



Trade and Trade-offs

**Using Resources,
Making Choices,
and Taking Risks**

M. Estellie Smith

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Preface

This book attempts to stitch together the increasingly raveled edges of areas of human concern that an institutionalized system of research and education compartmentalizes as “anthropology,” “economics,” “sociology,” “finance,” “business administration/management,” “marketing,” “psychology,” “international studies,” and more. Indeed, it seems that the more we talk about “crossing disciplinary boundaries,” the more we create degree-granting programs, post-graduate institutes or schools, and special, concentrated seminars that create or focus on new niches—globalization, war and peace, entrepreneurialism, development, e-commerce, cognition, semiotics, ecopolitics . . . and on and on. Unquestionably, however, as those in the music trade would put it, this text is a “cross-over” publication.

The reason is simple: humans are complex and, as we move both up and down the scale on which they interact with each other—e.g., one-on-one; in small or large, informal or structured aggregates; or as representatives of institutionalized structures such as nongovernmental organizations, government agencies or the governments they represent, and multinational corporations—we increasingly realize how much there is we still need to discover about the dynamics of such interaction. We are continually discovering how various areas of activity, once treated casually or even ignored, have infinitely more twists and turns, greater depths, and many more ramifications than was realized even as recently as a few years ago. As each emerges, they attract a number of specialists who then begin to explore the various niches, while in the process developing their own special theories, methodologies, and language—and the barriers to cross-disciplinary communication begin to increase rather than decline.

At the same time, however, we all want “solutions,” but the same sciences that bring the Good News also soon discover the Bad News. Thus, for example, if concerns about the health problems of automobile emissions emerge, a “clean air bill” is passed and chemists are told to

invent a way to clean up the gasoline that causes such toxicity. They do—only to discover that the additive itself presents problems and is causing contamination to ground water supplies on such a scale that whole towns are being abandoned as their water supplies are declared unsafe to drink. Again, if we invent a vaccine to cope with a health problem, we discover that some people die from the vaccine. We then have to ask how many are we willing to put at risk to protect, say, 99 percent of the population. That is, we may never be able to produce a totally risk-free universe; if not, we have to debate and reach consensus as to what degree of risk is acceptable by managers, researchers, and, most important, those with the health problem.

Further, while it's true that many issues that involve various interests can be resolved equitably, many cannot—especially if the issue is to be addressed in a timely fashion. In the winter of 1999–2000, a large number of the North American population came down with the flu. Hospitals—in Canada, especially—were overwhelmed by the number of patients and, quite soon after the start of the problem, ambulances began being turned away because facilities were already stretched to the breaking point. Earlier, staffs had been trimmed, decisions to buy new and very costly equipment had been deferred, and even entire hospitals had closed down in order to fight “waste” and reduce costs that, under “normal” conditions were unnecessary. The dilemma was that no one wanted tax dollars wasted (there are critical areas of health care to which the money could be better applied), but no one wants to have a system that can't respond to periods of high demand (such as epidemics). Adding to the problem is that people are more quick to economize relative to “surplus” health care delivery when demand is “average,” than in the midst of a catastrophe. Yet, the time to make decisions addressing the issue is before or after—not during—the crisis.

And that brings me to the main reason for writing this book. It is intended to speak to people whose life interests and lifestyles vary widely but whose lives are intermeshed by the exchanges that link us together at various aggregate scales. It intends to show how every decision, especially those about distribution/exchange, not only has benefits (the Good News) but costs (the Bad News), intended results but also unintended consequences.

Each of us increasingly is caught up in a world in which the demands of our personal lives, our work and our families, our roles as citizens—whether of our local community or the global society—are growing. We have two choices: we may live in blissful ignorance and make choices grounded in unenlightened self-interest, a self-interest that leads us to make decisions whose negative consequences for others—and to which we may give little if any heed—can boomerang on us; or we may grasp how important it is that we make thoughtful decisions. This isn't to say that, over the long haul, they will prove to be the “right” or the

“best” decisions. But, at least, they will not be careless decisions. We’ll have used the unique human potential for thinking in order to behave in ways that represent the best potential of this species, which impinges on all aspects of the world we inhabit.

