IRIS AperTO

UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI TORINO

AperTO - Archivio Istituzionale Open Access dell'Università di Torino

Stephen King’s 'Needful Things': A Dystopian Vision of Capitalism during Its Triumph

This is the author's manuscript

Original Citation:

Availability:

This version is available http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1789172 since 2022-02-16T23:25:58Z

Published version:

DOI:10.1080/01603477.2021.1932525

Terms of use:

Open Access

Anyone can freely access the full text of works made available as "Open Access". Works made available under a Creative Commons license can be used according to the terms and conditions of said license. Use of all other works requires consent of the right holder (author or publisher) if not exempted from copyright protection by the applicable law.

(Article begins on next page)

07 January 2023

Stephen King's *Needful Things*: A Dystopian Vision of Capitalism during Its Triumph

Mario **Cedrini**
Dipartimento di Economia e Statistica "Cognetti de Martiis", Università di Torino (*corresponding author*)
mario.cedrini@unito.it
http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1059-4458

Joselle **Dagnes**
Dipartimento di Culture, Politica e Società, Università di Torino
joselle.dagnes@unito.it

Çınla **Akdere**
Department of Economics, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, and PHARE, Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne
cakdere@metu.edu.tr

Abstract

In Stephen King's horror novel *Needful Things*, a stranger comes to town and opens a shop wherein any inhabitant can find exactly the thing s/he desires most, in exchange for playing "pranks" that cause distress to other members of the community, until the whole town is caught in a war of all against all. The paper analyses the novel as a "satire of Reaganomics", as the author himself happened to describe it. Using insights from economics, economic sociology, and economic anthropology, it aims at demonstrating that the book provides an opportunity to explore the actual and possible evolution of individual behavior in consumer societies, as well as the tensions that such societies engender between ideals of self-realization (*via* market logics and consumption) and social relationships.

Keywords

Consumption, Consumer societies, Reaganomics, Economics and literature, Social relationships, Dystopia

Jel Classifications: A13, D11, Z13

Word count (main text plus references): 10472

Stephen King's *Needful Things*: A Dystopian Vision of Capitalism during Its Triumph

1. Introduction

In a horror novel by Stephen King (1991), a stranger comes to the small town of Castle Rock and opens a shop, "Needful Things", where "anyone who enters his store finds the object of his or her lifelong dreams and desires: a prized baseball card, a healing amulet"[1]. Items are extremely cheap, but in this typical "free will dilemma", the seller requires his customers to add some "deeds" – that is, "pranks" that cause distress to other members of the Castle Rock community – to the small amount of money. Then, "these practical jokes cascade out of control and soon the entire town is doing battle with itself"[2]. Stephen King once identified (in Lehmann-Haupt and Rich 2006) *Needful Things* as an entertaining criticism of the ideal of "market society" proclaimed by Ronald Reagan (1981) in his inaugural address as 40th President of the United States:

> I thought that I'd written a satire of Reaganomics in America in the eighties. You know, people will buy anything and sell anything, even their souls. I always saw Leland Gaunt, the shop owner who buys souls, as the archetypal Ronald Reagan: charismatic, a little bit elderly, selling nothing but junk but it looks bright and shiny.

King's decision "to turn the eighties into a small-town curio shop called Needful Things and see what happened" (in Lehmann-Haupt and Rich 2006) provides an opportunity to explore the actual and possible evolution of consumer behavior at an epoch when, as Sassatelli (2007) writes, we have finally come to consider ourselves as consumers in a consumer society. In his own website[3], King recalls that the Eighties were "a decade in which people decided, for a while, at least, that greed was good and that hypocrisy was simply another tool for getting along". The decade – an epoch when "everything had come with a price tag" – "quite literally was the sale of the century. The final items up on the block had been honor, integrity, self-respect, and innocence". In this process, not so much the supply-side revolution in economic policy of Reaganomics, but rather the socio-political philosophy of Reagan's capitalism plays

[1] Thus reads the synopsis of the book appearing on King's website, at https://www.stephenking.com/library/novel/needful_things.html (accessed: August 27th, 2019).
[2] Ibid.
[3] https://www.stephenking.com/library/novel/needful_things_inspiration.html (accessed: August 27th, 2019).

a fundamental part. The paper argues that, viewed from this perspective, *Needful Things* appears as a visionary, dystopian scenario of capitalism during its triumph (to borrow from the subtitle of Hirschman's *The Passions and the Interests*, 1977), and at the same time a vivid illustration of the tensions that a consumer society engenders between ideals of self-realization (*via* market logics and consumption) and social relationships.

Having briefly exposed the social philosophy of Reaganomics (Section 2), the paper focuses on the elements of the market society as portrayed in *Needful Things*, i.e. seller, commodities, buyers and bargaining, to retrace the main lines of the evolution towards societies wherein consumers constitute their own identity through the symbolic world of consumption (Section 3). The article then concentrates on the final "war of all against all" and the curious end of "needful" things' life cycle (Section 4) to emphasize the importance of King's novel for deepening our understanding of the potentially harmful premises on which consumer societies rest.

2. A "satire of Reaganomics"

Everything is for sale, even the human soul. The surface meaning of *Needful Things* is a satire of "Reaganomics", which technically was "a major shift to conservative economic policies" (Blanchard 1987: 15). Reagan was elected upon the promise that he would organize a counter-offensive against inflation, which "penalizes thrift" (Reagan 1981); one against taxes, which "penalize successful achievements", and one against public spending, which "mortgage our future … for the temporary convenience of the present" (ibid.). The ideological underpinnings of the revolution included "ideals of individualism, the efficacy of the effort, the supremacy of private social arrangements over governmental regulation, and of private, unfettered economic enterprise", as well as the idea that "social and economic rewards should be distributed in accord with the energy and effectiveness of individualistic enterprises" (Jacob 1985: 10). Consider Reagan's inaugural address to the "no society" (to take from Margaret Thatcher) American nation of individuals who aspire to regain their lost destiny:

> From time to time we've been tempted to believe that society has become too complex to be managed by self-rule, that government by an elite group is superior to government for, by, and of the people. Well, if no one among us is capable of governing himself, then who among us has

> the capacity to govern someone else? All of us together, in and out of government, must bear the burden. The solutions we seek must be equitable, with no one group singled out to pay a higher price (Reagan 1981).

In this retreat-of-the-state scenario, public activities should be directed towards the promotion and enhancement of "the appetites and energies of economic man" (ibid.), by "growth through incentives" policies (Novak 1991), that is deregulation and tax reform, which would free the instinct, and provide incentives, to invest. Reagan's vision is a blend of classical-liberalism individualism and "ubertraditionalism" (see Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2004), implying faith in the virtues of the bourgeois organization of society: individualism, capitalism, progress, and virtue (Lal 2010). In this view, the government acts at the same time as guarantor of both the individual freedom to choose, in a Friedmanian-Hayekian way, and of the institutional structure of the society, which while providing support to the needy, presupposes and somehow paradoxically defends social inequalities. Greed enshrines – its valorization transferring the instrumentality of market relations "into spheres previously informed by a sense of uncalculated reciprocity and civil obligation (Bell 2016).

