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Methods and motivation of social domination

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1. One method of social domination: incentives and threshold control

One form of strategic social power is produced by controlling what serves as an incentive to others. Strategic control of incentive entails the control of a threshold across which people may be repelled or attracted. Attractive forms of incentive include money, security, praise, public honour, proximity to beauty, the trappings of success, entertainment, sex, prospect of entering heaven, luxury, freedom, the addict's drug, etc. Repulsive forms of incentive include poverty, insecurity, derogation, boredom, (ie, the various effects of unemployment), failure, the prospect of entering hell, prison, injury, drug withdrawal, ugliness etc. Those who control access to what serves as either form of incentive to others can exert a degree of control over them.

Figure 1 Toll Bridge across Mississippi River at St. Louis



Source: Library of Congress

Strategic control of incentive entails the control of a threshold, the dynamics of which can be understood by considering the metaphor of the toll bridge. This gives focus to what facilitates and what limits the controller's ability to benefit from their strategic location². More toll can be charged if there is more incentive to cross the threshold than when there is not. This occurs when the relative attractiveness of one side, be it real or illusory, is perceived to be greater than the other. This can be increased by heightening the repulsiveness of one side, or the attractiveness of the other, or both.

The extent to which the toll can be increased is constrained by people's willingness to endure not crossing in order to avoid paying the price of passage, by the extent to which the means exist to bypass the threshold, and by the controller's capacity to secure the threshold from gate-crashing and usurpation of their control.

If there is no other means of gaining access to what the threshold controls, and people are sufficiently desperate to reach it, the controller can increase the toll charged. Ultimately, as both the desperation to cross the threshold and the pain of paying the toll both rise, control of the threshold depends on withstanding gate-crashers and preventing usurpation as its controller. To prevent people getting through without paying (ie gate-crashing) requires guards and fortification. If people collectively perceive that the controller is extortionate, they

may organise to remove them from control, requiring a militia to repel them. Guards, fortifications, militia add to the material expense of operating the threshold, and hence lower profitability. Generally, the more that people can be encouraged to submit to the terms of the threshold by more virtual (eg., cultural) means, the more profitable it is for the controller. Fostering complacency and respect for the controller's authority, discouraging public critique of their management of the threshold, associating contestation of the threshold with deviance etc, reduces the need for more expensive (material) methods of fortification and compliance.

Society is a collection of more or less strategically significant thresholds that are controlled to bring about more or less socially desirable ends. The parent defines the toll (eg., a specific behaviour) that the child must pay in order to remain on the attractive side of the threshold separating punishment and reward. The priest defines the toll (conformity to religious teaching) the parishioner must pay in order to cross and remain on the attractive side of the threshold separating hell from heaven. The employer defines the toll (surplus labour/productivity) that the worker must pay in order to cross and remain on the attractive side of the threshold separating unemployment from employment. The retailer determines the toll to be paid (prices) in order for the consumer to cross and remain on the attractive side of the threshold separating commodity non-ownership from commodity-ownership. Society is a collection of thresholds (not all of which are strategically controlled such as these), and all of us are located between thresholds we have crossed and those we are yet to cross (and may never cross). This structure may be applied to different situations, with greater or lesser apparent correspondence.

Table 1 Various controlled thresholds

Control point	Controller	Alternate states	Conditions of passage	Sought advantage of control
Religion	Priesthood	Hell / Heaven	Conform to priests teaching	Authority & influence Tithe income
Labour market	Capitalist	Unemployed / employed	Maintain a profitable level of productivity (ie provide employer free surplus labour)	Profit, accumulation of wealth
Commodity acquisition	Retailer	Not own / own commodity	Paying the price	Sales receipts & profit
Education	Teacher	Not passed / passed	Successful completion of assessment task	Influence through determining what constitutes 'qualified'.
Marriage	Potential spouse (& their parents.)	Not married / married	Public declaration of faithfulness.	Status, security,
Electoral approval	Media mogul	Unfavourable / favourable publicity	Promotion of policy favourable to mogul	More power and wealth

Control of the most strategically significant thresholds constitutes strategic social domination. Some forms of incentive are more fundamental to people than others. In modern societies, access to food, shelter and the necessities of a dignified existence is mostly conditional on the payment of money, so that by controlling other people's access to money, control can also be exercised over them. A fundamental strategy of capitalism is to make most people's access to money conditional on their producing more than they consume, so that the surplus can accumulate to the controllers of that access. In all modes of production the object of control has been to compel subordinate people to produce more than they consume so that dominant people may control and consume more than they produce. Capitalism outstrips all preceding modes of production because of its ability to accumulate an *infinite* amount of the source of its power, namely capital, owing to its virtuality.

Money is a powerful form of incentive, and can be used to control other forms of incentive, such as those deployed by the state. Money can facilitate the deployment of legal and illegal forms of incentive, including bribes, criminal extortion, drugs and other sanctions and rewards. Significantly, it can also influence the deployment of the state's range of attractive and repulsive incentives by controlling the resources necessary to become installed as a manager of the state. These include campaign funds and favourable presentation of their policies and personal image to the public. These resources are strategically controlled to exact a toll (policies consistent with their interests) from those seeking to cross the electoral disapproval / approval threshold (Griffen-Foley, 2003). Influence over the conduct of the state is purchased in various ways. Key decision-makers implicitly negotiate policy positions in return for donations in various settings, such as exclusive fund-raising dinners, or via intermediaries such as peak industry bodies. Money also buys the discrete prostitutes and luxury hospitality that rewards the cooperative politician or senior bureaucrat (Tooth, 2001). To create the leeway for governments to act on their behalf, unencumbered by democratic accountability to an informed, alert electorate, public attention is attracted elsewhere with entertainment, celebrity, spectator sport, news, commercial advertising, etc. (Law et al, To the extent that wealthy people hold the public's attention, they control public awareness, and can significantly bend democratic processes to their will.

