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Managing Overflow in Affluent Societies

Edited by
Barbara Czarniawska and
Orvar Löfgren



Managing Overflow in Affluent Societies

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Managing Overflow in Affluent Societies

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and Orvar Löfgren**

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1 The Inherited Theories of Overflow and Their Challengers

Orvar Löfgren and Barbara Czarniawska

Many contemporary societies are supposed to have entered a stage of overflow—overflow of information, of consumption, of choices—which at times is portrayed as challenging, and at other times as fortunate. An appreciation of this tension is an important and integral component in understanding different kinds of overflow. Discussions of overflow—framed in terms of excess and abundance or their implicit opposites, scarcity and dearth—crop up in a number of contexts such as economic theory, management consulting, consumer studies, and the politics of everyday life. Although the phenomenon itself varies, the participants in such discussions—both academic and popular—usually apply the same notion of “overflow,” using it as a key to understanding various morally laden issues. As a result, the concept of overflow is symbolically loaded with a multitude of overtones, linked to numerous competing and contested worldviews, and inserted in many different ways into a wider “moral economy.” Many different phenomena are subsumed under the same concept, but also when applied to the same phenomenon, the meaning of the concept can vary dramatically depending on who is using it and in which circumstances. The term overflow or its synonyms (excess, surplus, overspill, etc.) is used as a label, as a classifying device, and such application has strongly normative consequences: a phenomenon thus classified must be “managed.” The very application of this label is the first of many strategies subsequently devised to frame or to control it. This classifying operation and the norms and activities that follow it are at the center of our attention.

This volume begins with an overview of the potentials and quandaries related to different conceptualizations of overflow as aids of gathering understanding of societal change and transformation typical of today’s Western societies. At the bottom of all different conceptualizations is a tension between perception of overflow (of any kind) as a problem or as a solution. To begin with the former, “It is simply too much!” has become a common complaint in contemporary Western societies, where many people often feel they are living in a situation of overflow because they have to deal with a steadily growing amount of commodities, technologies, and time constraints. Too much information, too many market choices, too many

responsibilities, and too many social relations, is the common complaint. This has been evident, for example, in the discussions around the “burn-out syndrome” denoting mental and physical exhaustion, a syndrome—or at least a discussion—that swept like an epidemic through many Western nations during the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Viewed from such a perspective, overflows can be understood to be the seedbed for widespread cultural uncertainty and nervousness. Large quantities of information, choices, responsibilities, and social relations create a wary sense of having too little organizing skill and memory capacity to control information flow; too little knowledge to make the right choices; too little competence to manage responsibility assuredly; and too little time to maintain relations.

Considered from a less dystopic angle, any overflow can be understood in terms of an opportunity and a creative richness. Such conceptualization invites a celebration of abundance, a delight in excess, and a desire to acquire more. Nevertheless, behind these perceptions of excess one can still detect a discourse of scarcity. Societies that “do not have enough” are assumed to suffer; potlatch economies are sometimes presented as a paradise lost. In a sense, this reasoning formed the basis upon which the welfare state originally took form, and it is through such perception that projects of charity, compassion, love, and caring develop and come to fruition.

Framed in terms of consumption, the notion of overflow turns scholarly attention toward desire as a cultural and economic force. And while desire may at times be understood to express a sense of “something lacking,” it can also be seen as a productive and facilitating force in society. Affluence and abundance open the way for new possibilities, and can be important prerequisites for the channeling of desire and its potential. In this way, desire fuels production, and the two stages become inseparable.

In short, overflow has been noticed and conceptualized in different ways in different epochs and social settings, and discourses about overflow almost always have a moral dimension. We wish to turn it into an open question, or rather several questions: What is overflowing? According to whom? Is it desirable or threatening, and if so, to whom? Some of these questions have a long history, but we plan to join the search for answers, however tentative and partial they might turn out to be. We chose the term “overflow” *because* of its multiple meanings, as these open possibilities of new explorations, but we are fully aware of the institutional embedding of the concept, and the connected dangers. In the book, we intend to scrutinize the play of metaphors, rather than trying to judge their supposed “correctness.”

