

Culture, Consumption, and Global Warming

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The Situation

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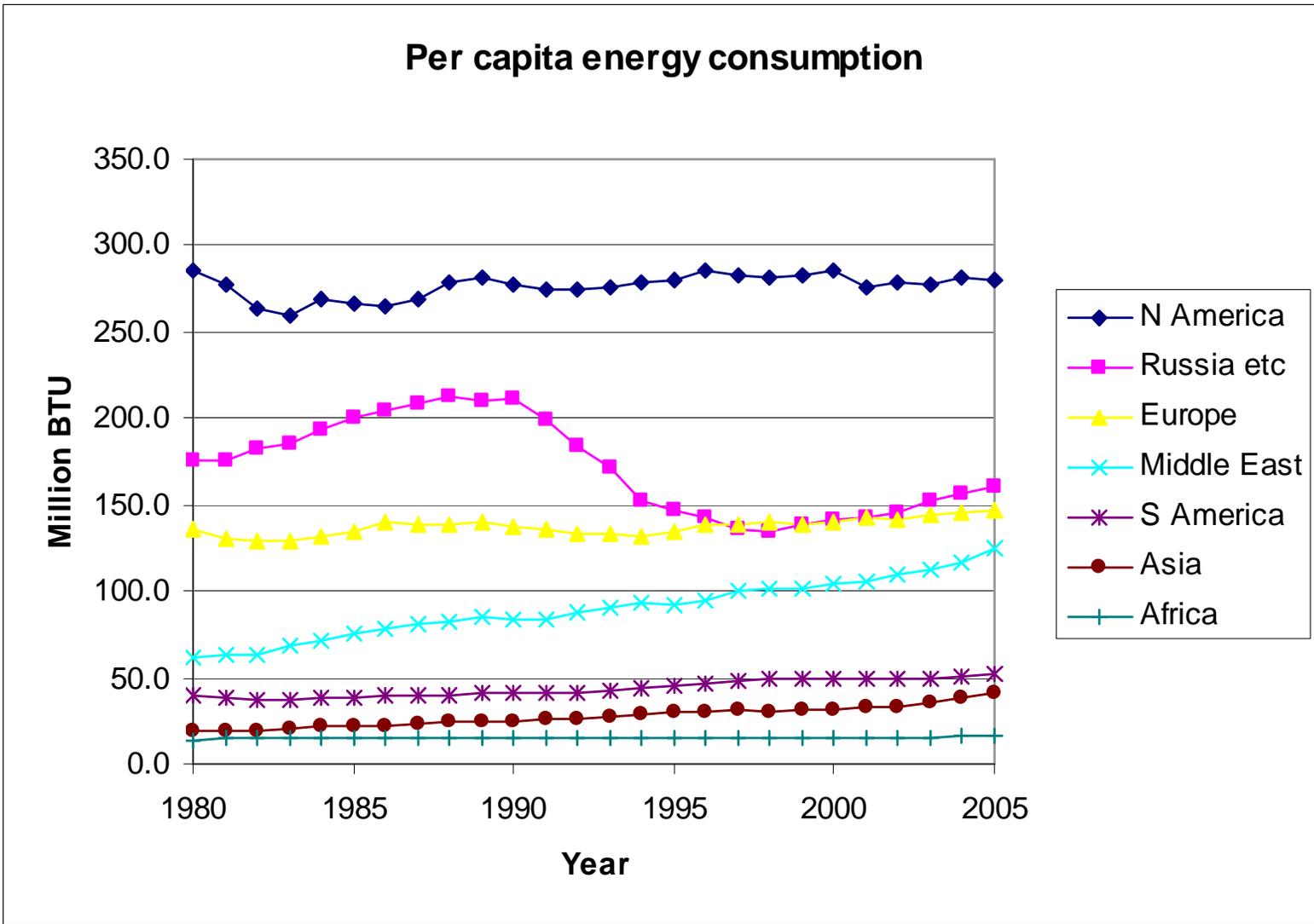
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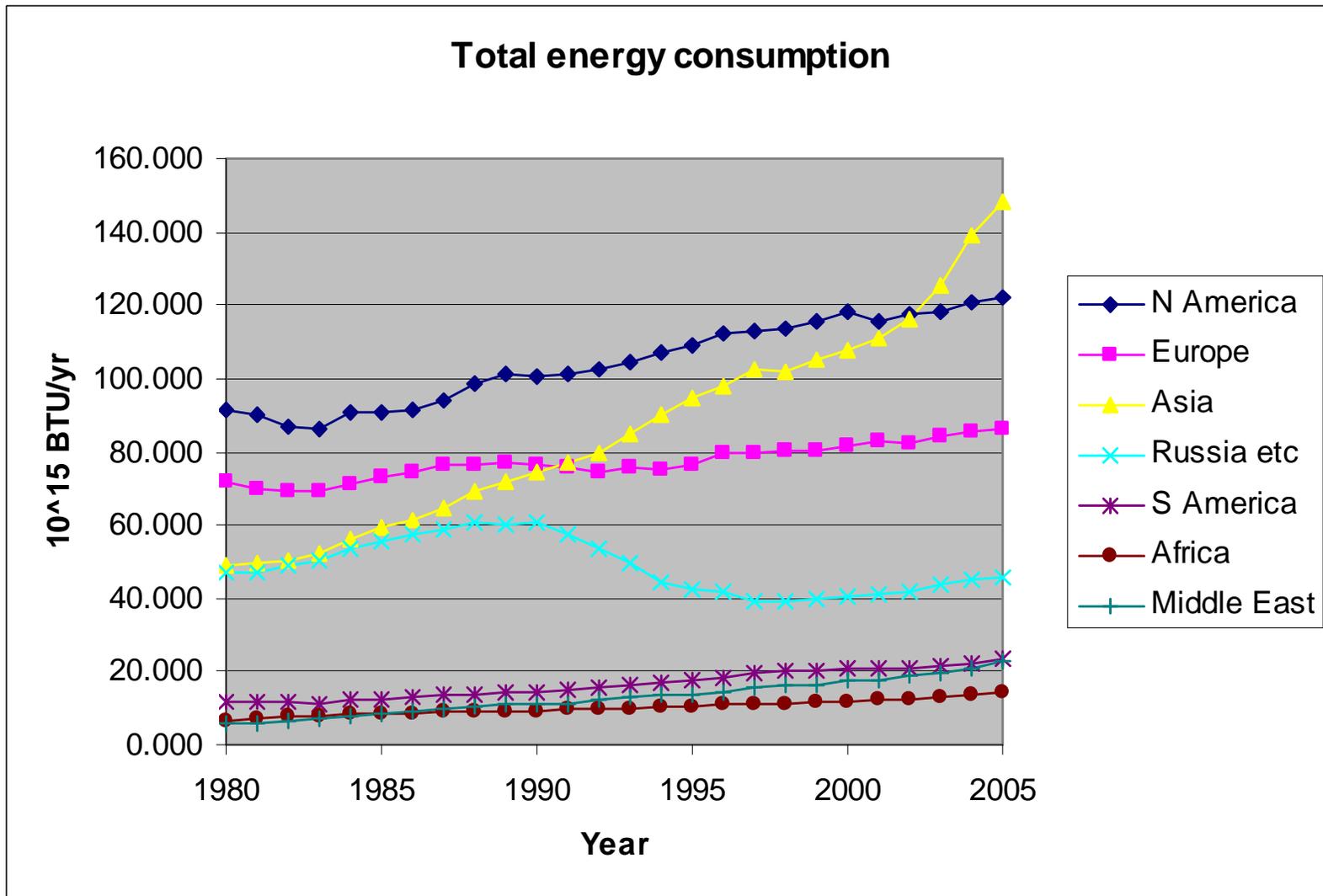
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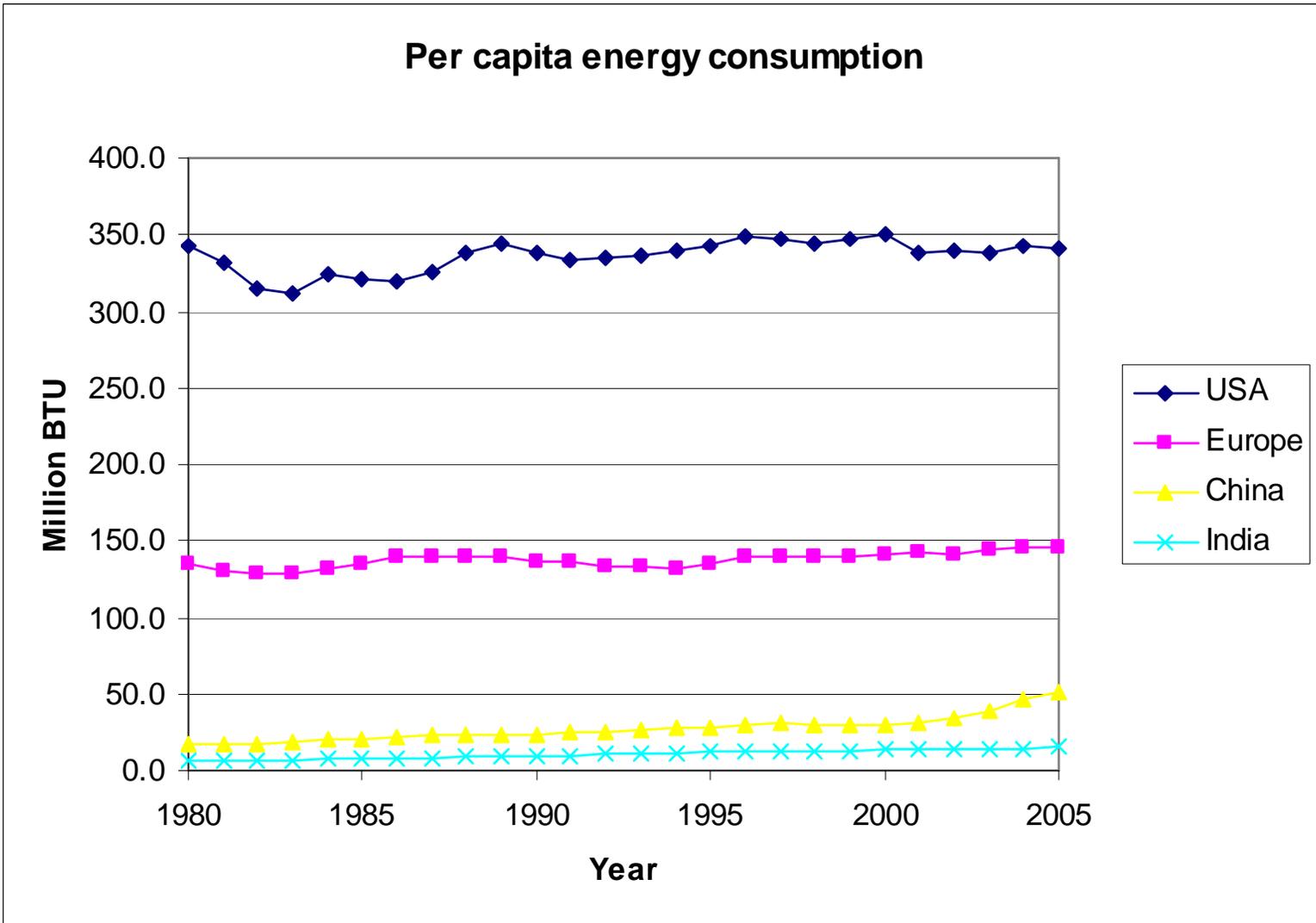
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- **Per capita** consumption is rising rapidly in the **developing world**.
- This is where **most people** live.
- **Our** consumption pattern is a second-order effect.
- As **their** consumption habits approach **ours**... we don't want to think about what happens.
- When it comes to consumption, **culture** is the driving force