After all, while liberals consider individuals as capable of ameliorating the human condition, "the conservative sees a spiritual, fallible, limited, semirational personality whose behavior cannot be improved by reason alone" (Hoover 1987: 247). This implies that the main role of the State is not to ensure equality of opportunity, but rather "to provide the appropriate environment for the nurturance of the particular strengths of each personality" (ibid.).

As James Buchanan (2013: 7) observes, this vision derives strength from its economic foundations:

> Mr. Reagan could not himself solve the simultaneous equations of general equilibrium economics. His economics education was confined to undergraduate courses at Eureka College. But he carried with him a vision of a social order that might be. This vision was and is built on the central, and simple, notion that 'we can all be free.' Through Mr. Reagan we see that Adam Smith's 'simple system,' even if only vaguely understood, can enlighten the spirit, can create a soul that generates a coherence, and unifying philosophical discipline.

But Smith "was anxious that a society governed by nothing but transactional self-interest was no society at all"; the neoliberalism of the Reagan/Thatcher era is conversely "Adam Smith without the anxiety" (Metcalf 2017). As Wrenn (2014) remarks, neoliberalism expands the

economic sphere, which comes to encompass the entirety of social life, and disembeds it, to say it with Polanyi, subordinating the other spheres

> to support its purpose and further intensification … [this] creates a vacuum in the lives of individuals left by the social dislocation and discontinuity created by the disembedded economy and the subordination of social life to the dictates of the market. The deepening of the structures of neoliberalism and the market not only further disrupt social continuity and erode the cohesiveness of basic social units, but also result in individual psychoses and cultural dilution and disintegration (506).

Since it is individual responsibility only that matters, under neoliberalism, the individual who serves her interests is also an individual who serves the common good. No greater group is involved any longer, and other possible facets of personal identities are simply subordinated to the neoliberal ideology. With the result that "to have a responsibility for the care of others diminishes one's own identification, constrains the possibilities of the responsible individual who is thereby self-sacrificing her own personal identity". But "neoliberal identity is isolating, disconnected from any larger community, and as such leaves the individual alienated" (ibid.).

It has been observed that if readers did not regard *Needful Things* as a satire of American consumerism and greed when it was published, this "only shows how accurately the book did define its era" (Anderson 2017: 135). The argument rests on moral bases – "King saw Reaganomics as a symptom of a defective society where people cared only about their own wants and needs" (ibid.). But the extra-literary power of King's novel may conversely lie exactly in exceeding the moral atmosphere generally prevailing in the literary tradition of novels where "a stranger comes to town, wreaking havoc for his own evil purposes" (Wiater *et al.* 2006: 166) by the proposal of a typical game of free will and determinism which ends up in destroying social relationships.

Needful Things is in fact remindful of various other novels of this kind, starting from Richard Matheson's *The Distributor* (1958), and King himself revealed (in introducing *The Storm of the Century*, of 1999) that it finds inspiration in Twain's classic *The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg*, of 1899. But it is more than a *j'accuse* pointed at "the cult of me-ism", as King (1981: 316) wrote in *Danse Macabre*, of 1981 (the year Reagan took office), and the resulting perversions of the individual-community nexus. What makes it unique is the emphasis on things, things that are not only desired but real, that can be – and are – sold and bought,

driving individuals' behavior, and producing effects on the community. The peculiar character and systemic features of the Faustian pact that the seller proposes to the people in Castle Rock (as well as the ironic parallel between the "deeds" that Gaunt requests when selling his *things* and the "great deeds" that, we learn from Reagan's inaugural address, the Americans are able to perform) rather seem to confirm that King puts the primacy of consumption in the foreground, thereby deepening the complex intertwining between personal intimate needs, symbolic meaning embedded in goods, and market-mediated social relationships[4]. In this sense, King's novel constitutes a vivid representation of the so-called consumer society and of the social and human dynamics supporting it.

3. A consumer society

As the sociological debate on this topic has shown, consumer culture is a complex and ambivalent phenomenon, concerning practices, discourses, and institutions. *Needful Things* addresses and problematizes in particular the relationship between people and objects. This relationship is not specific to the current contexts, since objects are material and symbolic landmarks in traditional societies as well. But these latter see a strong integration between production, consumption, and exchange, while this web is disentangled in contemporary Western societies (Graeber 2011), which, in addition, stand out for a primacy of commodities' possession as the way to satisfy daily needs (Weber 1923, cited in Sassatelli 2007).

Consequently, consumption appears now as an autonomous sphere, separated from consumer's daily experience, to the point where the potential buyer is surrounded by objects that s/he perceives as meaningless. Thus consumer society is essentially an articulated system aimed at "constructing meanings around products to make them 'consumable', (i.e. significant for the consumer) by placing them within his or her structure of needs" (Sassatelli 2007: 4). The definition directly refers to classic authors like Simmel (1990), who shifts the focus from the object (and its intrinsic characteristics) to the subject (the value of a good

[4] In the article we refer to social ties as to the relational assets owned by an individual at a given moment. The general theoretical-analytical framework is provided by the New Economic Sociology (Granovetter 1985), which aims to highlight the social embeddedness of action and the role of concrete personal relationships in defining the set of constraints and opportunities for individuals. These relationships, which constitute an individual's social capital according to Coleman's (1990) perspective, can also be market-mediated and, regardless of their origin, can contribute to the creation, diffusion and destruction of trust, reputation and social norms, with variable – and even unexpected – effects for individuals, groups and for society as a whole.

depending on the judgment of potential buyers) in consumption practices, or Baudrillard (1998), who regards the value of the good as tightly intertwined with the meaning attributed to it. Baudrillard believes that to understand how consumer societies work, it is not enough to dwell on the relationship between the individual and the single object. Even if the individual consumption act is apparently aimed at satisfying a specific need, the fulfillment can indeed take place only if objects are included in an articulated system of signs able of responding to the individuals' needs (ibid.).

Other scholars stress the active role of subjects in this ongoing process of meaning construction related to consumption, and underline how individuals can use consumer practices to affirm their own individuality and position themselves in a particular socio-cultural location, concurrently contributing to reproduce the social order they are part of (see Bourdieu, 1984; Douglas and Isherwood 1979). This process of meaning attribution can take shape through individualist consumption rituals, having some form of appropriation of the objects as ultimate goal (McCracken 1988). Consumption, therefore, can be conceived as a set of practices engaging the consumer in a continuous game of appropriation of goods that, through rituals of attribution of meaning, assume a subjective value and are thus subtracted – together with their buyers – to standardization and impersonality. Objects become identity goods, and assume the role of resources for construction and reproduction of individual – as well as collective – identities (Featherstone, 1990). The explicatory power of the symbolic dimension of consumption gained increasing acceptance in the Eighties (see Warde 2015), in relation to the large changes in the socio-economic context that made the previously shared sources of identity disappear or been redefined. Among these, the growing fragmentation of work and, above all, of the worker's career (Sennett 1998), the crisis of intermediate bodies such as trade unions and local political sections (Sennett 2017), and more generally, the process of progressive individualization of risk which puts the relationship between the individual and institutions under tension (Castel 2003).