In studies reported in this volume, we attempted to practice a symmetric attitude (Latour, 2005) assuming that overflow can be both positive and negative, that it can have different forms and different contents, and that both its existence and its evaluation are far from given. Our main focus is on the process of collective construction of definitions of overflow and

excess (and by the same token, of sufficiency and moderation), and of a variety of methods of preventing, framing, or using overflow, which we expect to differ from one societal realm to another, but also to be transferred among such realms aided by imitation and translation processes.

Transdisciplinarity is a trademark of each chapter in this volume, not only of their sum. The many variations of the phenomenon—as perceived by the actors involved, not as circumscribed by the disciplinary definitions—were the guide to the choice of disciplines to be combined in studying it. Thus management scholars evaluate the symbolic value of economic action, whereas ethnologists calculate the price of cultural expressions, with sociologists doing both. In this way, we hope to produce joined insights into phenomena that are much debated but relatively unstudied.

Let us then begin by taking a look at the morphology of the three parts that make up our topic. First we tackle the *flow* metaphor, then we scrutinize the etymological baggage of the prefix *over-*, and last we discuss the meaning of *managing* in the context of overflow. Thus equipped, we will formulate more explicitly the aims of this volume.

METAPHORS

Flow

Most metaphorical associations for the term “flow” lead toward physics, and furthermore, to Newtonian mechanics. Flow also has connections to work organization and loading capacity theories in engineering and logistics. Flood regulation is another obvious association, and so is an association with liquids in general. This last is best represented in the conceptualization of the present state of modernity suggested by Bauman in his *Liquid Modernity* (2000), where he warned against confusing “liquidity” or “fluidity” with “lightness” or “weightlessness” (usually associated with mobility and inconstancy). What sets liquids apart from solids is the looseness and frailty of their bonds, not their gravity or lack of it. What makes liquids an apt metaphor for our times, in Bauman’s eyes, is their inability to hold their shape for long on their own.

The “flow,” the favorite metaphor of the social psychologist Csikszentmihalyi (1997), is the defining characteristic of all liquids. It suggests a continuous and irreversible change of mutual position of parts, which, because of the weakness of inter-molecular bonds, can be triggered by even the weakest of stresses. Yet already here the tension suggested above is present: Bauman alerted his readers to the instability of modern life, whereas Csikszentmihalyi saw flow as a synonym for the modern sense of happiness.

Another aspect contributing to the metaphorical usefulness of liquids is their sensitivity to time, contrary to solids, which could be seen as devices to annul the impact of time. Bauman focused on analyzing the fragility and

temporary nature of human relationships; we intend to absorb his insights, but also to include questions concerning continuity and duration.

Over the past two decades, scholars in the humanities and social sciences have vigorously invoked the flow metaphor, as a means of coming to terms with, and understanding, processes involving movement and directionality. Most descriptions of postfordism claim as its characteristic the newly created flow, or blurring of borders between work and leisure (Aglietta, 1979; Hochschild, 1997). The flow metaphor has been central to the study of processes of globalization (see, e.g., Hannerz, 1990; Urry, 1990/2001; Appadurai, 1996; Castells, 1996;). In this context, flow is a metaphor of mobility, but there can also be other connotations of the term.

Also the emerging subdiscipline of the sociology of financial markets (Knorr Cetina, 2004) takes a “flow world” as its central metaphor. The reasoning, which we find interesting, is as follows: “the notion of ‘world’ as a natural container of globalizing processes of many sorts is (. . .) problematic” (Knorr Cetina, 2004: 38). In its place, Knorr Cetina offered the notion of flow, in order to put in focus a discontinuity

between the spatial or physical world we usually conceive of, and that of a time world. (. . .) In a timeworld or a flowworld (. . .) the content itself is processual—a “melt” of material that is continually in flux, and that exists only as it is being projected forward and calls forth participants’ reactions and contribution to the flux. Only ‘frames’ (. . .) are presupposed in this flowworld. (pp. 39–40)

But the frames can overflow, or be transgressed, just as a container that overflows. It is the prefix “over-” that drastically changes the meaning.