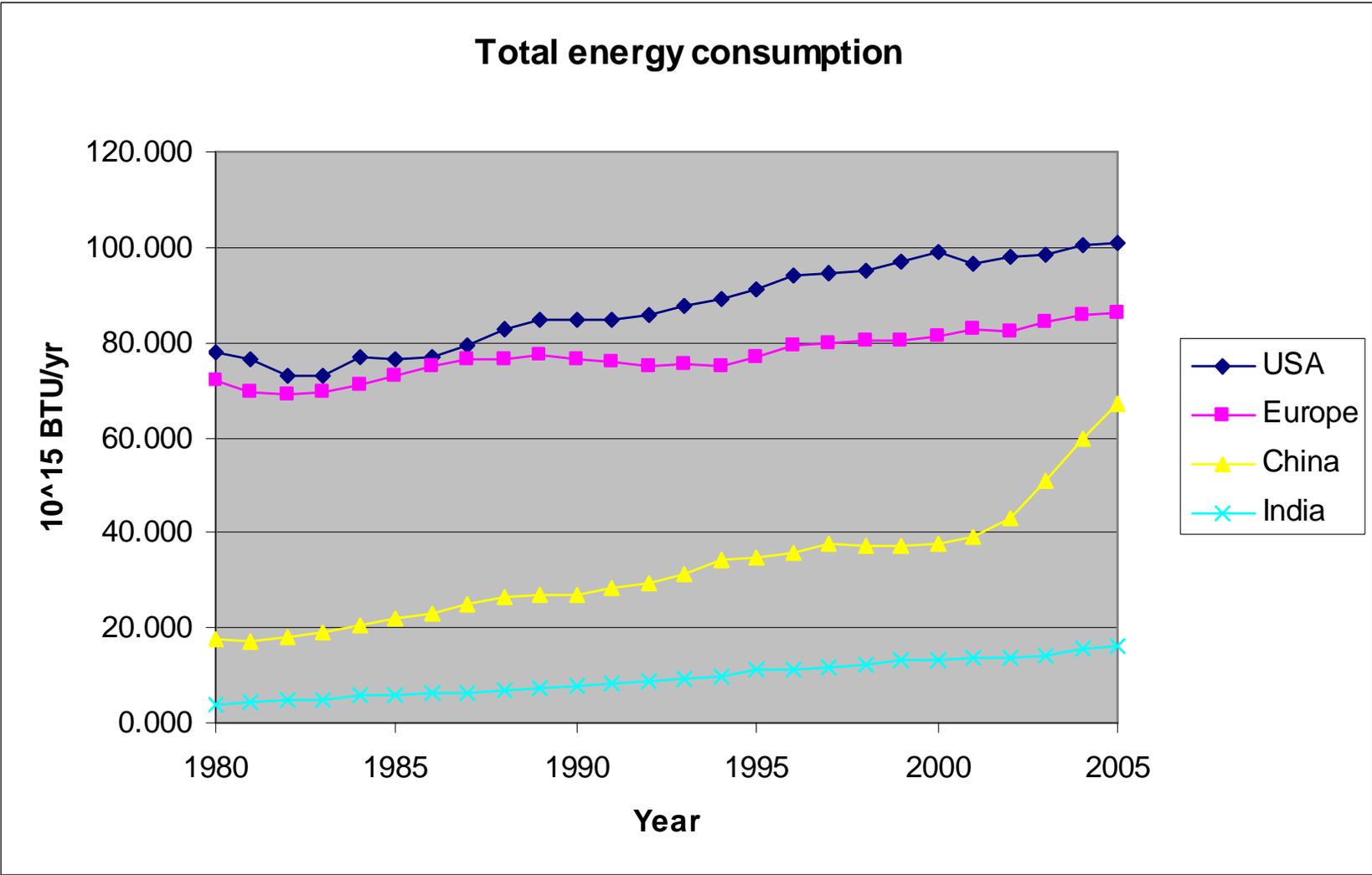
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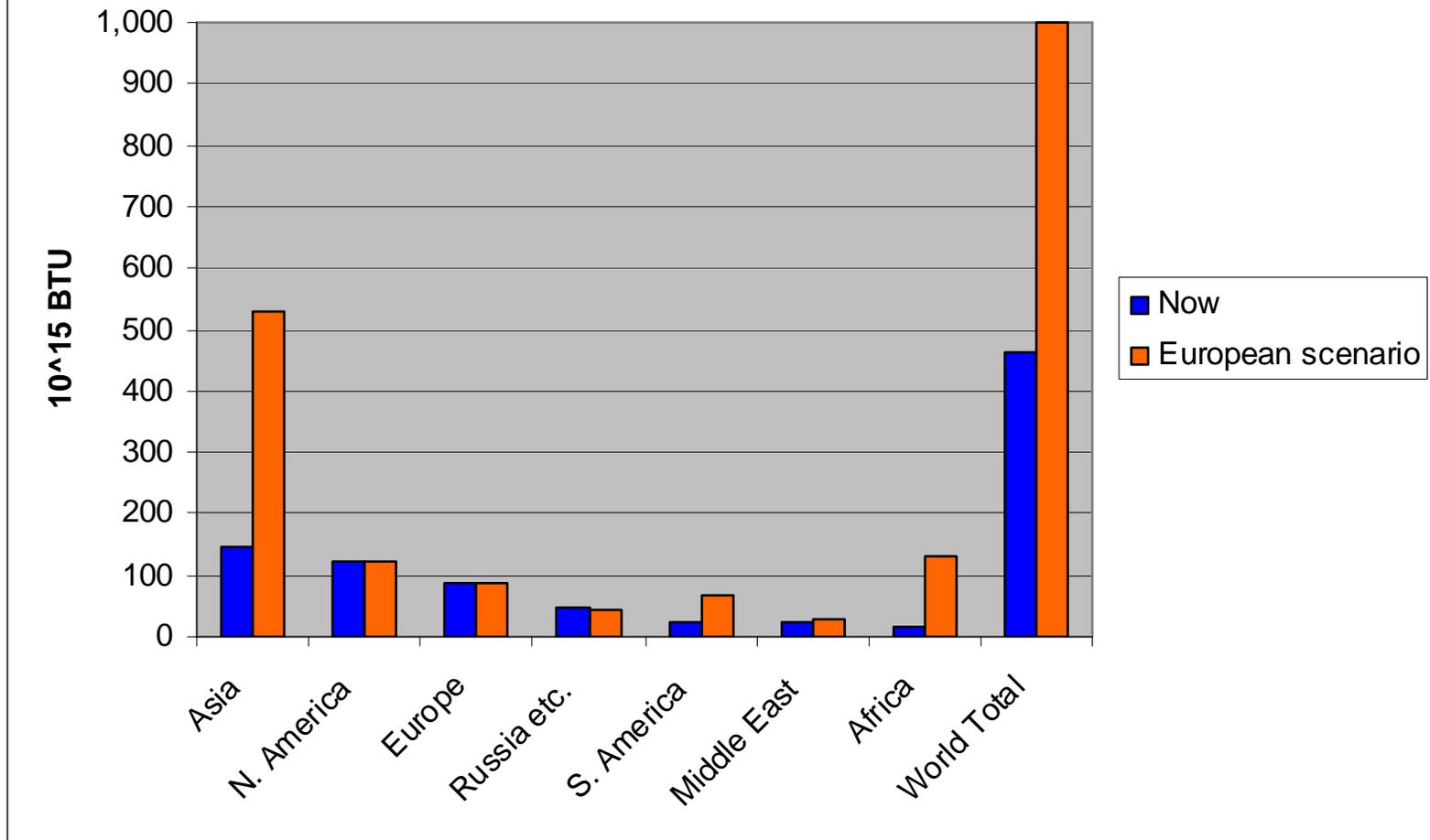


