

# Abandon Ownership! Join the Rentership Society!

By Chris Suellentrop ✉ November 1, 2010 | 12:00 pm | [Wired November 2010](#)



Photo: Mauricio Alejo

In the American mind, renters are regarded as an unsavory lot, willful dissidents from the American dream. They do things like put cars up on cinder blocks in their front yard or, worse, live in your basement. The vision of an Ownership Society was about more than just houses, but the promotion of homeownership was, for a time at least, its most successful element. You know the story by now: The rate of homeownership climbed to almost 70 percent, sellers walked out of closings trundling wheelbarrows full of cash, and the phrase “granite countertops” seemed to hold as much promise as “plastics” did in [The Graduate](#). Then it all fell apart. We woke up in a Rentership Society, and it’s starting to look permanent. And you know what? Thank goodness. Ownership, it turns out, is for suckers.

For renters today, finding a new apartment on craigslist is almost as easy as streaming a movie. (OK, not quite, but you get the point.) Homeowners don’t reside in this frictionless economy: They’re stuck in one place, unable to quickly downgrade to a cheaper residence when times are lean (or upgrade when times are flush). And it costs thousands of dollars in renovations to beat the depreciation curve.

I speak from experience. My wife and I bought and sold two condos during the latter stages of the real-estate boom, escaping both as break-even propositions (after transaction costs). When we moved into a rental apartment a couple of years ago, we realized that ownership had been a burden, a time sink, and a money pit. Now we ask the landlord to fix things when they break, and we don't mind that the floor is not the one we would have chosen. We pay less each month than we would on a mortgage, and we bank money that once would have gone into installing central air.

We discovered that this emancipating, and remunerative, mindset applies to a lot of things that in the pre-Internet age you had to accumulate in order to enjoy. We sold our car and now use Zipcar or Avis when we need one — my somewhat technophobic wife refers to Zipcar as “Netflixing a car.”

Granted, I live in Manhattan, where you don't need a car to get around every day. But no matter where you live, you've probably begun to embrace the Rentership Society without even realizing it. When was the last time you bought a DVD? Sales have plummeted because we all stream our video or get discs by mail. Amazon reportedly wants to get into the rental business, too, by creating a streaming service — their current (failed) model sells TV shows by the episode. I get my music from Microsoft's [Zune Pass](#) service these days — \$15 a month buys me flexibility, mobility, and freedom from having to upgrade when a new standard replaces MP3s (which it inevitably will).

I'm no freegan, mind you. I don't dig through dumpsters for my dinner, and I believe in the virtues of property rights. The Rentership Society doesn't have to mean the Tragedy of the Commons — the stuff I rent isn't owned by the government or by everyone. It's owned by someone — someone else. I just pay for use. Those of you with a profit instinct (and storage space) can even become landlords: Websites like [SnapGoods](#) and [Zilok](#) let people rent out their stuff — lawn mowers, vacuum cleaners, tools — to the tenant class (as discussed by Clive Thompson in issue 18.09).

For the rest of us, we'll always own some things. There's stuff we use all the time, like furniture and clothing, and objects with sentimental value (take your stinking paws off my Yoda figure with plastic snake). But the Internet is creating markets that enable us to own much less. The winner of the ebook sweepstakes will be the bookseller who becomes a bookrenter. I don't want to own hundreds of books on a Kindle at \$10 a pop. I want to Netflix them — pay for access to every book ever published. I'd rather be a renter in Borges' library than the owner of my own.

Everything, everywhere, all the time. That's the dream of the Rentership Society. And we're almost there. If you want to be able to possess some things, in some places, some of the time, well, keep on buying. But I vote for infinite abundance, on demand. Doesn't that sound like the new century's American dream?

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