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## Work, Consumption, and the Joyless Consumer

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## 13

# Work, Consumption, and the Joyless Consumer

Raymond Benton, Jr.

Consumerism is only the other side of the degradation of work—the elimination of playfulness and craftsmanship from the process of production.

—Christopher Lasch (1984, p. 27)

When the hot discussions in marketing were concerned with broadening the marketing concept, Thaddeus H. Spratlen pointed out that such interest was largely confined to extending its application rather than expanding its orientation. "That is," Spratlen wrote, "its operational domain is being extended, not its philosophical domain" (1972, p. 403). In the years since Spratlen wrote, the operational domain of marketing has indeed expanded, so much so that Nikhilesh Dholakia (1985) recently questioned whether the marketing wave is even stoppable.

During this period of expansion, however, few marketers bothered to investigate, scrutinize, or criticize marketing's philosophical base. Consequently, marketing has not been significantly broadened in the philosophical sense. It is time to stop and look into, or behind, that philosophical base, to question it, and perhaps to criticize it. There is, after all, sufficient evidence, both empirical and anecdotal, to suggest that economic growth and goods consumption is not necessarily correlated with the feeling of well-being by the people who participate in the process.

Empirically, research suggests that there has been "no marked and significant increase in the self-perceived happiness of Americans to accompany the

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very substantial rise in the standard of living that has been achieved in the postwar period" (Rescher 1980, p. 7; see also Easterlin 1973, 1974; Leiss 1984). Anecdotally, on a recent morning commuter train ride, a perfect stranger—a young, well-dressed man in a gray three-piece suit (a lawyer?)—voluntarily commented, in response to a conversation I was having with the person sitting next to me, "My wife and I both work and we make lots of money. We have the house, the BMW, and the Mercedes, and we take the trips. Generally we buy anything we want. But you know what? This yuppie trip has got to be the most unfulfilling thing we have ever experienced."

Similarly, on *Nightline* on December 25, 1985—Christmas night, of all nights—Ben Wattenberg of the American Enterprise Institute commented, in response to the suggestion that maybe the baby-boomers are spending more (which they are and which Wattenberg presented as evidence that things are getting better) but might be finding that they cannot buy happiness,

Well, you know, money can never buy happiness. The only thing that anyone intelligent would say that money can buy is the absence of specific miseries. It can prevent you from having clothes with holes in it [sic] or leaky windows, or it can give you a nice car. It can prevent certain unhappinesses but it doesn't buy happiness. No one ever said it does.

Indeed, despite widespread agreement among traditionalists that we must "get the economy moving again," Paul Wachtel might very well turn out to be correct in saying that "greater economic productivity is not what will relieve our distress and that the pursuit of economic growth may actually make things worse" (1983, p. 9). Explaining how this could be is part of the purpose of this chapter.

The question is not why we believe that consumption brings happiness—we believe it because we have taught ourselves to believe it—but—to borrow from Jeremy Seabrook's *What Went Wrong? Why Hasn't Having More Made People Happier?* (1977)—to understand contemporary patterns of consumer behavior, as well as contemporary patterns of consumer dissatisfaction and restlessness, one must understand consumer behavior in its relation to other domains of human experience (in this case, in its relationship to work and working). In brief, the argument is that much of contemporary consumption is a form of compensation for the lack of meaningful work. Consequently, the origins of our culture of consumption, as well as of contemporary patterns of consumer behavior, cannot be understood apart from an understanding of the progressive degradation of work during the twentieth century.

### On Work and Consumption: The Theoretic

We need a theoretical understanding that will correct and compensate for the traditional understanding that work is merely something we do to obtain the

means (money) to acquire consumption goods. We need to understand that, as Hannah Arendt expressed it, "the things of the world . . . are of a very different nature and produced by quite different kinds of activities" (1958, p. 94).

