

PLENITUDE by Juliet B. Schor

I. THE ECONOMIC CHALLENGES WE FACE

Schor argues that a continuation of the “business as usual” (BAU) economy—the current economic rules, practices, growth trajectory, and ecological consequences of production and consumption—is no longer a viable option during this time of economic and ecological challenge.

- **THE ECONOMY WILL BE LESS LUCRATIVE OVER THE NEXT DECADE:** Schor predicts that the BAU economy will yield less income, jobs, cheap goods, return on assets and life satisfaction and be more unstable for ordinary individuals over the next decade. Why? Added to conventional economic reasons (the nation’s declining position in the world economy, long swings in economic activity, inability to create adequate numbers of jobs) is mounting ecological degradation (climate change particularly) which creates scarcities and raises costs of production.
- **UNEMPLOYMENT WILL NOT BE GOING AWAY:** The US economy has lost 8 million jobs, and we will need about 500,000 new jobs every month for 2 years to get back to pre-recession levels. That’s simply an unrealistic number. The old way to generate jobs—growth in overall GNP—is less effective now because jobs are going offshore and information technology is replacing labor. We need new approaches to employment, in particular small-scale, community-based jobs and livelihoods.
- **BAU GROWTH IS DESTROYING THE PLANET:** The climate and ecological crises mean we can’t just grow our way out of problems in the usual way. Higher GNP yields higher carbon emissions. We need to rapidly reduce carbon pollution by shifting to lower impact activities and pinpoint economic practices that will reverse the dangerous damage we’ve already done to the atmosphere and the planet.

II. THE PLENITUDE SOLUTION

Through a major shift to new sources of wealth, green technologies, and different ways of living, individuals and the country as a whole can be better off and more economically secure. Schor draws on recent

developments in economic theory, social analysis, and ecological design to map out a path to a healthier environment and a higher quality of life.

- **SHIFT OUT OF THE WORK-AND-SPEND-CYCLE:** Schor, who pioneered the concept of the work-and-spend-cycle, finds that households are less attracted to the high-spending lifestyles of the past, and that jobs have become more demanding, less secure, and less lucrative. She argues that the savvy response to this new situation is for households to begin a shift out of the BAU market and into undervalued sources of wealth: time, creativity (especially ecological knowledge) and social relationships.
- **DIVERSIFY:** A key economic principle is not relying on a single source of income, such as the labor market. Households should diversify their sources of income and ways of meeting their consumption needs, by reducing time spent in the BAU economy. New ways to provide livelihood include self-reliance (making and doing for yourself), small businesses, sharing assets, and trading services within communities. These trends are already emerging around the country.
- **SMALL SCALE:** Innovation, dynamism, and employment is being generated by the small-scale sector. The vibrancy in our economy is now in small businesses and self-employment. Information technologies and on-line networking have eroded many of the advantages of big firms. Schor calls for a small-scale, decentralized, ecologically oriented sector of entrepreneurial individuals and households. .

III. IDENTIFYING ALTERNATIVE SOURCES OF WEALTH: PLENITUDE'S FOUR PILLARS

Humans are degrading the planet far faster than they are regenerating it. Food, energy, transport, and consumer goods are becoming increasingly scarce and over the long term will be more expensive. The economic downturn that has accompanied the ecological decline has led to another type of scarcity: incomes, jobs, and credit. We can start addressing both economic and ecological deficits by tapping into neglected assets.

- **TIME:** For decades Americans have been devoting more and more time to the labor market. Plenitude practitioners reverse that trend, using their newfound time affluence to invest in other sources of wealth. They make, rather than buy, share, rather than spend, and

build social relationships. These individual solutions also create balance in the labor market: hours of work in jobs fall which allows companies to hire more employees. Right now, productivity is growing too rapidly and hours per job are too high to absorb all the people who need work.

- **HIGH-TECH SELF-PROVISIONING:** We can reduce reliance on the market by meeting basic needs (income, food, housing, consumer goods, energy) through a series of creative, smart, high productivity technologies: growing food (using permaculture and vertical gardens), creating energy on a small scale (convert a Prius to a plug-in and double gas mileage), building homes with free labor and local, natural materials and using new Fab-Lab technologies (small, smart machines that make almost anything). Schor looks at examples of people already practicing self-provisioning and converting their skills into money-making ventures.
- **CONSUMING DIFFERENTLY:** Plenitude is a strategy for living that gives people more time, more creativity, and more social connection, while also lowering ecological footprints and avoiding consumer debt. It yields a high satisfaction style of life, although not necessarily a high spending lifestyle. So how does it meet our desires to shop, buy, and enjoy the fruits of a consumer society? It's a combination of accessing "new to you" products, sharing expensive items such as cars and appliances, and making careful purchases of long-lasting goods.
- **CONNECTION:** As more and more labor time went into the market, time for community disappeared. Social ties frayed and neighborhoods hollowed out. But social relationships are a potent form of economic wealth, which people can turn to during financial instability or adverse climate events. People who have strong social connections, or what's called social capital, fare much better when times get rough. Plenitude involves re-building local economic interdependence by trading services, sharing assets, and relying on each other in good, as well as hard times.