The product I’m offering is a modest one and is designed to offer an overview of the wide range of issues involved. Since the only way that we can improve our decision-making sense is to make decisions about which we have thought in advance and which we review after the fact, one aim of the material is to show how frequently decisions are demanded of us. A second aim is to stress the difference between calculating costs and benefits in the short- and long-term. A third aim is to encourage readers to think about their own personally held values, beliefs, and norms as these are reflected in the ways they select and prioritize such nonmaterial Goods (and “Bads”). A fourth aim is to emphasize that, to the extent to which an individual’s language skills—the tool with which we think, that organizes what we see (or fail to see)—are limited and inadequately utilized, to that extent the ability to think through and then review our decisions will be equally impoverished and poorly utilized. Finally, in order to stress how important it is that we improve our knowledge about how we use resources and make choices, the material aims to emphasize the degree of risk (some long-term and very remote indeed!) that accompanies *all* decisions.

The opening chapter poses a number of decisions, large and small, that introduce the reader to the costs and benefits involved in all decision making, even the most commonplace. Chapter 2 is a brief review of the anthropological—as opposed to, say, economic or psychological—tools that may be utilized to examine the way humans behave. The next chapter looks at how economists and anthropologists agree and differ on a few of the major concepts we utilize in common.

Chapters 4 through 8 explore economic behavior by utilizing a widely held framework that sees such behavior as a process consisting of (1) production, (2) distribution/exchange, and (3) consumption. Chapter 4 questions whether people produce in order to consume or, driven by the need to stay alive and sustain human societies, produce in order to meet the demands of consumption. It stresses that people produce both material goods and nonmaterial Goods. Chapter 5 looks at entrepreneurialism, a kind of behavior that is only now beginning to draw intense examination from researchers in a wide range of fields. It shows that entrepreneurs play a crucial role as agents of change, change that is necessary if sociocultural systems and the humans in them are to be capable of responding and adapting to context variability. Chapter 6 emphasizes distribution, especially as the allocation of resources is bound up in concepts of property—i.e., who has rights to whatever is identified as resources and their utilization. Indeed, property rights are the link between production and distribution/exchange. Chapter 7 is concerned with what happens

after resources have been allocated to individuals and these individuals then make decisions as to how to exchange with others. While not a few see markets, and especially the capitalist market system, as the root of all that is wrong with modern society, the position taken here is that (as with most of life) there's always a trade-off between the Good News and the Bad News. Chapter 8 looks at the many curiosities of consumption—e.g., acquiring what we never consume (and never intended to), fads and fashions in consumption, how we identify what is good or bad to consume, and the problems raised because much of what the public sees as investment (or savings) economists describe as consumption.

Chapter 9 is rather unusual because it addresses problems that arise not just because of scarcity (cf. poverty) but also because of surpluses—not the least of which is a surplus of garbage. Chapter 10 provides an overview of the material presented, particularly as critical, moral, ethical, and geopolitical issues are involved.

Overall, some themes appear and reappear because there was a need to reassess them in different contexts. Unfortunately, other points had to be excluded because both the publisher and I were aware that few people will read a 1,200 page introductory handbook!

I'm deeply indebted to a number of people, first and foremost my husband, Charles A. Bishop, who patiently debated, tracked sources, and proofread numerous versions. My interest in all of this was stimulated by my parents (who became entrepreneurs during the 1930s' depression because they found no markets for their math and engineering degrees), who were and led me to be insatiably curious about everything. The people at Waveland Press have been enormously supportive and helpful. The referees of the original manuscript (Paul Bohannon, Bryan Byrne, Karen Curtis, and Susan Squires) gave detailed comments and raised a number of important questions. Not all were taken to heart, however, and I absolve them of any responsibilities for flaws in the material. Colleagues, students, and a host of other people provided insights, data, and provoking (as well as provocative) questions. Over the years during which this book was being formulated I became indebted to a long list of significant others. However, I owe too much to too many to list them—and in any case, not uncommonly, it was points of disagreement with them that forced me to hone my thinking. Thus, it's quite likely that several would not want to be acknowledged and thereby held as somehow responsible for any of the material.