### The Activities and the Products

Every European language, ancient and modern, contains two etymologically unrelated words for what we have come to think of as the same activity, and retains them in the face of their persistently synonymous usage. To illustrate, Arendt considered several languages and their respective words: Ancient Greek—*ponein* and *ergazesthai*; Latin—*laborare* and *facere* or *fabricari*; French—*travailler* and *ouvrer*; German—*arbeiten* and *werken*; English—*labor* and *work*. The distinction between them is the distinction between "the Labour of Our Body and the Work of Our Hands," a phrase Arendt borrows from John Locke's *Second Treatise of Civil Government*. It is a distinction reminiscent of that made by the ancient Greeks between the *cheirotechnes* (the craftsman, to whom the German *Handwerker* corresponds) and those who, like "slaves and tame animals with their bodies minister to the necessities of life."

In all cases, only the equivalents for *labor* have an unequivocal connotation of pain and trouble. The German *arbeit* applied originally only to farm labor executed by serfs and not to the work of the craftsman, which was called *werk*. The French *travailler* replaced the older *labourer* and is derived from *tripalium*, a kind of torture. In classical Greek, *ponein* connoted labor; in modern Greek, its derivative, *ponoi*, simply connotes pain and hurt. The words for *work*, on the other hand, unequivocally connote creativity. These distinctions are maintained, as well, in popular idiomatic expressions. Consider the difference in implied meaning between the idioms "a labor of love" and "a work of art."

Just as we can distinguish between kinds of activities, between labor and work, so, too, can we distinguish between the things of the world, between consumption products and use products. In English, *consumption* is etymologically derived from the Latin *consumere* (to use up, eat, waste) and has the unmistakable connotation of destroying, doing away with, or devouring. Similarly, *use* is derived from the Latin *uti* (to use) and, while more general than *consume*, it connotes a sense of *using* as in employing or employing for a given purpose without the connotation of destroying, wasting, or devouring the thing used even though it may, in the process, be "used up."

### The Relationships

The distinction between labor and work was ignored in classical antiquity and has been ignored in the modern age as well. There is not a single theory in which *animal laborans* and *homo faber* are clearly distinguished (Arendt 1958, p. 85). The distinction between productive and unproductive labor made by the

classical economists, however, goes to the heart of the matter because it embodies the fundamental distinction between work and labor. The mark of all laboring is that it leaves nothing behind. The results of its effort are almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent, because labor produces those things destined for consumption. Despite the apparent futility of this effort, "it is born of a great urgency and motivated by a more powerful drive than anything else, because life itself depends upon it" (Arendt, p. 87). For that reason, it cannot be escaped.

The mark of work, on the other hand, is that it creates permanence, stability, and durability. The products of work provide the permanent and durable world within which we find the consumption goods by which life assures the means of its own survival. "Needed by our bodies and produced by its laboring, but without stability of their own, these things for incessant consumption appear and disappear in an environment of things that are not consumed but used, and to which as we use them, we become used and accustomed" (Arendt 1958, p. 94).

The ideals of *Homo faber* are the creation of permanence, stability, and durability. The ideal of *animal laborans* is the production of abundance, the dream of growing wealth, "the happiness of the greatest number." The age-old dream of the poor and the destitute is the dream of the modern era: to emancipate people from that which is necessary. Indeed, the contempt for laboring originally arose out of a passionate striving for freedom from necessity (Arendt 1958, p. 81).

For the ancients, the way to achieve the dream was through the enslavement of others. They felt it necessary to possess slaves because of the slavish nature of all occupations that served the needs for the maintenance of life. What people share with all other forms of animal life was not considered to be human; slaves were not, consequently, considered human. It was not, however, their capacity to be human that was denied, but only their humanity when they were totally subjected to necessity. Indeed, peasants, who were not slaves but did provide the necessities of life, were classified by Plato as well as Aristotle as natural slaves. To be a master of slaves was the human way to master necessity (Arendt 1958, pp. 82-83).

The modern era has striven to eliminate the realm of necessity, that of labor, through the *mechanization* of the productive process, thereby relieving people of the necessity of producing what necessarily must be produced, while at the same time producing an abundance of it. It is in part that dream, the dream of liberation from the realm of necessity through the production of abundance, that lies behind the hope "that scientific and technological progress would result in enhanced human satisfaction/contentment/happiness" (Rescher 1980, p. 4).

