Ethics of Consumption

The Good Life, Justice, and Global Stewardship

Edited by
David A. Crocker
and
Toby Linden

 Titles in the Series

Ethics of Consumption: The Good Life, Justice, and Global Stewardship (1998) edited by David A. Crocker and Toby Linden
Robert E. Lane

112. Edward O. Wilson, Sociobiology: The New Synthesis (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1975). Wilson gives the following example of the affiliative instincts of our primate forebears: “Rhesus monkeys, like other higher primates, are intensely affected by their [social] environments—an isolated individual will repeatedly pull a lever with no reward other than the glimpse of another monkey” (7). But there is evidence that controlling one’s environment, too, is a motive with biological roots: like affiliative motives, the need for control seems to be present in more than one species.

14

Delectable Materialism: Second Thoughts on Consumer Culture

Michael Schudson

On 31 January 1990, when McDonald’s opened in Moscow, Soviet citizens seemed stunned by the politeness of the people behind the cash registers who smiled and said, “May I help you?” They were delighted at the efficiency of the service despite a wait of two hours, and many took home their logo-laden McDonald’s refuse as souvenirs. Tongue in cheek, the New York Times wrote of hope-starved Soviet consumers won over to “delectable materialism.” The Washington Post, similarly jocular, painted a portrait of a factory worker standing beneath the golden arches and said of him, “He had seen the future—and it tasted good.”

In the waning days of the Cold War, American journalists poked fun at the Soviet passion for American consumer goods because they could not consider consumerism in the United States without depreciating it. It takes an immigrant or outsider to speak of American abundance in beatific terms. Boris Yeltsin, back home from a nine-day American tour in the fall of 1989, was effusive about the extraordinary wealth of American life: “Their supermarkets have 30,000 food items,” he told supporters. “You can’t imagine it. It makes the people feel secure.” Yeltsin urged that “at least 100 million Soviets must pass through the American school of supermarkets,” to understand the American system. “The leaders must be first.”

The late Henry Fairlie, a British immigrant to America, waxed eloquent about his adopted country in a celebratory Fourth of July essay. The United States is the first country, he said, in which he felt free. He cited his experience, in 1965, on his first morning in America, when the wife of the English friend he was staying with “took me, not to the
clarify the conflicted relationship to the world of goods that social critics, intellectuals, and others share today.

Most criticism of consumer culture shares a few basic assumptions, which should be questioned at the outset. The critiques of consumer culture all object, as Emerson did, that things are in the saddle and ride us. They all seem to hold that if we could live the simple life, where things satisfy natural, biological needs and little more, we could properly devote attentions to justice or comradeship or aesthetic pleasures. We could then bask in the spiritual satisfactions the natural world can provide. But “the simple life” expresses only one view of the good life, and not self-evidently the best.

The advocates of the simple life presume that we can neatly separate necessary from artificial needs and wants, and they hold that we should attach our desires to the former alone. But what is necessary to sustain human life? This is not an easy question. Its answer certainly does not lie in biology alone. People in all societies are biological and social at once. The infant’s first sucking at the breast is an act both biological and social, both nourishing and attaching. From that point on, the infant will want to be not only a living person but also a living person, a socially creditable member of a society. Human biological functions, like eating, are culturally coded and socially organized. It is important in all human societies that people eat like human beings, not like animals. This requires adherence to social conventions for eating that differ from one culture to the next. In the American middle class, a person must eat a certain quantity of food so that it cannot be said that the person “eats like a horse,” on the one hand, or “eats like a bird,” on the other. More important still, one must retain a certain reserve about eating so as to acknowledge that the activity is one of eating a meal, not one of simply consuming food. Without that reserve, a person can be accused of “eating like a pig” or failing to engage in the social activity of eating altogether by “inhaling” food.

In Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, prisoners in the Soviet labor camp are fed only a thin gruel with some fish heads and tails thrown in. Ivan Denisovich, weak from malnutrition and overwork, nonetheless organizes his own ritual for eating. He takes off his cap before he eats. He refuses to eat fish eyes. In a subsociety intended to animalize prisoners, Ivan retains his humanity by continuing to eat meals rather than simply consuming food. Even in the poorest societies, human needs and desires are culturally constituted and socially defined. Human needs are for inclusion as well as for survival, for meaning as well as for existence. And consumer goods, as Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood argued and as most scholars who think

Critics of Consumer Culture

Criticism of advertising and consumer culture today emerges not so much from a single source as from at least five distinguishable traditions of criticism. Three of these lie within bourgeois culture and two lie outside it, critical not only of the distinctive institutions of advertising and consumer culture but of middle-class society and capitalism in general. Teasing out and examining these strands of thought may help
on these matters have now fully accepted, are for modern societies central elements in the establishment and circulation of meaning.6

But what, then, is required to live a social and socially creditable life? And how much? This will differ from one society to the next. The requirements of personhood differ across societies as both philosopher of modern capitalism Adam Smith and capitalism’s most severe critic, Karl Marx, understood. Smith defined “human necessaries” as “not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without.”7 He observed that a linen shirt is not “strictly speaking” a necessary of life but that, in most of Europe in his day, “a creditable day-labourer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt, the want of which would be supposed to denote that disgraceful degree of poverty, which, it is presumed, no body can well fall into without extreme bad conduct.”8 Similarly, Smith judged leather shoes a necessity in England for men and women but for men only in Scotland and for neither in France.

Marx, like Smith, understood human needs to be socially and historically produced. In Capital, he distinguishes between two kinds of consumer goods, necessities and luxuries, but he does not assume that necessities are either biological or natural. True articles of luxury are items that only the capitalist class consumes. A consumer necessity is something that is in general and habitual use among the working class—such as tobacco—whether or not it is physiologically essential to life.9 Like Smith, Marx fully appreciated that human needs are social and relative. In Wage—Labour and Capital, he wrote that an owner may find a small house adequate so long as other houses in the same neighborhood are the same size. Then someone builds a palace and “the house shrinks from a little house to a hut. . . . Our desires and pleasures spring from society; we measure them, therefore, by society and not by the objects which serve for their satisfaction. Because they are of a social nature, they are of a relative nature.”10

For Marx, the frightening invention of capitalism is not the creation of artificial or new needs but the emergence of a concept that there is such a thing as purely physical or biological need. Other social systems had treated human beings as social entities, not biological machines. Only capitalism conceived of people as raw material and only capitalists dared calculate the minimum amount it would take to keep workers alive and healthy enough to work in factories and reproduce in families the next generation of laborers.11

Criticism of consumer culture may adopt more of this dehumanized understanding of the relation of persons and things than it realizes. It seems to me fundamental, in grappling with the ethics of consumption, to begin from that area of agreement between Adam Smith and Karl Marx—that human life is by definition social and cultural, that human needs are relative across societies, and that what counts as necessary in a given society has to be defined somehow in relation to what the poorest members of society require for creditable social standing. In the United States, for instance, this almost certainly means a television. It may even mean an automobile, except, perhaps, for residents of New York City and a few other places where public transportation is a passable alternative. The driver’s license may be as close to a badge of full social membership as this society has.

Keeping in mind the fundamental socialness of human needs and insisting that we cannot get around a degree of relativism even in trying to define basic needs (but I will return to just how this relativism is constrained), let me turn to the five critiques of consumer culture in American social thought. I will first take up three bourgeois objections to consumer culture. Some critics, whom I shall call Puritans, attack people’s attitudes toward material goods in pursuit of spirituality; some critics, whom I shall call Quakers, attack features of the goods themselves in pursuit of simplicity; and some, whom I shall label republicans, in pursuit of civic virtue attack the consequences of possession, notably complacency and the loss of civic engagement.12

The Puritan Critique

The Puritan critique worries about whether people invest an appropriate amount of meaning in goods. By Puritan, I refer to the conviction, symbolized by the sturdy and sober New England colonists, that people should invest less meaning in worldly possessions than in spiritual pursuits. In this view, pleasure should be subordinated to duty, the flesh to the spirit, and temporal concerns to religious obligations. Yet Puritan critics do not necessarily agree about what an appropriate degree of meaning investment in material possessions might be. Some critics have suggested that contemporary American attitudes toward goods are not crassly materialist enough, that people find goods insufficient without investing surplus meaning in them. British critic Raymond Williams writes that advertising is the very proof that people in modern capitalist societies are not materialist—because the job of the ad is to convey added value to the product itself. “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.”13 Advertising, then, is
magic, and it magically associates extra, non-essential meaning with perfectly ordinary, serviceable goods. For Williams, the trouble with contemporary attitudes toward goods is that goods, in themselves, are undervalued but, in their associations, are overspiritualized. In adopting this view, Williams accepts that there is such a thing as “goods in themselves.” He implies that drinking beer is no more than consuming a beverage rather than, among other things, a rich expressive display of comradeship (a remarkably Puritanical assumption for someone coming from pub-strewn Britain).