The relentless process of identity appropriation of consumer goods is necessary for subjects to maintain some degrees of freedom in a commodified social sphere that could otherwise overthrow them. But, as Sassatelli (2007) notes, in a consumer society, the relation between freedom and oppression is a complex one. The need itself for a symbolic appropriation of goods that can de-commodify these latter is in fact likely to commodify the subjects

themselves, who can become incapable of affirming their own individuality if not as consumers. In interpreting their role of social actors, consumers should find a balance between indifference to commodities and excessive personalization, which can lead them to attribute the power to fulfil deep, completely individualistic needs to the object itself (ibid.: 149). Otherwise, as King shows in the novel, the freedom of consumption may turn into the slavery of consumption. Let us now review how some peculiar traits of consumer societies reveal themselves in *Needful Things*, taking into consideration seller, merchandise, buyers, and (bargaining and) prices, in that order.

The shop proprietor is defined in vague terms. We are simply told that he is a tall man, quite old, with long hands and a very kind face. These few strokes are enough to outline a man who appears affable and charming at first sight, a man to whom many women – and men – in Castle Rock feel pleasantly attracted. Gaunt has indeed an infectious smile, arousing an "instant liking" (King 1991, chapter 1, paragraph 3 – hereafter: 1, 3) or in some cases, a strong sense of familiarity in the people he meets. This feeling is narratively expressed and amplified by his gorgeous eyes, which each visitor sees differently – green or grey, hazel or blue –, usually with exactly the same shade as someone beloved or desired. The seller's eyes thus constitute a narrative expedient to plastically introduce Gaunt as an empty screen onto which potential buyers can project themselves – and their desires – to find fulfilment. If the shop owner seems able to read visitors' minds, it is because he is not a *full* character: he is rather *empty*, granting each visitor the possibility to fill him with her/his own needs and desires. What is necessary to understand about the seller is rather the merchandise he sells, the conception of trade he adopts and, as a result, the bargaining with buyers.

"A little of everything, that's what a successful business is all about … Diversity, pleasure, amazement, fulfillment" (1, 5). Thus Gaunt at the opening of the shop. The assortment of goods offered is wildly varied, in terms of both type and value, with goods that are apparently worth a few dollars – if not entirely devoid of market value – placed side by side with precious objects. Notwithstanding this heterogeneity, items displayed – or, more often, recovered from the backroom, Gaunt declaring to have just received an item that could be very interesting for the visitor – are all *needful*, a characteristic that can be understood only by placing oneself from the buyers' point of view:

perhaps all the really special things I sell aren't what they appear to be. Perhaps they are actually gray things with only one remarkable property – the ability to take the shapes of those things which haunt the dreams of men and women (12, 9).

These items are *meaningful* for the buyers (see Lanier and Rader 2017), and perfectly respond to their expectations and deep desires, even when they are not aware of this. In the shop, each visitor finds a specifically tailored good that s/he most strongly desires – "more than anything else in the world at this moment?" (1, 4). Not by chance in the epilogue of the novel, when Gaunt suddenly appears in another town very similar to Castle Rock, the name of the store to be opened is *Answered Prayers*: as Baudrillard (1998) stated, consumption is always founded on a *lack*.

In this sense, buyers are presented according to a narrative scheme which is similar to the one employed for the shop owner. With the few exceptions of the main characters, customers are in fact defined exclusively based on their desires and/or needs (see Russell 1996). They are mirror images of Gaunt, characters shaped by a void, with an unfulfilled desire that gives form to their own biography and defines their personal trajectory. However, buyers are often unaware of desiring, until "their" item materializes in the shop. If young Brian Rusk, Gaunt's first client, says without hesitation that what he wants is the collectable card of a baseball player, other buyers recognize "their" *needful thing* only when Gaunt makes it appear before their eyes. Despite appearance, this process is not the unveiling of one's hidden desire, but its contrary. To profoundly seize an item, transforming it from an anonymous and standardized object into a personal good, buyers need to put a veil over it, which prevents them from seeing it for what it really is. When the veil falls, as happens in the final part of the novel, *things* are revealed for what they are: objects of no value, broken or damaged from the beginning, "fraudulent" items (22, 2) that have been mistaken for precious.

The process of meaning attribution represented by the magical transfiguration of trivial items into needful things symbolizes the way in which the merchandise becomes "consumable", evoking strong emotions and profoundly connecting with the structure of needs that derives from the personal biography of each consumer. "Like food to the starving, rest to the weary… quinine to the malarial" (9, 6): Gaunt himself states indeed that what he "really sell(s) is happiness" (4, 2). The case of Hugh Priest, an alcoholic, is emblematic. While walking by the store, Priest sees a fox-tail inside the display case. He suddenly relives the good old days, back

when he was a young newly licensed going around with his friends and driving his dad's convertible, whose radio antenna was hanging a "long, luxuriant fox-tail" (3, 6). This is the vivid memory of "the best hour of the best day of his life", "one of the last days before the booze him into had caught him firmly in its rubbery, pliant grip" (ibid.). To become the owner of the fox-tail means then to be able to implement a form of *compensatory consumption* with respect to his lost self (Rucker and Galinsky 2013). Beyond that, the item has in it a promise of change, the hope of being able to get his life back on track, ideally re-starting the course of events that alcohol addiction had shattered. In transformative consumer research, this attitude is labelled "fresh start mindset", the conviction of being able to redefine one's life course, regardless of what happened in the past, through a consumption practice (Price et al. 2017):

> *He suddenly thought: I could change … I could buy that fox-tail and tie it on the antenna of my Buick … Buy that fox-tail, tie it to the antenna, and drive. Drive where? Well, how about that Thursday-night A.A. meeting over in Greens Park for a start … In that moment, as he stood looking at the fox-tail in the display window of Needful Things, Hugh could see a future. For the first time in years he could see a future* (3, 6).

Appearing to all intents and purposes as an identity good, the good purchased, however, soon betrays its promise of freedom. On the one hand, the possession of the badly desired object entails a deep gratification, but on the other hand, the excessive personalization related to a suffocating process of meaning attribution brings with it a closure, a withdrawal to a private use, which leads to unwillingness – or impossibility – to share it even with the loved ones.

> *It was undoubtedly a sin not to share them. But she had been surprised (and a little dismayed) by the feeling of jealous possessiveness which rose up in her each time she thought of showing Lester the splinter and inviting him to hold it. No! An angry, childish voice had cried out the first time she had considered this. No, it's mine! It wouldn't mean as much to him as it does to me! It couldn't!* (13, 3).

This greed is soon associated with the fear of losing or ruining the item, corresponding to that of losing or ruining the new sense of self gained – or regained – through the purchase process (Ferraro *et al.* 2011):

> *It was still unused. The truth was just this simple: he was afraid to use it … (It) was too nice, far too nice. It would be criminal to risk it by actually using it* (15, 8).