Over-

When *over* is used as a prefix, it usually indicates excess (Lakoff, 1987: 433). In this context, we are especially interested in the tensions conventionally arising between the prefixes of “over-” and “under-”: overload, overbearing, overworked, overburdened, overeating, over-achiever, overabundance, overkill, overdone—or underfed, underdone, understated, undersexed, undersized, underemployed, underexposed, underdeveloped. This leads toward the ideas of satisfaction and saturation, but also spillage and slippage, diffusion and osmosis.

Lakoff (1987: 434) pointed out that in “overflowing” the notion of excess evokes not only an image, but also a metaphor, based on the everyday experience of correlating overflowing with waste and mess. If something “flows over,” it leaves one area and enters another: contaminating, enhancing, changing, or perhaps having the opposite effect: reinforcing, diluting, and enriching. But overflows can even run, moving through areas, entering others. In so doing they reshape the cultural terrain they enter

and pass through, destabilizing and upsetting those landscapes in some contexts, smoothing and calming them in others (Bogard, 2000). There are geographical implications to the notion of overflow that must be addressed in any study of the phenomenon. In the psychological context, however, overflow can be delineated in terms of an inability to contain, or an overwhelming desire to transcend, and, more often than not, both.

Above, we mentioned the mechanical associations to the notion of flow, which apply even more forcefully to the notion of overflow. There are obvious dangers in an unreflective use of such metaphors. First of all, they may trap us into thinking of culture as a liquid in a container or as a limited good. Excess is then produced through the mechanisms of pushing, swelling, spilling over. A kind of “hydraulic cultural thinking” is often the result: an overflow or elaboration in one cultural field must result in drainage, scarcity, or thinning out somewhere else. Excessive consumption or overloaded lives thus make experiences more shallow, less sincere or engaged; framed in this manner, these types of processes take the form of a diluting flow that threatens to drain everyday life of emotional content.

The polarities of the prefixes over- and under- have a central position in much of economic and social theory. Since the late nineteenth century, social scientists from Thorstein Veblen onward have been largely concerned with overflows as a negative process often tied to discussions of affluence, mass culture, and accelerating consumption. During the 1920s and 1930s, the tradition of the Frankfurt School (from Krakauer to Adorno) focused on problems of mass consumption and ideas of an increasing artificialization (as in “the entertainment” or “the culture industry”) and shallowness of experiences—overflow as wastefulness and decadence. After World War II, Bataille (1949/1991), writing in devastated France, joined them in condemnation of luxury and excess.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, however, “the new affluent society” spawned a new debate. Russell’s provocative essay from 1932, *In Praise of Idleness*, was remembered and became one of the voices. Russell wrote about a utopian future; seventy years later Corinne Maier (2005) wrote about a taken-for-granted present. The 1950s were a pivotal period in this respect: it was then that people experienced an actual affluence—first in the USA and later in Europe—perhaps for the first time in recorded Western history. But opinions differed then as now, as could be seen in now classical works such as Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* (1953), Galbraith’s *The Affluent Society* (1958), and Kerr’s *The Decline of Pleasure* (1962).

In later literature, for example in the globalization studies mentioned above, the addition of the prefix “over-” to “flow” demoted the issues of mobility and directionality to a secondary place, giving priority to the study of the conditions and consequences of excess, abundance, glut, and overkill. In relation to processes of globalization, this might be understood in terms of phenomena labeled as Americanization, post-colonialism, market exploitation, or aggressive corporate and capitalist expansion. In place of

mobility, one finds stronger associations to processes of accumulation and saturation, which are readily linked to parallel processes of domination or degeneration.

Also in literary theory and culture studies, “over” signals a problem. Eco spoke of “overinterpretation” (1992) as a danger awaiting readers who read too closely. Friedland and Mohr (2004) criticized the “over-meaning of culture,” accusing the humanists of conflating the political mechanism by which meaning is produced with its content.

Breaking away from the tradition of viewing overflow as an accelerating problem will enable us to take the prefix of over- into new terrains. First of all, the polarity of under/over creates a boundary zone, with ideas of balance or breaking points, and there are a number of boundary processes to analyze here (who draws the boundaries? how are they drawn?). Second, we intend to explore overflow as a potential and opportunity: what kind of resource is this and how can it be used in different settings?