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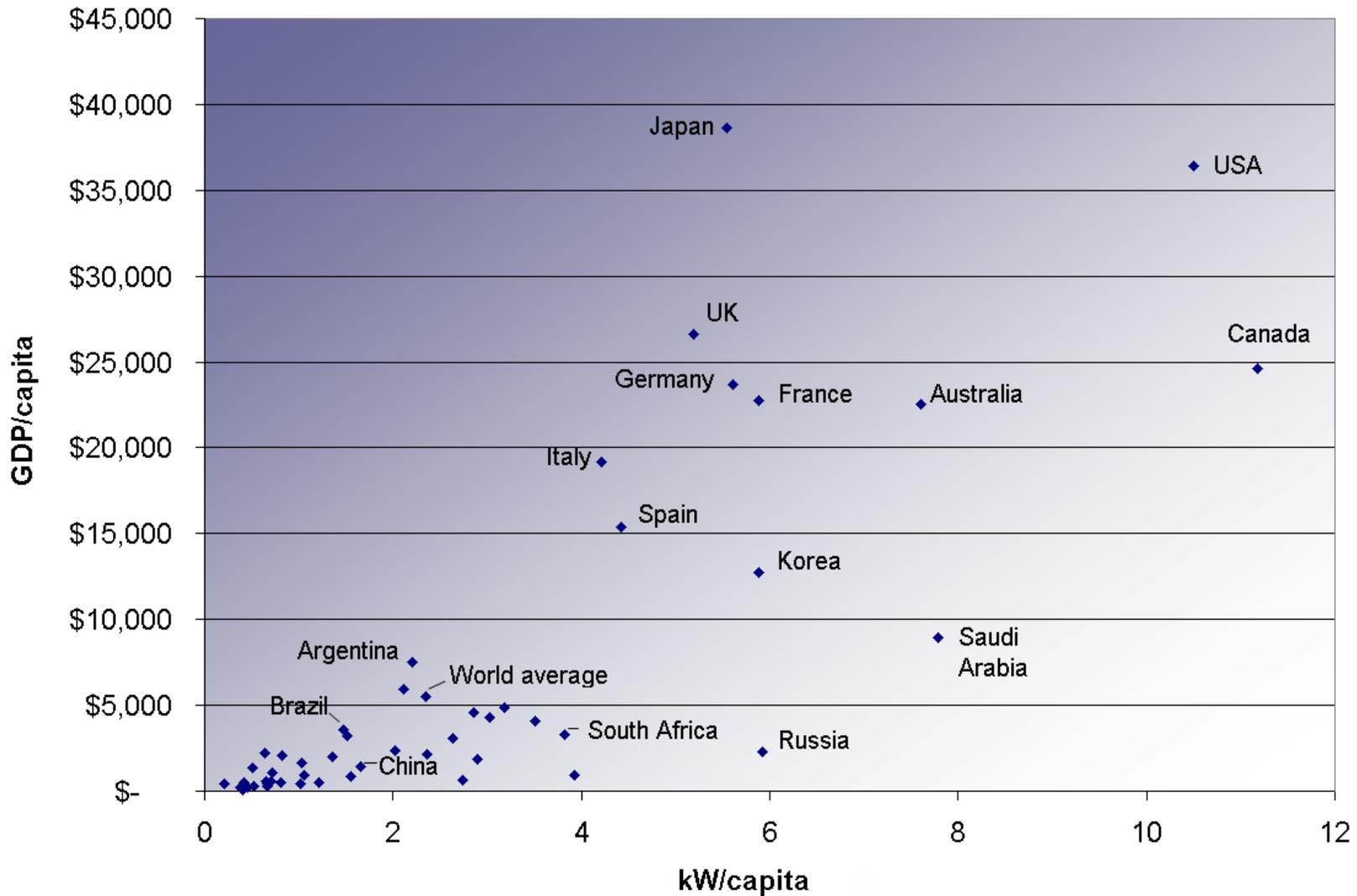
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Effect of world development outside N. America to European per capita energy consumption rate