King is here taking to the extreme a classical contradiction of consumer societies: the high relevance given to the aesthetics of products that, paradoxically, leads to reduced enjoyment in consumption (Wu *et al.* 2017). Since the *needful thing* can be neither shared nor used, its possession – which incorporated a promise of liberation – leads to a paralysis, to which one should add the buyers' suspicion and fearing that their good can be stolen, because of other people's envy. The unbearable idea of loss leads therefore to social exclusion. Being separated from your *needful thing*, while you are at work or on social occasions, becomes a source of stress, while the security of possession obviously involves high costs:

> *It was good when you had something you really wanted and needed, but it was even better when that thing was safe. That was the best of all. Then the smile faded a little. Is that what you bought it for? To keep it on a high shelf behind a locked door?* (5, 2)

Actually, the item promising to set you free – from disappointments, from pain, from the mistakes you have made – makes you a slave. No enjoyment of the coveted good is possible, because all attention is focused on the right of property and the fear of losing it. The "pride of possession" (15, 9) thus turns into obsession, preventing the sharing and condemning to a self-referential escalation. The process of meaning attribution and individualistic consumption, here pushed to the limits, has consequently as its first endpoint the *passive* destruction of social ties determined by an inward-looking tendency. As Gaunt deceptively states, "selfish people are happy people" (ibid.). This prepares the ground for an *active* destruction of social ties, which in the novel constitutes the most important part of the price to pay to get hold of one's own *needful thing*.[5]

All items in Gaunt's shop "had one thing in common (...): there were no price-tags on any of them" (2, 3). Since the value of identity goods is by definition subjective, the price-setting mechanism is as well a totally subjective process, which may openly clash with market rules. Concretely, Gaunt's merchandise has "a very special price" (1, 4), which consists of two different parts: "half... and half. One half is cash. The other is a deed" (1, 6). This two-part price "would depend on the buyer. What the buyer would be willing to pay" (1, 11). Items' very

[5] King's novel seems here to present a clear-cut contrast between social relations and the market system, the latter holding responsibility for the former's destruction (see Steiner 2009 for a review of the debate). In truth, for our analytical purposes, what seems useful to underline is that it is not commodification in itself that destroys social ties – since market and social life can be closely intertwined and feed on each other (Zelizer 2011) – but rather the individualistic identity withdrawal that prevents any form of social use, even *ex post*, of the commodified good.

moderate cash price, ranging from a few cents to some tens of dollars, is completely detached from the value of goods: it simply corresponds to what buyers have in their pockets at that precise moment. At first glance, therefore, "the price seems more than fair" (16, 8), as Gaunt ironically observes:

> *He charged them what they could afford, not a penny more or a penny less. Each according to his means was Mr. Gaunt's motto, and never mind each according to his needs, because they were all needful things, and he had come here to fill their emptiness and end their aches* (19, 1).

But it is the second half of the price – the "small prank", the "little trick on someone" (16, 8) – that corresponds to what economists call buyers' "willingness to pay"[6]. While Gaunt always presents the required deed as a small matter, it can actually vary from apparently innocent assignments (delivering a parcel, leaving a sealed envelope in someone's car) to more or less serious acts of vandalism (dirtying the sheets hung out in the sun to dry, throwing stones at the windows of a house, cutting the tires of a car), up to real violent actions, like killing the neighbour's dog. All buyers accept the terms of the agreement, whatever they are. Initially, they are driven solely by the desire to complete the payment and claim exclusive ownership of their *needful thing*. But later, after the prank is played, a certain pleasure – or even sexual excitement – takes over, "the normal malicious pleasure anyone feels when tearing hell out of someone else's much-beloved possessions" (15, 7).

What Gaunt defines as a "free trade" (4, 9) is thus a peculiar kind of market, where pricing is deeply affected by purchasers' willingness to pay (Wtp) any amount, not only by cash, in order to grab the desired good (see Akdere and Mete 2017). Price is not established by the free play of market forces, but rather depends on buyers' reservation price. That the characters of a novel on Reaganomics systematically miscalculate their own Wtp may seem surprising. Reasoning, like Gaunt, in terms of buyers' happiness (and applying Bentham's "felicific calculus"), the question at stake is why consumers fail to realize that the amount of pain that they will experience after playing the prank more than compensates the quantity of pleasure arising from buying their own "needful" thing – why individual preferences depart with no exception from the person's best interests, producing regret (Schubert and Cordes 2013).

[6] Gaunt clarifies the point: "The world is full of needy people who don't understand that everything, everything, is for sale... if you're willing to pay the price". Yet wallets do not provide "all the answers" (King 1991, 3, 7).

As the experimental literature on disparities between willingness to pay and willingness to accept has shown, agents that own a good might have a tendency to value it more than people who do not. Economists tend to attribute such "endowment" and "ownership" effects (after Thaler 1980, and Kahneman *et al.* 1991) to a psychological "loss aversion" (see Kahneman and Tversky 1979), whereby a loss would have a much greater psychological impact than a gain of equivalent amount. Still, the psychological literature includes now a variety of perspectives explaining the importance of such effects (see Morewedge and Giblin 2015). In *Needful Things*, Brian's mother Cora purchases a pair of sunglasses that belonged to Elvis Presley. Also an Elvis fan, Cora's friend Myra Evans buys a picture of him from Gaunt. Both enjoy (illusionary) extra-sensorial sexual experiences with Presley when holding their own memorabilia. When Cora realizes that Myra is a rival, she ventures to kill her – and Myra shoots her in reaction. In the book, consumers experience blind desire for the objects they see in the store, a desire that urges them no matter what the cost might be ("whatever deal they had made, [*the item*] was worth it", 1, 8). The coming into possession of "needful" thing creates a feeling of "*psychological* ownership": the good purchased is "incorporated into the self-concept of the owner" and becomes "part of her identity", which the owner herself imbues "with attributes related to her self-concept" (Morewedge and Giblin 2015: 343). Since self-evaluations are usually positive, the subject considers these associations as positive as well, with consequent "endowment effect". Consequently, "the potential loss of the good is perceived as a threat to the self" (ibid.). Brian Rusk can thus discover a "large fact about possessions and the peculiar psychological state they induce: the more one has to go through because of something one owns, the more he wants to keep that thing" (9, 8). While Cora and Myra show that even the *feeling* of psychological ownership produced by "merely touching a good, touching an image of a good, or imagining one owns a good" (Morewedge and Giblin 2015: 343) – can engender these same results.

In *Needful Things*, consumption assumes the main role of self-expression, so that giving up possession becomes impossible, and the subjective value of goods unfathomable. Worth is in fact defined "by need" (1, 8). The deed required, carrying a burden of relational sacrifice, paradoxically increases the value of the good: "price, Mr. Gaunt might have said, always enhances value… at least in the eyes of the purchaser" (18, 6). The illusory capability of consumption to respond to deep individual needs thus determines a progressive isolation of subjects and their disconnection from the rest of society, destroying social ties instead of

reproducing them. When buyers finally recognize that "that price is much too high" (23, 16), it is simply too late. There is just time to realize that the only meaning buyers can find in having played a prank on their victim is the possession of their own needful thing:

> *As to what you're doing here, Polly, the answer to that is simple enough: you're Paying. That's … all you're doing … it is the simplest, most wonderful aspect of commerce: once an item is paid for, it belongs to you … when you finish paying, it's yours. You have clear title to the thing you have paid for* (18, 2).

"Caveat emptor" (23, 17), rightly warns the seller.

4. A social dystopia

Once consumers "finish paying", in *Needful Things*, they can finally enjoy the "pride of possession" – but they can experience it in a private environment only, devoid of social relationships. Consumers' final isolation is exacerbated by sudden awareness of the dreamy atmosphere they had until then lived in. A *bad* dream, the nightmare of addiction, which King had just escaped before writing *Needful Things* (the first book he wrote after recovering from addiction to alcohol and drugs, see Smythe 2014). Addicted buyers transform into *junkies* – Gaunt "sells nothing but junk", after all. When the shop closes, visitors look "like hurting junkies who had discovered the pusherman wasn't where he'd promised to be. What do I do now?" (19, 1).