The hope was that the division of labor, the breakdown of operations into their simple constituent motions, and their consequential reintegration

through "teamwork," together with the application of machine technology, would deliver people from their human condition, from the necessity to "labor." What actually happened, and this is one of the ironies of the modern world, is that by dividing, subdividing, and mechanizing the tasks at hand (always with an eye toward greater productivity), what work existed was effectively eliminated, leaving only labor to be done. And while the tools and instruments employed may ease the pain and the effort involved, they do not change the necessity itself, but only hide it from our senses.

Part of the liberal philosophy that is our modern heritage is the assumption that if labor power is not spent and exhausted in the drudgery of life, it will automatically nourish other, "higher" activities. Freed from labor, people will pursue higher goals and ends. This was an assumption put forth as a policy by Adam Smith and a hope by Karl Marx; it lies behind contemporary concerns over what people will do with their leisure once they achieve it. Two hundred years after Smith and a hundred years after Marx, we intuitively know the fallacy of this reasoning:

The spare time of the *animal laborans* is never spent in anything but consumption, and the more time left to him, the greedier and more craving his appetites. That these appetites become more sophisticated, so that consumption is no longer restricted to the necessities but, on the contrary, mainly concentrates on the superfluities of life, does not change the character of this society, but harbors the grave danger that eventually no object of the world will be safe from consumption and annihilation through consumption. (Arendt 1958, p. 133.)

We claim, proudly, that we live in a consumer society, in an "economy of abundance." Inasmuch as labor and consumption are but two stages of the same process, imposed upon people by the necessity of life, to proclaim that we live in a consumer society is to proclaim at the same time that we live in a society of laborers (Arendt 1958, p. 126). Hence, a society that does not work, labors, and a laboring society *is* a consuming society.

Not inconsequentially, we treat all use objects (the rightful products of work) as though they were consumer goods, so that a chair or a table is consumed as rapidly as a dress, and a dress is used up almost as quickly as food. We no longer use the worldly things around us, respecting and preserving their inherent durability, but "consume, devour, as it were, our houses and furniture and cars as though they were the "good things" of nature which spoilt uselessly if they are not drawn swiftly into the never-ending cycle of man's metabolism with nature" (Arendt, pp. 125-26). This mode of intercourse with the things of the world is perfectly adequate to the way they are produced. As the industrial revolution progressively replaced workmanship with labor, the things of the modern world have become products of labor. It is the natural fate of labor products to be consumed, unlike work products, which are there to be used.

### The Primacy of Work over Consumption

There is no need to deny our zoological status, that we share something with the rest of the animal kingdom. Neither is there need to deny that there is a deep gulf between us and the rest of the animal kingdom. What we share with the rest of the animal kingdom is the necessity to be metabolically united with the rest of nature—we must consume. Where we are different, at least potentially, is in our need and capacity for work. Those systems of human activities that we call *work* are what define and determine the circle of humanity. No other animal *works*.

This duality was recognized by Milton Friedman when he noted that "Each of us is a producer and also a consumer" (1962, p. 143). Nevertheless, as Adina Schwartz has pointed out, the classical liberal/neoconservative tradition essentially holds that we "should not care about what persons do at work" (1982, p. 635). There is always a great deal of concern for the consumer's welfare, but not much for that of the worker. All social and political policy is, in the last resort, measured and gauged against its ultimate effect on "the consuming public." The concept of work is not even in the marketer's lexicon except in the form of "occupation" and then it is as a variable for segmenting consumer markets. Advertisers have recently discovered, however, that people generally dislike and even hate their work and that this can be exploited for commercial purposes just as "the striving for superiority and the needs for love, security and escape from loneliness" have been exploited "to sell toothpaste, deodorants, cigarettes, and even detergents" (Kassarjian and Sheffet 1981, p. 162).