In contrast, the late American historian and critic Christopher Lasch has argued that people overspiritualize goods. In *The Minimal Self*, Lasch complains that manufactured goods are inferior to handmade goods in that they cannot serve as “transitional” objects, that is, objects that bridge the gap between the individual’s inner self and the social world. He borrows here from psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott’s view that children often use physical objects to represent or stand in for the mother, even in the absence of the mother. Far from being regressive, this behavior helps the child develop autonomy from the mother. For Lasch, handcrafted goods have the mark of human activity upon them, while commodities are elements in a prefabricated dream world that cannot aid us in gaining a sense of mastery over our experience. Lasch is able to maintain this view only because he traces the beginnings of American consumer culture to the 1920s rather than recognizing, as many social historians now do, its eighteenth-century origins. In *The True and Only Heaven*, Lasch again writes with admiration of craftsmanship or, at least, with resentment of intellectuals who fail to appreciate manual labor as he does. But his larger point is that contemporary attitudes toward goods are more satanized than spiritualized, that we are possessed by our possessions, that we are, in a word, addicted. In his earlier work, *The Culture of Narcissism*, Lasch held that consumers are “perpetually unsatisfied, restless, anxious, and bored.” Capitalism shapes in them an unappeasable appetite for new goods and new experiences. This is not, Lasch emphasizes, conventional hedonism but something worse—a compulsion, an addiction, a sickness linked intrinsically to consumer capitalism.

So the heart of the Puritan critique is a utilitarian valuation of goods. Goods should serve practical human needs (or human social relationships, in Lasch’s view). They should be valued for their capacity to fulfill human needs but they should not be ends of desire in themselves. The concept of needs here tends to be very limited. Certainly the Puritan critique is suspicious of the aesthetic dimension of human experience and has no place for someone who takes pleasure in the feel or look of a consumer good. It may be, as James Agee once wrote, that the sense of beauty is a class privilege—that only the comfortable have the leisure to contemplate the beautiful. But this is an argument for economic improvement or redistribution, not an argument that an aesthetic sense is unrelated to the good life. The original Puritans found offensive dancing, music, theater, nonreproductive sexuality, and other material and bodily pleasures. They at least had the virtue of consistency.

There are implicitly empirical claims in the notion that people overspiritualize or underspiritualize goods, with little proffered evidence one way or the other. Is Williams right to suppose people do not find most advertising “insanely irrelevant”? My reading of the evidence is that people ignore the vast amount of advertising they see and distrust much of the little advertising they take in. Is Lasch correct that mass-produced goods fail as transitional objects? I see no evidence, certainly not from my own children, that mass-produced blankets are inferior to grandma-made afghans as “transitional objects.” I wished that my preschool daughter was as attached to the quilt my wife made as the afghan my grandmother made as to the cotton blanket we got from J. C. Penny, but she was not. Do I overspiritualize goods in this desire? Does my daughter underspiritualize? And what is the appropriate standard?

Of course, the preference for the handcrafted good may also betray an indifference to the burden of the laborer who does the handcrafting. In 1900, the American housewife did a great deal of handcrafting, spending more than forty hours a week in preparing meals. In 1975, the average housewife spent ten hours in food preparation and about one hour a week, rather than seven, doing laundry. Is this to be regarded as progress and liberation? Or must we conclude that it represents the underspiritualization of food and clothing?

---

**The Quaker Critique**

The Quaker critique is less concerned with how people feel about goods than with objectionable features of the products themselves, usually their wastefulness or extravagance. Christopher Lasch, whose multifarious critiques of consumer culture fit into almost all of my categories, took up the old complaint that modern industry is dictated by “planned obsolescence” or Sloanism, the annual model change that Alfred P. Sloan introduced to General Motors more than half a century ago to coax people to buy new cars even when they have serviceable old ones. Here critics take changes in products to be not only useless but also manipulative, aimed only at pointless product differentiation to
which people will attribute unfounded meaning. The fashion industry is a regular target of such criticism, as it was for the Quakers themselves in their adherence to plain dress.