The only freedom buyers can legitimately aspire to, in *Needful Things*, is freedom from social relationships. Russell (1996: 128) interestingly remarks (following King himself) that "Gaunt sees himself as an electrician, cross wiring connections between people. When the wiring is finished he will turn up the voltage all the way". Causing damages to individuals and, through a domino effect, to the community as a whole, such connections are of a negative, destructive nature. This evidently reminds of King's concern for "the lack of community and social connectedness in American society, and the culture's general spirit of apathy" (Wagner 1988: 7), and perhaps of the general pessimism about human aggregates revealed in the novel *The Stand*:

> *Shall I tell what sociology teaches us about the human race? I'll give it to you in a nutshell. Show me a man and a woman alone and I show you a saint. Give me two and they'll fall in love. Give me*

three and they'll invent that charming thing we call 'society'. Give me four and they'll build a pyramid. Give me five and they'll make one an outcast. Give me six and they'll reinvent prejudice. Give me seven and in seven years they'll reinvent warfare. Man may have been made in the image of God, but human society was made in the image of His opposite number, and is always trying to get back home" (King 1979: 253).

Remarkably, however, in *Needful Things* a proclaimed market relationship gives life to an obligation – to destroy social relationships, in exchange for "needful" thing – that cannot be escaped. In theory, "to owe nothing to anyone, to be able to walk away from a social bond and discharge an obligation just as you change tradesman when you're not satisfied – this capacity for *exit*, analysed by Hirschman (1970), is the defining feature of modern freedom as embodied in the market" (Godbout and Caillé 1998: 63). Whereas in *Needful Things*, *exit* is simply not an option, or, better, market relationships prevent consumers from exercising it. "In America", Gaunt observes, "you could have anything you wanted, just as long as you could pay for it", but "if you couldn't pay, or refused to pay, you would remain needful forever" (15, 8). Apparently, the market frees from needfulness, increasing choice and enlarging existing possibilities. But if you can, and agree to pay, and rather exactly because you can and agree to pay, you *enter* a spiral of reciprocal pranks which you cannot *exit* alive. "You can keep going … or you can stay where you are and get buried" (9, 7), says Gaunt to Brian Rusk.

The contrast with the liberal philosophy could not be starker. The market is believed to offer "each participant exit options in each relationship" (Buchanan 2013: 8), whereas King/Gaunt, here, suppresses both "the individual's desire for liberty from the coercive power of others" (ibid., 7) *and* the "second element in the liberal soul and spirit", that is "the absence of desire to exert power over others", which conversely, Castle Rock inhabitants end up with exerting, and even with desiring to exert. The originality of *Needful Things*, the story of an escalatory, vengeance-fuelled spiral of violence that gradually destroys a community, lies in the motives that entrap Castle Rock into the spiral, namely faith in the illusory capability of consumption to respond to deep individual needs. "Needful things" *replace* social relationships. If they manage to free Castle Rock people from social ties, it is because, being identity goods, needful things *are* a surrogate of social relationships that would otherwise live in a *milieu* of "primary sociality" (like marriage, kinship, partnership, friendship), or in any case of personal connections to the larger social group represented by the Castle Rock community. This is why needful things *suffice* to define the members of the community.

The spiral of violence is fuelled by vengeance. As Mark Anspach (2002, 2017) remarks, vengeance is the infliction of harm or humiliation on someone by someone else who has been harmed by that person, but s/he who kills in revenge becomes the next victim. In destroying the murderer, therefore, vengeance produces another: the balance is never restored, also because parties disagree on the beginning and cannot agree on the end of the circle. The only possibility to stop this vicious circle lies in reversing its logic, starting from the temporal orientation: instead of "allowing" them to make you pay the price of the injuries you caused to someone else, you pay the price first, by giving up something, "and then they take action against themselves – they give up something. They give up something after having already gotten their revenge on you" (Anspach 2017: 10). Exchangers self-impose costs, with the aim of fulfilling the others' desires even before these latter can express them.

Gift exchange is vengeance in reverse: Anspach's insightful interpretation of Marcel Mauss' (1990[1923-4]) pioneering study on the moral and political foundations of primitive societies, *The Gift*, and subsequent works in this tradition (see Marchionatti and Cedrini 2017) helps to understand how "unconditional" gifts, that is, gifts that are voluntarily offered, without guarantee of return, can play a fundamental role in creating and sustaining social bonds and alliances between partners previously regarding each other as enemies (see Godbout and Caillé 1998). What urges actors to strike back, and how can they come to cooperate by giving up something, in a context of radical uncertainty? To motivate both the negative reciprocity of vengeance and the positive reciprocity of gift exchange is the self-transcendence of the social relation. If two individuals come to exchange, it is because a "third term" emerges, but this transcendent element is in truth "nothing other than the relation itself, imposing itself as a separate actor entirely" (Anspach 2002: 5) despite being produced by the exchange itself. In the case of vengeance, individuals fail to *see* this meta-level of the social relationship, and feel compelled to act as if their action were dictated by an external force (like God), leaving no choice other than preparing the next funeral – and her/his own next. In the case of gift exchange, on the contrary, individuals observe and recognise the "relation" for what it is, namely, the *loci* where individuals themselves and the society interact, and can look forward, instead of backward, while taking decisions.

Emphasizing the historicity, rather than naturalness, of market exchange, Mauss (1990: 82-83) observed that "to trade, the first condition was to be able to lay aside the spear ... Only

then did people learn how to create mutual interests, giving mutual satisfaction, and, in the end, to defend them without having to resort to arms". At the same time, an anticipation of peaceful exchange can provide the precondition for laying down the spear, as Homer demonstrates in *Iliad*. By discovering, during the battle, that their forebears had exchanged gifts long ago, Diomedes and Glaukos come to envisage a peaceful vision of the future, wherein they will have one another as loyal host, and succeed in reorienting their (current) expectations, trading armours on the battlefield. Which confirms that individuals who are potential enemies or rivals can come to exchange if, and only if, they are willing to *see* the self-transcendence of the relation they establish with one another (see Cedrini et al. 2020).

In *Needful Things*, Gaunt acts as "third term" between the individual and the society. Representing individuals' inclinations towards identity goods that, ultimately, embody their withdrawal from society itself, Gaunt is an all-powerful external (third) authority imprisoning people living in Castle Rock into a logic of vengeance. Consider now Brian's dream, the passage in the book which includes the only relevant reference to the social dimension. In the dream, Brian is wondering whether he should yield to Gaunt and play tricks in addition to the original "deed" performed in exchange for his baseball card, when he suddenly realizes that the Castle Rock community was there, looking at him:

> *Brian looked around and was horrified to see that Ebbets Field was so full they were standing in the aisles ... and he knew them all. He saw his Ma and Pa sitting with his little brother, Sean, in the Commissioner's Box behind home plate. His speech therapy class, flanked by Miss Ratcliffe on one end and her big dumb boyfriend, Lester Pratt, on the other, was ranged along the first-base line, drinking Royal Crown Cola and munching hotdogs. The entire Castle Rock Sheriff's Office was seated in the bleachers, drinking beer from paper cups with pictures of this year's Miss Rheingold contestants on them. He saw his Sunday School class, the town selectmen, Myra and Chuck Evans, his aunts, his uncles, his cousins (*King 1991, 9, 7*).*

What horrifies Brian, in Gaunt's words, is that "everybody in Castle Rock [would come to] know you were the one who started the avalanche" (ibid.). Brian commits suicide, not so much because he had finally discovered the rules of the game set by Gaunt, but because the dream makes him finally able to *see* his relation with the seller for what it is. That is, the triggering mechanism for a spiral of vengeance gradually destroying Castle Rock. Among Gaunt's customers, Brian is the only one who can *see*, for a while (and in a dream), the individuals of

Castle Rock as a community, the social group that acts as mediator in transactions between individuals (Anspach 2002), the group that "needful" things brought into war with itself.