M. Estellie Smith

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Chapter One

It's All a Matter of Choice

Economic Anthropology and Today's World

—Hank and Debbie are making up a list of the people they'd like to invite to their New Year's Eve party. The list, however, includes (1) Joe and Mary—a rather dull couple who always end the evenings in a shouting match because Joe drinks too much and Mary doesn't want him to drive home; (2) Pete—who's trying to sell his house and, lately, can't seem to talk about anything but the real estate market and which way interest rates may go; and (3) Mike and Tamara—though Hank and Debbie met them only a few weeks ago and don't know them very well. It doesn't include two of their oldest and dearest friends, Jim and Allie, though they're still good friends and the four have always shared New Year's Eve. Why were these people included and excluded?

—Mr. Jones has been buying widgets from the ABC Company ever since he started his business. He recently received an offer from another company that said they could supply him the same widgets at a lower price because they were able to save on storage and shipping costs. Mr. Jones could add several thousand a year to his profit by changing suppliers, but he continues to patronize ABC Company. Why doesn't he purchase his widgets at the lower price?

—Money is tight this week and Jack is trying to watch his weight. Yet when the Scouts come around on their annual cookie sale he buys one of each of the six varieties, then gives them away to friends. Why did Jack buy them in the first place?

—*The alarm goes off; Laura knows its time to get up and face a Monday-morning world. But she stayed up till 2:30 A.M. on the Internet, and an extra fifteen minutes of sleep seems to offer a return to paradise. After thinking for a minute, however, she pulls herself from her bed with a loud groan and starts the usual morning routine of getting ready for work. What helped her make one choice rather than the other?*

—*Student life can be a drag. Dave has an examination on Wednesday; his friends are urging him to go to the Tuesday-night beer blast at The Big-Frat-On-Campus house. However, one of his courses is proving tougher than he expected. Worse, it's important in his major. Finally, there have been so many of these parties lately that he has to admit he's not really especially turned on by the thought of this one. He decides to party and, despite good intentions, he doesn't get home early to do some studying before bed. On Wednesday, he cuts his first class to do some last-minute cramming, wishing that professors didn't seem to have a fiendish instinct for scheduling exams on the days after such events. Why didn't he just skip the party and decide to study?*

—*Leslie never liked brown; it's always seemed a depressing color, and Leslie has always thought that people who wear brown are the same kind who buy "sensible family cars"—secondhand. But the latest addition to Leslie's closet is a brown jacket. Can it be that Leslie's preferences have changed? Why?*

All of the scenarios above involve making choices, deciding between alternatives. These are, say economists (and other social scientists, too), economic decisions because the outcome is arrived at by weighing costs versus benefits of each alternative relative to those of other possibilities—the Good News versus the Bad News that every alternative has.

It often surprises people to realize what very complicated mental bookkeeping they do many times a day. When you make a choice, you weigh the pros and cons of one possibility against another and usually end up calculating profits versus losses—in a Utopian world, greater versus fewer benefits (but in a dismal world, greater versus fewer losses). Are you skeptical because you can't see where that sort of thinking played a part in the above choices? Let me go back and show you a little more context for the above scenarios, the kind of context anthropologists look for in order to add depth to their search into the ways people organize their lives. And, let it be noted, it is one of the wonders of the human brain that humans can do many of these kinds of complicated processes so quickly that there is often little time between a choice being presented and a decision being made.

