The Chronicle
By Alice Loyd (through December 7, 2014)

Consumption
With this issue we introduce the category of Consumption, a topic that becomes especially conspicuous at this time of the year. Consumption is the corollary to Pollution and Climate Change; you can’t have one without the other, at least not in the Economic-Industrial model. We offer two December stories on the subject. The first might be said to highlight the malady and the second a hopeful healer.

An epidemic of homes the size of shopping centers is earning media coverage in Los Angeles. What is soon to be L.A.’s largest private home will contain 90,000 square feet, 75,000 of it for living space. It will have five swimming pools and sell for about $150 million. The article also mentions a 70,000- to 80,000-square-foot Mediterranean house; Chateau des Fleurs with 60,000-square-feet and a 40-car underground garage; a Hyatt hotel heir’s castle of 50,000 square feet; and two palaces of 48,000 square feet each, one with a 250-person-capacity ballroom.

“Twenty-thousand-square-foot homes have become teardowns for people who want to build 70-, 80-, and 90,000-square-foot homes,” Los Angeles City Councilman Paul Koretz is quoted as saying. The article comments, “So long, megamansion. Say hello to the gigamansion.”

At the other end of the country, a crusader has stepped up to preach against the form of consumption available to the rest of us, shopping. Appropriating the character of the Christian televangelist pastor, the Reverend Billy and his Stop Shopping Choir have led “exorcisms” of cash registers. He and the choir director were arrested after a performance in the Manhattan branch lobby of JP Morgan Chase, charged with riot, trespass, unlawful assembly, and disorderly conduct. This Thanksgiving the Reverend Billy and the choir went to St Louis, Missouri, where they hosted an organic meal on the front lawn of Monsanto’s headquarters before joining protesters from Ferguson.

The choir began to appear around Billy Talen when he was preaching on the street in Times Square. It seemed to grow organically as the crowd gave support to what he was saying. Their current show is “Monsanto Is The Devil,” at the Public Theater’s performance venue Joe’s Pub in New York City. Billy explained the theme in the interview: “Monsanto’s actions defeat the ability of the local ecosystem to recycle CO₂ into the plants and trees. . . . Basically, they are teaching people to distrust nature and distrust the natural world. When you don’t trust the natural world, you create climate change.”
At the time of this writing (December 7, 2014), the 20th session of the Conference of the Parties and the 10th session of the Conference of the Parties serving as the Meeting of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol is taking place in Lima, Peru. From December 1 to December 12 (later extended to December 14), the COP 20/CMP 10 is in session, with negotiators from more than 190 nations debating what countries should actually be required to promise regarding climate change: emissions, financial pledges, new technology to be shared, and/or assistance with adapting to climate impacts. The US has been leading toward the pattern of this year’s talks: to have each government offer up its own voluntary target. Chief US climate negotiator Todd Stern told NPR that countries will have to “subject what they are proposing to do to full sunlight, so . . . other countries and civil society and the press and everybody else can look to see what China, the US, Europe or Japan or anybody else is proposing to do.”

Prospects for progress have been improved by two notable events. Most significantly, in November the Obama administration unveiled a secretly negotiated deal between the United States and China to reduce their greenhouse gas output, with China agreeing to cap its output by 2030 or earlier if possible, and the United States pledging to cut its emissions to 26-28% below 2005 levels by 2025. The US also promised to increase its use of energy from zero-emission sources to 20% by 2030. Previously China had only pledged to reduce the rapid rate of growth in its emissions. The European Union has already endorsed a binding 40% greenhouse gas emissions reduction from 1990 levels target by 2030.

The second promising foundation for this year’s climate talks is President Obama’s November pledge for the US to contribute 3 billion dollars to the international climate fund aimed at helping developing countries prepare for and slow the effects of climate change. The announcement in November will encourage poorer nations to participate, since it may give hope that they can shift to non-carbon technologies while adapting to climate impacts. The United Nations Green Climate Fund, created in 2011, is an integral part of any international agreement. It asks industrialized countries and their private sector members that pumped most of the greenhouse gases into the atmosphere over the last century to now provide aid to developing countries who are trying to raise their per capita purchasing power to a more equitable level. The UK, Mexico, Korea, Germany, France and Japan are among the countries who have already committed to contribute.