Those who control key strategic incentives and thresholds of society use this control to accumulate more control. The business entrepreneurs are undoubtedly among the most shrewd, skilled, knowledgeable, hard-working and self-motivated people in our society. It is inevitable that such people would, collectively, have power over others less knowledgeable, less shrewd, more complacent, and less motivated than themselves. They control the thresholds to consumption and production, and have wealth enough to exert control over the state and thus (albeit remotely) over its various forms of incentive. Competition with each other, in the conduct of 'business', develops their skills and establishes a collective attitude of enterprise that occasionally subdues their competitiveness sufficient to prompt collective action in order to foster a better operating environment (Tsokhas,1984). Often this entails having the state act on their behalf, either to mask the conflictual nature of their relationship with groups on whom their wealth relies (eg workers and customers), or because the state is uniquely empowered to do so (eg., legislatively attacking unions). The managers of the state earn the campaign funding and favourable media coverage that make them its managers by providing political solutions for those controlling these incentives. Through this control, money buys an operating environment conducive to the accumulation of more money, and thus the accumulation of the means to greater control.

Table 2: Thresholds controlled under different modes of production

Mode of production	Repulsive incentive	Attractive incentive	Controller / source of power	Condition of passage
Pack hunting	Ostracism / death	Inclusion	Alpha male (leader) Physical force	Leader gets the biggest share
Slavery	Death	Life	Slave owner Slaves / Military force	Cheap labour (work in return for sustenance)
Feudalism	Landless / beggar / casual labour	Land occupier & farmer	Land owners Land ownership/military force	Pay tax or rent or provide free labour
Capitalism	Unemployment	Employment	Wealth owners Money (capital)	Surplus labour/Profitable level of productivity

Employers control the employment threshold which divides subjection to the repulsive incentives of unemployment from the attractive incentives of employment. The toll workers pay to cross this threshold is their maintenance of an acceptably profitable level of productivity. A more profitable operating environment entails fostering incentive in people to work hard without offering excessive attractive incentives in the form of wages. This is achieved through maximising repulsive incentives and limiting viable methods for by-passing the profit-generating threshold.

To this end, the state manages economic and social policy to preserve poverty, unemployment (Kalecki, 1971; Korpi, 1981; Korpi 1982; Bailey, 1950) and other forms of precariousness, to maximise the pain of non-employment, usually claiming that they do so to reduce unemployment³, even when refusing to reduce unemployment in order to maintain competition for low status jobs⁴. The state (often by deliberate and deniable inaction) preserves unemployment, distressing and demoralising the unemployed with coercive policies such as compelling them to compete for insufficient jobs, and maintaining their income support at the lowest politically acceptable level (Jose & Quirk, 2002; Quirk 2003). The management of public perception of unemployment by the state (Harding, 1985) is actively supported by commercial media and other business advocacy groups through their regular derogation of the unemployed (Windschuttle, 1980). Additionally, the public are 'economically educated' (Carey, 1995) to spuriously accept the 'precarization' (casualisation and job fragmentation) of the labour market as an anti-unemployment measure. Persons-based measures of unemployment accommodate this by depicting fragmentation of full-time, permanent jobs as 'jobs growth' (BLMR, 1986:7)⁵. The repulsive incentive of non-employment is also heightened by making access to decent standards of health, education and transport provision conditional on having money.

The option of by-passing the employment threshold is diminished by reducing the role of the state as an employer. This is achieved through the cultivation of hostility to public expenditure and the depiction of 'fiscal drag' (governments taxing more than they spend, i.e., budget surpluses) as economic prudence. This not only undermines support for public works and other methods of stimulating demand for labour, but also causes private sector dis-saving and debt (Mitchell, Wray, Mosler), thereby heightening the urgency to enter and remain in employment in order to obtain money.

The repulsive incentive of unemployment / underemployment increases the willingness of low status workers to meet the productivity demands of employers, to work harder in order to keep their jobs and avoid the privations of unemployment.⁶ Employers subsequently present workers with additional thresholds to cross, each separating relatively lower status, lower paid work from relatively higher paid, higher status work, each requiring higher levels of productivity to cross, usually by engendering it in one's subordinates. This structure pressures the labour force to produce an abundance of goods and services for employers at low cost.

Productivity drives consumption. Workers produce more than their wages enable them to consume, but for this surplus production to be converted into an accumulation of money by its owners, it must be sold to consumers (workers and non-workers). Higher levels of productivity make higher levels of consumption possible, but to convert more production into more money, people need to be sufficiently motivated to pay for its possession. Commercialised culture, especially advertising, psychologically manipulates appetites and normalises indebtedness (eg., 'easy credit'), to maximise the propensity to consume to enable employers to convert surplus product into as much money as possible.

