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“Summary of article by Alan Durning: Asking How Much Is Enough”

Increasing consumption levels around the world threaten our natural resource base and diminish our overall quality of life. As consumerism has become entrenched in industrial countries, material standards of success have come to dominate traditional non-material values. As a result, more and more societies are pursuing material goals that lead to global environmental degradation. This paper argues that a global consumer society, based on the continuing spread of the richest countries' high consumption lifestyles, is unsustainable, while the lifestyle of the "global middle class" is more ecologically benign. It identifies factors driving society toward ever-higher consumption; the author advocates a culture of permanence as an alternative to consumerism (see Durning summary in chapter 10 of this volume).

The Consuming Society

Evidence that consumption is increasing around the globe is available on almost any consumption-based indicator. While consumption among America's wealthy classes continues to rise, Japanese and Western European consumption patterns have come to parallel those of the United States. Even poor societies such as China and India, and Eastern European countries are beginning to adopt the consumer lifestyle of the West.

The costs of global consumerism are too high for this planet and its human inhabitants. The biosphere cannot support a global consumer lifestyle as that of the United States. Too many natural resources would be required and too much pollution and waste would be produced to sustain a livable environment. Not only are ecological costs high, but consumerism does not seem to promote human happiness. Despite spending twice as much per capita as they did in 1957, there has been no increase in the number of Americans who report being "very happy." In addition, cross-cultural studies show little difference between self-reports of happiness in rich and poor countries. Since pursuit of high consumption levels is both unsustainable and does not promote high levels of personal fulfillment, our social goals should be redefined.

In Search of Sufficiency

The notion of sufficiency applies to two distinct areas. The first concerns consumption levels that can be supported by the biosphere. The second involves personal consumption levels that are sufficient for human satisfaction.

The ecological impact of the global economy is determined by the size of the population, average consumption, and technologies that provide goods and services. Technological advances may decrease burdens on the environment that are caused by increases in population

and consumption. But without a reduction of consumer demand, environmental benefits from technological innovation will likely be inadequate to stop the resultant environmental degradation.

Obviously, average consumption levels vary within the global population, but it is only the world's affluent who consume at rates that are too much for the biosphere. The global population may be divided into three groups or classes that differ in their rates of consumption. The affluent class is responsible for consumption of 80 percent of the world's resources, but comprises only one-fifth of the world's population. The global middle class is associated with moderate or sustainable consumption levels, and comprises three-fifths of the world's population. The lower class, another one-fifth of the world, lives in absolute deprivation. An examination of the most important ecological consumption patterns (those involving transportation, diet and use of raw materials) indicates that the middle class is a model for consumption levels that can be supported by the biosphere, while the more affluent class is not. (Table 1 outlines the types of consumption associated with each class.)

Table 1. The World's Three Socio-Ecological Classes¹

OVERCONSUMERS 1.1 billion > \$7,500 per capita (Cars-Meat-Disposables)	SUSTAINERS 3.3 billion \$700-7,500 per capita (Living Lightly)	MARGINALS 1.1 billion < \$700 per capita (Absolute Deprivation)
Travel by car and air	Travel by bicycle and public surface transport	Travel by foot, maybe donkey
Eat high fat, high calorie meat-based diets	Eat healthy diets of grains vegetables and some meat	Eat nutritionally inadequate diets
Drink bottled water and soft drinks	Drink clean water plus some tea and coffee	Drink contaminated water
Use throw-away products and discard substantial wastes	Use unpackaged goods and durables and recycle wastes	Use local biomass and produce negligible wastes
Live in spacious, climate controlled, single family residences	Live in modest naturally ventilated residences with extended/multiple families	Live in rudimentary shelters or in the open; usually lack secure tenure
Maintain image conscious wardrobe	Wear functional clothing	Wear second-hand clothing or scraps

As consumption of automobiles, red meat and packaged goods increases, so does waste and natural resource depletion. Excessive use of automobiles by the affluent depletes the ozone layer, pollutes the air, and contributes to acid rain. Meat consumption, almost all by the affluent, takes 40 percent of the world's grain supply for feed, contributes to the greenhouse effect, and wastes energy in the long-distance transport of agricultural goods. Processing and packaged goods support a throwaway economy in which disposability and obsolescence are merchandisable qualities. If all countries were to adopt this affluent level of consumption as their model, there would be no hope for the biosphere.

In contrast, members of the global middle class characteristically ride bicycles or take public transportation, eat the healthiest diets of grains and vegetables, and use less than one-tenth the amount of raw materials of their affluent counterparts. The global poor have a negligible ecological impact and are forced to depend on unproductive ecosystems because of population pressures and landlessness caused by the overconsumption of the global rich. Examination of these consumption patterns suggests that modest consumption levels can provide modern comforts and are supportable by the biosphere.

The Cultivation of Needs

The modern consumer society employs five cultural factors to promote the desire to consume: social pressures, advertising, shopping, government and the mass market.

1) As pecuniary measures have replaced traditional virtues (e.g., integrity, honesty and skill) as indicators of social worth, social status is determined primarily by consumption-based comparisons with others. However, status seeking through consumption becomes unsatisfying and fruitless when individuals keep trying to outconsume each other.

2) The expansion of advertising into every aspect of our daily lives promotes ever-increasing consumption. Advertising infests not only radio, television, and print media, but also classrooms, doctors' offices, "telemarketing" calls in our homes, and more. Growth in total global advertising expenditures has outpaced global economic output.

3) Shopping culture, as exemplified in mall design, encourages acquisitive impulses and draws commerce away from local merchants. Mall sales account for more than half of all retail sales in the United States; the country has more shopping centers than high schools. Shopping itself has become a primary cultural activity.

4) Government economic policies promote high consumption levels through taxes and policy. In Britain, for example, automobile consumption is supported by tax breaks for companies that buy fleets of company cars. Globally, government policies undervalue renewable resources, ignore ecosystems, and underprice raw materials. Worst of all, such policy goals, based on the assumption that "more is better," misinterpret the ecological havoc of overconsumption as healthy growth.

5) Convenient, disposable, mass market products overwhelm household and local community enterprises. Household purchases are geared toward items that save time but contribute to waste and ecological burdens.

These factors fail to promote human satisfaction and tear away at the fabric of local economies. They promote social values that are not grounded in local communities and that dominate non-material measures of success. In addition, they create a false impression that there is a positive relationship between the ability to consume and happiness.

Notes

1. This chart is based on Durning's work, but was compiled by David Korten, Sustainability and the Global Economy Beyond Bretton Woods, address to the Environmental Grant-makers Association in October 1994, 5.