As Russell (ibid.: 134-35) reminds, there are two exceptions to the rule whereby items sold by Gaunt "represent the hidden dreams of the owners and often suggest unfulfilled desires in their lives" (ibid.: 135). Polly Chalmers is oppressed by arthritis, and "buys" a pain-relief device. Whereas Sheriff Alan Pangborn, Polly's lover, is obsessed by (and blames himself for) the mysterious road accident in which both his wife and son had died. Gaunt makes him watch a false videotape of the accident, but Alan, who will finally defeat Gaunt by employing a "trick based on misdirection" (Russell 1996: 132) of the kind of those used by his enemy to destroy Castle Rock, realizes it is a phony only after Polly has managed to persuade him. Now, Gaunt knows from the beginning that Alan will do anything he can to derail his project, and tries to set Polly against Alan by using their own past. Gaunt almost succeeds in convincing her that Alan is investigating her dark past, with the precise aim of making her question Alan's love for her. She then recognizes that Gaunt had tricked her (by suddenly realizing that the letter she had found announcing that Alan was looking into her past was inaccurate), and convinces Alan that Gaunt had tricked him too (the videotape as well was inaccurate in reconstructing the accident).

Like Brian, but differently from other people in Castle Rock, Polly and Alan see through the magic played by Gaunt, and realize that the implicit promises of hope, redemption, wealth, health, and so on, embedded in "needful" things are shaky, as illusory are "needful" things themselves: Alan accepts that he will not solve the mystery of his wife's accident, and Polly that she has to live with her arthritis. It is the force of Polly and Alan's "lasting relationship based on trust" (Russell 1996: 133) that preoccupies Gaunt and induces him to use their own past to set one against the other. And it is this same (Maussian in character, the bond being more important than the good) force to reverse the temporal orientation of the logic of vengeance that Gaunt wanted to impose on them. By discovering the true essence of Gaunt's illusory magic, and going all in on the trust of their relationship, Polly both manages to free herself from the burden of an otherwise worrisome past, and to free Alan from his own.

But even if Alan and Polly win the battle, Gaunt wins the war. He finally distributes weapons, and Castle Rock plunges into a Hobbesian war of all against all. All needful things, in the end, disappear. We come to know that Gaunt "had begun business many years ago as a wandering

peddler", that he has been selling "the same item over and over and over again" to "needful" people (19, 1): "at the end of things … Mr. Gaunt always sold them weapons … and they always bought" (ibid.). There might be some irony here by Stephen King. Reagan reduced transfer payments for welfare and social security, assuming that this (and tax reduction) would positively impact on incentives to work and save, bringing inflation down and spurring growth. But Reaganomics was admittedly a failure (Komlos 2018), and given rising inequality, household indebtedness even soared – it was the only way the middle class "could keep up with the rising consumption norms of the society" (ibid.: 9). Nor did Reagan reduce budget deficits. Spending at the state and local level, in fact, continued to rise – Reagan did not eliminate automatic subsidies from the federal government until the recession caused by Volcker's restrictive monetary policies was over, and taxes at these levels could still increase temporarily (see Krugman 2012).

But Military, or "Weaponized" Keynesianism played a fundamental role. Reagan tripled the debt between 1981 and 1989, and destined half of the increase to the military. In an economic system that "no longer gives any weight to the value of usefulness, it is the merchant who must contend with society's greatest problem, that of forging what was once an automatic link between producer and user" (Godbout and Caillé 1998: 154): producing weapons is one of the most efficient ways of coping with secular stagnation. In Reagan's philosophy, weapons are of paramount importance: "our nation was built and civilized by men and women who used guns in self-defence and in pursuit of peace" (Reagan 1975). "Property is a responsibility – it must be protected" (15, 7), says one of Gaunt's customer in *Needful Things* while receiving an automatic pistol. "Protect yourself! Protect your property" (17, 7), echoes Gaunt while giving a similar item to Hugh Priest.

5. Conclusions

Stephen King's *Needful Things* can appeal to social scientists for several reasons. A "traditional" but innovative horror novel (evil comes from supernatural powers, "but Castle Rock is destroyed by human violence", Russell, 1996: 138), *Needful Things* is not only a satire of the social philosophy of Reaganomics, but also a dystopian representation of consumer societies with their contradictions, that King takes to their extremes. Polly Chalmers offers the most succinct synopsis of the book: "there was a sale. The biggest going-out-of-business

sale you ever saw … but in the end, some of us decided not to buy" (23, 18). At the sale "of the century", to be sold is the "short" twentieth century (Hobsbawm 1994), the epoch when we considered the state and political institutions as guardians of civilisation and guarantors of social welfare, which ends, on the contrary, with severely undermined confidence in the state itself, free-market capitalism operating fundamentally unchecked.

In effect, the virtual laboratory of *Needful Things* illustrates the radical consequences of neoliberalism: Russell (1996: 135) remarks that in the novel, when social structures "begin to fall apart, King shows how ineffective the traditional supports of a community can be". It is however to be noted that such traditional supports, "the organizations we trust to maintain society" (ibid.), are exactly those that a neoliberal society tends to suppress because they "may impede pure market logic", to borrow from Bourdieu (1998). It is not King who "does not see much hope for society" (Russell 1996: 135): rather, Gaunt's shop is the last resort of a neoliberal project which has gone too far, and explicitly aims at the destruction of collectives.

In this regard, Strengell (2005: 222) notes that King's novels seem all characterized by a sort of "sociological determinism" – institutions moulding individuals' behavior – which would also be responsible for the moralistic tone employed in describing how residents take (bad) decisions. Evil fills a void, Strengell (ibid.: 223) observes, "created by the absence of healthy personal relationships, responsible government, and a supportive system of religious faith". As Polly notes, however, not everyone buys, and the consumer society described by King is also, and primarily, a society wherein consumption itself is called upon to help people fulfil desires that, at least in part, directly depend upon the void left by a cultural crisis, and – perhaps – would not otherwise find expression. One might also blame *Needful Things* for adopting biased perspective on materialism in treating "things" as surrogates of social relations. Anthropologist of consumption Daniel Miller (2008) stresses that the use of the "myth" of materialism to criticise laissez-faire capitalism is usually accompanied by adoption of a comforting common morality which *a priori* excludes the possibility that people who develop strong relationships with things are the same people who develop strong relationships with people, and easily undervalues the "responsibility for creating order and cosmology" (ibid.: 293) assigned to individuals and households. But King, writing in 1991, wants to explore the boundaries of the new philosophy exalted by Reagan in his public remarks – Reagan's *alter ego*, Gaunt, is "a malevolent encroachment" who manages to

"shatter" a community, "driving the individuals apart and turning into enemies" (King 1999, ix). *Needful Things* is a dystopia, leading to an extreme the tensions that may derive not from a trade-off, but from an explicit, radical opposition between social relationships and "needful" things – which, contrary to the things that populate the houses of the London street studied by Miller (2008; one could mention also George Perec's novel *The Things*) are not truly chosen by buyers: they rather impose their illusory nature on buyers themselves.