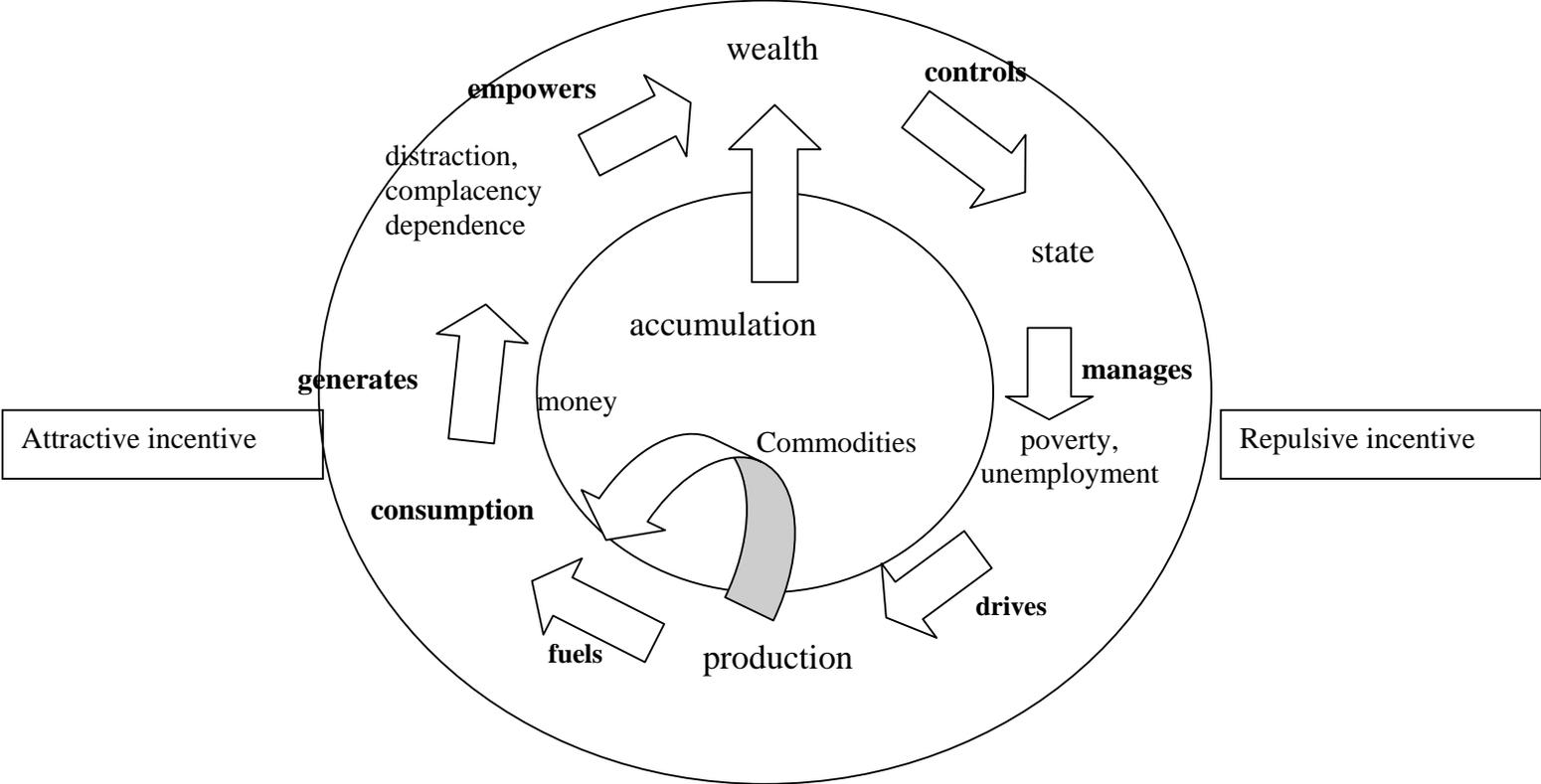
Complacency is systematically nurtured in citizens through consumption and distraction, which lulls them into surrendering control of the state to less complacent others. Throughout the 20th century, the advertising and entertainment industries refined their sophisticated attention-grabbing, appetite-fuelling and persuasion techniques, consciously constructing a culture of mass consumption whereby procurement of status-defining commodities is instilled from birth (Gass and Seiter,2003; Packard, 1962). Modern culture is almost entirely composed of manipulative attention-seeking distractions targeted segmentally at the entire population. Commercial advertising is designed by skilled behavioural scientists competing to produce better ways to attract and hold public attention while fuelling appetites for consumption, using psychological techniques such as manipulation of cognitive dissonance⁷. Entertainment is produced to capture audiences and prepare them for advertiser's messages, inculcating appetitive behaviour and driving consumption.

Those that deploy these attention holding technologies are strategically positioned to also manage public perception of the activities of the state. Given the intensity of commercially-driven competition for the public's attention, the task of deflecting public scrutiny away from the activities of the state is achieved through deniable acts of omission and carefully crafted strategic communication (eg., Reith,1999). Informed social criticism is marginalised through practices of co-option (eg, welfare agencies funded to police the unemployed, academics agreeing to have their funded research doctored), biased media format (eg., public debate by soundbite), strategic editing, and the mass production and dissemination of reaction (eg., Sydney Institute, IPA, CIS, Murdoch press). Compliance and conformity are also nurtured by fostering dependence on the only system that can satisfy the appetites it creates. The absence of scrutiny leaves the way clear for those who manage the state to deploy the state's unique array of repulsive and attractive incentives in the service of those controlling the money and favourable public awareness they need to remain the managers of the state.⁸ Public perception of the competence of politicians is managed by media owners determining (usually by repetition) the key issues on which political players are judged, eg., tax cuts and budget

surpluses rather than improved social welfare provision. The ability of these media to control political debate is preserved through careful cultivation of an optimal level of interest in public affairs: not so great that people will tune into obscure (uncontrolled) sources of information, not so little that they will tune out of mainstream (controlled) sources of information (Iyengar, 2004: 247-257).