Why, if each of us is "a producer and also a consumer," has the producer in each of us been given a back seat to the consumer in each of us, particularly if it is our patterns of work that define and determine the circle of humanity. How is it "obvious," as John Maynard Keynes wrote, that "the sole end and object of all economic activity" is consumption (1936, p. 104)? How could Adam Smith write that "Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production" (1776/1937, p. 625). What decree authorized that social and psychological priority be given to consumption and that "sovereignty" (the right to rule, direct, and control a sociopolitical body) be vested in the consuming side of our selves? Why are social tensions analyzed and economic policies justified by recourse to the welfare of *animal laborans* rather than *Homo faber*?

Within the Western social science tradition, Karl Marx was the only writer to break with the liberal tradition to focus on work and to be concerned about what people do at work and what work does to people. Although a great many sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists share these concerns today (without being Marxists in a strict sense of the word), it is still true that our contemporary social scientific understandings of what constitutes the degradation of work owe much to Marx. The Marxian tradition is not the only

tradition that places primacy of concern on work and the conditions of work rather than on consumption. All religious traditions place primacy of importance on work over consumption. It is only the liberal tradition of the West that has reversed the ordering and given pride of place to consumption over work.

### Protestantism

The United States is overwhelmingly a Protestant country. Protestant doctrine, primarily in the form of the Puritan formulations, significantly informs our beliefs, institutions, and sense of righteousness. When we speak of the Protestant ethic, however, it must be realized that there are two sides to it. One side is generally identified as the Protestant work ethic, the other as the Puritan consumption ethic. They are, however, two sides of the same coin.

In the Puritan/Protestant conception, God calls every person to serve Him by serving society and oneself in some useful, productive occupation. The emphasis is always on productivity for the benefit of society. In the Protestant formulation, work is not something done for itself or even for "the self," but for others, for society, for the community, for one's neighborhood, and—perhaps most importantly—for reasons of religious sanction. Work has primarily an extrinsic source of meaning as the satisfactions from work are gained in the knowledge that one is helping others, doing for others, and, thus, serving God. Every Christian has a "general calling" to serve God and a "personal calling," in the words of Cotton Mather, "by which his Usefulness, in his Neighborhood, is distinguished."

As an ethic, the Puritan/Protestant prescription is two-pronged—it is good to produce, but bad to consume any more than necessary. How much is necessary? Enough, but no more than needed, to maintain one's social position and to perform one's social duty. Indeed, the original condemnation of debt, which is very much a part of the ethic, was not that it threatened or revealed anything negative about the character of the individual borrowing the money, but that it left that much less for the person loaning the money to use in performing his social duty. As regards possessions accumulated, people are but the stewards of those possessions. If a person indulges in luxurious living, that much less will be available with which to support the church and society. People who needlessly consume their substance, either from carelessness or from sensuality, demonstrate failure to honor the God who furnished it. That is why the Puritan/Protestant temperament was and is uncomfortable with the prosperity that diligent effort produces (Morgan 1967; Shi 1985, chapter 1). God gives prosperity, but can use it as temptation, leading to idleness, sloth, and extravagance. Indeed, in Calvin's idea of predestination, it was God's will that everyone must work, but it was not God's will that one should lust after the fruits even of one's own labor. For the Puritans, a godly man worked diligently



at his calling, not in order to accumulate personal wealth, but to add to the comfort and convenience of the community.

#### *On Human Work*

Pope John Paul II's recent encyclical *On Human Work* clearly states that *work* is a perennial topic because it is a fundamental aspect of human existence.<sup>1</sup> As a topic, it is always relevant and constantly demands renewed attention and decisive witness. It is, he wrote, a "basic dimension of human existence." The source of the Catholic Church's conviction that work is a, if not *the*, fundamental dimension of human experience is the Bible. The Book of Genesis states that man has been created "in the image of God," in the image of his "creator," the "Creator" of the Universe. It is God the Creator, not God the Consumer.<sup>2</sup>

The Pope makes an important distinction between work in the objective sense and work in the subjective sense. The *object* of work is to gain dominion over the earth so as to produce those things that people need. This is, indeed, the point of emphasis in liberal thought. But there is also a *subject* of work. In a subjective sense, the meaning of work is the person: "*the proper subject of work continues to be man*" (p. 378). And again, "*As a person, man is therefore the subject of work*" (p. 379). The entire encyclical is concerned with the subject, not the object, of work.

