The Contradictions of Consumer Culture

The following are a collection of bumper stickers about consumption: “When the Going Gets Tough, the Tough Go Shopping,” “He Who Dies with the Most Toys Wins,” “People Who Say Money Can’t Buy Happiness Don’t Know Where to Shop,” “So Many Malls, and So Little Trunk Space,” “I’m Spending My Grandkids’ Inheritance,” and “A Woman’s Place Is in the Mall.”

Only the most naive reader would think that these are celebrations of consumption. All of them have an ironic edge. All of them represent a truth about our society: We love consuming, but we are not quite comfortable with that feeling. This chapter argues that the contradictions in our feelings about consumption have their origin in the contradictions in our consumer culture.

Consumption is central to our society. It is an essential part of the values and concepts through which individuals understand their place in society. However, before we can understand the culture, we first must understand the economic system that is the basis of our consumer culture. Following an examination of that economic system, we will look at some of the contradictions of consumer culture—its contradictions with the demands of production with bourgeois culture and the contradictions in the view of the consumer. Finally, we will look at the effects that consumer culture has had on our political system.
The capitalist economic system based on the ideal of a free market has become one of the main institutions of our society. Indeed, we seem to be currently engaged in a grand social experiment to see just how much of our society can be given over to the economic system. The market economy has assumed many of the functions—such as running schools and incarcerating lawbreakers—once thought to be the government’s responsibility. We tend to see the economy as more responsive to the needs of the average person than is any government agency. Increasingly, the public sees the government as bureaucratic interference in the economy and not as protection from the excesses of the economic system.

An important part of this change has been the increasing emphasis on the role of the consumer in the economy. Consumption is now recognized by both experts and laypersons as the economy’s driving force, and the ordinary consumer, rather than the producer, is seen as the central figure in the economic system. This, however, has not always been the case. It is useful to look briefly at the history of the change in economic thought from a focus on the producer to a focus on the consumer.

Economists, of course, have always had to recognize the existence of consumption, even if it had little place in their analysis. Adam Smith, the founder of modern economic theory, wrote that “consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to, only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer. The maxim is so perfectly self-evident, that it would be absurd to attempt to prove it” (Smith 1937, 625).

Despite economists’ recognition of its importance, consumption never entered into early economic analysis because it was seen as either a response to a natural need or as the result of unnatural and morally reprehensible greed. Consumers either increased their consumption because increased income allowed them to provide for previously unmet natural needs or they were led into increased consumption because of what economist Alfred Marshall (1890) called an “unwholesome desire.” Consequently, any policy to stimulate the economy by increasing consumption was either impossible or immoral. With this approach, there could be no recognition of an active consumer nor of a consumer culture.
However, the current economic view of consumption has moved from seeing it as an unwholesome desire to recognizing it as the central source of our economic strength. It is viewed as so important that after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, President Bush promoted increased consumption as a patriotic duty. As the New York Times reported, “Indeed, in the twitchy post-September 11 economy, consumer confidence has become the It Statistic. With business investment shrinking and the markets on the fritz, free-spending shoppers are considered the last line of defense against a disastrous economic slide” (Walker 2003, C1).

We will trace this change in the economic view of consumption through four stages: (1) consumption as detrimental to the accumulation of wealth; (2) consumption as a propellant that keeps the economy rolling; (3) the consumer as a rational agent that determines the allocation of resources; and (4) the consumer as a social agent involved in complex ways with fashion trends, social competition, and emulation. We will briefly comment on each.

The idea of a capitalist economy began with the concept of accumulating wealth and rationally investing it, rather than spending it on pleasurable consumption. It has therefore always been part of the “spirit of capitalism” (Weber 2002) to discourage consumption because it was seen as inimical to the accumulation of wealth on which capitalism depends.

The economist who did the most to recognize the positive role of consumption was John Maynard Keynes (see profile of John Maynard Keynes in chapter 6). Writing during the Great Depression, Keynes argued that low consumption impeded recovery, and he therefore promoted increased consumption as the solution to the economic malaise (see description of the Great Depression in chapter 6). Keynes suggested state intervention to stimulate consumption, and this idea guided the economic policies of President Roosevelt’s New Deal, President Kennedy’s New Frontier, and President Johnson’s Great Society, and continues to guide President George W. Bush’s calls for patriotic consumption.