In summary (Figure 3.), wealth controls the state, the state herds the bulk of the population to seek wages with various repulsive incentives, which coupled with the attractive incentives of the consumption sphere, underpin the chain of productivity-driving thresholds in the production sphere. Production fuels consumption, consumption generates dependence, distraction, and public complacency over the role of the state, which enables those with wealth to control the state, which controls the populace on its behalf.

Figure 2 The accumulation cycle



2. The motivation for social control

2.1 Introduction

According to this model of the accumulation cycle, the elimination of poverty and unemployment would constitute a significant diminution in the state's ability to deploy repulsive incentive as a tool of strategic control on behalf of those controlling who may be its managers. To the extent that this would diminish the desirability of crossing the employment threshold, it would also diminish what its controllers can charge for passage across it. Compensatory increases in attractive incentives to cross the threshold, to the extent that they cost money, will diminish the rate of accumulation. This warrants consideration as to the strategic options open to both those seeking this result and those seeking to resist it.

Marx and his followers argued for the usurpation of the owners of the means of production, ie., the controllers of the production and consumption thresholds, through the worker's seizure of the state and the state's seizure of the means of production. He inadequately enunciated how these and other thresholds would consequently operate, what forms of incentive would apply across them, or what tolls would be charged for passage.⁹ The disadvantage of this approach is reflected in what followed as a consequence of abolishing unemployment in the Soviet Union in the early 1930's, whereby other incentives were created to drive productivity.

‘the search for alternative forms of labour discipline was a necessary counterpart to the abolition of unemployment. In its search for these alternatives, the government improvised frenetically, and the solutions it found profoundly shaped the structure of the emerging Soviet society. The logic of the issue can be seen clearly through the crucial issue of labour turnover, or ‘floating’.’ (Christian, 1985: 96)

‘Floating’ refers to the propensity of workers to quit unpalatable work when they believe they will not be significantly penalised by doing so. Public pressure was brought to bear, urging expulsion of ‘quitters from party and union. People were vilified for not pledging to remain in their jobs. Unemployment benefits were abolished for quitters, internal passports detailing employment history were re-introduced in 1932 after their abolition in 1917. Truancy was punished with loss of ration cards and eviction from enterprise housing. By 1938, quitters lost health and maternity insurance rights, with the right to leave a job finally abolished in 1940. (Christian, 1985: 97- 99). In the state socialist states that emerged during the 20th century, party membership became a crucial threshold, and conformance to the party line a crucial toll to be paid (particularly during oppressive periods under Stalin, for example).

Thus, usurpation of strategic threshold control (eg, violent overthrow of the state in a mass revolution led by a revolutionary vanguard) provides no certainty that what subsequently emerges would constitute any greater freedom from domination. Gate-crashing (eg., theft, occupation of workplaces) has a similarly limited potential. In any event, as Gorz argued, an emerging proletarian revolutionary consciousness (as would engage in the overthrow of the state) was a philosophical assertion of Marx without empirical basis. Modern capitalism produces a wage-working herd functional to its needs, which do not include a disposition or capacity to seize and control the state (Gorz, 1980).

An alternate strategy for diminishing domination is to reduce the incentive to cross strategically controlled thresholds, which entails reducing the perceived repulsion and attraction on either side of them. For example, in relation to the employment threshold, one way would be to reduce the perceived repulsiveness of unemployment (for example, by redressing the stigma, social isolation, boredom, inactivity etc. of the unemployed) or

reducing the perceived appeal of employment, (eg., denying that material consumption is a path to happiness).

Another strategy is to devise methods of by-passing strategically controlled thresholds by creating other non-strategically controlled means of reaching desired goals. Assuming that people primarily seek to cross the employment threshold to achieve economic security, this could be achieved without their having to supply surplus labour to a profit-seeking employer, either by provision of a guaranteed minimum income, expanding free public services, or by providing immediately accessible public sector employment. If we accept that employment meets additional psycho-social needs (social contact, activity and stimulation, daily structure, social identity) (Jahoda, 1982) then public sector job creation emerges as the closest potential alternative of obtaining what private sector employment offers while avoiding the toll demanded of the private sector employer. This may be achieved through general expansion of the public sector, selective public works, or the establishment of an 'employer of last resort' (ELR) program, such as the CofFEE Job Guarantee or the CFEPS ELR (Mitchell & Wray, 2004).

Diminishing the ability of some people to manipulate what serve as attractive and repulsive incentives to others seems an obvious step toward a freer, less dominated society, but many will respond: is this desirable? If people were less compelled to work hard, because they were less driven by the repulsiveness of unemployment or the attraction of material possessions, or could achieve economic security without surrendering significant amounts of their surplus labour, would that produce a better or worse society? The rest of this discussion is primarily focused on addressing this issue.

There can be any number of ways of expressing what constitutes the best social system, but most definitions are likely to entail the idea that it should 'most efficiently meet the needs of the greatest proportion of humans, while enabling the greatest possible freedom and the greatest possible rate of sustainable growth'. Such statements are only useful, however, if we can define 'freedom', 'human need' and 'growth'. The argument implied by the accumulation cycle model is that the fewer incentives there are by which some people can significantly influence the behaviour of others, the freer the society. But to be definitive as to what a human needs we need to be clear about what a human is, and if we are growing something we should be clear as to what it is and why we are growing it. To answer these questions, we can benefit from considering them through the lens of multiple disciplines.