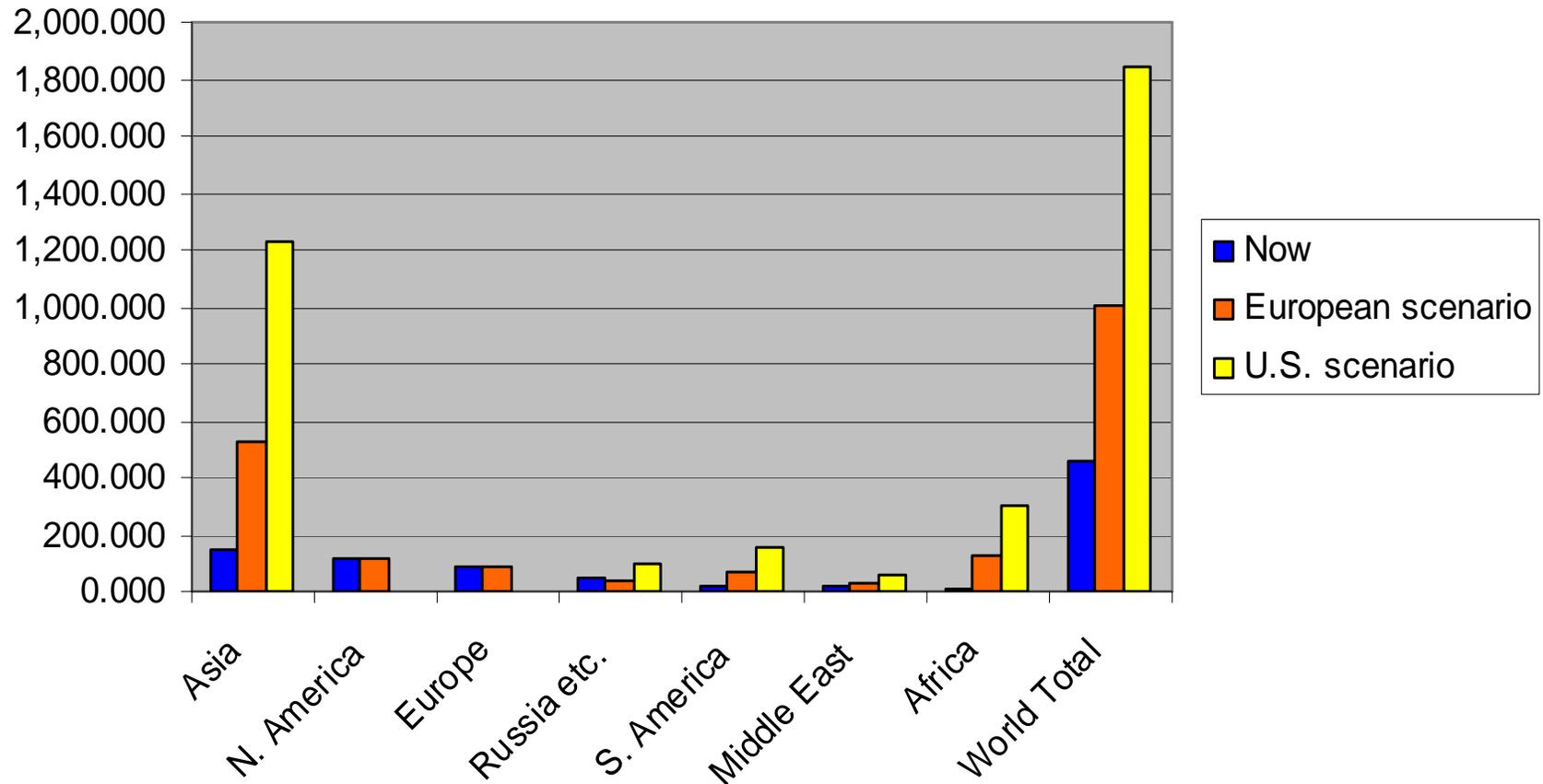
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Per capita energy consumption vs. per capita GDP