Managing . . .

Accumulation and saturation are phenomena connected to overflow not only by globalization scholars. For the economic historian Offer (2006), for example, defining affluence did not present a problem. It is simply a question of more cars, more TV sets, more food, etc., since the 1950s, the pivotal era. It can easily be measured in numbers and described in graphs and figures. Nor is judging affluence difficult: it is bad. There are too many easily accessible, rewarding things that people cannot resist buying. Affluence overflows and the problem is one of management: managing deficient self-control of individuals and societies by the help of what Offer called *commitment devices*. Some such devices are communitarian: norms, knowledge, shame, pride; others belong to the sphere of business and law: contracts, mortgages, marriages, pensions. When societies change, so do commitment techniques. But it takes time to discover, develop, learn, and teach such techniques. If the rewards of affluence arrive faster than the discipline of self-control can form, then self-control will decline with affluence, causing obesity, obsession, hedonism, and narcissism.

The notion of commitment devices is worth investigating, but we do not see the situation as that simple. In order to discuss the management of overflow, we first need to address the issue of the *emergence* of overflow. It can (1) *arise spontaneously*, even surprisingly, or it can be *produced*, (2) *intentionally* or (3) *not* (as we understand Offer, the affluence he was speaking about has been produced by US and UK industries). In all three cases, however, the process of defining is of crucial importance. When does one reach that certain point when something is starting to overflow? Depending on context, the definition of this point varies. Here it is important not to fall into simplistic physical analogies, as we have stressed earlier. Seeing cultural and societal processes as part of a homeostatic system, in which

events flow like liquids, can sometimes be fruitful, but at other times it might camouflage the complex nature of these processes.

Who has the power of definition and to whom will the definition apply? The collective classification and the resulting judgments are highly interesting (Bowker and Star, 1999). To what extent is something overindulgence—or not? In what ways and through what processes do overflows become morally laden in terms of “good” and “bad”? The answers to these questions will vary, depending on perspective, time, and place. Survival of a population might depend on overflow, as many evolutionists claim, but it might be a deadly burden to some individuals in this population.

Another aspect is how the rhetorics and practices of sustainability have arisen. Various collective actors, for instance, environmental organizations, are trying to define the limits for a sustainable society, but the definition of the point of overflow is a difficult task. What one culture defines as necessity, another might see as decadence. Opulence and austerity have fought against each other as aesthetic ideals throughout history, and this is where the quest for balance enters the discussion—the often-fruitless search for equilibrium.

This brings us to the issue of management, and here the notion of *framing overflow* (Callon, 1998a) is of utmost interest, as it connects our two themes: framing means making something understandable, and therefore defining it (defining means imposing borders), but it also means managing it, one of the central points of this study: the ways of *managing overflow*, once it has been classified as such. Here, we would like to draw attention to the double meaning of “managing”: controlling, but also getting by, coping. The ways of dealing with overflow can therefore be roughly divided into *learning to live with overflow* and *controlling (handling) overflow*.

Overflow is often related to consumption. But overflows do not have to be consumed; they can just as easily be spilled, lost, ignored, or remain unseen, undetected, and unregistered. We need a perspective that transcends the illusory production-consumption divide (Jackson et al., 2001), revealing that to define something as an overflow is already a way to control it, while living with it or harnessing it might be ways of reproducing and even magnifying it. It is also important to critically study ideas like “less is more.” Such ideas might require the possibility of selection, the ability to sift out what is experienced as unnecessary.

While the ways of managing overflow have been extensively explored in, e.g., engineering and city management, and recently rather intensely in medicine and psychology, the ways of *living with overflow* might be less charted (apart from how-to-cope-with-stress manuals and New Age recipes). Thus there is a need to study how the skills of making priorities, sequencing, and multitasking are advertised, recommended, and taught. But dealing with overflow also generates competencies, subjectivities, devices, routines, habits, and rituals; it even creates new personalities fit for a society in excess, and new coping strategies for organizations as well