2.2 Human nature

Humans are animals whose lineage separated from chimpanzees 6.5 million years ago at the stage of development known as Australopithecus. This species is believed to have had highly sophisticated social cognitive ability comparable to that observed in modern gorillas and chimpanzees. This enables our nearest living relatives to anticipate the reactions of others to their behavior, to build coalitions, declare submission to authority, and to engage in deceit and treachery ("machivellianism") (Byrne & Whiten, 1988). The processing power required to manage the tactical and diplomatic requirements of group life is a leading theory ("Social Brain Hypothesis") as to the impetus for the rapid growth in hominid brain size (Barrett, Dunbar, Lycett, 2002:139). The pack reproduced over millennia, restocking with the offspring of the most lethal and the most strategically adept social survivors of the previous generation. Refinement of their skills of domination / subordination contributed to the external competitiveness and internal coherence of the pack, and thus to the establishment of our species as the most lethal on the planet.

Human cognition is widely believed to have evolved a modularised structure, with cognitive processing ability first increasing with an expansion of general-purpose intelligence that subsequently differentiated into context-relevant domains capable of faster processing of more complex phenomena¹⁰. The social (folk-psychology) domain (that we saw exists in gorillas and chimps) is the most ancient of the higher functioning brain specialisations of humans, thought to have emerged over 6 million years ago at the time of Australopithecus (Mithen, 1996; Geary & Huffman, 2002: 667-697). Two other specialised cognitive domains later emerged (about 1.5 million years ago) that enabled hominids to develop instrumental control over their physical environment and strategically outperform other species. A 'physics' domain processed cognition of movement, representation and engineering (relating to the manipulation of the physical universe, eg., tool making). A separate 'biology domain' processed cognition of flora and fauna (Mithen, 1996; Geary & Huffman, 2002). These three cognitive domains are thought to have functioned independent of each other during the next million or so years, so that concepts processed by one were not accessible by the other two. For example, animal bones and furs (biology domain), do not appear to have been used to make tools (physics domain) or to signify social status (social domain). Homo erectus and early Homo Sapiens are thought to have experienced this compartmentalisation in a way similar to the motorist that drives their car through complex traffic situations focussing on something completely unrelated, like a conversation with a passenger, competently yet unconsciously deploying driving skills and knowledge (Mithen, 1996).

Modern humans emerged in their present physical form approximately 500,000 years ago, and possibly possessed some form of low level language as long ago as 250,000 years (Frankish, 2000). Even so, it was not until sometime between 70,000 and 40,000 years ago that the enormous cultural explosion took place that has so clearly delineated our species from other living things, reflected in the emergence of cave art, diversified technology, status symbols and religious rituals. It is believed that the social, technological and natural history cognitive domains that till then had been separate, achieved 'cognitive fluidity', a sharing of the comprehension and awareness of the elements formerly confined to each. Though debates rage over the timing and impetus for the emergence of language, it is likely to have been the principal connecting mechanism, itself a capacity traceable to specific language acquisition structures in the brain. Arguments as to whether a natural internal language preceded verbal language, that a simple communicative language preceded cognitive language, or that our conscious selves are virtual and formed simultaneously with language, are unresolved. (Chomsky, 1975; Bickerton, 1995; Barret, et al, 2002:330-331;Mithen, 1996; Carruthers, 1998; Dennett, 1991, Frankish, 2000, Dunbar, 1996, 1993).

Whatever the precise mechanism, the establishment of 'cognitive fluidity' (Mithen, 1996) was a quantum leap. It enabled members of our species to consciously reflect upon, express and *compare* their understandings of the social, biological and physical elements of the universe, thus enabling the building of verifiable knowledge and its transmission across generations. It enabled us to achieve levels of adaptable social coordination of unparalleled sophistication on this planet. This was manifested in technology, bio-management (hunting and agricultural technique), art, religion, text and other practices that could be deployed in the process of social management and coordination. With expanding comprehension of the physical universe our cognitive selves eventually extricated the bodies we occupy from most of the life-threatening hardships of nature, and thereby from the mechanism of physical natural selection. Today, even the most powerless and dysfunctional can survive and reproduce in the modern industrialised environments humans have engineered for themselves.

2.3 Human need

What then do humans need? The physical needs of the modern human body are probably not so different to those of our pre-conscious predecessors, requiring relatively finite quantities of air, water, nutrition, exercise, sleep, stable temperature, shelter from injury, etc. Though not exclusively, we still use sex to reproduce. Both our material needs and the resources we must consume to satisfy them are finite, and therefore unquestionably quantifiable and capable of fairly precise accounting. The possibility of sustainably meeting all human physical need is therefore calculable and those that have made this calculation have found we have had the means to eliminate material deprivation on this planet for many decades.

But in addition to our physical needs, our complex cognitive architecture creates needs of its own. To perform its function of providing its body with survival-enhancing orientation to its environment, our consciousness compiles itself as a cognitive map of what it perceives and theorises of existence. Cognitive theory holds that as new experiences are encountered they are interpreted and compared with information we have already accepted as 'true'. These truthful propositions or 'cognitions' are integrated within us when they appear consistent with what we already hold to be true, and rejected when they appear to contradict. Experiences that are partially compatible with previous understandings are 'selectively perceived': reinterpreted and reconfigured to better conform to previously accepted 'truths' before being integrated (Festinger, 1957; Gass & Seiter, 2003:64-68). We perceive contradictory implications arising from our set of 'truthful' propositions as a form of 'aversive anxiety' known as 'cognitive dissonance'.

