([1774] 1984) and Chateaubriand ([1802] 1906), respectively, began that praise of emotional excess that would dominate much of the nineteenth century. Yet this very insatiability of human emotions became one of the core problematics of modern fiction in figures like Marianne Dashwood and Emma Bovary.<sup>2</sup>

In social theory, our focus on scarcity has more immediate roots in the literature of political economy. As we read the political economists from the eighteenth century forward, we can see excess recede into the background as scarcity takes center stage. To be sure, excess—or at least abundance—was always the desired end of an economic system throughout that period. But the motor forces of the system began very early to be located in scarcity.

In Mandeville, excess is in the first instance personal. Mandevillians seek individual luxury. Social abundance—whether of goods, employment, or, as Mandeville implies, happiness—can arise only from personal vice, dishonest appetite, and striving after excess: "Bare Vertue can't make nations live in Splendor" (Mandeville [1724] 1989:76). Although Mandeville's main argument concerns personal luxury and excess, he shows clearly that societal abundance (he does not discuss social excess) itself requires the motive power of unworthy pursuit of personal excess above all else.

By contrast, in Adam Smith ([1776] 1976), "wealth" (which denotes a seemly abundance rather than Mandevillian excess) has become a mere result, rather than an individual motivator. For Smith, personal motivation lies in truck and barter on the one hand and a rather timid "self-love" on the other. Smithian individuals are not Mandevillian sybarites but sober businessmen, not consumers but investors. And the most important abundance is not at the individual but at the social level, since Smith's purpose is to confute the mercantilists' beliefs about the wealth of nations. (He was not particularly interested in personal abundance or excess.) Glut and overproduction—the social level excesses—do not seem as apparent to Smith as they do to Mandeville, and of course he doesn't imagine the Victorian industry that will soon make such overproduction a reality, if a rather badly distributed one.

But Smith makes another important change. At the level of the individual, he emphasizes the division of labor, which is occasioned by differences of talents as realized through the propensity to truck and barter. Despite his overall focus on abundance as a necessary and desirable product at the social level, Smith's attention to division of labor opens the

possibility—almost impossible for Smith’s successors to avoid reading back into him—of conceiving an individual-level mechanism through which not individual excess but individual scarcity and competition will produce social abundance. The Mandevillian appetite for personal excess disappears in Smith, replaced by sober division of labor and seemingly self-love. But the next step on this path seems inevitable.

It is Malthus ([1798] 2008) who takes that step. The first excess in Malthus is the social superabundance of human bodies, and on the surface, Malthus’s argument runs from the social fact of excessive population to the individual experience of scarcity and starvation. But in fact his argument centers on scarcity from the first chapter with its famous contrast of the arithmetic increase of subsistence with the geometric increase of population. Unlike Smith and the mercantilists, Malthus has no interest in the many good things that excess population can bring to a nation: military strength, cheap labor, and so on. The wealth of nations does not concern him. Indeed, nothing substantive about excess concerns him. What concerns him is only the disproportion of population and subsistence and the consequent scarcity experienced by individuals. The social excess of population is merely a condition of this larger, foregrounded situation of individual scarcity. Malthus thus turns excess into a literal obverse of scarcity, which it is not in either Mandeville or Smith.

Malthus makes this inversion quite deliberately, pitching his argument against what he sees as the overly optimistic social theory of the Enlightenment. The *philosophes* had expected society to be positively transformed by excess, in particular by abundant—even superabundant—knowledge. But on his first page, Malthus mocks Enlightenment notions like “the great and unlooked-for discoveries,” “the increasing diffusion of general knowledge,” and “the ardent and unshackled spirit of inquiry” (Malthus [1798] 2008:9). He thinks these will amount to little.

Malthus thus turns on its head Mandeville’s optimistic view of the substantive excess that will be produced by personal vice. In Malthus, luxurious desire produces not plenty but want. The only restraints on the negative excess of population are the immediate forces of scarcity and destruction (hunger, pestilence, war, and great [i.e., pestilence-ridden] cities), to which are added those enjoyments that for Malthus inevitably if indirectly lead to scarcity and want (luxury, “unwholesome manufactures,” and “vicious customs with respect to women”) (Malthus [1798] 2008:45).<sup>3</sup> In his concluding chapter, Malthus tells us in no uncertain terms that “[the] general tendency of a uniform course of prosperity is rather to degrade than exalt the character” (Malthus [1798] 2008:150). For him, as for the authors of Deuteronomy, scarcity is morally desirable.

Formalizing Malthus, Ricardo ([1817] 2004) produces the theory of scarcity that has sustained subsequent economics. On his first page, he notes scarcity as one of the two sources of value (quantity of labor is the other). Moreover, the Ricardian analysis of rent—probably the most influential section of the theory in the long run—is rooted in scarcity. That which is excessive—or even merely abundant—is worthless, however useful it may be. Ricardo is uninterested in the actual use of things; all that matters is their exchange value.

From the other side of the political fence, Marx too focuses on scarcity. *Capital* (Marx [1867] 1967) is one long meditation on scarcity; declining wages and class conflict are all about scarcity, even though an overwhelming fact of British history from 1750 to 1850 was the rapid expansion of economic production. By focusing on distribution alone, Marx upends the Malthusian arguments that the basic problem of society can be logically derived and that it concerns the theoretical disproportion between the growth potentials of agriculture and of population. In Marx, the basic problem of society is empirically discoverable and concerns a political matter, the unjust allocation of socially superabundant production, which imposes personal scarcity on the majority of the population. Personal scarcity is still central, but

arises differently. Marx manages thereby to avoid comment on the central reality of nineteenth-century British economics: the sudden excess of production in both agriculture and manufacturing, an excess so large that even all of India was not able to absorb it.<sup>4</sup>

Even empirical economics managed to ignore excess. To be sure, the emergence of fully developed capitalism made the business cycle into a well-formed problem by the end of the nineteenth century, and in the business cycle, excess was fully as problematic as scarcity. But in the usual argument about business cycles, the problem of glut was really a problem of scarcity: glut of products meant not only low prices, but—more important—scarcity of employment. Thus the main line of empirical economics, growing out of liberal political economy, retained Ricardo's and Malthus's focus on scarcity as the central conceptual aspect of the economic problem, even when excess might be a central empirical one.<sup>5</sup>

Outside the mainstream of economics, there did arise a line of scholarship that treated excess of goods simply as a distribution problem, continuing the socialist argument that scarcity was artificially maintained, but taking a more optimistic view about the possibilities of ending that artificial maintenance. Excess of goods meant a lack of livelihood only if the excess could not be accessed without wages. This line of upbeat mainstream economics began with Simon Patten, who published *The Theory of Prosperity* in 1902. John R. Commons followed Patten's lead in *The Legal Foundations of Capitalism and Institutional Economics*, and by 1930 Keynes ([1930] 1963) was asking what humans would do with themselves in a few years, when productivity would mean that they would need to work only two or three hours per day. (On this line of economics, see Fox 1967.)

Keynes meant to be optimistic, but later writers turned his message negative. In 1958 John Kenneth Galbraith warned of the dangers of *The Affluent Society* in terms reminiscent of Malthus and Deuteronomy. And despite overwhelming evidence of economic growth, the mainstream managed to retain its focus on scarcity. Even overwhelming excess of goods could be turned into scarcity for purposes of analysis. The brilliant Gary Becker trumped Keynes by incorporating time itself as a scarce resource in utility-maximizing behavior; excess of leisure goods thereby disappeared behind the scarcity of time in which to enjoy them (Becker 1965). (I will turn to this argument in the next section.)

As the conjuncture turned, however, so also did the role of excess, at least in some parts of economics. In extreme supply-side thinking, Mandevillian excess would arise at the top of the income distribution and trickle down, creating a well-regulated Smithian plenty for the middle classes. (The poor could either pull themselves up by their Malthusian bootstraps or simply struggle in Ricardian squalor; there was nothing in supply-side thinking that had not already appeared in the economic tradition.) Thus, the concept of social-level excess disappeared behind a neo-Mandevillian economy of individual-level excess. Interestingly, one of the most criticized aspects of supply-side thinking was precisely its disattention to scarcity: the notion that America could "grow itself out of recession" seemed ridiculous to the mainstream.<sup>6</sup>

In summary, excess has seldom been a focal topic for formal economic thinking for the past two centuries. Mainstream economic theorists quickly translate most problems of excess into those problems of scarcity for which their intellectual machinery has come to be so well designed. Indeed, the commitment of economic thought to the concept of scarcity was made definitionally absolute in what is arguably the foundational statement of modern economics: Carl Menger's *Principles of Economics*. Menger defines economics as the study of only those behaviors that involve "economizing," which is itself required only for "economic goods," which Menger in turn defines as those goods for which "requirements are larger than the available quantity" (Menger [1871] 1976:94). To be sure, Menger conceived of goods in excess; his conceptualizations of value and utility recognize the possibility

clearly. But he was simply uninterested in such excess goods (“non-economic goods,” in his terms) and placed them outside economics *ex hypothesi*.