Source: International Energy Agency, Frank van Mierlo in Wikipedia

Effect of world development outside N. America to European and U.S. per capita energy consumption rate



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Cultural Attitudes toward Consumption

- Tlingit, Kwakiutl



Longhouse, site of potlatch



Conspicuous consumption

Cultural Attitudes toward Consumption

- Some Chinese subcultures



How much is the rent?
If you have to ask, you can't afford it.



“To be rich is glorious”

Cultural Attitudes toward Consumption

- Bantu-speaking peoples



Shona gathering, Zimbabwe

Cultural Attitudes toward Consumption

- Ladakh
 - See Helena Norberg-Hodge, *Ancient futures : Learning from Ladakh*, 1991



Having a good time in Ladakh

Concepts of Development

- We Westerners equate development with technological development. Why?

Concepts of Development

- We Westerners equate development with technological development. Why?
- We rely fundamentally on technology.
- We universalize our approach to life.
 - We believe development = being more like us
 - So we judge others by the state of their technology.

Concepts of Development

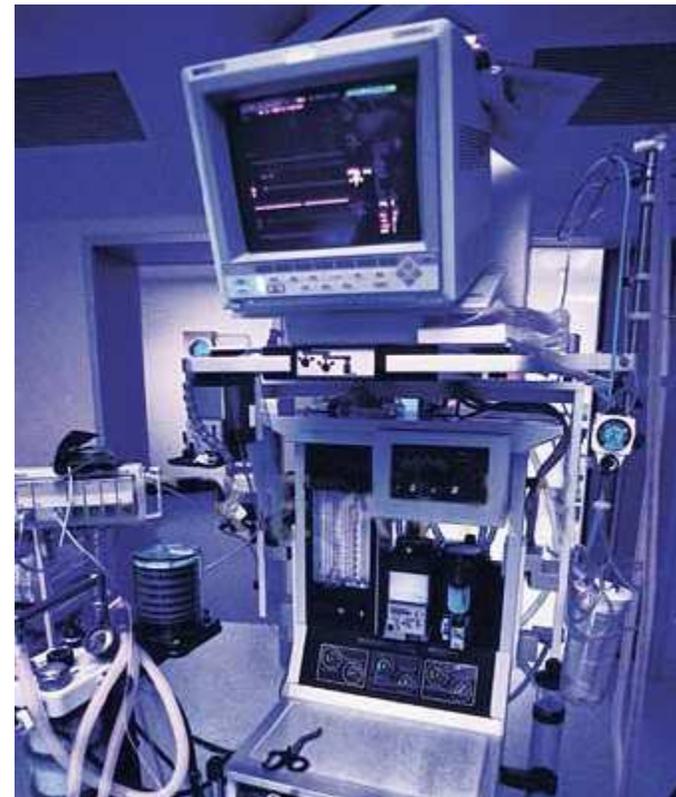
- Cultural role of technology
 - In the West, technology is the primary coping mechanism
 - Western development = technological development



Medical technology

Concepts of Development

- Cultural role of technology
 - In the West, technology is the primary coping mechanism
 - Western development = technological development
- We are better at technology because we rely on it more
 - Other cultures rely more on relationships.
 - Family, friends, group solidarity, etc.



Medical technology

Concepts of Development

- If cultures are so different, why do so many **accept** the Western concept of development?



Buy-in to Western-style Development

- Cultures have always borrowed ideas
 - Some obvious benefits of Western technology.
- But why so much focus on consumer goods?