Critics, however, have too easily generalized from a few salient examples. Does Sloanism actually guide American industry? Does it even guide the automobile industry? While General Motors was developing the annual model change, other companies were producing washing machines, radios, single-family homes, bicycles, phonographs, and bathroom fixtures that were designed to last, and did last, for years. Sloanism is an aspect of the American economy, but it is more a marketing strategy for a particular set of conditions than a deep cultural force.

In the case of automobiles, consumers were not happily holding onto their cars for years until Sloan found a way to introduce wasteful fashion to utilitarian transport vehicles. Before Sloan dreamt of the annual model change, the used-car market was large and growing; people were obviously “buying up” as they could afford to, reproducing in the automobile an objective correlate of already existing systems of class and status distinction. They were resisting the implications of Henry Ford’s one-model, one-price policy. So were many of Detroit’s auto makers, for reasons no more calculating. Many of Detroit’s entrepreneurs were building more expensive cars, pricing themselves out of the lucrative mass market, and ultimately bankrupting themselves in a status-driven effort to manufacture cars of a sort appropriate to their own station, or desired station, in Detroit society.21 They went too far up-market while Henry Ford controlled the lower end of the market and Alfred P. Sloan looked to the middle.

The fashion consciousness Sloan helped institutionalize was the General Motors solution to a perceived problem for the industry—the expanding market in used cars.22 Sloan himself understood General Motors to be using the annual model change to adapt to the existing trends of American life, notably the practice of trading up. “Middle-income buyers,” he later wrote, “assisted by the trade-in and installment financing, created the demand, not for basic transportation, but for progress in new cars, for comfort, convenience, power, and style.”23 The problem for the industry was that the cars were in fact well made and lasted a long time. The annual model change may indeed be wasteful, but “planned obsolescence,” as critics still call it, does not characterize most of American industry and it was in its origins as much a response to the desire of consumers to be fashionable as a cause of fashion consciousness.

Still, we can concede that some kinds of consumption are more practical, less ostentatious, and less wasteful than others and, by that mea-
can opener, the electric toothbrush but not the electric blanket. But on what grounds are such decisions made? How do we arrive at a baseline for consensus—and, if we cannot and (I think that we cannot), then what is the character of the moral objection to excessive consumption? The distinction between necessary and superfluous consumption is, as historian Lorna Weatherill suggests, “deeply misleading.” The notion of luxury simply “does not provide a firm basis for examining the meaning of consumer behaviour.”

The Republican Critique

The last of the bourgeois objections to consumption, the republican perspective, is concerned not with attitudes toward goods nor with the wastefulness of goods themselves but with the corrupting influence on public life of a goods orientation in private life. This is perhaps the most trenchant and resonant of the critiques. In the republican vision, a goods orientation or consumerist orientation is debilitating in three ways. First, it is passive. People consume themselves, Stuart Ewen has written, “into social and political passivity.” Satisfaction with goods produces acquiescence in politics. People who transfer their passive orientation toward goods to the world of politics expect political life to be prefabricated and expect to participate in it simply by making a choice between predetermined alternatives. This idea of politics reduces a voting booth to a vending machine.

Second, a goods orientation gives priority to possession rather than to production as a defining feature of personal identity. In a consumer society, “lifestyle” surpasses a person’s work life as the defining feature of existence. Republicans take this to be not only a misunderstanding of what human beings are but also a politically conservative misunderstanding that diverts attention from the task of making our work lives more vital and democratic.

Third, a goods orientation is privatizing. People abandon the town square for the front porch, and then later the front porch for the backyard or the television room. The town pump gives way to the commercial laundry or Laundromat, the Laundromat to the home washer and dryer. People seek comfort increasingly inside their domiciles, and their domiciles increasingly house only members of a nuclear family, not an extended family, servants, or boarders.