The study of excess in economics provides a pattern to some extent repeated in other social sciences: occasional interest in excess among the unorthodox, but a main focus on scarcity. American sociology, to be sure, began with a fairly strong interest in abundance and excess. Simon Patten’s main interlocutors included sociologists like Albion Small, Franklin Giddings, and E. A. Ross. John Commons was well known in sociology, and the discipline continued the optimistic anti-capitalist themes of excess economics well after they had been extirpated in economics itself (for that extirpation, see Furner 1975).

But continental sociology looked quite different. Durkheim famously took excess as deeply problematic. In *Suicide*, he speaks of “the disease of the infinite” ([1897]1951:287).<sup>7</sup> He argues that human desire is inherently insatiable and hence inherently dangerous unless limited by social norms:

Irrespective of any external regulatory force, our capacity for feeling is in itself an insatiable and bottomless abyss. But if nothing external can restrain this capacity it can only be a source of torment to itself. (Durkheim [1897]1951:247)

Poverty, he tells us, “protects against suicide because it is a restraint in itself” (p. 254). It is the rich who are most in danger:

At least the horizon of the lower classes is limited by those above them. Those who have only empty space above them are almost inevitably lost in it, if no force restrains them. (Durkheim [1897]1951:257)

Excess is thus both excess of desires—an emotional excess—and excess of things. The unstable relationship that produces suicide arises in the positive feedback between the two: the more you have, the more you desire. This argument had been familiar since the Old Testament prophets, whom Durkheim—the son of a rabbi—no doubt knew by heart. But at the same time, Durkheim was also following a long tradition of secular psychologies; the insatiability of human emotions had been a staple of Western psychological theory since at least the seventeenth century. Indeed, in his id concept, Freud would make it the foundation stone of modern theories of the self. Thus, excess in post-Durkheimian sociology tended to take on the problematic, dangerous quality of Old Testament excess.

In political theory, many of the issues were the same. The incurable excess of and inevitable conflict between human desires has been a mainstay of Western political thinking since Hobbes. In the Federalists and to some extent in their follower Tocqueville a new obsession emerged—worry about the excessive and dangerous emotions of the common voters. Here too excess was problematic, and here, especially, excess concerned not only the excess of bodies but also the excessive differences of political ideologies and policies. The plurality and the conflictual excess of human desires were at the foundation of modern republican and democratic thinking.

We see then that while the modern economists knew well about the empirical facts of excess, they developed a strong preference for theories attending to scarcity. The other major traditions of social thinking have more often been concerned with excess as a theoretical question, but they have mainly seen it as dangerous to individual character or morality. Their positions have rested less on a specific argument about how excess presents a challenge to moral activity itself than on a (moral) disapproval of a certain kind of character—one that lacks moral controls. In sum, the social science tradition has seldom tried to theorize society from the point of view of excess. It has rarely begun from the premise that the general

problem of social life—whether of knowing or feeling or acting—is having too much rather than too little.

Suppose then that we try to formalize that approach. Suppose we insist on thinking about society principally in terms of problematic excess, as is suggested occasionally in the line of socialist and progressive economics and by many of the practical problems we face today. This would mean a thoroughgoing reconstruction of longstanding habits of thought that we have inherited from the past. For example, we would need to see poverty as a case of too much of something rather than too little, and conversely to start seeing privilege as a case of being able to minimize some problematic form of excess rather than of being able to maximize something else, whose excess is definitionally regarded as unproblematic.

Outside the social sciences, there has occasionally been serious reflection about excess (in e.g., Nietzsche, Wagner, and Foucault). But most of these writers have been apostles rather than social analysts, morally committed to excess in the same way that the Federalists, Freud, and Durkheim were morally committed against excess. Perhaps the only general theory of excess—itself not very well specified—has come from Georges Bataille (1989). Bataille was more concerned to reinterpret cases than to provide a rigorous theory and he too was ultimately an apostle rather than a theorist. But his argument is nonetheless interesting.

Bataille begins from an almost cosmic assumption of excess: more solar energy comes into the world than is necessary simply to maintain life in that world. This leaves an inevitable excess, which can be used only for growth. (Growth for Bataille includes extension, in the sense of extending life processes to new spaces or zones, as well as simple multiplication of current life forms in size or endurance.) If for some reason growth is impossible, then the excess of energy—and of the things produced with it—must simply be dissipated. Bataille's argument can be scaled down to the group or individual level, although it is originally framed quite generally. At these lower—and more real—social levels, dissipation of excess in effect means destruction and waste. The real aim of war is thus to waste excess resources. The real aim of love and sexual activity is to squander energy, resources, and time. Indeed, the real aim of all animal life—the eating of plants—is simply necessary waste and luxury: the world would otherwise be overfilled with decaying plants. Bataille's examples range from Aztec human sacrifice to Islamic expansion to the Marshall Plan, all of which he treats simply as variants of potlatch (which is also analyzed). It is no surprise that Mauss's famous essay on the gift was Bataille's starting point (Bataille 1989:193).

Aspects of this argument are surprisingly compelling. Bataille's reinterpretations of familiar cases are always interesting, and he is right to recognize that the particularism inherent in marginalist economics led to assumptions about individuals that inevitably could not deal effectively with general, system-level constraints. But he does not address the question of precisely why waste is necessary, a question that might have been resolved by pursuing more closely his analogy with the laws of thermodynamics. More important, he doesn't realize that "growth" and "extension" can take forms that undercut the need for waste (e.g., the infinite extension of consumption needs and the fractal subdivision of the spaces of desire). Thus, in the end, Bataille's general theoretical argument leaves more questions than it answers, thereby directing us to theorize the precise means by which excess creates problems. But at least Bataille sets the example of taking excess seriously as a subject for social theory.<sup>8</sup>

## THE IDENTITY ARGUMENT

Before we can develop that theory, however, there is an important preliminary step. That is the rejection of the argument—clever, attractive, but in the last analysis unhelpful or even wrong—that excess of one thing is simply scarcity of another. Thus, as previously noted,

Becker (1965) has argued that excess of possible consumer goods is simply lack of time in which to enjoy them all. I shall call this the identity argument. As I have noted, the identity argument has provided economists with their formal justification for ignoring excess as a separate question from that of scarcity. It is therefore important to consider it at length. Only once it is set aside can we begin to set forth the mechanisms by which excess actually creates problems.

The notion that excess of one thing is scarcity of another arises in a simple intuition. Suppose we have a set with two kinds of elements and consequently two exclusive subsets, each of which has an internally consistent type (e.g., right- and left-handed people). If these two subsets are of vastly different cardinality, it is simply a matter of convention whether we speak of the scarcity of the one type of element in the overarching set or the excess of the other; “most people are right-handed” is the same statement as “left-handed people are uncommon.” But while this convention is obvious, it does not cover most situations. For example, suppose by contrast that we have a set with many kinds of elements, all but one of whose exclusive kind subsets have equal cardinality. And suppose that that one has much smaller cardinality than the others. (For example, suppose nine exclusive subsets each of which contains 11 percent of the larger set, plus one exclusive subset containing 1 percent.) We might in this case still speak of the scarcity of that one element in the overarching set. But we would not speak of excess among the others. Indeed, if there were enough types such that even the largest exclusive subset contained a maximum of 7 percent of the overarching set (say 14 subsets of 7 percent each and one of 2 percent), we would speak of the rarity of *any* particular type and the “extreme rarity” of the one “truly unusual” type.

We can think about scarcity, that is, without having a conscious concept of excess opposed to it. Our concept of the alternative to scarcity is thus a residual one, and we adjust it to the situation. Only if there are very few types (and particularly in the case of only two types) do we really see excess of a particular thing as immediately equivalent to scarcity of another.

It should be noted that we have similar concepts of excess that in the same way lack an “opposite” that is scarcity. These are perhaps less intuitive. For example, there are infinitely many rational numbers, but they are many fewer than the irrational numbers because the former are countable while the latter are not (see note 2). So we can speak of countable and uncountable infinities, and of the rationals as dense (there is a rational number between any two rational numbers), but of the reals as complete (they contain the limit of any possible sequence of rationals, even if that limit is not rational). But despite this difference, we would certainly not think the rational numbers are scarce. After all, they are infinitely many. Thus, just as in the case of scarcity we can imagine levels of scarcity without envisioning excesses as opposites to them, we can also think of levels of excess without inevitably thinking about any particular kind of scarcity as their opposite.