Hank and Debbie's guest list. Hank and Debbie know that inviting people to a party isn't just a case of picking your best friends, or the

people who are “best” at a party. For openers, your best friends don’t always mix well in a crowd (especially a New Year’s Eve type of crowd), but those who are best at a party aren’t always your favorite people. (1) Joe and Mary made the list because Debbie and Mary are core members of an office work team; it’s important for the success of the team that, at the least, personal tension be kept minimal. If Mary weren’t invited she’d be hurt, resentful, or both: life for Debbie might have some unpleasant surprises. (2) Pete invited them to his New Year’s party last year; it’s pay-back time. (3) Not only are Mike and Tamara a racially mixed couple (Hank and Debbie wouldn’t want the couple to think they were prejudiced), but they live in the upstairs apartment—which means they’d know about the party and could complain about the noise. (4) Jim and Allie are going through a nasty divorce. You can’t have both at the same party and you don’t want to take sides.

Mr. Jones’s buying pattern. X Company is run by his father-in-law.

Jack’s Scout cookies. Jack was a Scout when he was young and doesn’t like to feel he has let “his own” down. “You like to feel good about yourself—and,” he adds, “what do you think my neighbors would say if I were too cheap to give the kids a couple of bucks? Everybody buys those things, even if they don’t plan to eat them but plan just to give them away.”

Laura’s alarm. It took only a few seconds for Laura to work out the benefits of an extra fifteen minutes of sleep versus the costs those fifteen minutes would bring—of having to rush, cutting short morning coffee time and time spent at the mirror in the bathroom as well as deciding what to wear. “It just wasn’t worth the extra hassle. I just had the feeling the whole day would go wrong if I slept in a little longer. Last night, it seemed like a good idea but today . . . no way, I decided.”

Dave’s examination. The situation that Dave was facing was one that required him to confront the fact that he had been mixing short- and long-term goals without any clear picture of which was what and when. He wanted to obtain the necessary credentials to gain entry into a job market when he graduated, and he wanted to create social networks that would be helpful at that time. He also wanted to enjoy college life (“before I have to go into the ‘real world’”) and have friends who were sources of valuable information about which courses/professors to search out/avoid, the “in/out” drinking places, and all the other things one has to know to “make it on campus.” If Dave were an entrepreneur (and, in a way, he was), he would be confronting what in business is called “a cash flow” problem. Each expenditure increases or diminishes at least some of the costs/benefits that must be taken into account when making the next decision about yet another expenditure. Dave had not been “recosting” as events unfolded. Further, this particular decision also created a number of follow-up but immediate choices that had to be made: What time to quit the party? What were the short- and long-term costs/benefits of “one more beer”? Was it better to try to study after the party or just to go to

bed and try to get up early to study? And, on the morning after, having done neither of the above, how should he weigh the profits versus losses of cutting the first class relative to the benefits/costs of gaining time for last-minute cramming?

The brown jacket. The favorite color of Leslie's current "significant other" (SO) is brown. Just last week SO pointed to someone who resembled Leslie and commented on how well the person looked in the brown outfit being worn, commenting that "People in that color always look in control, like, they don't have to run with the crowd but can do their own thing." Leslie decided that the way SO perceived people who wore brown mattered enough to buy the jacket and hope for the best.

Although the actors in all of the cases discussed did a social (versus a monetary) analysis, the process of calculating profits and losses, immediate or short- versus long-term benefits and costs, was not much different from the kind of monetary and social calculations done by all large organizations today.