Is a consumerist orientation to goods necessarily passive? H. F. Moorhouse makes a strong argument to the contrary, as have many others who emphasize the “active” involvement of audiences in their consumption activities. Moorhouse examines the consumption of automo-

biles in the United States. He writes of the appropriation by young people of Detroit-made cars in the “hot rod” culture of the 1940s. Teenagers did not passively accept the automobile but decorated, redesigned, and even reengineered Detroit cars for their own purposes in racing (often illegally). The ethos of hot rod culture was not passivity but a commitment “to labour, to strive, to plan, to exercise skill, to compete, to succeed, to risk.” One does not have to look back to the 1940s, of course, to find people actively engaged with the things they consume, developing expert knowledge about goods they like even to the point of becoming manufacturers themselves. This may involve redesigning products for their own purposes or even directly entering the world of production, like women romance novel readers who turn to writing and publishing romances themselves.

I do not mean to protest too much here. Certainly even active forms of watching baseball are, with respect to physical activity, more passive than the most passive ways of playing the game (the daydreaming elementary school right fielder at least stands erect and trots on and off the field). But it is important to note that there are degrees of activity in consumption just as there are degrees of disengagement in labor. A younger may watch as a coach demonstrates a gymnastics routine or how to field a ground ball; watching of this sort is not likely to be passive at all.

The role of work in human identity is scarcely self-evident. Why must we assume that it is the defining feature of human identity? Many sociological studies of labor take it for granted that only in labor can “real” satisfaction in life be attained; all other satisfactions have to be regarded as substitutes, more or less unsatisfying, more or less illusory. But why treat consumption, a priori, as peripheral to key matters of human fulfillment? Moorhouse holds that there is no empirical rationale for privileging workplaces as “the crucial sites of human experience and self understanding.” I agree. Labor and occupation are very important but it is some kind of metaphysics that makes labor the defining feature of human life.

As for the privatizing character of consumerism, this too is contestable. When are private satisfactions in consumer goods too private? When backyard swimming pools replace the community pools? When purchased books weaken public libraries? When a washer and dryer replaces the commercial Laundromat or commercial laundry, themselves replacements for hard domestic labor and household servants? When radio and television replace movies, theaters, and concerts, themselves rather recent commercial replacements for quilting bees and barbecues and social visiting on the front porch?

But the most serious riposte to republican critics is this: the rise of
consumer culture has been a building block of a participatory, active, democratic society, not a barrier to it. Political activism in the years leading up to the American Revolution was organized around consumer identity and the nonimportation of British consumer goods. The anti-importation movement, as David Shi has suggested, was in part encouraged by the ethic of republican simplicity; the battle against Britain was seen also as a war for moral regeneration. Many colonial leaders saw frugality and patriotism linked closely together. Samuel Adams, though the owner of a brewery, was indifferent to his own economic well-being and took pride in the frugality and simplicity of his living while he devoted himself to political affairs. But anti-importation was not a protest against commercial culture so much as an effort to regulate life within it. The rapidly growing consumer culture and improving living standards were widely welcomed. The anti-importation movement provided, as T. H. Breen has argued, a basis for the democratization of political protest. While traditional political action was available only to property white males, consumer-based protest could be much more widely shared. Basing protest on consumer identity was a radically egalitarian move and a novel one: “No previous popular rebellion had organized itself so centrally around the consumer.”

This is not a unique instance. Lizabeth Cohen has suggested that the growth of a national mass culture “helped unify workers previously divided along ethnic, racial, and geographic lines” in the 1920s and 1930s, and so contributed to the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) organizing efforts. Organizing around a consumer issue proved a potent force: ethnic working-class opposition to Prohibition, she argues, brought workers a new unity as Democrats and a new openness to state actions as solutions to their problems. In the 1960s, political protesters certainly did not all use marijuana, but a common culture of protest was forged in part by a shared appreciation of rock music and the democratic aura of both rock and pot. It is clear, at the very least, that consumer culture cuts two ways in its effects on political protest and popular militance. Perhaps critics are right that consumerism may sometimes take people out of the public square, but clearly there are also powerful historical instances where consumer culture has provided the avenue and the engine for entrance into public life.