As people work, they perform various actions belonging to the work process. Independently of their objective content, these actions must all serve "to realize his humanity, to fulfill the calling to be a person that is his by reason of his very humanity" (p. 379). The value of work is not in the kind of work being done, not even in the results of that work, but in the fact that the one who is doing it is a person. The primary value of work lies with people, themselves, as the subjects of work, not with the object of it. Overall, one must recognize the preeminence of the subjective meaning of work over the objective one because "in the final analysis, it is man who is *the purpose of the work*" because "through work man . . . achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes 'more of a human being'" (pp. 380, 383).

When people work, they would like the fruit of that work to be used by themselves and by others. People like to feel useful; they like what they produce to be useful and to be used by others. People also like to handle the materials, to see them take shape as imagined because work has a creative aspect to it. It is, indeed, the only means of extending the human personality into nature. That is why people like to take part in the work process as sharers in responsibility as well as sharers in creativity. What is wanted is not only due remuneration for their work, but also to *know* that in their work, even on something that is owned in common, they are working "for themselves," are "producing" the self, and are developing their capacities as creative human beings to the fullest.

The Pope is unequivocal: "The church's teaching has always expressed the strong and deep conviction that man's work concerns not only the economy but also, and especially, personal values" (p. 386). While he does allude to the goods that result from the production process, he insists that human beings are also part of the result of the production process and that is why *work* has the priority: "work is 'for man' and not man 'for work'" (p. 380).

#### *The American Work Ethic*

The American work ethic has always included the "other-worldly" work-as-a-duty orientation of Protestantism. But it has always included conceptions of personal independence, self-regulation, and individual creativity (Gutman 1977; Rodgers 1978). These latter elements are generally considered to be derived from the Renaissance view of work, but they are strikingly similar to those understandings that motivate the encyclical *On Human Work*.

Americans generally view work as something that can be and should be intrinsically meaningful even if productive work is, at the moment, what most ordinary people dislike. The meaning of work is considered to lie, in part, in the work itself and not only in an ulterior realm or consequence. Not income, not salvation, not status, not power over other people, but the work process itself is seen as at least potentially gratifying. This has been described as the work-as-craftsmanship model (Mills 1956, pp. 215-38).

What is necessary for work-as-craftsmanship is that some tie between product and producer exist at the psychological level. It is less important that the producer actually own the product than that it be "owned" in the sense of knowing what goes into it by way of skill, sweat, and material and that the skill and sweat be visible in the result.

Craftspeople have an image of the completed product. Even though they may not make it all themselves, they see their place and their part in the whole, thereby understanding the meaning of their exertion in terms of that whole. Satisfaction, indeed fulfillment, is derived from the sense of accomplishment, of having achieved or reproduced that "image." The inner relation between the craftsman and the thing made, from the image first formed of it through its completion, goes beyond the mere legal relations of property and makes the craftsman's will to work spontaneous, even exuberant. All human activities have an element of travail and vexation because they involve the expenditure of physical and mental energy. The craftsman is carried over it, not by the feeling of need, but by the feeling of keen anticipation.

Craftspeople have control—they can begin work according to their own plan and are free to modify its form and the manner of its creation as they go along. Craftspeople are the masters of the activity and of themselves in the process. The craftsman's work is thus a means of developing skills as well as

a means of developing oneself as a person. Self-development might be a motive, but it is also the cumulative result of devoting oneself to and practicing one's skills.

### On Work and Consumption: The Historic

It is understandable how early Protestantism, particularly in the United States, could omit concern with the intrinsic aspects of the meaning of work. As late as 1840, the United States was largely preindustrial in its manufacturing processes. Except for the textile industries, manufacturing was conducted, not in the factory, but in the workshop, and was organized along the traditional model of masters and journeymen. It was, indeed, a society of yeoman farmers, small businesspeople, and self-supporting craftspeople.