Mobile phones, Japan

Buy-in to Western-style Development

- Role of imitation in cultural evolution.
 - People are more imitative than apes.
 - Particularly, imitation of successful or high-status individuals.
 - Peter J. Richerson and Robert Boyd, *Not by Genes Alone: How Culture Transformed Human Evolution*



Buy-in to Western-style Development

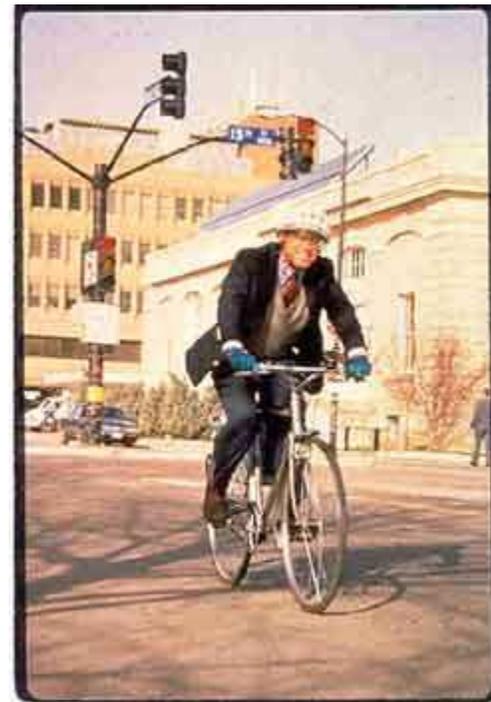
- Due to Western economic hegemony, elites are likely to have links to the West.
 - Elites adopt elements of Western lifestyle, including consumer goods.
 - They are emulated.



Mercedes-Benz in
Port-au-Prince

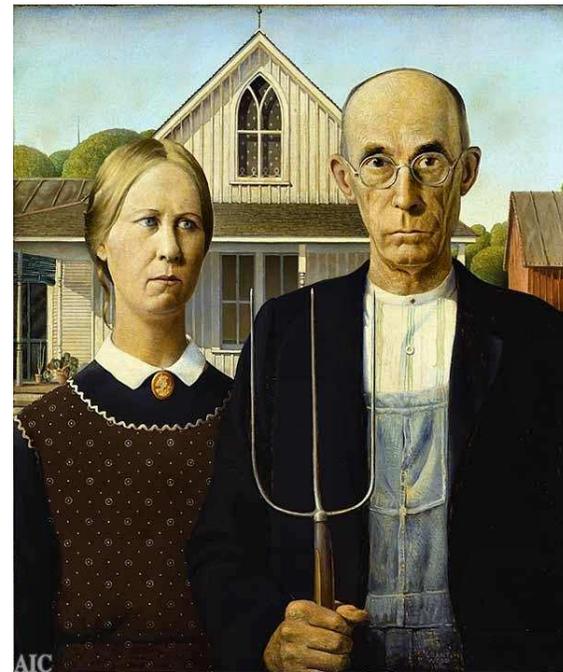
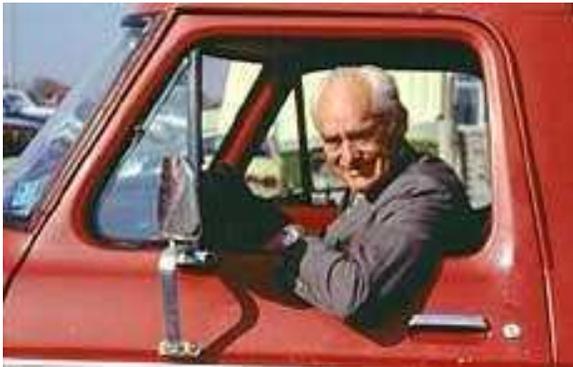
What to Do?

- Lifestyle change in the West will have little **direct** effect.
 - “Developing” countries dominate the picture.
- But rest of the world may emulate Western example.



What to Do?

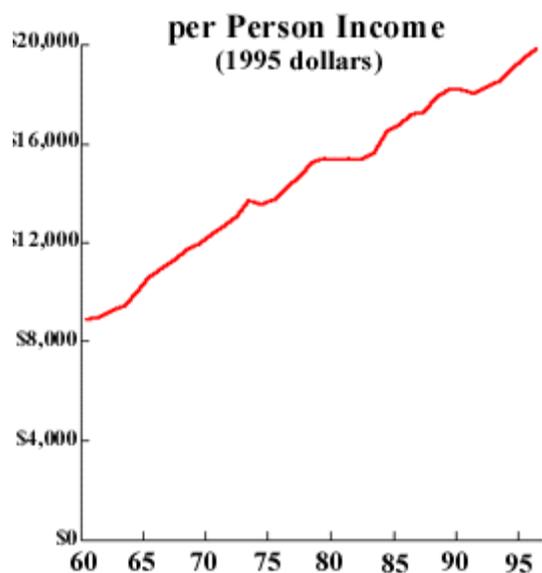
- Consumption need not play a central role in U.S. culture.
 - We criticize our own consumerism and materialistic lifestyle.



Sam Walton. Drove an old pickup, never paid more than \$5 for a haircut.

What to Do?

- As prosperity rises, happiness falls.
 - “Very happy” scores fell about 5% in the last 30 years.