For Keynes, though, it made little difference what the consumer bought. Consumer buying did not enter the market as information so much as a propellant that stimulated the economy. The next step in understanding the economics of consumption saw the consumer not just as propellant, but also as the provider of information on which a rational economy could be based. This has come to be called the neoclassical approach.
The neoclassical approach sees the consumer as a rational, utilitarian purchaser. The economy might often go in the wrong direction—investing too much in one sector rather than another, producing too much or too little—but decisions by the rational consumer will sooner or later set the economy on the correct course. The best thing that a business can do is to pay attention to the choices of the consumer, and the best thing that the government can do is to leave consumers alone to make their choices. Governments could never adequately direct the economy because a rational economic order depends on the dispersed bits of information held by individual consumers.

This neoclassical view, which still dominates current economic thinking, depends heavily upon the rationality of the consumer (Stigler 1982, 52), despite the fact that study after study has shown that consumers are far from rational. The neoclassical view starts with the assumption that the economy is rational and reasons backwards that the consumer that steers it must therefore be rational as well. However, there is just as little evidence to support the rationality of the economy as there is to support the rationality of the individual consumer. Both seem to have at their core social processes—such as fashion trends, whims, and manipulated emotions—that the neoclassical model must see as extraneous and irrational.

Recently, there has been more acceptance of an approach to the economics of consumption that, like the neoclassical approach, recognizes the irreplaceable role of the consumer in steering the economy, but that also recognizes the social processes at the heart of the economy. In this more sociological approach, it is the very irrationality of the economy—its dependence on fashion trends, emulation, and competitive consumption—that makes the role of the consumer so necessary for steering the economy. It is not that the government does not have all of the information dispersed among rational individuals—if that were the case, then we could reinstate centralized planning once we had found a way to gather and organize all of the dispersed knowledge. Instead, it is precisely because the economy is not rational that consumers are irreplaceable. Only consumers are in touch with the never-entirely rational social processes that are at the center of our economic system.

In fact, Michael Porter (1990) has argued that consumers in touch with fashion trends are one of the most important resources determining the competitive advantage of a nation. The intensity
of the Japanese interest in audio and photographic equipment, the Italian love of fashion, the German love of cars, the British love of gardening, the American love of fast food—all of these have resulted in industries that dominate the world market.

This is even truer in a globalizing world where the industry’s domestic market of sophisticated, knowledgeable consumers provides a place to test new products. These consumers demand rapid improvements, are in touch with the latest fads, and are highly aware of the status effects of having the newest model. Sophisticated, knowledgeable consumers provide a continuing competitive advantage so long as the demands of the home market are not idiosyncratic and are predictive of trends in other countries. For example, the American consumer’s interest in fast, inexpensive, and convenient food provides a competitive advantage so long as other countries are moving along the same path of putting more value on speed and predictability than on the quality of the food.

Today, nearly everyone recognizes the importance of consumption to our economy. We will next argue that this importance extends far beyond the economy. Consumption is more than just an economic transaction. Consumption has become central to our culture.

**Consumer Culture and Its Contradictions**

The shared concepts and values of a culture help people to relate their individual lives to larger themes. Historically, most cultures have been centered around a set of religious values and concepts. Alternatively, a few cultures have found their values and concepts in secular, intellectual, and aesthetic movements, usually called “high” culture. This is the type of culture that one refers to when speaking of the arts, manners, or education. We will be looking at something different from either of these: a consumer culture.

To say that we are a consumer culture means that our central shared values have to do with consumption. This is not to say that religion and high culture have disappeared from our society, but that they have become instances of consumer culture. People still have religion, but increasingly, they “shop around” for the right religion and choose one that fits their lifestyles. Religion is not a tradition that we are inextricably embedded in; instead, it is
chosen, consumed, and sometimes discarded, returned, or exchanged like any other commodity.