In such a social economy, the aesthetic satisfaction of creating things, as well as the satisfaction of knowing that one has served others through what one has created and has distinguished oneself "in his Neighborhood," could be directly experienced. In this and all previous societies, the work of artisans and even that of the immense mass of the population engaged in crop or animal husbandry as farmers, peasants, and serfs was, as a rule, conducted autonomously. So far as the direct processes of work and labor are concerned, artisans and peasants, even in slave and feudal societies, worked according to traditional methods generally under their own control. This contrasts with contemporary industrial societies where many people work at jobs in which they are hired to perform specific series of actions such as assembly line work, key-punching, or clerking on an automated checkout line. These jobs provide almost no opportunity to formulate aims, decide on means, or adjust goals and methods in the light of experience. As Adina Schwarz expresses it:

Instead of being hired to achieve certain goals and left to select and pursue adequate means, workers are employed to perform precisely specified action. Even the order in which they perform those operations, the pace at which they work, and the particular bodily movements they employ are largely determined by others' decisions. When the entire job consists of such mechanical activity, workers are in effect paid for blindly pursuing ends that others have chosen, by means that they judge adequate. (1982, pp. 634-35).

The "masters" take over the entire process, repeatedly reshaping it and reorganizing it, parceling it out as tasks to laborers for whom the process as a whole is now lost. The ownership of the tools and instruments of production is transferred to others, the ownership of the product is transferred to others, and the ownership of the proceeds from the sale of the product is transferred to others. First the capitalist and today "management" controls these things.

Everything about the productive process has become foreign to the workers in the sense that everything is outside their interests, claim, and/or control. It amounts to nothing less than the mass degradation of work (Braverman 1974; Terkel 1974).

### Consumerism and the Degradation of Work

There is a distinct connection between consumerism (the acceptance of consumption as the way to self-development, self-realization, and self-fulfillment) and the degradation of work. If meaningful work is systematically denied to a people, then obviously they must seek their meanings elsewhere. It should be no surprise that the search was directed into the realm of consumption. As T.J. Jackson Lears expressed it, "A quest for self-realization through consumption [has] compensated for a loss of autonomy on the job" (1983, p. 29). But we all realize that no matter how much we try to convince ourselves to the contrary, the satisfaction derived from consumption is not the same as the sense of accomplishment, joy, and fulfillment that producing something engenders. Surrogate satisfiers are always inferior.

With the introduction and application of scientific management to the division of labor plus the mechanization of the productive process, work was reduced to an industrial labor routine. Two situations followed. First, as Loren Baritz (1960) has discussed, new forms of labor discipline had to be found or devised in order to deal with the problems of "motivation" and "morale" that arose when workers lost control of the design and rhythm of work. Second, the laboring middle class had to be encouraged to find in consumption that satisfaction and fulfillment that could no longer be found in work.

The second problem required a multifold attack. What was left of the original Protestant ethic's emphasis on frugal living had to be eradicated. The Puritan consumption ethic guided people to find satisfaction in work, not in consumption. The country had been flooded with a welter of goods that threatened to cause havoc unless people accelerated their spending. A newspaper editorial at the time proclaimed that the American's "first importance to his country [was] no longer that of citizen but that of consumer. Consumption is a new necessity" (as quoted in Shi 1985, p. 219). Consequently, the public had to be taught the joys of consumerism; the springs of impulse buying had to be uncoiled. This was largely the role of advertising. Writing in the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (1922), Leverett S. Lyon claimed that "Advertising is the greatest force at work against the traditional economy . . . [and] almost the only force at work against puritanism in consumption" (as quoted in Ewen 1976, p. 57).