The intensity of dissonance depends on the relative proportions of dissonant and consonant cognitions in the person's cognitive system as well as the cognition's relative importance. According to Festinger, cognitive dissonance produces a state of aversive tension that people are motivated to reduce. This can be achieved by the addition of new consonant cognitions, by elimination of dissonant cognitions, or by reducing the importance of these cognitions. In all cases, the objective is to reduce the discrepancy between the cognitions. (Jonas, et al, 2003:1183)

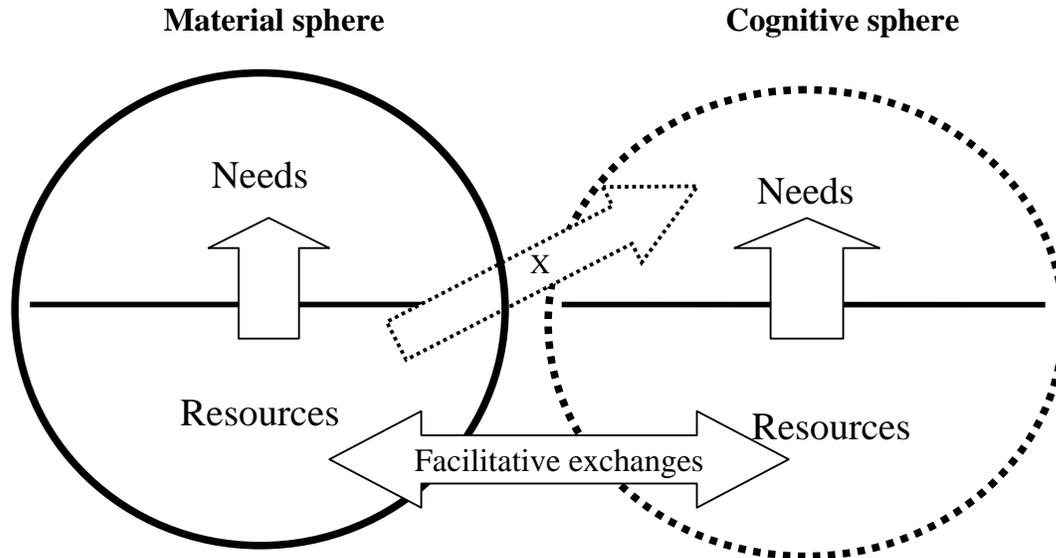
The crystallisation of consciousness within our animal bodies was an arrival, a birth of what is effectively a new class of non-material entity on this planet, composed of information¹¹ and with a need (appetite) to assimilate congruent information (knowledge / truth) and eliminate perceived inconsistencies (dissonance) between the cognitive propositions of which it is composed. Our 'human nature', is thus focused on satisfying both the material appetites of our material bodies and the cognitive (knowledge / truth) appetites of our cognitive selves. While (with the aid of medicine and other sciences) most of us are aware of our material needs, certainly hunger and thirst for example, we are less skilled at understanding our cognitive needs. These are shaped in part by the strengths and limitations of our cognitive apparatus, our habits of perceiving and comprehending, and our limited capacity to share and compare our experience of existence with others.

2.4 Allocative efficiency

DNA appropriates material from its environment for incorporation into itself in order to grow and reproduce, as do our bodies which are elaborations on the basic DNA design. Similarly, our cognitive selves incorporate knowledge of our existence gleaned from our perception of our environment and what is communicated to us by others. As a compound of these two processes, humans meet their material and cognitive needs through two distinct processes, drawing on two distinct types of resources. Crucially, only a material resource (eg., food, water, a woollen jumper, etc.), can satisfy a material need, and only a cognitive resource (eg.,

knowledge, information) can satisfy a cognitive need. Needs / resources pertaining to the material sphere are absolute, hence finite and calculable, while those pertaining to the cognitive sphere are relative, hence infinite and incalculable.

Figure 3 Exchanges between the material and cognitive spheres of human existence



While these two spheres are existentially distinct, to *assist* the efficient procurement of resources pertaining to the satisfaction of needs in one sphere, we routinely appropriate resources pertaining to the other. For example, to obtain information we may read a book, use a telephone, watch television, all of which are material things built from material resources. Conversely, we use our knowledge of agriculture, or of the procedures of supermarket shopping, to provide our bodies with appropriate nutrition.

The relative efficiency of exchanges can be significant, and yet are routinely overlooked when we conflate these two dimensions of human existence / human need. The material sphere can make infinite demands on cognitive resources without depleting them, and indeed, the cognitive sphere was called into existence by the body's need to better comprehend its environment in order to better meet its material needs. Moderate use of material resources in the deployment of cognitive resources to satisfy cognitive needs is also beneficial.

These 'facilitative exchanges' are not fundamentally erroneous, because the need being addressed is still ultimately being satisfied by resources drawn from its own sphere, albeit with some facilitation by resources in the other. Far more problematic are spurious exchanges (arrow X in Figure 3), particularly those arising where finite, thus depletable, material resources are appropriated in the mistaken belief that they will *satisfy* a cognitive need (eg., eating food because one feels unloved; amassing inconsumable wealth in a symbolic bid for immortality). Spurious exchanges in the opposite direction, such as a kind word to a person who is starving, are also possible though their folly is more obvious to us. This mismatching of need and resource means the real need remains unmet, and the real hunger is never satisfied no matter how much of the inappropriate resource is consumed. Where an unsatisfiable, infinite, cognitive appetite drives consumption of a finite material resource to its depletion, the misallocation inevitably precludes the satisfaction of the material needs that such resources alone *can* satisfy. The billions of people who currently live and die in conditions of

unnecessary material deprivation, and the billions more that will join them as the Earth's finite resources are steadily depleted, are the victims of such misallocation. Significantly, since the 1950's the global advertising and marketing industry has been scientifically refining its techniques for psychologically inducing appetites in audiences in order to fuel material consumption¹² (Ewen, 1976; Packard, 1962; Clark, 1988; Key, 1972). Our commercialised culture actively promotes this misallocation.