In general, then, there is no reason to think that scarcity and excess are symmetrically contrary concepts. But the Becker version of the identity argument does not actually work by simply exchanging excess of goods for scarcity of time in which to enjoy them. Rather, time is a factor of production; households produce utility by combining time and income. They do this in two ways, for not only must time be directly used up to produce utility (in the process of consuming leisure), it must also be spent working in order to acquire the income with which to purchase the consumption goods that, when combined with (leisure) time, will produce consumed utility. There is thus not only a direct constraint (one has to “spend” time to enjoy leisure) but also an indirect one (time spent on leisure is time spent not earning income, and therefore not producing the wherewithal to buy the goods and services whose enjoyment *is* leisure). Long before the average household confronts the pure time

constraint on leisure, its leisure is already limited by want of income to purchase the goods and services necessary to leisure.

By this argument, the only people for whom excess of consumption possibilities is simply equivalent to scarcity of time in which to enjoy them are those without any income constraint. More specifically, such people are those whose income is unaffected by whether or not they work. They include the unemployable, those supported purely by transfer payments, and those with inherited wealth. For those people in particular, time is involved only in the direct production of (leisure) utility, and Becker's argument does reduce to a simple equivalence between abundance of potentially consumable goods/services and scarcity of time in which to enjoy them.

In this limited case, therefore, lack of time can serve as a budget constraint—a criterion of scarcity. But there are some problems with treating time as a budget constraint. Income must purchase one thing; buying one good forbids purchase of another with the same income. However, it is not clear that time behaves this way. We can certainly enjoy two pleasures at once. We can read a book while listening to music, or sitting with a loved one, and so on. Although multitasking is no doubt overrated, one cannot deny that time can be multiply enjoyed in a way that purchased goods and services cannot. There is even a case to be made that multiple simultaneous enjoyment of utilities might enhance their individual value—watching a sports event with a friend with whom one can discuss it, for example.

This multiplicity of time's uses suggests a further problem. The classical choice situation in microeconomics involves two distinguishable goods, between which we choose on the basis of two things: first, convex isoquants that map utility-equivalent mixes of the two goods and second, a budget constraint whose slope is determined by relative price. But in situations of excess we are generally making choices among not two but many alternatives. The researcher in a medium-size research library must decide which of a million books to read. Indeed, most such researchers must choose not one individual book but some combination of books, of which there are not one million but, roughly speaking, one million to the  $n$ th power, where  $n$  is the number of books chosen.

It is obviously silly to address this problem with the classical choice model. Even if we must choose only two books, the number of possibilities is half a trillion in a one million volume library. The classical choice model might approach the book choice situation by considering the choice of one book against a million possible alternatives, but the assumptions necessary to produce the properly convex isoquants would be heroic. Herbert Simon's concept of bounded rationality was long ago developed to deal with this situation, of course, but it did so by assuming that the chooser decided not to optimize but to employ heuristics that would produce some *threshold* level of utility. That's a more viable strategy than specific choice in so huge a space of alternatives: one simply picks books off the shelf until a book turns up that is minimally useful.

But of course that is not what researchers do. They have complicated research algorithms telling them which books to ignore, which indexes to use (and to ignore), and so on. Rather than classical choosers, they are probabilists and indeed enthusiastic Bayesians, relying very heavily on the choices of prior scholars. More generally, most modern algorithms for optimization in combinatorically generated spaces pursue Monte Carlo strategies. Typically, these strategies consider the value of some point in the combinatoric space in terms of an objective function. They then perturb the chosen combination following certain rules (and possibly integrating Bayesian priors) and see whether the objective function improves or not. If it improves, they accept the perturbation and try another. If it does not, then they accept the perturbation, but with a probability that declines as the iterations continue. (This is the Metropolis-Hastings algorithm for simulated annealing.)

Such algorithms for excessive spaces differ radically from the classical microeconomic model of choice between alternatives. In the first place, they are iterative, whereas the classical model produces an analytic solution, at least in principle. In the second place, they make few assumptions about the surface of the objective function in N-space, it being assumed that the surface looks more like the topography of Switzerland than like a smooth, everywhere-convex surface.

But most important, they do not assume a unique and fixed measurability of the contribution of any one item to the objective function, but only the measurability of the value of a *combination* of items as a whole. They thus allow for the value of an individual item to vary depending on what else is present in the combination. The value of a particular book in a bibliography, for example, is obviously a function of what is already in the bibliography. This very broad assumption about measurability allows anything from absolutely distinguishable goods to close substitutes, indeed allowing substitutability itself to vary. In what follows I shall refer to this property as “respecting value contextuality.” It will play an important part later in the article. Here, the important point is that while most modern optimization methods respect value contextuality, it is not admissible in the classical choice model.

Note, however, that even modern optimization algorithms do assume the existence of some sort of objective function, which is in effect a measure, a *numéraire*. Although that *numéraire* respects value contextuality, it is still subject to a wide variety of other problems. The iterative strategy does not escape completely from a notion of “measuring” quality but simply employs a far more general and realistic type of measure than does the choice model. Thus, to return to the scholar/library case, for example, most scholars employ Simonian bounded rationality with respect to this *numéraire*; they search for a threshold level of excellence in sources, perhaps continuing beyond that to some level determined by personal preference. But they do not—and cannot—iterate to the extent that optimization algorithms do.

But even if we turn from computer algorithms to simple human procedures for optimization under conditions of excess, we find that they do not set excess of one thing equal to scarcity of another. Thus, Gigerenzer’s celebrated “take the best” algorithm implements choice by creating a hierarchy of properties for any two items (Gigerenzer 2000:171–97). One then proceeds down the hierarchy until one finds a property that distinguishes them. For example, we usually assume that if we have heard of only one of two cities, the one we have heard of is larger, but if we have heard of both, then the one that is a political capital is larger; if they’re both political capitals, then we will believe that the one that is the capital of a larger state is larger, and so on. In practice, this rough-and-ready heuristic outperforms many formal models. But scarcity plays no role in it. Quite the contrary, the algorithm proceeds *from* the well known *to* the sparse and stops at the first sign of differential result.

In summary, treating excess of one thing as scarcity of another seems dubious. Even within the classical choice framework, while one good may have the distinguishable and linear qualities necessary for the scarcity reasoning to work, the other may not have them, as we see in the case of Becker’s switching of excess of goods for scarcity of time. More broadly, the excess situation typically involves choice of combinations of goods or utilities, often under conditions where information about them is incomplete and where prior knowledge about the value of a particular utility may be invalidated by other utilities included in the ensemble (that is, by value contextuality). Finally, it seems that none of the major approaches—combinatoric or heuristic—to the problem of choice in spaces of excess employs any kind of flip of one kind of excess for another kind of scarcity. All of them take iterative approaches, typically taking extensive advantage of prior information, however discontinuous it may be.

In short, there seems to be no real case for the identity argument. Excess is something fundamentally different from scarcity. It is only in the simplest circumstances that we are justified in simply recasting excess of one thing as scarcity of another.

## EXCESS AS PROBLEM

Having dealt with the identity argument, we can now turn to the problem of how and why excess is problematic. As we saw in rehearsing the history of excess among political economists, excess can take place at two levels: individual and social. Since mechanisms of excess may differ at the two levels, it will behoove us to retain that separation here. It is also important that excess seems to be of two kinds. One of them is excess of one thing. I shall call this *surfeit*. The other is excess that comes through the “manyness” of things; not through “too much” but through “too many.” I shall call this *welter*.

This twofold distinction gives us four kinds of excess to consider: individual surfeit, individual welter, social surfeit, and social welter. Examples of individual surfeit might be having too much money, too much knowledge, or too much inspiration. But individual surfeit might also be emotional (as in depression or mania) or conative. (I use the philosophers’ word *conative* to denote “having to do with purposive action.” Examples of conative surfeit might be excessive ambition or obsession-compulsion.) Examples of individual welter are also familiar: too many possible friends, too many passions, too many possible topics for research, too many jobs to do well, too many moral obligations, and so on. Like individual surfeit, individual welter can range from the cognitive to the emotional and the conative.