- **Businesses.** Do we drop a poorly selling product or try to rebuild demand by adding to the advertising budget?
- **Government.** Should we cut out the school lunch program, delete funding for the arts—or make small cuts in both?
- **Charitable organizations.** A professional fund-raising firm says it will increase donations, but the charity wonders if the consulting firm's high fee will cancel out the increase in donations—and what if the campaign doesn't increase donations?
- **Hospitals.** A kidney for a transplant has become available, and two patients are eligible (one aged 20 and one aged 68)—the first is the skinhead leader of a neo-Nazi group, the second is a world-famous pianist. In any case, there are other issues: perhaps it's wrong to let age or personal lifestyle matter. Would it be fairer—and relieve physicians of the task of having to play God—to be guided by the simple rule of "first come first served?"
- **Religious institutions.** The Bishop must decide whether to continue to meet the rising costs of keeping open a church that has served a neighborhood for over a century but has been losing members for the last decade—or to close it and use the money for a youth program.
- **The military.** Told they have to close ten bases, the army has to decide whether to go ahead with plans to close low-priority Fort X. The elected political representative for the district in which Fort X is located also heads the committee that will decide next year's military budget—and has let it be known that the hardships the closing will cause for her constituents will lead her to take an equally tough line on the army's requested funding increase.

These examples are only a small sample of the kinds of choices available, factors to weigh, and decisions we make in everyday life. They also illustrate the difference between most economists and most economic anthropologists, as well as, say, sociologists, political scientists, or business managers—a difference that rests on what is taken into account (a neat phrase that reminds us that making decisions often involves a process rather like doing bookkeeping in one's head!) when trying to select, predict, or understand the decisions we and others make. Economists prefer to deal with things that can be counted and measured; they tend to discount (another neat phrase that we use in everyday speech to talk about reducing the value of something) the very things economic anthropologists see as critical. Here's an example:

Jim and Lisa Marie, an inner-city couple with four children, won \$10,000 in a lottery. After taxes (of course), they took \$2,100 and used it to host a block party so friends and relatives could help celebrate their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. They used the remainder as a down-payment on a six-year-old minivan.

An economist would say this was a poor use of the money; Jim and Lisa Marie should have invested in something that would bring them long-term benefits rather than wasting it on parties and a van that might soon require expensive repairs they couldn't afford. However, Jim and Lisa Marie calculated (note how often we use economic terms in everyday speech) that over the years they had been helped over tough times by those friends and neighbors; Jim and Lisa Marie knew they owed them. Said Jim,

Hey, I can't tell you how many times those people came through for us. Now, we both know it's payback time. But you can't go to them and start counting up all the free meals, the help they gave when the apartment needed painting, all the times our friend Alice babysat for free; the money different people lent when the car broke down or when Jimmie needed Scout stuff—things like that. You could count them up, then try to pay them back. But you can't.

We're not dumb enough to think life's going to change. What happens when this money's gone but there's another streak of bad luck? Do you think those people will come through another time after you forgot them when you had a little luck? Besides, that van will come in useful in lots of ways; Maybe we'll have problems with it—even a new car can be trouble—but my brother works in a gas station and can fix anything real cheap. And what if it's old? You think I'm dumb enough that I'm going to park a new car on the street in *my* neighborhood? Nobody's going to bother something like that. And you didn't think of how low my insurance will be on a car like that.

Jim and Lisa Marie were not being stupid or illogical in the way they spent their windfall. Nor—though some economists (and others)

might claim it—are they using their unexpected resources¹ in ways that are not economically rational. Economically rational behavior consists of actions, activities, or choices selected by groups or individuals, using the means available to them that are appropriate to the ends desired. Given the context in which they currently exist, Lisa and Jim have, quite logically, worked out various ways to allocate the money; they considered the immediate and possible potential costs/benefits; and they allotted their windfall in ways that their “bookkeeping” showed made the most sense—that is, that promised them the optimum return, with the least risk, at the lowest cost.

In the pages that follow we’ll explore the segment of human behavior that involves economizing behavior. We’ll see how making many of our big and small decisions involves trade-offs that determine the quality of life—that yardstick we use to measure the degree of satisfaction we have with the gains and losses of day-to-day living as well as their long-range outcomes. Because we will be viewing economizing activities from an anthropological perspective, those activities will be selected from a wide range of societies—even some that no longer exist. Among the things we’ll examine and questions we’ll explore will be:

Where do we get the goods (and Good) and services that people distribute and exchange?