**Antibourgeois Critiques**

I will discuss more quickly the nonbourgeois or antibourgeois objections to consumer culture since, in a variety of ways, they have been bootlegged into the bourgeois self-criticism. The Marxist or socialist objection to consumer culture is that, however beneficent the economic system may appear from the side of consumption, it rests on the exploitation of workers in the capitalist system of production. Indeed, Ewen and Lasch have separately argued that the point of consumer society is to distract the minds and bodies of workers, to serve as an opiate of the people, submerging dissatisfaction with life in the exploitative workplace. “The tired worker,” Lasch writes, “instead of attempting to change the conditions of his work, seeks renewal in brightening his immediate surroundings with new goods and services.” Advertising, Lasch complains, “upholds consumption as an alternative to protest or rebellion.”

Twenty years ago, Lasch’s hyperventilating prose seemed persuasive, at least for those already critical of American materialism. But he offers no evidence that the baubles of consumerism buy off discontent or that, if they do, we are nonetheless safe in dismissing them as baubles. A questionable assumption in his argument is that the satisfactions of the consumer world are illusory. Ordinarily, they are quite real. The critics may see goods as distractions, but they can also be seen as authentic sources of both utility and meaning. Moreover, as I have just suggested, they may be as often motivation for political activity as a substitute for it. The current social transformation of Eastern Europe, galvanized by economic aspirations as well as by political hope, is the most recent case in point.

The aristocratic objection to consumer society is primarily aesthetic. Where the socialist critique of consumer culture is a critique of exploitation on behalf of the goal of equality, the aristocratic or elitist objection to consumer society is an attack on ugliness in defense of culture. Mass-produced goods are ugly. The trouble with this critique is its anti-democratic bias; the attack on mass-produced goods is often a thinly veiled attack on the masses themselves. Mass-produced goods may be judged ugly by some, but they are often significantly cheaper than handcrafted products. The evidence of this is not only before our eyes but available in the historical record. For instance, carpets were once available only to the wealthy; the power loom made them available to most citizens. Ready-to-wear clothing was available by the mid-nineteenth century to working-class people who could not have afforded items of such quality before. A great amount of homemade wear was shoddy and ill-fitting.

Again, the problem is one of standards and relativism. We cannot just smuggle in an assurance that we know what valid culture is: no one does. Worse, as economist Fred C. Hirsch argued, aesthetics are intrinsically implicated in hierarchical relations when “positional” goods like parks, vacation spots, and restaurants are found beautiful in part be-
cause of their exclusiveness, spaciousness, quiet, and seclusion—in short, because of the absence of other people. Valuing what is exclusive, we call it fine or beautiful and so incorporate social distinction into our very definition of quality. Some of our terms of praise call attention specifically to scarcity, and scarcity becomes linguistically equated with quality—rare, unique, one of a kind. The problem of not having aesthetic standards on which we could all agree is compounded by the problem of having too readily at hand aesthetic standards that are intrinsically antidemocratic.

Conclusion

Historian Daniel Horowitz, in his study of social science discussions about consumerism at the turn of the century, comes to a curiously modest conclusion. His book is critical of the “moralism” of the critiques of profiagility and self-indulgence he analyzed, but he says in the end that his work is “a critique of a view of consumption that I still hold to a considerable extent.” He lists what he takes to be pieces of an alternative and more positive view of consumption, including studies that demonstrate people’s complex incorporations of commercial goods into their own lives. People make these goods serve their individual needs and, even when they use the goods in standard fashion, take them quite pragmatically, not attributing to them any of the spiritual or romantic qualities that advertising seeks to build up. He concludes of these and other arguments, “No one has yet pulled these scattered pieces of evidence and different modes of interpretation into a coherent counterargument.”

This remains true a decade later. What has changed, however, is the world scene, particularly the economic collapse and political disintegration of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Communism’s collapse does not justify capitalism’s remarkable failures, at least in the United States, to provide citizens with basic needs of affordable shelter, health care, and economic security. But it does make more apparent the need to scrutinize the criticisms of consumer culture that have flourished among relatively affluent intellectuals in Western societies. It is time to criticize, as Michael Walzer has, the mistake of “rational leftism” in its critique of consumption, “as if it were not a good thing for ordinary men and women to possess useful and beautiful objects (as the rich and the powerful have always done).” When owning things becomes the exclusive aim of living, then something is clearly amiss, “but we need to mark off that moment from all previous moments of innocent desire and acquisition.”