2.5 Cognitive deprivation

The failure to squarely address and dispel the dissonance arising from fundamental inconsistencies in what we hold to be true, the deep and disturbing anomalies in our conception of existence, gives rise to attempts to suppress our awareness of those anomalies, to embrace spurious explanations for them to which we then force the world to conform. Such attitudes and practices result in the preservation of unsustainable resource misallocation and social oppression. Political, commercial and industrial psychologists have privately explored and exploited these effects for decades, but since the 1980's, academic interest has turned to seeking how to overcome them. Empirical studies in Terror Management Theory (TMT) demonstrate that to suppress the dissonance arising from subliminal awareness of the inevitability of death (mortality salience) people embrace more materialistic, accumulative, and hierarchy-enhancing attitudes and behaviours, turn to charismatic leaders, and pursue wealth and other symbols of immortality in a subconscious bid to avoid death (Solomon, et al 1998; Landau, et al 2004; Kasser, & Sheldon, 2004; Cohen et al, 2004). Conversely, when people are placed in situations (actually and experimentally) where they are forced to directly confront and accept the prospect of their death, as Near Death Experience (NDE) and Post Traumatic Growth (PTG) research reveals, they frequently become less materialistic, less hierarchical, and more embracing of the 'other' (Cozzolino et al, 2004: 280). Explorations in the drivers of authoritarianism, essentialism, social dominance orientation, find evidence of various underlying ego-buffering, anxiety suppression and other psychological causes (Sidanius et al, 2003; Rabinowitz, 1999). Of particular interest to a critical theoretical perspective¹³ is a System Justification Theory (SJT) that addresses why hierarchy and social injustice are so stable, and why subordinate groups have historically acquiesced in their subordination.

Observing that self interest is a poor predictor of political ideology, that low income groups are scarcely more likely to support economically redistributive policies than wealthy groups, SJT research has detected a 'general (but not insurmountable) system justification motive to defend and justify the status quo and to bolster the legitimacy of the existing social order' (Jost et al: 887). They see this interacting with two other levels of justification: Firstly 'ego justification', the need to maintain 'a favourable self image, and to feel valid, justified and legitimate as an individual actor'; and secondly, 'group justification', the desire to maintain a favourable image of one's group and 'to defend and justify the behavior of fellow in-group members'. An innate need to 'imbue the status quo with legitimacy and to see it as good, fair, natural, desirable and even inevitable' means that

...hierarchy is maintained not only through mechanisms of ingroup favouritism and outgroup derogation exercised by members of dominant groups, but also the complicity of members of subordinated groups, many of whom perpetuate inequality through mechanisms such as outgroup favouritism (Jost *et al*, 885).

Poor and powerless individuals are observed to preserve their self-esteem by dissociating themselves from the poor image of the socio-economic group to which they belong, often by joining in with their denigration (eg., the unemployed: see (Kenny, 1986)). The observation that SJT is strengthened by mortality salience suggests that believing the system is rational

and good reduces the anxiety people would feel at it being irrational and bad, even when presented with evidence to that effect. Finding reason to believe the system good may be a crucial coping mechanism, helping people through adverse situations they feel powerless to change. It means though that:

‘...members of disadvantaged groups are likely to engage in social change only when ego justification and/or group justification motives overcome the strength of the system justification needs and tendencies’ (Jost, et al, 2004 :887)

The possibility that must be considered, then, is that a community-wide focus on developing a more coherent conception of existence, one that dispels rather than suppresses deeply embedded dissonance by explaining perceived existential contradictions, may be crucial not just to social progress (more freedom and less deprivation) but also to our survival as a species.

3. Conclusion

Diminishing the exploitative power of our society’s significant strategically controlled thresholds is argued here to be a necessary step toward more freedom and less material deprivation, particularly that being brought about by spurious misallocations of material resources. Support for reducing the power differentials across incentive thresholds, or for bypassing them, entails abandonment of neurotic appetitive and hierarchical attitudes and behaviours. The evidence of political psychological research is that to do this we individually and collectively need to resolve deep seated anomalies in our conception of the universe and our place in it. We need to face fearful truths and come to an understanding of them. Only by acquiring this sort of knowledge can we dispel the dissonance-generating anomalies that appear to be at the heart of extinction-threatening propensities of our species.

What I am arguing for is ‘cognitive growth’, the assimilation of a more comprehensive account of the nature of our existence, which is the same as saying, lets have more truth and knowledge. Habermas (1991) makes a case that such knowledge is only possible through communication that is free of strategic distortion. Our cognitive selves, isolated as we are in our own perspectives of existence, need to cross reference with others to view our existence from all perspectives, to see and understand what we alone do not, in order to build a more comprehensive picture of what we are collectively experiencing. The only possible test of the truthfulness of such a synthesis is whether all who contribute to it can freely attest to its truthfulness. This cannot happen among communicants engaged in either domination or subordination, because strategically distorted communication is routinely deployed from both sides of dominant / subordinate relationships.

We are thus faced with a zero-sum option, between two types of growth:

- Ramping up strategically distorted communication to justify more repulsive incentives and removal of by-passes to incentive-controlling thresholds, to increase material production, and the fuelling of consumption by further cognitive manipulation of material appetites, (material “growth”), or
- the diminution of incentive differentials across strategic thresholds, to reduce the need to defend them with strategically distorted communication, enabling the reduction in dissonance-driven appetites for material accumulation and consumption, and domination / subordination, through growing self-knowledge (cognitive growth).