So also at the social level. Modern theorists of knowledge have spoken much of the surfeit of things to know and the consequent specialization. Similarly, they write of the welter of socially constructed ways to know the world: ideologies, sciences, pseudo-sciences, popular impressions, and so on. Correlatively, social theorists from LeBon forward have seen a surfeit of dangerous emotions in crowds, as well as a welter of dangerously conflicting emotions between different crowds. Still other writers have seen a paralyzing welter of alternatives for social *action* (e.g., Tocqueville on the near impossibility of concerted action in democracies), as well as conflict between these endlessly many alternatives, as we see in the complex party politics of those European democracies that follow proportional representation. Thus we see both surfeit and welter at the social level, just as at the individual one. However, while these examples show us that excess is a problem at both individual and social levels, and that it permeates not only the cognitive but also the conative and emotional realms, they do not show how it is that excess in fact creates problems for humans.

Showing how excess affects individuals and groups is particularly important because we are so familiar with how scarcity has its effects. The mechanism of scarcity is very simple. We assume humans or groups to be entities that can feel, act, and symbolize. Following the economists, we usually think of those processes as modes of production: each of them requires certain inputs to succeed, and scarcity means that some input is present in insufficient quantity. Therefore, production cannot succeed. That is, the mechanism of scarcity works through the first of Aristotle’s four causes: material cause. Production fails for want of material. But in the case of excess, want of material should not produce problems; for any given resource, excess necessarily implies sufficiency. So production cannot fail for lack of something. Even with multiple resources, if all are sufficient and one or more is in excess, then that excess should not be problematic.

Excess must therefore be problematic for some other reason. As the reference to Aristotle suggests, the most likely reasons are structural (no clear plan for production) or final (no clear purpose for production). Thus, excess may be problematic because sufficient inputs

must not only be present, but must also be specifically selected or assembled to be effective in production. To be sure, we could choose inputs at random. But there could be constraints on which combinations of inputs are jointly sufficient. It could be that for sufficient resources A, B, and C, each of which has four different portions, only the partial combinations of {A1, B2, C1} and {A2, B1, C4} will work. That is, we might have to coordinate particular subsets of the sufficient inputs. In that case, random selection will not necessarily succeed.

Thus stated, the excess problem sounds like a coordination problem. And indeed there are long-familiar models for solving coordination problems, whether within the self or beyond it: markets, leviathans, hierarchies, and so on. This chain of association suggests the surprising view that leviathans, hierarchies, and so on might actually originate in problems of excess rather than in problems of scarcity, a suggestion to which we shall return in the next section. But for the moment, what matters is that markets, leviathans, hierarchies, and so on actually function as coordination devices only if the things to be coordinated are subject to some type of formal tradeoff, a structuring of production.

The case of markets is clearest. Markets require prices, which cannot emerge without scarcity (which helps produce the necessary commensuration) and the absence of value contextuality. In the context of excess, there is no scarcity, hence there can be no prices, no budget constraints, and no basis for choice. That is, the theory of markets arises because of a coordination problem that is indeed about excess in some sense (too many possible choices for an individual to decide what he wants), but then it resolves that problem by imposing a form of scarcity. (That is, by imposing relative evaluation of all items on a common *numéraire* [pricing] and presuming a budget constraint with respect to that *numéraire*.) A more general approach to excess problems cannot accept such assumptions. There may be value contextuality or some other failure of commensurability, and by assumption there is no budget constraint. Put another way, if markets in fact derive from an attempt to resolve excess problems, they do so by imposing a form of scarcity. But what interests us here is not whether that scarcity is itself real or imposed, but rather why, in the first instance, excess presents problems that must be resolved: not how the coordination problem is solved in the case of excess, but why it is problematic in the first place.

### *Individual Level*

I begin with individual surfeit. Emotionally, individual surfeit creates problems through overload and habituation. An excess of one pleasure at one time may overwhelm the self, while an excess of one pleasure over time reduces the ability of that pleasure to satisfy. Cognitively, surfeit creates problems chiefly through overload. A place, a person, or a discipline can be too big to know. Yet surfeit of knowledge can also create problems by isolating an individual (from others who know different things) and by strongly reducing his or her ability to know other things. (The latter might seem to assume scarcity [of means to know] but could also follow from cognitive habits developed to handle the original overload.) Conatively, surfeit creates problems through overload (some tasks can be too big or too complicated) and through habituation (routines can degenerate into meaningless habits).

To be sure, one could argue that surfeit is self-regulating because of negative feedback. Thus, in the case of emotions and tastes, excessive things become less fulfilling, so they are less sought, and hence seem less excessive in experience, and so eventually regain their ability to fulfill. But in many examples, this argument seems not to hold: the favorite ice cream permanently loses its savor, the long-practiced politics becomes meaningless, and so on. Habituation does not seem to be necessarily self-regulating.

Thus whether we look at emotion, cognition, or action, overload and habituation seem to be the two principal mechanisms through which surfeit creates problems at the individual level. Overload involves what we might call “technological” constraints on the production of emotion, action, and knowledge; one way or another overload leads to paralysis or failure of production. (We could think of this as a failure of final cause [purpose] or effective cause [actor].) Habituation works slightly differently, implying that the value of inputs to emotions, action, and knowledge changes with its amount, and does so in such a way as not to permit a stable negative feedback system with a simple equilibrium.

Similar avenues produce the effects of welter at the individual level. Here the technological constraint arises through numbers: too many things to know, too many emotions to experience, too many possible actions. In all three cases, the self is paralyzed; there is an overload, but an overload of alternatives. This overload creates not only a direct problem of choice, but more important, induces considerable value contextuality. The sheer number of available alternatives produces a combinatoric redefinition of the value of each, which depends on the context of others chosen. Value instability arises through this momentary value contextuality across combinatoric market baskets of choices. And that value instability produces a further technological constraint on emotion, action, and meaning.

Thus in the case of individual welter we find again two principal mechanisms. The first—overload—is shared with individual surfeit. But the second (value contextuality) contrasts with the second surfeit mechanism of habituation. Value contextuality across current possibilities is not the same as habituation over time to a single reward in excess. At the individual level, then, we have three basic mechanisms: overload/paralysis, habituation, and value contextuality.

### *Social Level*

The same mechanisms obtain to a certain extent at the social level. Social surfeit and welter work in the first instance through overload, habituation, and value contextuality, much as they do at the individual level. These effects are particularly obvious in those social entities that are “individuals” in the sense of being congeries of biological individuals concentric with one another: families, neighborhoods, communities, provinces, and nations. Thus, a long-familiar sociological tradition has discussed the effects of an overload of emotion in crowds: effects on politics, religion, and so on (Le Bon, Freud). John Dewey’s (1927) famous *The Public and Its Problems* is an extended meditation on the overloading of the public by new means of communication, which create both surfeit of information and welter of possible publics and possible policies. And there are theories on social habituation, too: for example, the long-familiar argument of Georg Simmel ([1903] 1971) and Robert Park (1925) that metropolitan life overwhelms city dwellers with a surfeit of stimulation, leading to superficiality and lack of commitment (Simmel and Park).

Such effects are visible not only in “social individuals,” however, but also in things like ethnic groups, voluntary associations, bureaucracies, and genders that we usually view as constituted of *aspects* of individuals rather than of whole individuals. So we can imagine habituation in political groups, which over time require more and more extreme politics to fan the faithful into action. Or we can imagine academic disciplines unable to deal with onslaughts of new information. Or we can imagine voluntary associations torn apart by excess of internal dissension. Finally, the problems of value contextuality are a byword to anyone who follows partisan politics, particularly in parliamentary systems, where the political worth of a particular policy is completely at the mercy of other policies proposed alongside it.

Thus we see overload, habituation, and value contextuality at the social level as at the individual one. But there remains the possibility that there are at the social level new mechanisms by which excess creates problems.

A first possible new social-level mechanism for excess might be that excess produces conflict between individuals. Even in the supposedly excessive state of nature (Sahlins [1972] speaks of the stone age as possessing the first superabundant economy) there can be conflict because of the attitude of universal possession created by an excessive world. But this new mechanism is more apparent than real. To be sure it involves excess of individual desire. But in a world of excess, the sheer superfluity of satisfactions should make that excessive desire easier to fulfill. What actually creates these conflicts is not the excess itself, but rather the mutually shared value schemes that lead actors to desire the same things. These in fact create scarcity, which in turn leads to conflict.

A familiar modern example of such an artificial scarcity is the marriage market. As any parent knows, when teenagers first pass puberty, they think that only a tiny fraction of the opposite sex could possibly be satisfactory as romantic or sexual partners. This is a traditional (and curiously reciprocal) situation of scarcity: too many of each side confronting too few of the other. Yet not too long afterward, the vast majority of both genders will be married to one of those people whom they previously regarded as unsatisfactory partners. That is, what appears to be a conflict over supposed scarcity is actually created by a social regime of desirability that has in turn created a scarcity problem. For the fact is that the average individual could probably have a marriage of average success with thousands or tens of thousands of potential partners. The scarcity is induced precisely because of that staggering excess of possibilities. It thereby produces a belief in romantic specialness and in the idea of individual attraction, notions that are central to maintaining marriages over time.