This meant, however, that *use* goods, the proper products of work, had to be treated as *consumption* goods. Writing in *Printer's Ink* in 1930, Earnest Elmo Calkins declared, "consumption engineering must see to it that we use up

the kinds of goods we now merely use" (as quoted in Salgo 1973, p. 31). Similarly, Leon Kelley wrote in *Printer's Ink* (1936):

It grows more and more apparent that the modern cycle of over-production and market-glutting leaves practically no room for mankind's old ideas about long lasting products . . . Above all, we face the task of selling the whole public away from the deep-rooted idea of durability (as quoted in Salgo, pp. 31-32).

This also was the role of advertising. As an executive of General Motors proclaimed in 1929: "Advertising is in the business of making people healthily dissatisfied with what they have in favor of something better. The old factors of wear and tear can no longer be depended upon to create a demand. They are too slow" (as quoted in Salgo, p. 31).

What was needed, as Otis Pease noted in *The Responsibility of American Advertising* (1958), was for advertisements to "create in their middle class readers a frame of mind that constantly sought new acquisitions" (as quoted by Salgo, p. 27). Articles that did not wear out or were not consumed were thought of as business tragedies; one common approach, articulated by silver and watch manufacturers, was to ridicule the past from which the use goods came, those "ancestral heirlooms 'woefully outmoded'" then being used rather than used up (as quoted in Salgo, p. 27).

It was also realized, as *Printer's Ink* editorialized in 1919, that "if we encourage Gusseppe, the track laborer, to wear silken pajamas we must not complain when he strikes for more pay" (as quoted in Salgo, p. 27). The solution here was not so much to provide those higher wages (although real wages were rising) as to provide—at interest—the funds for the purchase of those silken pajamas.

Nothing is more obvious yet more overlooked than the simple fact that mass production, which (whether or not it invariably included a tremendous degradation of work) required mass consumption for ultimate success. Daniel Bell points out that while a number of technological revolutions made mass production possible, mass consumption was made possible by several specific social inventions, including the development of marketing, "which rationalized the art of identifying different kinds of buying groups and whetting consumer appetites," and the spread of installment buying, which, more than any other social device, "broke down the old Protestant fear of debt" (1976, pp. 66-72). American capitalism changed its nature in the 1920s, Bell wrote, "by encouraging the consumers to go into debt, and to live with debt as a way of life" (pp. 242, 69).

The tremendous increase in indebtedness in our time is widely viewed as reflecting a change in popular attitudes and behavior. Indeed it does. But the increase in indebtedness can only be understood for what it is if it is seen as an

integral part of the whole. An increase in consumer debt, as Galbraith has pointed out (1976, chapter 13), is implicit in the process by which consumer appetites are whetted. Any society prepared to spend billions of dollars to persuade people of their wants must also find ways to finance those wants. That largely means that it must be prepared to persuade consumers of the ease and desirability of incurring debt to realize their wants.

The old value pattern that defined achievement as doing and making, and in which people displayed their character in the quality of their work, was intentionally and systematically replaced by a value pattern in which achievement was redefined to emphasize status and taste. The importance of *doing* was replaced by the importance of having as the citizen-craftsperson was replaced by the citizen-consumer. In a very real sense, a culture of production and creation was replaced by a culture of consumption (Ostreicher 1981).

## Conclusion

We are at a point, then, where marketers must realize that if they sincerely want to contribute to a better and a higher quality of life, they must broaden their philosophical domain (their area of concern) and embrace much more than what has hitherto been embraced within the rubric of "marketing." They will have to realize that much consumption is necessary, but much of it today is part of a larger pattern of dependence, disorientation, and loss of control (Daun 1983). Consequently, there is little that marketing can do to enhance the quality of life as long as it is primarily concerned with maximizing the market's consumption of goods and services. Indeed, marketing might be expected to decrease, rather than increase, the quality of life in direct proportion to the vigor with which it pursues that traditional purpose.

Such a stance, however, would ally marketing with traditional social critics against the mainstream of the liberal tradition. It would also ally marketing with the women's movement, the ecology movement, and any number of other contemporary social change movements. These movements have a very different worldview than either traditional management or traditional labor as they embody or prefigure the sense that it is possible to live better by working differently and/or consuming less (Gorz 1980, 1982). To ally with such movements may pit marketers against those for whom they have traditionally worked, but it may also put marketing on the side of the future (Milbrath 1984).