Similarly, high culture has simply become a niche market in a consumer culture. From the perspective of marketers, people who go to classical concerts and art museums are a cluster group who also tend to buy Italian espresso machines, Volvo cars, and Pierre Cardin clothes. In other words, a preference for a certain type of “high” art has been reduced to a simple indication of the “type” of consumer items a person is most likely to buy. Even if we don’t “prefer” high culture, it nonetheless occasionally finds its way into our experience of consumption. High culture is what we listen to while we are on hold waiting for customer service. It is what we pass on our way to the museum gift shop. It is what we buy to decorate our living rooms. Even where high culture is not simply a commodity, it functions more and more like a commodity, with an emphasis on the new, the latest, the attention-getting, the controversial, the shocking.

Despite its differences from previous cultures, consumer culture is still a set of meanings through which individuals can relate their individual lives to larger themes. In most societies, culture has been the way to transmit the established social meanings of objects, their appropriate use, or tasteful display. However, our culture has and continues to create a multitude of items that have no established social meanings. For example, what is the traditional meaning of a modem or a DVD player? Consequently, one of the main tasks of consumer culture has been the creation of new meanings, especially through advertising. In addition, consumer culture, like all cultures, must motivate us and give our individual lives meaning. The main point of this section is to argue that the meanings that make up consumer culture are contradictory with both the traditions out of which they have emerged and with the culture’s own understanding of itself.

Contradictions between Consumer Culture and Capitalist Production

A capitalist economic system requires, by definition, the accumulation of capital, which is then consistently and rationally invested in production. Capitalism was able to emerge because it was originally linked to a culture that emphasized self-control, delayed gratification, and rational planning in the pursuit of
clearly defined goals. However, a culture structured around produc-
tion has, to a large extent, been transformed into a culture struc-
tured around consumption, and this is hardly a culture of self-control and delayed gratification. A culture that once saw
work as a moral end in itself now sees work only as a means to-
ward more consumption (Schor 2000).

Capitalism requires completely different attitudes from those
who produce as compared to those who consume—even though
they are usually the same person. The rational, calculating pro-
ducer requires the irrational, impulsive consumer. If we were as
rational in our consuming as we are in our producing, the econ-
omy would grind to a halt. Capitalist production still requires
self-restraint, discipline, and frugality in our work, but our con-
sumer culture promotes just the opposite. Whereas once we were
encouraged to save and invest, we are now also encouraged to
spend and go into debt. Daniel Bell in The Cultural Contradictions
of Capitalism argued that the only solution to this contradiction is
for us to become fragmented, to have one set of values at work
and another when we consume. As Bell puts it, “One is to be
straight by day, and a swinger at night” (1976, 72). But Bell did
not believe that this fragmentation would be sustainable. He pre-
dicted that the industrialized world would soon enter a crisis be-
cause the capitalist economy is contradicted by a consumer cul-
ture that is focused on hedonism and novelty. According to Bell,
consumer culture’s pursuit of the new and improved and its re-
jection of all that is old-fashioned and passé have infected a cul-
ture that now rejects all traditions and that accepts new values
with an ironic stance that degenerates into bitter attack once those
values are no longer fashionable. We have lost all other overrid-
ing values motivating us to work—only the desire for more con-
sumption remains. But, Bell believed that this value could not get
us through an economic downturn in the way that a work ethic
could.

More than twenty-five years later, Bell’s analysis of the con-
tradiction between a consumer culture and capitalist production
appears to be absolutely correct. Capitalism seems even more
 driven by this contradiction than ever. However, his prediction
appears to be absolutely wrong: The disjunction continues and
even worsens, but it does not appear to be bringing us any closer
to a cultural crisis. Indeed, it will be argued below that our very
fragmentation now fuels our consumption as we purchase com-
modities that promise a lost wholeness.
Contradictions between Consumer Culture and Bourgeois Culture

Marxists, members of the aristocracy, and others who see themselves as outside of consumer culture have always had an animosity toward it. Marxists have argued that consumer culture rests on the exploitation of workers (Sklair 1995). Even where it seems to benefit the workers, that benefit is only a device to “buy off” their revolt and delay the triumph of the popular will (Marcuse 1992). Those who see themselves as part of an aristocratic tradition advance a more elitist condemnation (Gronow 1997). Consumer culture is, for them, a contradiction in terms. Nothing that can be popularly consumed could form the basis of a true culture. The aristocratic critique is based on the assumption that the triumph of consumerism is the triumph of the popular will, and this is precisely what they do not like.