- **Production.** Is begging productive work? Is producing babies any different from producing fields of rice, automobiles, selling crack, delivering the mail or a sermon, interpreting dreams (for psychoanalysis or for help in picking the right numbers to bet)?
- **Distribution.** Who benefits from what I produce? Does someone buy from me simply to exchange my stuff with others, to help me by providing a market for my goods or services—or to exploit me by making an unfair profit on my labor?
- **Consumption.** How can some people argue that the less you have, the richer you are? Are the best things in life free? Can there be too much of a good thing?

What are the ways people can distribute and exchange?

- **Obligatory.** What do I have a right to receive? What are the “birthrights” to which every individual is entitled—which I have to neither earn nor be awarded, and of which, morally, I can’t be deprived? What rights of others am I morally obligated to acknowledge? Can I voluntarily surrender a right? Do children have the right to be supported by their parents? Do parents have the right to be supported by their children? Does everyone have a right to expect that they will never lack for adequate food,

¹If you should encounter a word that is unfamiliar on its own or in context, please turn to the Glossary, which contains definitions for many of the terms you will come across in the text.

housing, and medical care? Who determines what the adequate amount is? If you had to choose, which set of rights would you surrender—those just listed, or the rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”?

- **Equitably.** I give what you want, you give what I want, and each calls it an even transfer. Is there such a thing as fair exchange—all gain and lose to the same extent—my apples for your oranges, my labor for yours (I'll spend an hour tending your baby; you spend an hour fixing my teeth)?
- **Variably.** One or both parties perceive that the exchange was unequal—and, possibly, unfairly so. Though, as with the previous two exchanges, coercion may be the basis for the exchange, threat or actual use of force is more likely to occur in this type of transaction. Is “your money or your life” an unequal exchange—and, indeed, how can you “gain” what you already possess?

What are some of the tools that aid in the distribution and exchange process?

- **Money and barter.** It's often claimed that “money is the measure of all things.” Is it? Why is the original handwritten score of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony worth more (\$100,000) than the outstanding recording of that music by the world's leading orchestra (\$15)? Are food stamps money? What can plastic poker chips buy in Las Vegas? What can't they buy? How can a business pay you in money that it prints itself and that can be spent only in company stores? If money has replaced barter, why does France sell military planes to Iraq in exchange for barrels of oil?
- **Marketplaces.** How do the Saturday flea market and the global commodity market for oil resemble and differ from each other? How has the cybermarket changed the world? Is the Global Economy completely changing the world's economies and, if so, how? What may and may not be priced, bought, and sold in the marketplace? What property rights do you need to have (and perhaps don't) to sell things? How do goods and services differ in terms of their production, distribution, and consumption?
- **Accounting.** There are various ways of keeping track of costs and benefits, profit and loss, and appreciation and depreciation. How does the government measure things that don't get counted and for which the records (if they exist at all) are hidden? What does theft cost? What does wasted time cost? How much money is circulated in the drug trade? Should kids pay taxes on money earned for babysitting or collect a sales tax on worms they sell to fishermen? Should charitable volunteers calculate the hourly worth of their labor and receive tax rebates—and, if they do, can we really count it as charitable work? If 80 percent of the people

in a certain poor locale work off the books, and 40 percent of these “unemployed” people make an average of \$20,000 a year, how does the government calculate the taxes needed to support the official number of unemployed? How do we calculate the costs of the decline in nonrenewable resources such as oil, water, or clean air? What’s the difference between price and value? (For example, what’s the price of a college education, what’s its worth, and why do people pay different prices for the same B.A. degree earned from different universities? How is it that, at the same university, people get different value for their money?)