For sure, *Needful Things* is a parallel world that appears "existing and plausible, credible even in its aspects of disorder and chaos" to the reader's eye, using Ingrao's (2001: 10) criterion to identify successful novels. In novels, Ingrao continues, individuals are mainly motivated by passions; when interests drive their action, they tend to mask and describe them as passions. And differently from interests, passions usually require relationships to others. In *Needful Things*, on the contrary, passions require *the destruction* of such relationships: "needful" things, in a consumer society, are thought to be the required vehicles for social climbing, for redemption, for giving (new) meaning and sense to one's life (without even requiring active involvement on the part of the buyers, who limit themselves to desire).

This way, *Needful Things* helps us address the "basic problem in the social sciences" that economics "removed from our perception … namely the existence of extremely destructive individual and collective action" (Ingrao 2001: 33). Here too, as any successful novel, *Needful Things* can be regarded as a simulation of selves in the social world (see Mar and Oatley 2008) which compels readers not only to experience thoughts, emotions, and forms of social interactions related to the events described in the novel, but also to acquire the stock of complex social information embedded in how narratives model and abstract the social world. Reading *Needful Things* means critically reflecting upon the emergence and evolution of consumer societies, including how we act as "consumers", that is, how we "put on a particular kind of identity and … deal with its contradictions" (Sassatelli 2012: 236). In *Needful Things*, "honor, integrity, self-respect, and innocence", writes King, are the final items to be sold. In a word, the "self", given that late modernity comes with "a far too autonomous, self-contained, self-possessed vision of the self as [the] reference point" of "individual identity" (ibid.: 252). Those who, in the novel, do not yield to the imperative of selling one's self, Polly and Alan, are "sovereign of themselves and of their will" (ibid.) because they have the capacity to "exit"

the choice made. The possibility to exit (choose not to choose) is the only way of signalling their right to autonomous, basically unconstrained, choice.

But this means that the concept of consumer sovereignty traditionally employed in economics needs serious revision. In general, *Needful Things* incorporates a vision of progress that is somehow antithetic to the one outlined by John Maynard Keynes in *Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren* (see Carabelli and Cedrini 2011), where the Cambridge economist predicts the end of the "economic problem" of material scarcity (finally defeated by "science and compound interest", Keynes 1972: 328) and the advent of a new era, and an Aristotelian "good and happy life" with it, when "the arena of the heart and head will be occupied, or reoccupied, by our real problems — the problems of life and of human relations, of creation and behaviour and religion" (ibid.: xvii). Expanding the economic sphere and putting technological progress at the service of growth and accumulation, the neoliberal capitalism of *Needful Things* promises the freedom of, not from, things. The mechanism itself whereby buyers acquire their needful thing is remindful of the rising indebtedness (de facto, an endless cycle) that necessarily accompanied Reaganomics "to keep up with the rising consumption norms of the society" (Komlos 2018: 9) and compensate for the reduction in the maximum tax rate (benefitting high income earners).

But *Needful Things* also includes a tacit invitation to replace the neoclassical theory of consumer choice with the more realistic tenets of the Post Keynesian approach (see Lavoie 2004), which exhibits the theoretical tools required to deal with those peculiar features of consumer societies that King's novel radicalizes and brings to their extreme: the idea, in particular, that needs are not equal, and that there exists a hierarchy of needs (some of them must be fulfilled in priority); that needs are separable, that expenditures may follow lexicographic ordering, all the more so when moral issues are at stake, and, as a general rule, that needs are irreducible. Finally, what all stories in *Needful Things* remind us, for paradoxical as it may seem, is that "decisions and preferences are not made independently of those of other agents" (ibid.; 647). That consumption is essentially a social activity, and that the problem of identity – which arises in case of discrepancy between committed and displayed behaviour (Coşgel 2008) – should have in economics as well (following, among others, Davis 2010) the undisputed relevance it has in social sciences.

References

Akdere, Ç., and Mete, Ö. (2017), "İktisat ve Edebiyatın Disiplinlerarası İletişimi: Stephen King'in Ruhlar Dükkanı Romanında Tüketim". In Boz, Ç. (ed.), *İktisat ve Sosyal Bilimler*, İletişim Kitabevi, İstanbul, 241-58.

Anderson, J.A. (2017), *The Linguistics of Stephen King: Layered Language and Meaning in the Fiction*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland.

Anspach, M. (2002), *A buon rendere. La reciprocità nella vendetta, nel dono e nel mercato*, Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.

Anspach, M. (2017), *Vengeance in Reverse: The Tangled Loops of Violence, Myth, and Madness*, East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

Baudrillard, J. (1998[1970]), *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, London: Sage.

Bell, D. (2016) "Communitarianism", in E.N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition), available at: https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/communitarianism (accessed: 26 June 2018).

Blanchard, O.J. (1987), "Reaganomics", *Economic Policy*, 2(5): 15-56.

Bourdieu, P. (1984), *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, London: Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. (1998), "The Essence of Neoliberalism", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, December, available at: https://mondediplo.com/1998/12/08bourdieu (accessed: April 3, 2021).

Buchanan, J.M. (2013), "Saving the Soul of Classical Liberalism", *Cato Policy Report*, 35(2): 1, 6-8. Originally published in the *Wall Street Journal* on January 1, 2000.

Carabelli, A. M., and Cedrini, M. A. (2011), "The Economic Problem of Happiness: Keynes on Happiness and Economics", *Forum for Social Economics*, 40(3): 335-359.

Castel, R. (2003), *L'insécurité sociale. Qu'est-ce qu'être protégé*, Paris: Le Seuil.

Cedrini, M., Ambrosino, A., Marchionatti, R., and Caillé, A. (2020), "Mauss's *The Gift*, or The Necessity of an Institutional Perspective in Economics", *Journal of Institutional Economics*, 16(5): 687-701.

Coleman, J.S. (1990), *Foundations of Social Theory*, Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Cosgel, M.M. (2008), "The Socio-economics of Consumption: Solutions to the Problems of Interest, Knowledge and Identity". In Davis, J.B. and Dolfsma, W. (eds), *The Elgar Companion to Social Economics*, Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 121-36.

Davis, J.B. (2010), *Individuals and Identity in Economics*, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Douglas, M. and Isherwood, B. (1979), *The World of Goods. Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*, New York: Basic Books.

Featherstone, M. (1990), "Perspectives on Consumer Culture", *Sociology*, 24(1): 5-22.

Ferraro, R., Escalas, J.E., and Bettman, J.R. (2011), "Our Possessions, Our Selves: Domains of Self-Worth and the Possession-Self Link", *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 21(2): 169-77.

Godbout, J.T., in collaboration with Caillé, A. (1998), *The World of the Gift*, Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press.