The bourgeoisie were those shop owners and small businessmen who came to dominance as the feudal order faded. The bourgeoisie created a culture that was distinct from the landed aristocracy, and it was this culture that the middle class adopted as economic conditions changed. Because consumer culture became identified with bourgeois culture, the disdain of consumer culture by both Marxists and aristocrats is usually combined with a rejection of the bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, even though bourgeois culture is deeply intertwined with consumption, bourgeois culture has roots that preceded consumer culture (Schudson 1998), and despite the best efforts of modern advertising, bourgeois culture is still not entirely comfortable with the centrality of consumption. Consequently, we see a contradiction between consumer culture and the bourgeois culture out of which the former emerged. Bourgeois culture was related to the Christian, especially Protestant, religion (Weber 2002). Its early emphasis was on sacrifice and self-restraint. Identity and personal satisfaction were to be found in a career or vocation. In addition, it included a sense of family and community that encompassed but extended beyond the self-reliant individual (Ashcraft 1972).

All of these traits are inimical to consumer culture. Rather than sacrifice and self-restraint, hedonism and luxurious indulgence are emphasized. Consumer culture presents identity as being infinitely transformable with the purchase of new products (Halter 2000), and even on the production side, people are encouraged to be flexible, mobile, and transitory rather than devot-
ing themselves to a lifelong vocation (Hage and Powers 1992). Finally, consumer culture emphasizes the individual over the community. It may take coordinated groups to produce objects, but these objects are usually consumed by individuals.

Consumer culture grew out of bourgeois culture, but parent and progeny are often at odds, and there is little hope that there will ever be a complete reconciliation between bourgeois culture and its "prodigal son." A bourgeois critique of consumer culture has persisted and helps to explain the long sociological neglect of consumption as a serious subject of study (Ritzer, Goodman, and Wiedenhoft 2001). And even ordinary shoppers are often subject to self-contempt because their consumption is so indulgent and un-restrained.

Michael Schudson (1998) lists three bourgeois objections to consumer culture. The first, which he calls the Puritan objection, criticizes the pursuit of material goods because it takes away from the spiritual. The second, which he calls Quaker, objects to the frivolity and indulgence that are not compatible with a life of simplicity and self-restraint. Finally, the third objection, which he calls republican, believes consumer culture has undermined the community, leading to political complacency and the lack of civic engagement.

There is a long history of bourgeois anticonsumption sentiments (Breen 1993; Horowitz 1985). Indeed, consumer culture has always developed in tandem with its own critique. We consume, but we often feel guilty about it. The belief that consumer culture is not compatible with spirituality, simplicity, and community is a strong part of our bourgeois heritage. The feeling that virtue lies in thrift and self-restraint, and sin in consumption, is still present, even when it has lost its religious roots. But just as our fragmentation fuels more consumption, so does our guilt and loss of spiritual meaning. Advertisers have found ways to use this guilt to get us to consume more. As we will describe below, people buy objects that promise spirituality, simplicity, and community.

The Consumer as Sovereign and as Dupe

The demands of capitalist production and its relation with bourgeois culture do not exhaust the contradictions of consumer culture. There is also a strong contradiction in regard to the rationality, autonomy, and power of the consumer. On the one hand, the consumer is sovereign. The consumer's rational choices determine
the direction of the economy. Everything is designed with the intent (albeit often failing) to please the consumer. The rich and powerful of our society must listen to the consumers' voices and try to discern their fleeting whims. On the other hand, the consumer is often portrayed as nothing but a dupe, subject to uncontrolled impulses and manipulated by the most transparent tricks.