- **Budgets and budgeting.** Think about how you allocate your resources. How do you really spend your time (yet another of those interesting everyday, economic phrases) as well as your money (how often have you heard the phrase “Time is money”)? How do you budget work and play—and what do you define as work versus play? Are professional sports people playing or working? Is sleep a waste of time? When was the last time you just sat and did nothing? Is thinking work? When you buy a gift for someone, are you spending, investing, or wasting money?

There are other issues that will be examined in order to understand the themes in the material presented here: the impact on our lives of the High-Tech (HT), Information Technology (IT), Biotechnology, and the Internet revolutions; the growing importance of commodities and, more important, the process of commoditization in the lives of the world’s peoples; problems of growing waste and declining natural resources; and the way sentiment, emotion, and other noneconomic considerations affect economic processes.

Our modern world is increasingly centered around commodities—their production, distribution and consumption. But just what is a commodity? A common definition is “any good or service produced for its exchange rather than use value.” Until a few thousand years ago, most people, most of the time, produced for their own use and within a small circle of kin and group members. If they had an occasional surplus, it was unplanned and shared with others, given to the gods in thanks, or simply left to rot. Nowadays, the majority of the earth’s people are engaged in producing, distributing, and consuming commodities: They aim to provide goods and services to others so that, usually, they will receive, through a salary or share of the profits, some monetary reward (workers rarely anticipate going unpaid and company personnel or shareholders rarely expect the company will go bankrupt though, in point of fact, companies do collapse and, during the late 1990s, many workers in Russia and other parts of eastern Europe hadn’t been paid for a half year or more).

However, it’s not uncommon that goods originally produced for self-use ultimately enter the market and are exchanged—think of native

crafts produced for self-use and personal adornment, or another possibility, antiques that were once items that people made for their own use. Thus, the definition of “commodity” used here is “any good or service that can be exchanged in an institutionalized marketplace or system of trade.”

Now, there is a great deal of concern being expressed by people in all segments of society about the ways in which modern humans are allowing the chase after commodities (goods or services) to dominate—indeed, to become the only thing that matters—in our lives. A growing number of people, or so it's claimed, center their lives around chasing wealth, on getting money in order to buy a constantly expanding array of “things.” We allow the possession (or lack of possession, as the case may be!) of things to color our opinions of others, and we are deeply concerned about the way in which things color their opinion of us. People all over the globe are, increasingly, driven either to catch up or keep up with the Joneses: the citizens of emerging economies must play catch-up with those of developed economies; the economically depressed regions of the European Union must be given subsidies to catch up with the prosperous regions; and you and I need to worry about debt (or find more income) in order to keep up. Concerns about “overconsumption” are valid as we see its effects in a depletion of resources, a creation of waste, a despoiling of the environment, and mounting levels of personal stress. Despite all the gains, many feel a disquieting sense of loss.

That said, those who are concerned can't just wish away the phenomenon. Indeed, it's difficult if not impossible to address the concerns we have about the process, if we ignore the legitimate aims that underlie it and the complex conditions that sustain it—as well as make it difficult to alter. Gathering statistics may be informative of the costs and even supportive of our concerns, but they don't always enable us to work together to redirect or modify the chase after commodities in realistic ways—ways that take into account the very real need for some to catch up, or the equally real aim of others to use the market system and patterns of consumption to express their public persona. However we make judgments on the process, it is unrealistic to deny it exists. The way people are ranked by others is often used to measure their eligibility for a promotion, for invitations to events where valuable social networks are built, for their children to be invited to parties—and how such friendships may affect their future quality of life.

This emphasis on the way in which the possession of or access to certain goods and services are judged to be important for how others evaluate our social position isn't new; archeologists find evidence for it in both small-scale societies and early empires. For example, we find emblems of valor or special spirituality once worn by warriors, priests, or rulers, or a set of pots used for ordinary cooking and eating but other finer, thinner, more elaborately painted pottery used to serve high-ranked elite, important visitors, or supernatural beings. Differential access to Good, goods,