In the first option, spurious and futile misallocation of finite material resources to infinite cognitive appetites will lead to their inevitable depletion, while the latter conserves material resources to meet material needs and facilitate infinitely sustainable cognitive growth. Both material and cognitive deprivation grow with the first option, both are diminished in the latter,

better meeting the needs of more people. People are less free in the first option, being more subject to incentives controlled by others than in the latter. Thus, reducing incentives and creating ways to bypass the strategic thresholds of the accumulation cycle is more likely to create a better society, one that 'most efficiently meets the needs of the greatest proportion of humans, while enabling the greatest possible freedom and the greatest possible rate of sustainable growth'.

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² A simple heuristic tool such as a useful metaphor can give us better traction on a complex issue, sufficient to enable some useful theory-building. Metaphors enable us to recognise hitherto unrecognisable patterns in apparently disconnected phenomena, by applying a model used to understand the causal relationships present in one phenomenon to suggest possible causal relationships that may be present in another. This is useful if it brings an underlying and hitherto unseen causal mechanism to our attention, even if it does not accurately describe all its significant elements. The task of science is to then test the correspondence of such a proposed model with perceivable reality, and alter the terms of its expression to improve their correspondence to what we are attempting to describe in order to share our understanding of it (Lewis, 1999:83-98).

³ For example: The Hon Tony Abbott MP, Minister for Employment Services interview with a delegation of the United Kingdom Parliament, 2 / 11 / 98. "The Minister argued that two ways to get more people into work were to reduce wages or to make it more difficult for people to remain unemployed by reducing benefits. However, neither of these options were available to the Government. One of the aims of the Work for the Dole project, therefore, was to make work more appealing *vis a vis* non-work. "Work for the Dole" provided better value for much the same return as "Working Nation" (UKP, 1998).

⁴ For example: Kevin Andrews, Minister for Employment and Workplace Relation, rejected the suggestion by the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) to lower unemployment through direct public sector job creation along the lines advocated by the Centre of Full Employment and Equity (CofFEE) with the following admission: "Offering guaranteed jobs at the [Federal Minimum Wage] can also have impacts on incentives. Although you suggest that the CD-JG would not substitute private sector jobs, once on a Government funded guaranteed job for unlimited duration that pays the FMW, a person may not see the advantage in seeking or taking up a private sector job". (Andrews, 2004). Unemployment is thus preserved to drive people into private sector employment.

⁵ The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) classifies one hour of paid work (or unpaid work for a business owned by a family member) as 'employed'. Australian labour force became one of the most casualised in the OECD in the 1990's, heightening the deficiency of official labour market data. If Australia adopted German practice of counting 15 hours work per week as 'employed', Australia's official unemployment rate would rise significantly.

⁶ As the Times of London, explained in 1943: "Unemployment is not a mere accidental blemish in a private enterprise economy. On the contrary, it is part of the essential mechanism of the system, and has a definite function to fulfil. The first function of unemployment (which has always existed in open or disguised form) is that it maintains the authority of master over man. The master has normally been in a position to say: 'If you do not want the job, there are plenty of others who do. When the man can say: 'If you do not want to employ me, there are plenty of others who will,' the situation is radically altered." (Korpi, 2002: 6)

⁷ Harold Lasswell summed the situation up in a 1970 address to the American Psychological Association: "If the earlier promise was that knowledge would make men free, the contemporary reality seems to be that more men are manipulated without their consent for more purposes by more techniques and by fewer men than at any time in history" (Albee, 1982)

⁸ Alex Carey's famous summation is apt : "The twentieth century has been characterised by three developments of great political importance: the growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power, and the growth of corporate propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy" (Carey, 1996: 18).

⁹ "That nothing is lost or wasted and the means of production are consumed only in the manner required by production itself, depends partly on the skill and intelligence of the labourers and partly on the discipline enforced by the capitalist for the combined labour. This discipline will become superfluous under a social system in which the workers work for their own account, as it has already become practically superfluous in piece-work". Marx (1959) Capital Vol III, Progress Printers, Moscow. Page 83.

¹⁰ For the sake of coherence I present a broad brush account of material in psychology and other disciplines, in which I am not trained, well aware that many of the details of these concepts are contentious. The fundamental argument I make can accommodate other accounts of these processes, and I leave those debates to those better equipped to have them. Their research has crucial implications for social theory, politics, economics etc., and I welcome any advice on ways to refine my reportage of it.

¹¹ Frankish (2000) refines the suggestion of Dennett (1991) that our cognitive selves are composed of a non-verbal 'natural language', that we do not exist within our brain structures but as expressions within the language (program) that is processed by those brain structures.

¹² Packard cites the April 1950 edition of the Journal of Marketing as the moment at which research dating from the 1930's in 'depth techniques' or 'Motivational Research' entered the US commercial mainstream, prompted in part by the growing realization that consumers (and certainly market research survey respondents) did not appear to know what they want, and were often not prepared to admit what they want if they did know. The frustration this caused merchandisers and manufacturers drove them to adopt more sophisticated approaches to understanding the public psyche, which led to their discovery of ways to manipulate it for commercial and political purposes (Packard, 1962: 17-37).

¹³ Critical theory seeks to liberate the oppressed by bringing them to an understanding of the repressive ideology that oppresses them (Dryzek, 1995: 99).