The US-China agreement puts new pressure on India to announce its strategy. As the chart (below) makes clear, India is third now in emissions, but a Brookings Institution writer comments, “India could reasonably argue that its target date for peak emission should be much later than 2030. India’s per capita GDP is less than half of that of China’s on a purchasing power parity basis.” India could argue that its target year should be extended until such time as its per capita GDP grows to match China’s, which, at a rate of 6 percent per year, would not happen until 2043.
Although there are reasons to be encouraged, these are possibly outweighed by reasons for concern. A large body of scientific research warns that already it may be impossible to prevent the temperature of the planet’s atmosphere from rising by 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit, given the current level of greenhouse gases already in the atmosphere and the projected rate of emissions expected to continue before any new deal is carried out. That increase is considered the tipping point at which the world will be locked into a near-term future of severe impacts. Nonetheless, “Scientists say that United Nations negotiators should not give up on their efforts to cut emissions. At stake now, they say, is the difference between a newly unpleasant world and an uninhabitable one.”

December 31, 2014 Update on Lima Conference

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is one of three conventions entered into at the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. By 1995, countries who had signed the convention realized that emission reductions provisions in the Convention were inadequate. They launched negotiations to strengthen the global response to climate change, and, two years later, adopted the Kyoto Protocol. There are now 195 Parties to the Convention and 192 Parties to the Kyoto Protocol. The US is a member of the UNFCC but is not a party to the Kyoto Protocol.

A continuing source of conflict in the climate negotiations has been whether developing countries should be subject to the same emissions reduction requirements as developed countries. The Kyoto Protocol was based on the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities.” “Annex 1 Parties” (developed countries) agreed to binding emissions targets, but non-Annex 1 Parties (developing parties) did not. The First Commitment Period started in 2008 and ended in 2012. Since that time parties to the UNFCC have been trying to come to agreement on a post-Kyoto protocol. It is expected that some agreement will be reached at the
21st Conference of the Parties that will be held in Paris in late November through early December 2015. The Lima conference was preparatory for the 2015 Paris.

Some considered the Lima conference a success because it was agreed that all countries would enter into the new framework. Others considered Lima unsuccessful because again all that was required of the parties is that they make voluntary commitments to emissions reduction.

The declaration that came out of the conference was called the “Lima Call for Climate Action.”

Here is the The Guardian’s assessment of what was agreed and what wasn’t.

Prior to the Lima Conference, on November 19, 2014, the United Nations Environmental Program released its The Emissions Gap Report 2014. According to UNEP:

The new report clearly states that to stay within the 2 degrees Celsius limit, global emissions need to:

* turn the corner around 2020 and be heading downward by 2030. By 2030, global emissions should be 15% or lower than in 2010.
* be at least 50% lower than 2010 by 2050.
* reach net zero sometime in the second half of the century, with any remaining emissions offset by re-afforestation and other means.

The UNEP Gap Report also focuses on the urgency to act now to achieve ever higher ambition before 2020.

**IMMIGRATION**

President Obama continued to exercise presidential initiative when on November 20 he issued an executive order on immigration reform. According to a fact sheet issued by the White House, the order involves three major elements: tougher border security to prevent illegal immigration; deportation of people who threaten national security and public safety; and registration of undocumented immigrants who have lived in the US for more than five years and are parents of US citizens or Lawful Permanent Residents. By registering and passing criminal and national security background checks, an estimated 5 million undocumented immigrants will have the chance to stay in the US without fear of deportation for three years at a time. The fact sheet states, “The President’s actions will also streamline legal immigration to boost our economy and will promote naturalization for those who qualify.”

The decision to exclude the parents of dreamers—along with all agricultural workers and H-1B visa seekers—highlights the legal and political challenges the administration is navigating as it aims to curb the ongoing deportation of illegal immigrants. A Washington Post story says, “Operating in an arena that is typically shielded from judicial review, federal government lawyers have tried to broaden the number of people who can stay in the United States while
shying away from the kind of overreach that could give Congress grounds to overrule the policy.”

Congress can pass legislation to undo an executive action, but the measure would be subject to presidential veto. The Supreme Court can also declare an executive order unconstitutional as it could any other law, and the court system appears to be the route opponents are taking. In early December a coalition of 17 US states sued the Obama administration maintaining the executive order is illegal.