Source: D. G. Myers, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty*

What to Do?

- But advertisers vigorously promote Western consumer goods to elites worldwide.
- Media and entertainment depict successful and glamorous people as consumers.



7-star hotel, Dubai

Corporate Responsibility

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 - Many complain about corporate power, but we will increasingly rely on it.

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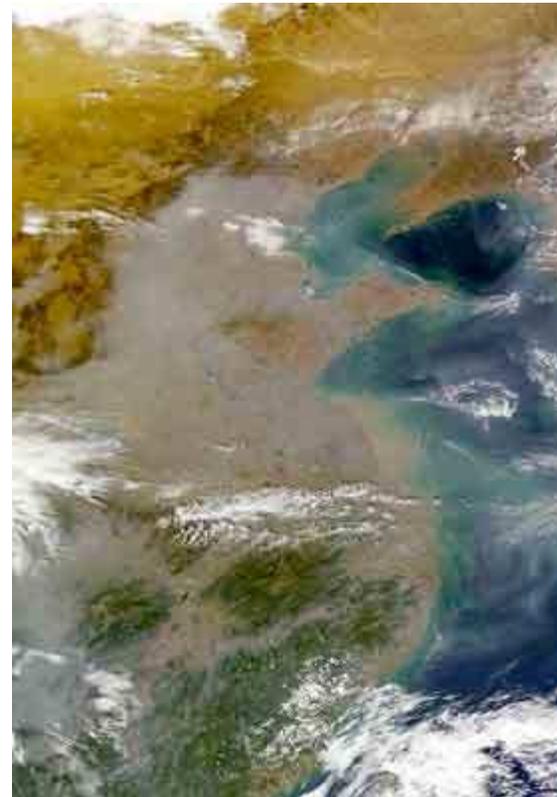
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- MNCs will be directly responsible for maintaining conditions **necessary for their own existence**.
 - Some already understand this.

Visible Urgency

- Developing nations are already dealing with environmental crisis.



Garbage dump, Guiyu,
China



Air pollution in eastern
China, seen from
satellite

Visible Urgency

- Infrastructure is already overwhelmed.



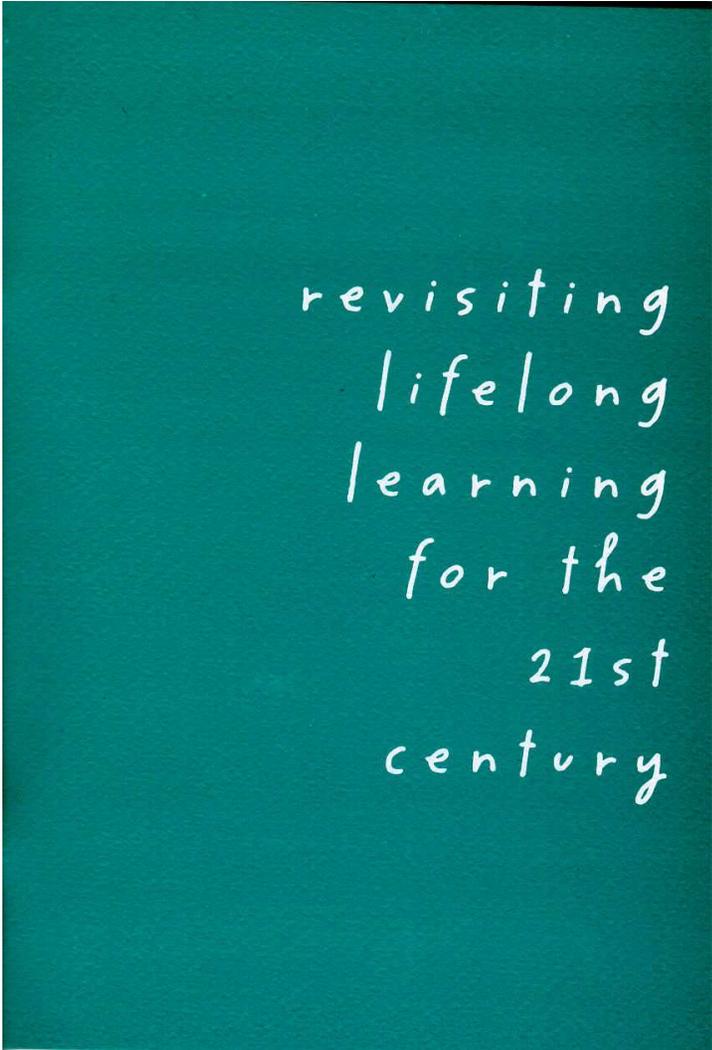
Traffic, Delhi

Traffic, Bangkok



Alternative to Material Consumption

- Replace **consumer goods** with **lifelong learning**.
 - Predicted by anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson
 - Learning is more satisfying than consumption.
 - Not resource intensive.
 - Byproduct: knowledge.



revisiting
lifelong
learning
for the
21st
century

More Cultural Support

- Abundance of choice is expensive.
- Too much choice can make us unhappy.
 - Barry Schwartz, *The Costs of Living: How Market Freedom Erodes the Best Things in Life*
 - Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less.*
- If culture determines more life choices, we may be more content.