Following the implicit suggestion of this case, I shall argue in the next section that these rating schemes create scarcity in order to deal with the first of my excess mechanisms—that of overload with its consequent paralysis of action. Many social institutions that we commonly understand in scarcity terms can be more productively construed as strategies for dealing with excess. The scarcity they involve is deliberately created to guide behavior. And it will be interesting to ask when in particular humans choose to do this, when it is that they turn what is in fact excess into apparent scarcity, which then drives their social and economic conceptions of their life processes. But for the moment what matters is that this does seem to be a choice, rather than a truly separate mechanism by which excess becomes problematic.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, in most cases excess does not produce effects through conflict. Rather, conflict is induced (deliberately or not) by the strategies used to handle excess. However, while conflict thus is not an additional social mechanism for excess, there are two more realistic possibilities. Both of these follow from the nature of social entities. A brief note on that nature is thus useful.

As just noted, social entities include not only things like cities and families that are often analogized to individuals, but also things like ethnic groups, social movements, and bureaucracies that consist of parts or aspects of individuals, rather than of whole persons. Because such entities involve continuous weaving or unweaving of new people and new parts of people, they can change much more rapidly than do individuals, who are burdened with a mass of memories and anticipations holding them together over the long run. In this sense our constant names for social entities are a misnomer. We speak of “the civil rights movement” or “Irish Americans,” but these are not constant things in the ways that individuals are, but rather are perpetually changing in membership, ideology, and structure. The specifically social mechanisms of excess are those that interfere with this process of continuous

weaving and unweaving, thereby facilitating or destroying the coherence of the lineage over time. On this argument, for example, the civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century held together as long as it had specific, straightforward objectives. Once the crucial court cases had been decided and the main civil rights legislation passed, the movement faced a plethora of possible future objectives and dissolved into subgroups with different interests. The opening of the broad realm of possibilities helped actually unmake the group. We may call this the disruptive mechanism.

In continuously self-reproducing social groups (as opposed to social movements), excess problems often arise in a slightly different way. The group's stability presupposes replacement of aging members by younger ones. But the excess of things necessary to be passed on to the new generation often leads to a habituation that undercuts the ability to generate new commitment. This process is quite evident in academic disciplines. Academic disciplines deal with the excess of things to know by creating canons: there have after all been many more sociological theorists than just Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. But the simplicity of the canon—as taught to those who have no idea what an immense reduction in complexity it represents—inevitably leads to habituation and consequent loss of respect. This in turn leads to effloration of new, non-canonical argument, which is most often merely the excess of the past, recreated in the present. Thus, today's new theory is just rediscovered Gumplowicz or Mannheim or whomever. Only in truly progressive disciplines can this cycle be avoided, and these are few. As a result, most academic disciplines have no firmer definition of excellence than that something is “new,” which in fact means only that it hasn't been observed in the canon in living professional memory (Abbott 2014). In this case, excess produces meandering or cyclical patterns through its interaction with the problem of reproduction. I shall call this the mechanism of misinheritance.

In total, then, we have five different channels through which excess causes problems. Three are common to the individual and social levels: overload, habituation, and value contextuality. Two are specifically social: disruption and misinheritance. Of these five, overload leads to confusion/paralysis and thus makes cognition, action, and emotion fundamentally impossible. Habituation and value contextuality both also paralyze through the inherent instability of their implications for action. All of these happen not only in the cognitive, but also the emotional and conative realms, as I have noted. At the social level, we see these mechanisms also, but in addition we see the two mechanisms by which excess interacts with processes of lineage, either disrupting a group or unsettling its heritage through an overload of the processes of socialization.

## STRATEGIES FOR EXCESS

Given that excess creates problems via these various mechanisms, there must then be strategies for dealing with those problems. There are indeed a variety of such strategies, both at the individual and at the social levels. Broadly speaking, they fall into two types: reduction strategies and rescaling strategies. Reduction strategies are those strategies that cut down the amount of excess. There are two subtypes. A basic strategy simply ignores excess altogether. A more subtle and proactive strategy simplifies it and reduces it to tractable terms. I shall call these two versions of reduction the defensive and the reactive strategies, respectively.

By contrast with these reduction strategies, rescaling strategies work by changing the definition of desirability. They don't reduce excess, but redefine it out of existence. These too come in a simple and a subtle version, and as with reduction strategies, the simple version is the more extreme. It not only accepts existing excess but increases it, making excess and its enjoyment the core of life. This is the strategy urged by the apostles of excess earlier

mentioned: Nietzsche, Foucault, Bataille, and so on. The more subtle version is a more judicious one, comprising strategies that somehow make a virtue of the inescapable fact of excess. I shall call these the creative and the adaptive strategies.

I have then four kinds of strategies: the two reduction strategies of defense and reaction and the two rescaling strategies of creativity and adaptation. They make a scale from the most conservative to the most radical approaches to excess—from defense to reaction to adaptation to creativity—and I shall review them in that order. We shall find that they make a pretty complete inventory of human behavior, which is quite important for my argument, since I wish to argue that we could in principle replace social theories based on scarcity with social theories based on excess.

### *Defensive Strategies*

At the individual level, the easiest defensive strategy is simply to ignore excess. One can fall back on habits of mind and simply ignore novelty, difference, and the other makers of excess. In the sphere of action, such defensive modes of excess avoidance are standard. One can act habitually, simply choosing the same dish every time at the Chinese restaurant. One can choose randomly, as many people do when playing the lottery. One can imitate, choosing whatever is the popular thing in the environment or (what is logically equivalent) choosing the reverse of the popular thing in the environment. Often there are ideological tools to cover up these surrenders of will, as the ideology of romantic love covers up the quite random association of spouses in modern societies (a case mentioned earlier) or as elaborate fashion rules cover up for imitation.

At the social level, we see many of the same defensive mechanisms. The chief cognitive tools for social excess reduction are stereotypes and, more broadly, the traditions that constitute the “cognitive habits” of groups. Such stereotypes and traditions enable us to save the extraordinary time it would take actually to know others for themselves. On this argument stereotypes are therefore not so much moral delicts as they are cognitive necessities, and getting rid of them is no more possible than getting rid of humans’ dependence on air and food. It is rather the deleterious social consequences of certain kinds of stereotypes that must be the object of policy, because they are in fact the only possible object of such policies.

Randomness also is used to handle excess at the social level, although we don’t tend to see it. For example, many social structures have positions that will function reasonably effectively no matter who is placed in them. That this or that particular person becomes a superstar in this or that academic or artistic field is relatively accidental. The narrowing of reputational rankings into steep hierarchies results from centralization of communications, not necessarily from better knowledge of the “actual” rankings of people, as Sherwin Rosen (1981) argued long ago. But if we impose artificially steep rankings on talent distributions that are in fact relatively flat, randomness inevitably increases. Luckily, it doesn’t really matter who is the top soprano, the top swimmer, or the top professor of sociology. Once created, social entities can survive despite relatively random and average inputs, something quite evident in the history of monarchy and aristocracy throughout the world. Random filling of elite positions probably makes very little difference to many social structures.<sup>10</sup>

As at the individual level, habit is again a dominant strategy for excess in the realm of social action. At the social level, we call habit “tradition.” We solve the problem of what among many things to do simply by doing what we have always done. There is a strong case to be made that academic disciplines arise through just such a mechanism of tradition. Perhaps disciplines constitute desert islands of common concepts and methods in a vast sea of intellectual differences; the potential novelty of the world is after all far greater than we

think. On this model, the disciplines grow by slow accretion, as wanderers in the huge ocean of possible knowledge wash up on the shore. They then tend to stick with tradition because no other island is visible. Canons may therefore be not so much fortresses of power as they are lonely atolls with at least the virtue of being above water.

