

## Afterword: a surplus of ideas

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When do we cross the border between enough and too much? When does a comfortable abundance become an oppressive surfeit? When does choice move from being a privilege to a burden?

This book finishes up a series of three by the same editors which address these questions and more, exploring many aspects of excess, over-abundance, and overflow. These extremes might be the best way to characterize our world, populated by an almost unimaginable 8 billion people, hundreds of millions migrating and seeking refuge, where the obese far outnumber the undernourished and middle-class homes are filled to bursting with goods and possessions. Our consumer marketplace is driven into perpetual motion, as we watch today's valuables turn into tomorrow's trash. Overflow, or perhaps surfeit, is also the best way to describe the wealth of new ideas circulating in these essays.

Trained as an archeologist, I always think about overflow in terms of material stuff; but this book takes us in other directions, into overflows of time, emotions, attention, and activities – describing a proliferation of new categories, whole new branches in cultural taxonomies, and a continuing flow of new things that cannot yet be categorized. But overflowing also means forgetting, cut not in a conscious decision process, but instead in a haphazard undisciplined way that leaves gaps in our memories, people and places that seem familiar but which we cannot name.

Overflow itself is a liquid metaphor that easily accords with the many word choices that social scientists have used to discuss culture, place, and time. In the Boasian anthropology of the early twentieth century, culture appears as a thick liquid like blood, moving from place to place, flowing continuously over time and between

generations, and sticking to tribal people like an invisible tar from which they could not extract themselves. Using terms like diffusion, circulation, transmission, and stagnation gave a scientific edge to what were otherwise mysterious phenomena, as if cultural change was caused by the invisible force of gravity. And while tribal society was like a somnolent dark pool of thick paint, modernity was always ready to add some thinner to get things moving forward.

Outside cultural studies, economists also use hydraulic metaphors which portray the substance of economic transaction, money, utility, or value as a liquid. Exchange becomes a flow which is channeled by markets and regulations, the economy can slow to a trickle under pressure, and of course there are liquid assets that can leak, drain away, or get overheated. Used this way, metaphors can become a conservative influence that restricts and blocks (dams?) creativity and innovation in our thinking (Löfgren and Wilk, 2006). Instead, in this collection the authors show how a metaphor like overflow can also be a creative springboard for understanding and framing new phenomena, connecting otherwise disparate places and processes in new configurations.

One of the key themes woven through this book is the moral value of overflow, which often carries the connotation of error or even terror. Online encyclopedias define overflow this way in reference to the operations of computer programs: ‘Overflow condition, a situation that occurs when more information is being transmitted than the hardware can handle’, ‘Integer overflow, a condition that occurs when an integer calculation produces a result that is greater than what a given register can store or represent’. The implication is simply ‘too much’, confirmed in a Google image search which turns up mostly water overflowing from a glass or sewage from a pipe. The Old Testament provides a very different interpretation of overflow and over-abundance, from an era when it was considered a very rare blessing or privilege. In Psalm 23, King David (the author) says ‘my cup runneth over’; he is testifying to God’s generosity to those who love him, or in the Christian interpretation it signifies that ‘in Christ we can have overflowing joy, overflowing love, and overflowing peace’.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, it makes a difference what substance is overflowing, for whom, and in what setting, and whether the overflow is expected, rewarding, or threatening.

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1 From Got Questions, <https://www.gotquestions.org/my-cup-runneth-over.html>, accessed 2018–03–28.

Another key theme in this book is the endless variety of social and cultural devices used to keep overflow from happening. Some are physical spaces like train stations and storage lockers, channeling, regulating and managing people and things, sorting them into categories to get them organized and safely emplaced. While consumer capitalism is inevitably a messy and wasteful system, constantly generating outmoded and unwanted goods, jobs that go nowhere and useless skills, there is another less visible system that drains this overflow, manages uncertainty with complex models, screens out the useless from the useful, and simplifies the endless variety of market choices.

As the authors in this collection reveal, the sorting and screening, blocking and chopping of overflow is an inherently political activity with winners and losers. Overflow is therefore always tethered toward choice and decision-making, becoming an indicator of inequality, a subject of judgment and approbation. Today's information ecology depends on an overflow of information and communication, the substance of our social networks and endless hours with our noses pointed to LCD screens. Like the phrenology, passports, photos, and crude biometrics which managed the human overflow of the twentieth century, Big Data is now an instrument of power, 'mined' and manipulated, stolen, bought and sold. These are the new tools for managing the excessive and infinitely intricate complexities of an explosive online culture. And like the earlier tools for managing overflow, they are inevitably imperfect, subject to bias and unable to capture the moment. In this sense, overflow is also the vital currency of our time, the bedrock resource of the information economy.

This book opens the door to a room of hidden machinery, like lifting the back of a pocket watch to see all the complex gears and wheels and springs that drive those two simple hands. From the table of contents, this work might first appear as an overflow of disparate case studies set in places as diverse as a train station, a newspaper office, and the guts of a climate-change model. What could possibly connect them? Overflow turns out to be a multitool for finding hidden and unsuspected connections, unique insights into the workings behind everyday life.