ECONOMY AND ECOLOGY 15.11.2022 | Kate Pickett

The most wonderful time of the year

This Christmas, the greatest gift we can give is the permission to not over-consume

We know the holiday season has kicked off in earnest when primetime television starts to fill with the over-the-top annual promotion bonanzas of the big retailers. The giant supermarkets and the biggest of the department stores spend millions every year to try to boost customer spending during November and December, these months usually accounting for more than a fifth of the year's sales.

In Britain, according to the *Guardian*, this year however 'retailers are struggling to find the right tone for their annual promotional push as a surge in the cost of essentials including energy bills and food leaves many families short of cash'. The middle-to-upmarket retailer Marks and Spencer, whose advertising for its clothing and home stores last year featured a Hollywood-style, singing-and-dancing extravaganza, 12 months on is showcasing recipients of its £1 million charitable donations to community groups and good causes. The German-owned discount retailer Lidl echoes this tone: its seasonal advertisement is focused on the teddy-bear mascot of its toy-bank initiative, which makes charitable donations of toys and games to children.

Despite the cost-of-living crisis leading to an estimated 6 per cent fall in the value of Christmas sales in the United Kingdom, they are still predicted to be £82.2 bn in 2022.

The low-price supermarket Tesco's has meanwhile hit on the economic crisis created by the disastrous October mini-budget during the short-lived premiership of Liz Truss. Its pretend party-political broadcast from 'The Christmas Party' includes a 'manifesto' promising 'more pigs in blankets for more people' and 'wines that deliver on budget', with the pledge: 'The only things we'll cut are prices and cake.'

Despite the cost-of-living crisis leading to an estimated 6 per cent fall in the value of Christmas sales in the United Kingdom, they are still predicted to be £82.2 bn in 2022. That big number lies beneath some of the 'fun facts' provided by the British Retail Consortium — which

include the 16 Christmas presents received by the average child and the 7,000 calories (lumberjack level) consumed by the average Brit on Christmas Day.

Status consumption

Not-such-fun facts are, of course,
that poverty, destitution and homelessness are all on the rise in the UK, accompanied by severe pressures on mental and physical health. The pressure to spend to achieve a mythical perfect Christmas is just one more stress for those already suffering the greatest burdens from the crisis. Too often, the spending has to come from savings and credit cards rather than from truly disposable income.

How Christmas is celebrated is riddled with social-class implications. So much so, the English humourist Richard Osman could tweet:

'The issue of class, of where we all fit, and the boundaries that separate one class from another, are so complex and multi-faceted. But, basically, it all boils down to this. The later you open your presents on Christmas Day, the more middle class you are.'

And the pressure to spend — perhaps spend more than one can afford — shapes Christmas spending in surprising ways. It seems to be more important further down the social ladder to present a social identity that suggests financial security, affluence and generosity, rather than further up.

Unsurprisingly, households with lower incomes spend a higher proportion of their income on Christmas.

Poverty denies people opportunities to be generous and at Christmas, in particular, people want to avoid looking ungenerous or hard up. Unsurprisingly, households with lower incomes spend a higher proportion of their income on Christmas. But researchers have also found that in some years members of the British working class spend more in absolute terms on food and drink in December than their middle-class counterparts — perhaps reflecting a need to reinforce social status through seasonal feasting that contrasts with everyday hardship.

A 2019 comparison of Christmas celebrations with seven European neighbours bears this out: the UK spent the most (€639 per household) and the Netherlands the least (€341 per household), with gifts making up the majority of the spending in both countries. Income inequality has

been linked to higher status consumption — spending to improve social status through the conspicuous consumption of consumer goods that confer and symbolise it. And on such measures as the Gini coefficient, the UK has become an outlier in Europe for its accentuated inequality.

Christmas spending and the climate crisis

Research has also suggested that status anxiety may be the mechanism that connects income inequality with status consumption. A group of us at the University of York have just published a review of the evidence which found that status anxiety may indeed be an important driver of the higher consumption observed in more unequal societies such as Britain.

Consumption fuelled by status anxiety is associated with household debt, the separation of rich and poor into distinct geographical communities, cycles of unsustainable consumption and longer commuting times, ultimately contributing to higher carbon emissions. Income inequality raises expectations of what is considered a 'normal' lifestyle, exerting further pressure to buy material goods and pay for experiences that signal status to others — all of which gets amplified in the holiday season.

Inequality-driven patterns of consumption — not only of material goods but also the growing 'experience economy' where globalised tourism and travel become additional ways to display status — are driving ever-more-unsustainable carbon emissions. Although the sites of production for material goods are often in developing countries, they are transported and consumed in high-income countries, contributing even more to greenhouse-gas emissions than if they were consumed locally.

One study optimistically advanced the idea of 'conspicuous conservation', in which status would be sought not by conspicuous consumption of the usual goods but through purchases that showed concern about the environment. A 'Prius halo' would accrue from spending on a high-status but low-emissions vehicle, for instance.

A recent analysis shows that it takes the bottom 10 per cent of earners in the UK 26 years to emit the same amount of carbon dioxide as do the top 1 per

Analogous phenomena related to excessive Christmas spending are 'Buy Nothing Day', an international day of protest against consumerism, and the 'Buy Nothing Christmas' movement. If in the context of the climate emergency perhaps status can now be displayed via green credentials, then in the context of the

cent in a year.

cost-of-living crisis maybe it can come from rising above the pressure to spend at Christmas?

Sadly, it seems unlikely such movements will be able to mitigate the high-carbon lifestyles of the rich. A recent analysis shows that it takes the bottom 10 per cent of earners in the UK 26 years to emit the same amount of carbon dioxide as do the top 1 per cent in a year.

The environmental footprint of the rich is so large that it has to be reduced — not only for the sake of justice but as an essential part of bringing the environmental crisis under control. And the move towards sustainability will meet widespread opposition unless people feel the inevitable burdens of change, and of the policies necessary to drive it forward, are fairly shared.

These are just two compelling reasons why greater equality is essential in a world facing a climate emergency. This holiday season, perhaps the greatest gifts we can give one another are permission to *not* over-consume, in pursuit of an unattainable ideal Christmas, and encouragement to join movements of activism and solidarity — promoting the real 'peace and goodwill' of sustainability and resolution of conflicts.

This is a joint publication by Social Europe and IPS-Journal



Kate Pickett

Kate Pickett is the deputy director of the Centre for Future Health and associate director of the Leverhulme Centre for Anthropocene Biodiversity at the University of York.