Graeber, D. (2011), "Consumption", *Current Anthropology*, 52(4): 489–511.

Granovetter, M. (1985), "Economic Action and Social Structures: The Problem of Embeddedness", *American Journal of Sociology*, 91(3): 481–510.

Hoover, K.R. (1987), "The Rise of Conservative Capitalism: Ideological Tensions within the Reagan and Thatcher Governments", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 29(2): 245-268.

Hirschman, A.O. (2013[1977]), *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Hobsbawm, E.J. (1994), *Age of Extremes – The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, New York: Pantheon Books.

Ingrao, B. (2001), “Economic Life in Nineteenth-century Novels: What Economists Might Learn from Literature”, in Erreygers, G. (ed.), *Economics and Interdisciplinary Exchange*, New York: Routledge, 7–40.

Jacob, C.E. (1985), “Reaganomics: The Revolution in American Political Economy”, *Law and Contemporary Problems*, 48(4): 7-30.

Kahneman, D., Knetsch, J.L., and Thaler, R.H. (1991), “Anomalies: The Endowment Effect, Loss Aversion, and Status Quo Bias”, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 5(1): 193-206.

Kahneman, D., and Tversky, A. (1979), “Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk”, *Econometrica*, 47(2): 363-391.

Keynes, J. M. (1972[1931]), *Essays in Persuasion*. In E. Johnson & D.E. Moggridge (eds), *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes*, Vol IX, London: Macmillan.

King, S. (1979), *The Stand*, London: New English Library.

King, S. (1981), *Danse Macabre*, New York: Everest House.

King, S. (1991), *Needful Things*, New York: Viking.

King, S. (1991), *The Storm of the Century*, New York: Gallery Books.

Komlos, J. (2018), “Reaganomics: A Historical Watershed”, CESifo Working Paper No. 7301, available at https://ssrn.com/abstract=3338628 (accessed: August 15, 2019).

Krugman, P. (2012), “Reagan was A Keynesian”, *The New York Times*, 7 June, available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/08/opinion/krugman-reagan-was-a-keynesian.html (accessed: August 15, 2019).

Lal, D. (2010). *Reviving the Invisible Hand: The Case for Classical Liberalism in the Twenty-first Century*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Lanier Jr, C.D., and Rader, C.S. (2017), “Deconstructing Symbolic Consumption: Exploring the Anti-synthetic Space between Meaning and Meaninglessness”, *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 20(3): 215-244.

Lavoie, M. (2004), “Post Keynesian Consumer Theory: Potential Synergies with Consumer Research and Economic Psychology”, *Journal of Economic Psychology* 25: 639-49.

Lehmann-Haupt, C., and Rich, N. (2006), "Stephen King, The Art of Fiction No. 189", *The Paris Review*, 178, available at: https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5653/stephen-king-the-art-of-fiction-no-189-stephen-king (accessed: June 26, 2018).

Mar, R.A., and Oatley, K. (2008), "The Function of Fiction Is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience", *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 3(3): 173-192.

Marchionatti, R., and Cedrini, M. (2017), *Economics as Social Science. Economics Imperialism and the Challenge of Interdisciplinarity*, London and New York: Routledge.

Matheson, R. (1958), "The Distributor", *Playboy*, 5(3), March.

Mauss, M. (1990[1923-24]), *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

McCracken, G. (1988), *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Metcalf, S. (2017), "Neoliberalism: The Idea that Swallowed the World", *The Guardian*, 18 August, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/aug/18/neoliberalism-the-idea-that-changed-the-world (accessed: June 26, 2018).

Micklethwait, J. and Wooldridge, A. (2004), *The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America*, New York: Penguin Press.

Miller, D. (2008), *The Comfort of Things*, Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.

Morewedge, C.K., and Giblin, C.E. (2015), "Explanations of the Endowment Effect: An Integrative Review", *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 19(6): 339-348.

Novak, M. (1991), "The Rich, the Poor, and Reaganomics", *First Things*, April, available at: https://www.firstthings.com/article/1991/04/the-rich-the-poor-and-reaganomics (accessed: June 26, 2018).

Price, L.L., Coulter, R.A., Strizhakova, Y., and Schultz, A.E. (2017), "The Fresh Start Mindset: Transforming Consumers' Lives", *Journal of Consumer Research*, 45(1), 21-48.

Reagan, R. (1975), "The Gun Owner's Champion", *Guns and Ammo*, available at: https://patriotpost.us/pages/171-ronald-reagan-the-gun-owners-champion (accessed: June 26, 2018).

Reagan, R. (1981), “Inaugural Address”, 20 January, available at: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=43130 (accessed: June 26, 2018).

Rucker, D.D., and Galinsky, A.D. (2013), “Compensatory Consumption,” in Ruvio, A.A., and Belk, R.W. (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Identity and Consumption*, New York: Routledge, 207–215.

Russell, S.A. (1996), *Stephen King. A Critical Companion*, New York: Greenwood Press.

Sahlins, M. (1972), *Stone Age Economics*, Chicago and New York: Aldine Publishing Company.

Sassatelli, R. (2007), *Consume Culture. History, Theory and Politics*, London: Sage.

Sassatelli, R. (2011), “Consumer Identities”, in Elliott, A. (ed), *Handbook of Identity Studies*, London: Routledge, 236-253.

Schubert, C., and Cordes, C. (2013), “Role Models that Make You Unhappy: Light Paternalism, Social Learning, and Welfare”, *Journal of Institutional Economics*, 9(2): 131-159.

Sennett, R. (1998), *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, New York: WW Norton & Company.

Sennett, R. (2017), *The Fall of Public Man*, New York: WW Norton & Company.

Simmel, G. (1990[1907]), *Philosophy of Money*, 2nd edn, London: Routledge.

Smythe, J. (2014), “Rereading Stephen King, Chapter 29: Needful Things”, *The Guardian*, 17 June, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jun/17/rereading-stephen-king-needful-things (accessed: June 26, 2018).

Steiner, P. (2009), “Who is Right about the Modern Economy: Polanyi, Zelizer, or Both?”, *Theory and Society*, 38(1): 97-110.

Strengell, H. (2005), *Dissecting Stephen King. From the Gothic to Literary Naturalism*, Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Popular Press.

Thaler, R. (1980), “Toward a Positive Theory of Consumer Choice”, *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 1(1): 39-60.

Wagner, K.S. (1988), “Introduction”, in T. Magistrale, *Landscape of Fear: Stephen King's American Gothic*, Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University, 6-10.

Warde, A. (2015), “The Sociology of Consumption: Its Recent Development”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 41: 117-134.

Wiater, S., Golden, C., and Wagner, H. (2006), *The Complete Stephen King Universe: A Guide to the Worlds of Stephen King*, New York: St. Martin's Griffin.

Wrenn, M. (2014), “Identity, Identity Politics, and Neoliberalism”, *Panoeconomicus*, 61(4): 503-515.

Wu, F., Samper, A., Morales, A.C., and Fitzsimons, G.J. (2017). “It’s Too Pretty to Use! When and How Enhanced Product Aesthetics Discourage Usage and Lower Consumption Enjoyment”, *Journal of Consumer Research*, 44(3): 651-672.

Zelizer, V.A. (2011), *Economic Lives: How Culture Shapes the Economy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.