Probably the first thing that we think of in terms of manipulating the consumer is advertising. Billions of dollars are spent on advertising every year, and very little of that advertising is of the informational variety that the assumption of a rational consumer would lead one to expect. Advertising is increasingly pervasive. In 1880, only $30 million was spent on advertising in the United States; thirty years later, it had increased to $600 million (Durning 1992), and today, it is in excess of $200 billion in the United States and over $300 billion worldwide (Cardona 2002). Every day, North Americans are exposed to an estimated 12 billion display advertisements, 3 million radio commercials, and more than 200,000 television commercials. Not only are advertisements plastered on billboards, shown between breaks on television shows, popped up on our computer screens, and placed beside text in our newspapers, but they are also beamed into classrooms, played in elevators, featured as props in movies, displayed above the urinal in men's bathrooms, used as part of athletes' uniforms, and displayed in every place and in every manner that human ingenuity can devise. We seem to be currently engaged in a grand experiment to see just how much of our society can be given over to the economic system, and perhaps the riskiest part stems from the constant exposure of people—from cradle to grave, from waking to sleeping—to advertising.

Examining advertising makes it clear that the concept of a consumer culture includes much more than a direct relation between individuals and the objects they consume. To a large extent, that relation is mediated by the meanings attached to the objects. Of course, all cultures have attached traditional meanings to objects, but our culture is so flooded with a constant stream of new (and improved) products that they long ago exceeded all traditional meanings. Many objects depend, at least initially, on the meanings produced by advertising. Whatever its initial aim, advertising does more than sell products. It is an integral part of consumer culture. It not only attaches meanings to commodities, but also to the people who purchase and use them, as Daniel Bell explains:
The advertising in the women's magazines, the house-and-home periodicals, and sophisticated journals like the *New Yorker* was to teach people how to dress, furnish a home, buy the right wines—in short, the styles of life appropriate to the new statuses. Though at first the changes were primarily in manners, dress, taste, and food habits, sooner or later they began to affect more basic patterns: the structure of authority in the family, the role of children and young adults as independent consumers in the society, the patterns of morals, and the different meanings of achievement in the society. (1976, 69)

Indeed, the meanings produced by a consumer culture extend even to the personality of the consumer. It is not just a motorcycle or a white ball gown that one purchases, but the identity that goes with it. One becomes a biker or a debutante. Identities become commodities to buy, and like other commodities, there are competing identities on the market. As a 1991 cover of *Cosmopolitan* declared: "By changing the way you look . . . you can create a new you!"

One of the early leaders in advertising, Helen Woodward, identified the attraction of the purchasable identity in the following way: "To those who cannot change their whole lives or occupations, even a new line in a dress is often a relief. The woman who is tired of her husband or her home or a job feels some lifting of the weight of life from seeing a straight line change into a bouffant, or a gray pass into beige. Most people do not have the courage or the understanding to make deeper changes" (1926, 345; see profile of Helen Rosen Woodward in chapter 6).

It is in the ability to proffer new meanings and identities that consumer culture and advertising contain a strong dose of idealism. We are more attached to the ideal meaning of the object and to the ideal identity represented by the object than to the object itself. This is the phenomenon that Raymond Williams refers to when he writes that advertising is proof that people in modern capitalist societies are not materialist. Williams claims "if we were sensibly materialist, in that part of our living in which we use things, we should find most advertising to be of an insane irrelevance" (1980, 185). It is not that we are tricked by the meanings that advertisements deliver. To a large degree, it is the meaning—
the advertising, the brand, the logo, the Nike swoosh, the Polo pony—that is wanted, especially by the young. The actual commodity is just the convenient carrier of that meaning.

The idea that we wear the logo not the clothes, drink the advertising not the soda, and drive the image not the car has seemed to many to prove that we are being manipulated. Advertisers, it has been argued, create desires that consumers obediently express as if the desires were the consumers’ own. This has been called the “hypodermic theory” of advertising—advertisements inject us with false needs (Key 1972). According to this theory, the desire to consume is largely the product of the manipulations of advertisers on an unsuspecting public. A passive public is duped into spending money on things it does not need.

Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957) was an early and influential example of this viewpoint, arguing that our minds are controlled by the hidden, subliminal messages contained in advertising (see profile of Vance Packard in chapter 6). Packard’s interviews with advertisers revealed their rather disturbing attitude toward the general public. He writes, “Typically they see us as bundles of daydreams, misty hidden yearnings, guilt complexes, irrational emotional blockages. We are image lovers given to impulsive and compulsive acts. We annoy them with our seemingly senseless quirks, but we please them with our growing docility in responding to their manipulation of symbols that stir us to action” (1957, 12).

Another influential book attacking consumer culture was Stuart Ewen’s *Captains of Consciousness* (1976). Ewen argued that consumer society is a gigantic fraud, a conspiracy to manipulate the public and sell people items they do not need. Whereas those who controlled society were once captains of industry, society is now controlled through the manipulations of advertising by captains of consciousness.

These books have been followed by a steady succession of anticonsumption books, including most recently: *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting, and the New Consumer* (1998) by Juliet Schor, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Name Bullies* (2000) by Naomi Klein, *Culture Jam: How to Reverse America’s Suicidal Consumer Binge—And Why We Must* (2000) by Kalle Lasn, and *Shoveling Fuel for a Runaway Train: Errant Economists, Shameful Spenders, and a Plan to Stop Them All* (2002) by Brian Czech, not to mention the magazines such as *Ad Cult* and *AdBusters.*
Of course, it is easy enough to dismiss this hypodermic theory by pointing to advertising's spectacular failures. New products with substantial advertising are introduced every day, and the vast majority of them fail. One of the most cited examples is the huge amount spent introducing and marketing the Edsel car, which became a laughable flop (Larrabee 1957).

Furthermore, it has been argued that the creation and control of meaning is not a one-way process. Advertisers may create saleable meanings for the new commodities, but consumers often create meanings of their own (Abercrombie 1994; de Certeau 1984; Fiske 1989). For example, hippies took the American flag and unpatriotically used it as clothing, punks took the safety pin and used it as bodily adornment, and rap DJs took the turntable and turned it into a creative instrument. None of these uses were intended or even imagined by those who created and marketed the products. Advertisers may often have the first word on meanings, and there is no disputing the power of that position, but consumers sometimes have the last word. Rather than simply a conduit for the producers' meanings, consumer objects are often a site of struggle over meaning.

Despite this struggle over meaning, few can doubt that advertising is aimed at controlling our behavior, and we must suspect that it is fairly successful. Otherwise, why would corporations continue to spend billions of dollars on it? Nevertheless, most people, although they often feel disdain for advertising, are not ready to revolt against the "captains of consciousness" and their "hidden persuaders." Perhaps this is because the sort of control that advertising exerts is not one that is experienced as disagreeable. It is not a rigid, constraining control, but exactly the opposite. Advertising manipulates us toward unrestraint in spending. It encourages us to enjoy forbidden pleasures, to break the old rules of thrift and self-discipline. One might say that it is controlling us to go out of control, at least where consuming is concerned. Controlling us to be, in a sense, out of control is a contradiction, but it is one that is easy to avoid examining too closely. Despite the contradiction, it is easy to think of this control as freedom and this manipulation as power.

What the vast amount of advertising really sells is consumer culture itself. Even if advertising fails to sell a particular product, the advertisements still sell the meanings and values of a consumer culture. As Christopher Lasch writes, "The importance of
advertising is not that it invariably succeeds in its immediate purpose, much less that it lobotomizes the consumer into a state of passive acquiescence, but simply that it surrounds people with images of the good life in which happiness depends on consumption. The ubiquity of such images leaves little space for competing conceptions of the good life” (1994, 1387).

What advertising constantly sells is the idea that there is a product to solve each of life’s problems—that the good life, the attractive personality, the appropriate taste can be purchased along with the object that we are told represents it. However, this promise is constantly broken. One of our first great disappointments is the discovery that buying that special toy does not bring us the infinite fun portrayed on television (Gunter and Furnham 1998). Nor, we soon discover, does buying those clothes gain us social acceptance. Our first car does not translate into freedom, and buying a beer does not surround us with beautiful members of the opposite sex. We buy the commodities, but the good life does not follow.