Fashion is of course another general strategy for excess, in which the defensive strategy of imitation plays a central role. For the individual, deciding one's clothes on a purely aesthetic basis is a burdensome task (Hsiung 2010). It is much easier to decide which clothes to wear because the system tells you the proper answer (in part by not even selling the things you might otherwise consider). At the social level, of course, fashion permits the endless replacement of perfectly useful clothing (or operating systems—I am writing this article in Wordstar 3.24 on a DOS computer) and hence the continued employment of millions of garment (or software) workers who might otherwise have the Keynesian problem of figuring out how to fill their leisure with things to do. Fashion also facilitates other strategies for problems of excess, by providing useful material for ranking systems, which are, as I shall shortly argue, perhaps the most important of the reactive strategies for dealing with excess. As this analysis suggests, the phenomenon we call fashion is actually a compound mechanism combining several excess strategies: to defensive imitation at the individual level are added the reactive strategy of hierarchy and the adaptive strategy of serialism, the latter two of which I shall cover shortly. Note that fashion includes such intellectual mechanisms as the fractal mechanisms discussed in *Chaos of Disciplines* (Abbott 2001), whereby fractal intellectual fashions produce constant novelty (hence exploring excess creatively) and constant stability (hence preventing it from overwhelming us.)

But there are two great defensive mechanisms for handling glut at the social level that are even more familiar to us than these. Markets and democracy are in fact means for handling excess. Logically, the two employ the same structure—truck and barter, in Adam Smith's famous phrase. To markets, the barterers bring differential amounts of resources according to their labor, productivity, capital, inheritance, and so on. To democratic polities, by contrast, the barterers bring, at least in theory, one voting unit of opinion or desire per person. In both cases, they then exchange what they bring. Both of these truck and barter strategies work the same way: they facilitate exchange under certain rules (in particular an assumption of measure—the *numéraire* of cash or votes) in order to solve the problem that, as Hobbes put it so bluntly, "Naturally, every man has right to every thing," (*Leviathan* Book I, Chapter 14). In Hobbes's world, the excess of choosers overwhelms the excess of the chosen and makes it almost certain that excess will not be so great as to avoid all conflict. Markets and democracy solve this conflict (itself a question of excess of choosers) by enabling exchange under rules of commensuration.

Now as we have seen earlier, markets and democracy both operate by translating excess of one thing—economic and political aims and desires—into scarcity of another (a *numéraire* consisting of money or votes, distributed in various ways). In this sense, they follow the logic of the identity argument. But by recognizing that in fact markets and democracy are in the first instance mechanisms of dealing with excess, we can see that they are not in some sense necessary things and that there are alternative ways of handling the same excess. One could for example reduce the excess of choosers by training people to different desires, for example. About \$700 per person per year is spent on advertisement in the United States, most of it training people to want the same things, which in turn produces the excess demand for a limited number of objects that—as Menger tells us—markets were invented to solve. In this case, that is, the use of rankings to solve the paralysis problem overshoots the mark. We can therefore simply transform Rosen's insight so as to see that such rankings create not superstar income, but superstar demand. If we believed that the purpose of advertising was

to spread demand out through a relatively flat and quite superabundant space of alternatives in order to reduce the need for markets and the production of superstar demand, our advertisers would emphasize the importance of difference, variety, and multiplicity of alternatives.

It is in this sense that markets and democracies are defensive strategies. They simply deny the excess of things to be consumed, making it appear that modern consumers are limited by Malthusian scarcity when of course average modern American consumers enjoy levels of welfare and choice—in terms of health, well-being, transportation, knowledge, and services—beyond the dreams of even the richest consumers of a century ago. The apparent scarcity is produced by Veblenian conspicuous consumption and by a sales machinery (sales occupies 11 percent of the U.S. labor force) designed to make people feel that they are lacking things. After all, one way to solve Hobbes's problem is simply to reduce desire, as Sahlins (1972:37) notes when he says "The world's most primitive people have few possessions, but they are not poor," and as mystic ascetic religions have argued for millennia. Alternatively, one could assign goods and policies at random, or by tradition, or using any of the other individual defensive mechanisms.

All these strategies in effect avoid dealing with excess altogether. They use randomness or habit to ignore the problem or they use exchange and manipulation to transform it into a problem of scarcity. Note that such methods are completely incapable of dealing with, say, the excess of ways to know the world or its more practical avatar, the problem of which books to read in the library. We could create a market in library books as if they were scarce. Each faculty member and student could get five library chits a week and faculty could purchase their students' chits by teaching them. But it is obvious that such a market would not produce knowledge worth much. For such burning problems, we need a whole different range of strategies, much more drastic and much more proactive. These are the strategies I have called reactive.

### *Reactive Strategies*

Like defensive strategies, reactive strategies for excess can be viewed at both the individual and the group levels. At the individual level we have cognitive strategies like abstraction, which reduces welter by turning multiplicities of diverse things into specific emanations of simpler but more abstract things. At its most drastic, abstraction can work by simply ignoring differences, by making an excessive collection of highly differentiated things look like a repetitive collection of identical things, among which random choice can easily suffice. This is science's way of thinking about laboratory rats or volcanic eruptions or supernovae. By contrast, contemporary humans typically resent being treated as mere representatives of this or that type, as "sex objects," "tokens," "men in the grey flannel suit," or "homo economicus." They want to be (laboriously) understood as individuals. Abstraction does not work as well for human interaction.<sup>11</sup>

However, the dominant reactive strategy—whether for cognitive, active, or even affective excess—is hierarchizing and concentrating one's attention at the top end of the hierarchy. Restaurant reviews, college ratings in *US News and World Report*, university priority documents, Great Books lists: all these follow a simple of logic of "take the best, forget the rest." As I noted earlier, Gerd Gigerenzer (2000) has argued that this is one of the fundamental modes of human cognition. But it is true of emotion to some extent as well: overwhelmed with a welter of conflicting emotional loads, one is likely to select a dominant few to experience. Hierarchy can work in reverse as well: a winnowing strategy can prune excess from the bottom, reducing a complex array of possibilities to a narrower group of serious

alternatives. And the universal call to “set priorities” is nothing if not a command to ignore most things and concentrate on a few.

But there are other reactive excess reduction strategies for individuals’ feelings. The various psychotherapies and drug regimens for stress and panic are obvious examples, as is self-medication with alcohol. All of these aim to blunt feelings of excess and overload. At the same time, however, they begin to move into strategies for solving excess problems by modifying desirability (that is, rescaling). The extreme case here is hermit-like withdrawal from the world and from its concerns. One removes oneself from excess simply by lowering one’s level of desire to a point where a tiny and purely random amount of food, or happiness, or moral activity will suffice.

At the social level, we have many of the same reactive strategies, although they are further structured. Consider first reactive strategies for cognitive excess. Here we do not see the defensive strategies of stereotype and tradition, but rather division of labor and specialization. Both of these tame the vast array of possible things to know and skills to exercise. Division of labor is obvious in academia, for example, with its proliferation of specialists of many kinds. The inevitably excessive conflicts between these specialized disciplines and groups are themselves tamed by various systematically structured forms of reciprocal ignorance, which become noticeable only when they are violated, as in the humanists’ invasion of the social sciences over the past two decades. As for the myriad amateur knowledges, the subsumption of such immediate everyday knowledge by expert, abstract knowledge also reduces the welter of things to be known. For example, there have been thousands of careful histories and surveys of American communities. All these are subsumed into abstractions by one or two academic articles on “typical patterns of urban development,” in which the detailed prior work on community histories becomes “mere randomness,” “variation around the mean,” or other kinds of unimportant things. The huge welter of amateur knowledge is thereby turned into mere experience, unimportant given the abstraction of academia.

Hierarchy also permits other kinds of reductions. The failure of direct democracy in a group of any size is remedied by the fractal process of creating representative republican institutions, reproducing the mapping of individuals and their differences at a smaller, less excessive, more manageable level. (This is the theory of pluralism argued by Robert Dahl 1961). Self-similarity of this sort is used throughout complex social systems as a modular and scalable strategy for reducing vast arrays of structural relations to instantiations of a few simple patterns (see Abbott 2001:6). Immensely complicated social systems can thereby become easily navigable and manipulable. Specialization and self-similarity can thus be seen, with hierarchy, as the three fundamental reactive strategies for excess reduction at the social level.

Finally, there are a wide variety of strategies for dealing with excess social emotion. The most common of these are safety valves. The danger of excessive emotion is a long theme in social theory, from Le Bon onward. Clearly there are many social structures whose main purpose is the defusing or channeling of these emotional excesses: participatory and spectator sports, political rallies, and so on. Where excess male sexual energy has threatened social systems we find quite elaborate brothel systems and pleasure quarters to keep the boys satiated and calm. And those who have read *Eros and Civilization* will recall that Marcuse saw the sexual revolution as in some ways repressive because it stripped sublimated energy from social critique by simply indulging it. Another strategy for handling the excess of emotion in society is the forcing of emotion into private settings: churches, hospitals, homes, and so on. If excessive emotion threatens the social order, sequestering it proves an effective reactive strategy.