Macromarketing researchers who want to understand consumption behavior in contemporary United States must move beyond the study of consumption by itself. Particularly, any attempt to understand prevailing patterns of consumption must have a historical perspective, one with a broader domain and embrace than the simple sphere of consumption by itself. Historians are



beginning to understand the ways in which industrialization altered the daily lives of nineteenth century workers and the resulting evolution of working class culture (Dawley 1976; Edwards 1979; Nelson 1975). They are discovering that the process of industrialization took place within an atmosphere of deep ambivalence, not only among workers, but also among those who have previously been characterized as uncritical supporters of modernization. We have yet to fully confront the psychological reorientation that accompanied this development, although some progress is being made here, too (Fox and Lears 1983). That psychological reorientation is what the culture of consumption is all about. It would seem to be properly part of marketing as a discipline since it is related to marketing as a professional activity and to one of the central areas of marketing's concern—consumer behavior. Marketers must understand that it cannot be really understood without an equally detailed understanding of the entire process, including what happened to work.

Finally, those macromarketers who see themselves as change agents concerned with transforming our society and economy into one that serves life, rather than just living, might take their cue from Eric Fromm when he wrote:

The transformation of our society into one which serves life must change the consumption and thereby change, indirectly, the production pattern of present industrial society. Such a change would obviously not come as a result of bureaucratic orders but of studies, information, discussion, and decision making on the part of the population, educated to become aware of the difference between life-furthering and life-hindering kinds of needs. (1968, p. 120)

Fromm, however, had things backward in that the transformation of our society into one which serves life must start by changing the patterns of work and thereby change, indirectly, the patterns of consumption. But he was correct that it cannot be the result of bureaucratic orders handed down from above but the result of studies, information, discussion, and decision making on the part of everybody. And in this, marketing educators can play a significant role.

But what of marketing as management technology? It will occupy the same role it occupies now, however much changed in scope and importance. Marketing as management technology will still be concerned with, as Kotler expresses it, "influencing the level, timing, and composition of demand in a way that will help the organization achieve its objectives. Simply put, marketing management [will still be] demand management" (1984, p. 15, emphasis in original). The objectives of the organization, however, will not lie solely with the expansion of capital and thereby serving the needs, wants, desires, hopes, dreams, and philosophies of "management." It will also lie with the expansion and creation of meaningful work for all, thereby serving the needs, wants, desires, hopes, and dreams of all people as workers, citizens, family members, community members, and consumers.

## Notes

1. All page references to the encyclical are to the excerpted version in Williamson, Evans, and Rustad (1985, pp. 375–89).
2. This expression is mine and is not similarly expressed in the encyclical *On Human Work*.

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## 14

## The Social Construction of Consumption Patterns: Understanding Macro Consumption Phenomena

A. Fuat Firat

### The Questions

By 1974 (the last year for which ownership statistics were published in the U.S. *Statistical Abstract*, 1978), 83.8 percent of all households in the United States owned automobiles. The proportion of ownership in the same year for television sets was 96.6 percent. For refrigerators, it was 98.9 percent, and for washing machines, it was 71.9 percent.

Why have these products become so diffused among households, and so universally purchased and consumed in advanced market economies? Why is there no interest within marketing and consumer behavior disciplines in explaining this phenomenon? What are the forces behind the growing universality of consumption of certain products in the First World and increasingly in the Third World? Does this have anything to do with the "irrational" choices made by the poor and disadvantaged consumers in society?

The theoretical framework presented briefly in this chapter was developed to try and answer such questions. While to some, the large proportions of ownership reproduced above may be sufficient reason to believe that such products are indispensable in human life, such brushing aside of the issue is neither scientific nor pragmatic. However, such large proportions may partially explain the reason why, in the models of behavior in marketing, the need for a certain product (for example, a car or a television set) is taken for granted and the product features/brand choice process is studied.

Consumption choices, it must be recognized, take place at different levels. For example, there is the consumption mode choice: car versus public trans-