Donella Meadows explains why, despite our continued dissatisfaction, we continue to consume.

People don’t need enormous cars, they need respect. They don’t need closets full of clothes; they need to feel attractive and they need excitement and variety and beauty. People don’t need electronic equipment; they need something worthwhile to do with their lives. People need identity, community, challenge, acknowledgment, love, and joy. To try to fill these needs with material things is to set up an unquenchable appetite for false solutions to real and never-satisfied problems. The resulting psychological emptiness is one of the major forces behind the desire for material growth. (1992, 216)

The greatest contradiction that consumer culture has had to face is not with an economic system that values both the accumulation of capital and consumer extravagance, nor its contradiction with the bourgeois ethics out of which it emerged, nor the contradiction between the rational and irrational consumer. The greatest contradiction that consumer culture has had to deal with is that it does not deliver on its own promises, and this very mendacity fuels further consumption.
Consumer Contradictions in Politics

A consumer culture has effects far beyond actual consumption and its associated advertising. Such a culture tends to change all other institutions into something compatible with its consumerist values. We have already discussed how religions have changed from unquestioned traditions into belief systems that we “shop around” for in order to fit our lifestyles. The same sort of thing happens in higher education, where students are more and more frequently treated like consumers, and the mission of the school is increasingly shaped by its attempts to market itself to its target audience. Similarly, news becomes entertainment, artistic value is measured by price, and history is turned into theme parks. Indeed, it seems that every human expression, from art to sex to outrage, is either sold as a commodity or used to sell a commodity.

Of most concern to many is the effect that consumer culture has had on politics. The democratic model depends on citizens making rational decisions, but the same marketing techniques and advertising campaigns that have targeted the irrational consumer are now aimed at the irrational citizen. It is not just that people think they should be able to buy good government rather than creating and participating in it or that people place more trust in the efficiencies of a consumer-driven economy than a citizen-led government. It is rather that our very models of political freedom and civic participation come from consumption. Freedom now means the opportunity to indulge our impulses rather than the capacity to determine our destiny, and civic participation means choosing among prepackaged political candidates. In this way, the contradictions that are at the heart of consumer culture have infected our political system.

To some extent, consumer issues such as the cost of living, scarcity of goods, health and safety effects, and the conditions under which commodities are made or sold have always been of political concern. But it was in trying to end the Great Depression that the concerns of consumption and consumers became established as a central part of public discourse. The New Deal began a process that equated the consumer’s freedom of choice with democracy and defined the American way of life through consumer goods. By the time of the Cold War, it was the difference between Soviet and American consumers that defined the conflict more than the difference between political citizens.
However, consumer culture has affected politics in more ways than just making the satisfaction of consumer demands a political priority. The consumer in the market has become the model for the political citizen. Indeed, some early enthusiasts proclaimed the consumer market to be more democratic than any government could be.

Edward Filene, founder of the Boston department store and early consumer expert, suggested that by buying commodities, consumers were voting with their dollars. In this way, "the masses of America have elected Henry Ford. They have elected General Motors. They have elected the General Electric Company, and Woolworth’s and all the other great industrial and business leaders of the day" (1931, 98).

Charles McGovern describes the way that the fledgling advertising industry welcomed the analogy between consumer and citizen.

In metaphors equating consumers with citizens and purchasing with voting, admen portrayed consumption as the true exercise of the individual’s civic role and public identity; consumption was the ritual means of affirming one’s nationality as an American. They identified their own work of persuasion as politics—the promulgation of ideas and programs for the common good to be affirmed or rejected through a public, communal, and voluntary process. The central political comparison in advertising was the electoral metaphor. (1998, 43)

There is, however, one glaring problem with this analogy. If consumers vote with their dollars, then some people have many more votes than others. Equality may be the goal in politics, but inequality is the rule in consumer markets. What the poor need but cannot afford simply does not appear in the market, while the wealthy’s every whim is catered to by many.