Presidential orders to defer deportation of certain immigrants are common, however, according to the pro-immigration American Immigration Council, whose figures are substantiated by “a number of experts,” to quote from one source that analyzed the data. President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1956 and every president since then has acted to keep families together or to shield illegal immigrants from returning to countries where they might be persecuted—39 instances in all. The action of George H. W. Bush in 1990 protected 1.5 million illegal immigrants, about 40% of the estimated number at the time, the same proportion Obama’s order will affect of the current total of illegal immigrants.

As for the number of executive orders issued, Obama stands out for restraint. As of October, the President had issued 193 executive orders, the lowest total of any two-term president since Theodore Roosevelt. By comparison, George W. Bush issued 287 executive orders between 2001 and 2009, and William J. Clinton issued 308 executive orders between 1993 and 2001.

POLLUTION

On November 25 the EPA proposed to strengthen the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) for ground-level ozone, based on extensive scientific evidence about ozone’s effects. The proposed regulation would lower the current threshold for ozone pollution to a range of 65 to 70 parts per billion, from 75 parts per billion. The EPA proposal, keeping open the possibility that the final rule could be stricter, would also seek public comment on a 60 parts-per-billion plan.

Coverage by the NY Times states, “The agency estimates that the new regulation would by 2025 prevent from 320,000 to 960,000 asthma attacks in children, and from 330,000 to 1 million missed school days. It also estimates that by 2025 the rule would prevent 750 to 4,300 premature deaths, 1,400 to 4,300 asthma-related emergency room visits and 65,000 to 180,000 missed workdays.

The regulation would come with a high cost to industry, which the EPA estimates would be $3.9 billion in 2025, using a standard of 70 parts per billion. The cost would be $15 billion in 2025 at a standard of 65 parts per billion. (The EPA chose 2025 as an example because that is when the agency expects the regulation to be fully in force.)
Because ozone is a byproduct of fossil fuel pollutants, energy-intensive industries, including the American Chemical Council and American Petroleum Institute, have raised the strongest objections to the changes. The National Association of Manufacturers sees it reducing GDP by $270 billion per year. The EPA defends the standard by asserting that its rules have helped improve air and water quality while the economy has simultaneously grown.

The Clean Air Act requires EPA to review the standards every five years by following a set of open, transparent steps and considering the advice of a panel of independent experts. EPA last updated these standards in 2008, setting them at 75 ppb. Environmental groups have been advocating for a lower limit on ground-level ozone since it was initially set at 75 parts per billion under George W. Bush in 2008, but an article in MarketWatch summarizes the attitude of the business community to the proposal: the-epa-pours-on-the-pain-with-new-ozone-regulations.

The agency is expected to release new coal-waste disposal guidelines later in December. In the meantime Duke Energy is polishing its green image, including by an appearance of CEO Lynn Good on 60 Minutes December 7, along with North Carolina Waterkeepers and other environmental critics of the coal ash spill in the Dan River in by Duke Energy, the world’s largest utility, in February 2014.

Communications
In yet another move challenging Republican leadership, on November 10 President Barack Obama asked the Federal Communications Commission to reclassify internet service under Title II of the Telecommunications Act. In so doing the President, advocating for the internet to be regulated like any other public utility, is backing a policy commonly referred to as “net neutrality.” Specific recommendations include the following:

- If a consumer requests access to a website or service, and the content is legal, an ISP should not be permitted to block it.
- Nor should ISP’s be able to intentionally slow down some content or speed up others through a process often called “throttling.”
- The FCC should make full use of the transparency authorities the court recently upheld, and if necessary apply net neutrality rules to points of interconnection between the ISP and the rest of the Internet.
- No service should be stuck in a “slow lane” because it does not pay a fee.
- The FCC should make these rules fully applicable to mobile broadband as well, while recognizing the special challenges that come with managing wireless networks.

In a message shown on the Whitehouse website, the President referred to the 4 million public comments calling for net neutrality. “For almost a century,” he said, “our law has recognized that companies who connect you to the world have special obligations not to exploit the monopoly they enjoy over access in and out of your home or business.”