## *Adaptive Strategies*

Defensive and reactive strategies deal with excess problems by taming them. It is therefore not surprising that we find many of the social institutions ranged in these strategies. Markets, hierarchies, republics, and so on are all ways of taming excess either by reducing or avoiding it. By contrast, there are many other aspects of social life that do not involve the reduction of excess but quite the contrary, that involve adjusting to it, playing with it, even creating it where it did not exist. In order to continue our gradual move across this spectrum of strategies, I next turn to the more subtle form of positive excess strategy—adaptation.

As I noted earlier, adaptive strategies focus less on ignoring or reducing excess than on finding it more desirable and less disturbing. They rescale excess. Adaptation does this in a subtle and nuanced way. Again the most familiar and obvious examples are the individual ones. A common example is surfing the web or, to give the equivalent for an earlier generation, reading encyclopedias. To encounter a randomly ordered source and simply read through it is to wander arbitrarily through the enormous excess of knowledge, to choose randomness as a positive good. More sophisticated adaptive strategies take the form of seeing analogies, making translations, and yoking together areas of work that are often far apart. These are of course urged to the point of parody in the literature on interdisciplinarity. But they are nonetheless important strategies for adapting to excess. Translation is not an easy business, but the access it gives to new realms bespeaks the pleasures of excess.

In the realm of action, we see other strategies. Serialism is the most obvious conative strategy for adapting to excess. Over a life course, one moves through a sequence of jobs, friends, romantic partners, interests, hobbies. One moves at different rates in different areas, but few members of the early twenty-first-century societies remain in precisely one place for even 20 years on all these dimensions. It is true that we tend to tame this practice of serial adaptation to excess through narratives of odyssey or self-discovery or whatever. But narratives lie; we just keep on moving to the end. As a result, there is nothing as embarrassing as reading old pieces of autobiography, seeing photographs of oneself with forgotten friends, wearing dated clothes and hairstyles that one has come to find amusing.

And just as we are different persons over time, most of us are different persons in the many social settings in which we live: dutiful mothers in one place, assertive academics in another, thoughtful friends in a third, clever manipulators in a fourth, and perhaps ardent musical performers in a fifth. Indeed, the excess of selves can be disconcerting at times, although perhaps less to us than to those who, knowing us only in one or another of these roles, surprisingly encounter us in another. But multiple selves in multiple contexts and multiple selves over time allow us to enjoy an excess of life possibilities that was not possible in societies with more rigid manners and structures. It is to be sure true that these multiplicities themselves get organized into normative life course trajectories: thus, academics who were once hot-headed young radicals must inevitably become authoritative powerbrokers in middle age and generative seniors in old age and retirement. But at least they get the chance to be all three things.

At the social level also, we find many adaptive strategies for excess. Some of these are structures that impose serialism. Term limits, compulsory retirement, and other such mechanisms are a means of generating turnover in order to embrace the vast excess of possibilities. Another set of adaptive strategies are those that provide access to whole new realms of ideas, experiences, and people. Thus, cognitively, we see the emergence of complicated translation systems between the huge excess of different symbolic systems: pidgins, creoles, and dialect gradients arising between the already excessive languages of the world. The same kinds of things emerge in academic disciplines and interdisciplines, which have their own methodological creoles and theoretical pidgins. Yet by adapting to excess and difference, translation

brings more and more experiences into our immediate world; it increases excess. As these examples suggest, translation systems themselves tend to stabilize and turn themselves into new differences (more excess), which in turn require inter-translation. In this sense, to adapt to excess means committing to perpetual change, both across social differences in a moment and across different successor societies over time. We do have academic disciplines that explicitly aim at this kind of translation—anthropology and history. And although it is in some quarters customary to condemn anthropology and history as politicized servants of empire, it is clear that their underlying projects aim—in ideal terms—at understanding the amazing excess of human society when taken on its own terms.

There are other important forms of social structure that embody this adaptive approach to the excess of social life. Trusteeship, for example, is a conative social structure committed to balancing between past, present, and future. We also have things like tourism, multiculturalism, and international exchange. These strategies—so often derided as political claptrap—are in fact of long standing and tradition. In earlier periods of European history, not only elites but middle-class families exchanged children across wide social and geographic spaces, precisely with the aim of creating truly multilingual and cosmopolitan adults. The monolingualism of modern nation-states—the United States the most extreme example—is actually quite unusual in the history of human societies (Gal 2011). Multiculturalism may be a lifelong commitment and difficult practice rather than a facile teenage acquisition. But it is not any the less important as a way of addressing the excess of human societies.

### *Creative Strategies*

Finally, then, I come to creative strategies. The creative approach to excess is familiar enough, for it has been the subject of the great apostles of excess like Nietzsche, Foucault, and most particularly Bataille. But these writers have given the creative strategies for excess a bad name, having associated them with power, evil, and death. Interestingly, their theory of the individual is shared almost completely with the pessimistic lineage running from Deuteronomy through Hobbes to Malthus, Freud, and Durkheim: individuals have infinite desires that inevitably conflict. For the older lineage, however, this situation required the evolution of characterological controls, either internal (Freud) or external (Durkheim). By contrast, the apostles of excess celebrated lack of control and inevitably appeared as prophets of evil by comparison with the mainstream theory of control.

Yet one could think about creating and celebrating excess not so much as an evasion of control, but as an answer to the Keynesian question of what to do with our free time. The modern world is astoundingly productive. Perhaps the extraordinary evolution of the arts of civilization, and their spread from the aristocracies to the middle and even lower classes, is not so much testimony to evolution of new patterns of restraint and discipline with which to protect one's group interest, as Elias (2000) argued in *The Civilizing Process*. (For Elias, like all the rest, ultimately accepted the ideas of impulse and control that underlie the Deuteronomic lineage.) Perhaps that evolution reflects an attempt to fill leisure time with activity and creation, whether of conversation, thought, connoisseurship, or artistic performance. In the modern world, we have the luxury to eschew stereotypes; to know a spouse or friend in staggering detail, in ways impossible when families were mainly economic and reproductive units in desperate straits.

Bataille's theory seems clearly appropriate here. In a modern, hyperproductive world, every individual can live the complexities of Werther. Modern emotional subtlety may very well be a time-wasting strategy designed to fill the vast expanses of leisure that Keynes foresaw. In this sense, the Keynesian moment has already arrived. Every day, average

people enjoy on talk shows the detailed personal attention previously reserved for the highest of aristocrats, while Facebook allows every individual to curate a version of *People* magazine dedicated purely to himself or herself. What is this, if not a staggering waste of time, effort, and resources, which an earlier generation might have dedicated to eradicating poverty, creating a general unified theory, or worshipping the gods?

One could similarly argue that the academic epidemics of radical juxtaposition, deconstruction, and hybridizing, along with the valorization of previously unimportant differences, are all responses to the extraordinary effloration and power of scholarship in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After all, there had been 33 American dissertations on Jane Austen by 1968 and a whopping 363 on William Shakespeare (McNamee 1968, 1969). By 1980 there had been 90 articles (in JSTOR) on Austen and 1,808 on Shakespeare. Small wonder scholars began to write about race in *Mansfield Park* or colonialism in “The Tempest!”

In summary, the creative strategies for excess have undeservedly acquired their bad reputation. In fact, these are among the most familiar strategies in modern life, and in fact, we have already arrived at the Keynesian moment of needing desperately to fill the time no longer required for subsistence or even for middle-class production.<sup>12</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In closing I wish to turn briefly to recasting some classic problems of sociology in terms that make the problematic of excess central. Here are a few examples.

Consider the familiar problem of economists’ perfect competition. We all know that perfect knowledge of a system is impossible. Indeed, those forms of economics that attend to the costs of information recognize that quite well. But some people’s imperfect knowledge is better than others’. Indeed, an excess way of thinking about economic privilege is that the people at the center of, say, the stock market are people who are not swamped with bad information. Similarly, elite people who have been diagnosed with cancer are privileged precisely because they do not have to wander around the Internet, being overwhelmed with the useless, and often wrong, information to be found there. They may have physician friends and in any case they will know effective quality criteria for judging web pages (in this case, they know to look for things from the National Cancer Institute and will quickly find the NCI Guidelines for Medical Professionals, which are reliable and current). Privilege, that is, lies in not being swamped with disinformation—whether about stocks or about cancer.

Or again, an excess way of thinking about wealth is that it saves you the problem of having to think about a lot of things. You don’t have to worry about when cheap flights are available, when the clothing sales are, where you can go for vacation, which restaurants have which prices, when you can afford to retire. A whole set of burdensome information—prices, times, availabilities, future government policies, and so on—can simply be ignored. That is privilege indeed. Perhaps wealth is not so much about enjoying lots of utilities—goods and services—as it is about not having to spend time thinking about constraint or regretting experiences that you couldn’t afford.