There may be no way out for us yet. We may be stuck in our intellectual life as in our culture with ambivalence about goods. Albert O. Hirschman finds this ambivalence in Adam Smith himself. David Shi finds it throughout American history: “From colonial days, the image of America as a spiritual commonwealth and a republic of virtue has survived alongside the more tantalizing vision of America as a cornucopia of economic opportunities and consumer delights.”

Neil Harris finds even in Sinclair Lewis, that great critic of crass American values, an ambivalence about the commercial world: “Merchandising, then, occupied a curiously ambiguous place in Lewis’ scheme of things: on the one hand, testimony to the commercialization of American culture, the triumph of mass-produced objects over personality; and on the other, evidence of taste, culture, artistic accomplishment, and sophistication. Buying could be either an act of subservience to manufacturers and advertisers or a demonstration of individuality.” Horowitz insists that it is inevitably and necessarily both.

It is time to face up to that ambivalence en route to a political and moral position beyond the snickering, joking, and hypocritical posturing of most criticism of consumer culture. This does not mean we should forgo criticism of consumer culture, especially at a moment of growing concerns about environmental and ecological catastrophe and the distribution of consumption not only among rich and poor people within a society but among rich and poor nations within a world system. It is more difficult to take for granted, as Adam Smith did, that a clearly demarcated national society is the correct social world within which necessity and luxury are to be defined. We do need to think today of consumption in a global context. Issues such as “dumping” of products in the Third World, international agreements on fishing and whaling, or international policy on the production of ozone-depleting products all lift our moral horizons to the global level.

At the same time, the implications of a global vision are difficult to fathom. To live as well in Phoenix as one might in New York for a middle-income person requires air-conditioning, just as for a resident of Boston to live as well as a resident of Los Angeles requires substantial investment in fuel during the winter. If Americans all agreed to move to the more temperate climates of the country, we could save enormously in world energy resources. If we required everyone to live within a certain distance of their place of employment, we could also save enormously on gasoline. But people have investments in locale, even in a global age. It is one thing to question the political legitimacy of, say, Jewish settlers in the West Bank, whose presence, less than a generation old, has divided Israelis from the outset, but it is quite another thing to question the ecological legitimacy of the entire popula-
tion of southern California, northern New York state, or Minnesota. Without any practical policy suggestions to justify massive redistributions of population and resources it is hard to know just where a global consumer ethic might end.

But a global consumer ethic should begin, and it should begin afresh. Freeing ourselves from biblical or republican or Marxist moralisms, we should recognize that there is dignity and rationality in people’s desire for material goods. We should then seek to reconstrct an understanding of the moral and political value of consumption that we and others can decently live with.

What might that understanding look like? What principles might it be founded on? I have raised a host of questions about various existing standards of moral condemnation and I have suggested that the standards most frequently appealed to are inconsistent and ill considered. But I do not mean to say that no standards can be established.

Amartya Sen offers some guidance in his emphasis on human “capabilities.” He writes of the same Adam Smith passage I cited earlier that Smith’s example of the leather shoes is not an argument for moral relativism. It is only an argument that leather shoes may or may not be a human necessity. What particular consumer goods mean will vary from one society to another and one era to another. But what remains constant is the goal that people should have goods sufficient so that they will not be ashamed in society. Societies should be organized so that no one falls below a level that provides access to the consumer goods required for social credit and self-respect. The protection of human dignity or, more broadly, the ensuring of human “capability to function” is not relative.

If societies should be organized so that all inhabitants (or all citizens—there are important debates here about who counts as a society member) possess a “capability to function,” this may suggest a moral and political baseline concerning consumption. It has to do most of all with the distribution of goods across classes. If some few consume so much bread that there are not enough crumbs left for others to have the capability to function, the society has failed.

Just what this means, practically, is an intensely difficult problem, on two grounds. First, to a large extent, people understand their own capacity to function locally, not nationally or globally. People’s social reference groups, modern mass media notwithstanding, are the people they see face-to-face on a daily basis or the people they feel closely connected with by kinship or social location. These are the people who truly matter to their capacity to function. Think of the hundreds of tales, in novels, short stories, and films, of the young couple from different ethnic groups, religions, or social classes meeting each other’s families for the first time. The young people anxiously fret that their parents will embarrass them—either because their material possessions are too humble and shabby or, on the other hand, because they are too extravagant and ostentatious. We still live in a multitude of differentiated social worlds and the goods that make a person creditable in one may be meaningless or even discrediting in the next.

