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Renting furniture from Ikea? I'm not buying that idea

Who really benefits from widespread rental?

Rhik Samadder The Guardian Tue 5 Feb 2019

Ikea customers may soon be able to lease rather than buy new furniture. The initiative will be piloted in Switzerland, and is being described as an environmentally progressive step. But is it, though? Is that all it is? It is February, it is dark, and I have my suspicious glasses on. Also my cynical hat, and a thick jumper that says: "Don't Trust Capitalism." (I had to make it myself.)

I thought generation rent applied only to young people being excluded from the housing market, then rampantly exploited by private landlords. But it is more than that, it is an expanding business model in which increasingly, we rent access to everything, all our music and TV, but also art, clothes, tyres, wedding cakes, caskets, pets. I don't want to rent everything I have to touch or see with my eyes on a daily basis. It is the idea of having an ongoing relationship with a company that I kick against. I understand I have to consume things to live. But I would prefer the transaction to be short, self-contained and an accepted source of shame, like going to the toilet. Ikea says it is looking for ways for customers to "buy, care for and pass on products". If I take home a Tobias or a Fanbyn, I want to buy it, sit on it and be left alone.

Some renting suits our personality or circumstances: a previous partner latched on to streaming services immediately, realising Spotify was a way to free our home of my vast collection of Now That's What I Call Music CDs. (Apart from No 31, which I strapped to a mattress slat under the bed, like a lost book of the bible.) There is a case to be made for renting short-term necessities such as tuxedos, maybe even textbooks. And I do believe a circular economy – one sustained by upcycling, refurbishing, narrowing of the energy loop, things an Ikea spokesman has said the company is committed to – are the future. But I like it grassroots. I'm part of a Facebook group in which people post photos of old mattresses going free on our neighbourhood streets, and, weirdly, I feel less icky about this. I recently downloaded the food-waste reduction app Olio, through which people donate their excess kefir grains, or you can pick up their unwanted ham because they're going on holiday. (I've made it sound bad, but it's really good.)

I don't have any particular beef with Ikea, I even like its meatballs. My sofa is a secondhand Ikea one, bought for £30 off Gumtree. I just find it impossible to trust any globalised, tax-efficient conglomerate's motives. It's an instinct that rises in me in direct proportion to all tactics designed to gainsay it; all the kooky, best-buds packaging, greenwashed marketing and pseudo-profound adverts I am meant to find inspiring. I don't want to be told I'm enough by a banana smoothie, or think I'm saving the Earth by switching my coffee table up.

We need to refurbish our ideas about ownership and consumption, and stop letting markets tear us apart. But can these changes be led by organisations that have caused the problem? And is comprehensive renting the answer? I find it odd that the brighter future involves money leaving our accounts on a monthly basis, and flying towards the same companies, which control more and more of the material realities of our lives, while we own less and less. The comedian Bill Hicks bemoaned a world in which we put a dollar sign on everything on the planet. Did he imagine a ticking clock on everything in the world too, one in which the shirt can literally be taken from your back?