What about competition between disciplines? An excess theory suggests that disciplines don’t actually compete at all. Rather, as I argued earlier, disciplines are lonely hearts clubs where people adrift in the huge sea of intellectual possibility are trying to find a few souls with similar preferences. New canons are lighthouses attracting the lonely survivors of prior intellectual wrecks and sinkings. To be sure, eventually a given canon may get powerful enough to dominate an island chain. But perhaps it is much more important to see the vastness of the ocean here than the politics of disciplinary defense and attack.

With respect to the theory of action, thinking in terms of excess provides a foundation for Eric Leifer's (1988) insight that skill means arranging your activity so that you never have to make a rational choice.<sup>13</sup> The problem with rational choice is that it is impossible given the excess of information and the infinite excess of possible futures. Skill lies in keeping open many possibilities and options, indeed in retaining an excess of possibilities. And Padgett and Ansell's (1993) "robust action" is precisely a definition of power in terms of the creative retention of excessive possibilities of action. To decide is to concede one's freedom, to lose possibility.

One can even rethink poverty in excess terms. Broughton's (2001) study of women in a welfare-to-work program shows clearly that one of the central problems of poverty is the large cognitive burden it creates. Just to get to the program's classes, women had to make complex arrangements to ensure care for their children, change doctors' appointments, hide their valuables from predacious boyfriends, and so on. To be sure, they didn't have to have middle-class knowledge—of mortgages, for example. But the things they did need to know were not things with long run future payoffs, like mortgages. On the contrary, the things they needed to know were things without long run payoff precisely because there would be intensive and continuous change in them—bus schedules, mothers' health problems, boyfriends' whereabouts. Indeed, one of the signs of impoverishment is precisely the move from long run knowledge with its continuous payoffs and lower cognitive load to short run, high cognitive load knowledge that will be worthless or wrong after a brief interval. To take an example higher in the social pyramid, scholars' status is being rapidly reduced because the continuous (and unnecessary) "improvement" in digital research tools forces them to learn new library tools all the time, just like the poor people who have to learn new bus routes, bureaucratic practices, and so on. The ability to lower your excess cognitive load by blocking needless change is a sign of privilege, in this case one that scholars have lost.

These examples show that once we have recast social theory onto the basis of problematic excess rather than problematic scarcity we find many new angles on old problems. A problematic of excess is not only a feasible foundation for social theory, but probably a very rich one as well. It is well worth exploring.

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## NOTES

1. The problem of suburban sprawl was first argued in Britain in the interwar period (e.g., Williams-Ellis 1928), then reached a crescendo of debate between writers like Whyte (1958), Gans (1967), and Venturi, Brown, and Izenour (1972). The 1960s and 1970s brought concern over the glut of human beings; serious works predicted population catastrophe by 2000 (e.g., National Academy of Sciences 1971). They were right about the population prediction but wrong about the catastrophe: GDP grew even more than population! (Demeny and McNicoll 2006). In the 1970s and 1980s, pollution of the environment became the focal glut, starting with Rachel Carson's (1962) best-selling discussion of DDT and broadening into a concern for emission-induced global warming. (Curiously, the chief author of the NAS population report—Roger Revelle—was also, in his earlier incarnation as an oceanographer, coauthor of the central modern paper on global warming.) By the turn of the century came the glut of "information." This concern had been launched much earlier by Alvin Toffler's (1970) "information overload" concept, now made into a more evident reality by the Internet avalanche.
2. The problem of excess arose even in mathematics. In 1874 Georg Cantor proved that the set of transcendental numbers could not be "counted" in the formal sense of being put into a bijective relationship

- with the natural numbers. Given the relatively small number of transcendentals familiar at the time, this was a profoundly disturbing result.
3. This list is a standard excess list and, particularly in its latter section, contains many of the things that Mandeville covertly or overtly admired. Malthus was made of different stuff. He summarizes the list with the remark that “All these checks may be fairly resolved into misery and vice.”
  4. British industrial production expanded by a factor of 10 between 1750 and 1850 and population by a factor of about 3 (Hoffmann 1955, Table 55). Output per worker thus tripled. But of course, only so much cotton can be worn at home. Fully 75 percent of British cotton textile production was exported by the 1870s (Hoffmann 1955:83).
  5. In empirical economics, the word *glut* has been the usual word for excess. I have generally avoided it in this article because *glut* carries connotations about the impact and consequences of excess that *excess* itself does not. *Glut* is a much more strongly evaluative word.
  6. On supply-side economics, see Krugman (1994). This example illustrates well an important distinction in my argument. Economics has talked a good deal about empirical phenomena of excess. As noted earlier, that topic is central to the business cycle literature. But what concerns me here is not empirical excess but rather the habit of not using concepts of excess as central parts of theoretical logic. Underneath modern economic thinking is always a *theoretical* model about scarcity and limits, not about excess.
  7. The ultimate origins of Durkheim’s phrase “disease of the infinite” (*mal de l’infini*) are not clear. At first hand, Chateaubriand was Durkheim’s source; the passage Durkheim cites (Chateaubriand [1802] 1926:116–17) would have been known to every lycée student. But Chateaubriand generally used the phrase “call of the infinite” (*appel de l’infini*). The “disease” version may have been a back-formation from the widespread later phrase *mal du siècle* for the broader version of the same phenomenon—disinterest in reality induced in part by satiation. The ur-text of this disinterest argument, Goethe’s ([1774] 1984) *Sorrows of Young Werther*, often stresses the theme of sheer excess itself. See, for example, the letters of November 3 and 8. But Werther’s last formal letter (December 6) closes with the lines that became the watchword of the *Sturm und Drang*: “And when [man] soars with joy, or sinks into sufferings, is he not in both cases held back and restored to dull, cold consciousness at the very moment when he longs to lose himself in the fullness of the Infinite?” (Goethe [1774] 1984:124–25).
  8. Bataille’s work exemplifies his own theory quite well, no doubt quite deliberately. It is mainly taken up with an excess of examples. *The Accursed Share* has two volumes, totaling almost 500 pages, of which explicit theorizing takes up a scant 30.
  9. Even Hobbes, in the celebrated Chapter 13 of Book 1 of *Leviathan*, recognizes that conflict arises between equal men only when they desire the same thing, and his supposed demonstration that this is the usual state of affairs is in fact only an empirical assumption, not a derivation from first principles. (Chapter 13 has surprisingly little connection with the dull recitation of mechanical psychology that precedes it.) It should be noted that modern advertising is essentially a system for training all people to want the same things.
  10. As an economist, Rosen of course assumes perfect rankability of all talents in a superstar market, noting that this implies imperfect substitutability (one article by a first-rate economist may indeed be worth 10 articles by mediocre economists), a phenomenon that partially explains the superstar incomes that are his object of study. However, I am here emphasizing Rosen’s other mechanism, which is a technology that allows one actor to serve a larger and larger proportion of the market (as recordings concentrated classical music incomes into a fairly small elite). But unlike Rosen, I am arguing that under such conditions of concentration, it doesn’t really matter whether talent is well ranked or (in the extreme case) even exists (cf. Chambliss 1989). The ranking system produces the conditions of its own reproduction because it resolves the problem of excess. That is, up to a point, people will find reasons to think excellent the singing of whomever ends up being the top soprano or top economist or whatever. The presence of George W. Bush in the White House is an obvious example of this phenomenon. The United States easily survived eight years of a president with mediocre abilities and limited experience, and substantial numbers of Americans thought Bush a distinguished figure.
  11. D’Alembert’s “Preliminary Discourse” in the *Encyclopédie*—so much derided by Malthus—is in fact a passionate statement of the importance of categorization, hierarchy, and division of labor as strategies for controlling excess.

12. I have no space in this article to discuss the reciprocal dynamics of these mechanisms, although these are of obvious interest. For example, it may be inevitable that habits of scarcity will drive out those of excess. The aristocrat takes the attitude of excess, doesn't reflect about future implications of his or her spending, doesn't think about depreciation and the like, and so is eventually dispossessed by those who do care about such things and who count everything. Then, of course, those new people's children live as aristocrats, waste their patrimony, and so on. Or again, similarly, lowering one's level of desire makes individuals prey for others in important ways. This has long been an account of the social implications of Indian religion, for example; it has often been argued that ascetic Hindus and Buddhists were ideal subjects for Asian despotism.
13. Leifer made this particular statement in the author's hearing at the Shaker Inn Conference in Enfield, New Hampshire, August 18, 1991. The argument, but not the pithy phrase itself, can be found in Leifer (1988).

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