Second, we have increasingly and paradoxically an opposite problem: that we have more and more information about how the other half lives, an other half from across the street or half way around the world. There is a sense, more than ever before, that we are all part of a single reference group. Humanity as a whole is not of daily concern to most people, but people in the developed regions of the world certainly have easy access to information about people all over the globe. We also know that we are globally connected more than ever and that economic and political decisions in one corner of the world influence daily life in other corners—the worldwide sensitivity to oil prices is a good example. Whatever people’s particular religious or cosmological views may be, there is certainly a growing veneer, at least, of universalism. No one is an island, no one stands alone, as the John Donne-based song says, “each man’s joy is joy to me, each man’s grief is my own.” Whether from universalistic ethical principles of traditional religions, from Enlightenment liberalism, or from growing awareness of the interdependence of people in a global economy on a planet with finite resources, it grows hard not to imagine that the whole of humanity is my reference group, my community.

On the one hand, then, there is the persistent localness of reference groups and the consequently local definition of what package of goods is required for the human capability to function. On the other hand, there is the growing globalness of human consciousness that compels universalistic standards. The former would seem to suggest a nearly boundless relativism, the latter a set of universal standards that would imply a redistribution so radical that even saints might hesitate to recommend it.

Somewhere in between the radically relativist and the hopelessly universal, there may be some standards, flexible but not spineless, for judging consumption. When we find a way to define them, they may resemble some of the standards I have found wanting here. It seems to me there is something to save from the heritage of Puritanism, which recognizes possession as an inappropriate aim of life, however valuable a means; from Quakerism, which recognizes the vanity of goods and, in a modern ecologized variant, moves from objecting to the vanity of goods before God to the wastefulness of goods before a resource-scarce and unequal world; from republicanism, which scouts out dangers of
private satisfaction in the face of public squalor—not that private satisfaction in itself is wrong but that it can dangerously remove people from pitching in to maintain our public household, our common life; from a Marxist or socialist vision, which sees that for every act of consumption there is an act of production and that a calculus that weighs the moral worth of the consumption of goods must take into account the human dignity of the work that went into their production; and from aesthetic elitism, which, without making beauty a class privilege or craftsmanship a religious cult, honors both utilitarian and aesthetic standards of grace and durability, form and function.

Certainly people should live by some set of moral rules for consumption—and, in any event, we do. How much and what we consume can have moral consequences. Increasing awareness of environmental deterioration and ecological and economic interconnectedness makes this more apparent than ever before. At the same time, I do not see any likelihood of establishing a calculus that will enable us to reach agreement about whether our own or anyone else’s uses of products are justified. Coming to agreement on such matters is more likely to be worked out in the thick of politics than in any clear-cut philosophical guidelines.

Notes


20. Lasch, The True and Only Heaven, 63, 110, 520.

15

Consumption As Culture:
A Desert Example

Alan Strudler and Eleonora Curlo

Once the southwestern desert was dry and brown (or perhaps light green). Now much of it is wet and deep green. New suburbs sprawl, with names like “Green Valley,” “Evergreen,” “The Lakes,” and “Waterford Falls.” In a large southwestern city, dolphins splash about in a 1.5 million gallon pool, endless lines of tract homes sport Bermuda lawns, and trees and bushes transplanted from the soggy and humid East Coast flourish in parks thick with sprinklers and fountains. Something happened. Southwesterners changed their consumption practices. They became consumers of large quantities of water, and used this water to transform their neighborhoods.

In this chapter, we examine the ethics of a consumption choice: the choice to change the color of the desert. In doing so we will avoid questions about the economics of this change. We will not be concerned with the question of whether, by changing the desert, people risk depriving themselves of natural resources that either they or their children will one day need. We stay away from the economic question for two reasons.

First, we doubt the cogency of worries about the consumer threats to the water supply, at least for the short run. Although individual consumers in the desert use more and more water, the sum of their use is tiny compared to commercial agricultural use. If anything threatens the water supply in the desert, it is commercial agriculture. But desert agriculture is declining. By insisting upon the development of elaborate devices for bringing water to the desert, agricultural industry drove up the price of water. As a result farmers can hardly afford to pay for the water they need, and the industry is moving to places where it is