As consumer markets became the model of democratic choice, political campaigns became more like advertising campaigns. This process has been described in detail in both Theodore H. White’s *The Making of the President, 1960* (1961) and Joe McGinniss’s *The Selling of the President, 1968* (1969). But it takes little analysis to convince us of the similarity of politics and advertising, because the parallel has become an accepted part of the political discussion. Pundits constantly refer to the success of
political advertisements and the ability of the candidate to sell his or her image. Beyond the rhetoric, political campaigns regularly hire people who work in advertising, and techniques developed in the field of market research are widely used to analyze the preferences of voters. This has led individuals to view themselves as passive consumers rather than active citizens. People now expect politics to consist of selecting between prefabricated choices in which the political affiliation of the candidate works something like a brand name. In such an environment, issues are less important than style.

The wholesale adoption of advertising techniques for political campaigns began in earnest with Eisenhower's presidential campaign in 1952. In that year, only 5 percent of campaign expenditures went to broadcast media. By 1972, that figure had reached 15 percent for direct expenditures and undoubtedly much more when media consultants and production costs are included. Since then, political advertising has focused more on television (see table 2.1).

Some see a conspiracy behind this relation between politics and consumer culture. Consumer culture is believed to be part of

Table 2.1  Political Advertising on Television: Breakdown of Total Dollars Spent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election Year</th>
<th>National Networks</th>
<th>Local Stations</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970*</td>
<td>$260,900</td>
<td>$11,789,000</td>
<td>$12,049,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>6,519,100</td>
<td>18,061,000</td>
<td>24,580,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
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<td>2000</td>
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* Political advertising was first measured as a category in 1970.
The Contradictions of Consumer Culture

a larger scheme to tranquilize the public and to channel all discontent into a wish for more goods. Stuart Ewen argued that the captains of consciousness intend for us to consume ourselves “into social and political passivity” (1976, 204). Herbert Marcuse coined the term “repressive tolerance” to describe the way in which our leaders substitute consumer satisfaction for real freedom and weaken the capacity for protest through the propaganda of commodities (1965).

However, such a conspiracy theory is difficult to support, especially since those in charge seem to be as limited by the consumer model as those who are supposedly being controlled. Political leaders today need to watch the polls constantly, and their leadership is severely limited by the need to “sell” their programs to an electorate that is always looking for a better deal. This is not to say that the problems described by such critics as Ewen and Marcuse are not real, but that it seems more likely that they can be attributed to a pervasive culture than a conspiracy.

Political leaders at both ends of the spectrum have had difficulty adapting to this consumer culture. Liberals have been reluctant to adopt the marketing strategies of the big businesses that they have traditionally opposed, while conservatives have found it difficult to reconcile these strategies with their emphasis on family, community, and traditional values.

Edward Luttwak, a former Reagan administration official, describes the contradiction of conservative politics in terms that are analogous to the contradictions of consumer culture. “The contradiction between wanting rapid economic growth and dynamic economic change and at the same time wanting family values, community values, and stability is a contradiction so huge that it can only last because of an aggressive refusal to think about it” (de Graaf 1997, 50). Or perhaps we are so used to living this contradiction in consumer culture that we can no longer see it in other spheres.

Conclusion

It seems that our consumer culture is infected with contradictions. We are to be self-disciplined and self-indulgent, spiritual and materialist, calculating and impulsive. We are authentically cynical, traditionally radical. Consumption is experienced as a mix of pleasure and guilt, anticipation and fear, desire and trepi-
We both love and hate our consumer culture and our guilt, fear, trepidation, and hate involve us in this culture just as deeply as does our love.

Ambivalence about consumption is part of our consumer culture. Some believe that the consumers' desires need to be suppressed, while others are working to incite them. At different times, we see the consumer as sovereign and as victim; we see shopping as a process through which we create and express our identity and as the acting out of the advertisers' hypnotic suggestions; we see the shopping center as our community and as the destroyer of our community. We are unsure whether we are on the verge of unprecedented abundance and empowerment or social and environmental devastation.

References


