**Confronting Modern Lifestyles（Excerpt）**

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【1】Few people would disagree that modern society has changed dramatically in the course of only a few decades. These changes can be characterized in a variety of different ways. We can point, for example, to the growth in disposable incomes, to a massive expansion in the availability of consumer goods and services, to higher levels of personal mobility, increases in leisure expenditure and a reduction in the time spent in routine domestic tasks.

【2】We might highlight the gains in technological efficiency provided by an increasingly sophisticated knowledge base. Or the rising resource “footprint” of modern consumption patterns. Or the intensification of trade. Or the decline in traditional rural industries. Or the translocation of manufacturing towards the developing world. Or the emergence of the “knowledge” economy.

【3】We should certainly point out that these changes have been accompanied, and sometimes facilitated, by changes in the underlying institutional structures: the deregulation (or reregulation) of key industries, the liberalization of markets, the easing of international trade restrictions, the rise in consumer debt and the commoditization of previously noncommercial areas of our lives.

【4】We could also identify some of the social effects that accompanied these changes: a faster pace of life; rising social expectations; increasing divorce rates; rising levels of violent crime; smaller household sizes; the emergence of a “cult of celebrity”; the escalating “message density” of modern living; increasing disparities (in income and time) between the rich and the poor, the emergence of “postmaterialist” values; a loss of trust in the conventional institutions of church, family, and state; and a more secular society.

【5】It is clear, even from this cursory overview, that no simple overriding “good” or “bad” trend emerges from this complexity. Rather, modernity is characterized by a variety of trends that often seem to be set (in part at least) in opposition to each other. The identification of a set of “postmaterialist” values in modern society appears at odds with the increased proliferation of consumer goods. People appear to express less concern for material things, and yet have more of them in their lives.

【6】The abundance offered by the liberalization of trade is offset by the environmental damage from transporting these goods across distances to reach our supermarket shelves. The liberalization of the electricity market has increased the efficiency of generation, reduced the cost of electricity to consumers and at the same time made it more difficult to identify and exploit the opportunities for end-use energy efficiency.

【7】To take another example, the emergence of the knowledge economy has increased the availability and the value of information. Simultaneously, it has intensified the complexity of ordinary decision-making in people’s lives. As Nobel laureate Hebert Simon has pointed out, information itself consumes scarce resources. “What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention, and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it”. This consuming effect of information makes the concept of “informed choice” at once more important and at the same time more difficult to achieve in modern society.

【8】These examples all serve to illustrate that modern lifestyles are both complex and haunted by paradox. This is certainly one of the reasons why policy makers have tended to shy away from the whole question of consumer behavior and lifestyle change. It is clear nonetheless that coming to grips with consumption patterns, understanding the dynamics of lifestyle and influencing people’s attitudes and behaviors are all essential if the kinds of deep environmental targets demanded by sustainable development are to be achieved.