



“Summary of article by William Leiss: The Limits to Satisfaction: Examination”
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The market economy of affluent societies is characterized by the provision of many technologically sophisticated commodities to large numbers of people. This high intensity market setting is governed by the principle that the economy should expand steadily and the concern that sufficient resources be available for this purpose. This paper argues that the systematic orientation of all needs toward commodities within such markets makes it difficult to determine and satisfy individual desires, intensifies the experienced scarcity of goods, and promotes a dangerously short-sighted view of the ability of the environment to absorb the resource costs of mass production.

The Individual

In an expanding market place, the individual consumer faces a number of insurmountable problems. Since many mass produced goods require complex production processes, consumers often do not have the knowledge or the time to make informed decisions that avoid the physiological and psychological dangers that accompany consumption of some commodities. Ideally, consumer choices are informed by an intimate understanding of the goods that will achieve their desired ends. This is the kind of knowledge that is applied in craft skills. For example, a cook who carefully prepares a sauce knows which ingredients and pans are most useful.

In a mass market nobody can possibly have craft knowledge of more than a few products. Without craft knowledge, individual choice amounts to little more than a grand arbitrary experiment in matching goods with needs and wants. One consequence is that most actual consumer decisions reflect a choice among the messages or images associated with different commodities, rather than among the commodities themselves. Many product images create short-lived impressions of indispensability that reflect the shallowness of most consumer wants.

A consumer's health may be endangered in a number of ways by ignorance of the nature and effects of commodities. In a high intensity market setting, the number and variety of goods depends on the incorporation of materials that have untested long-term physical effects on people and the environment. Hyperactivity in children, poor nutrition and drug dependencies are but a few of the many physical problems that have been associated with the consumption of some modern products.

Psychologically, a significant health issue arises with attempts to satisfy the multitude of needs generated by advertising. Advertising fragments genuine social needs, into many other needs each of which is associated with a particular commodity and message. For example, the

consumer need for an acceptable external appearance is broken into smaller and smaller needs by compartmentalizing the body into different parts, each of which require separate products. Thus, for example, a variety of deodorants and other chemical mixtures are designed to enhance the smells and appearance of different body parts. The consumer who is hooked on addressing needs through consumption will spend more and more time consuming in order to maintain a sense of self.

In The Harried Leisure Class, summarized in chapter 2 of this volume, Staffan Linder argued convincingly that the value of time spent consuming goods increases with productivity gains in the labor sector of the economy. He raised the important point that leisure will become increasingly oriented toward activities that utilize consumer goods. As a result, activities that do not depend on consumption will become less important to consumers bent on optimizing the yield on their time. The urge to optimize leisure time is exemplified by the packaged tour which allows travelers to see as much as possible in the least amount of time. Unfortunately, experiencing efficiency is not the same as experiencing different cultures. The planned menus, bus trips, and guided tours effectively insulate the traveler from contact with other cultures. The appeal of the package tour and its seeming "efficiency" to the harried consumer raises questions concerning the meaning of the phrase "satisfaction of wants."

In the high intensity market setting...both the states of feeling that are incorporated in an individual's wants and the multidimensional aspects of commodities are highly complex; the complexity of the interplay between needs and commodities increases exponentially as a result. It is far too simplistic to adopt the conventional description of this process as one in which 'new' wants emerge attendant upon the 'satisfaction' of previously existing ones. In this setting wants become less and less coherent, and their objectives less clear and readily identifiable, as individuals continually reinterpret their needs in relation to the expanding market economy. (27)

If it is true that consumers are often unable to relate goods to their perceived desires, this calls into question the usefulness of the notion that human wants are insatiable. Wants cannot be continuously generated and satisfied when it is difficult to say when and whether any particular want is satisfied.

Society

Early proponents of an expansionist market economy believed that the scarcity of goods results from limited productivity and that problems related to the elimination of scarcity represent the central concerns of economic systems. This notion of scarcity implies a relation between wants and available resources, but fails to recognize that scarcity has an experiential component that cannot be addressed or eliminated by increasing production. "If we view scarcity as the disparity between our wants and our capacities, we can understand the possibility that scarcity might increase simultaneously with rising social wealth and productivity." (30) For instance, in any society respect from others is not easy to obtain, so it has a scarcity value. When scarce commodities are associated with respectability, the experienced scarcity of respect is compounded. Consequently, it is possible for individuals living in a society of wealth and

limitless resources to have intense experiences of scarcity. The threat of scarcity is a socially manufactured, permanently entrenched characteristic of any society that connects the satisfaction of needs to consumption of goods, and this threat will not be diminished by increases in the supply of goods.

The threat of scarcity has returned as a significant economic issue as mismanagement of industrial waste products begins to pose global environmental threats. Multinational corporations avoid pollution restrictions in industrial societies by producing in countries that accept environmental hazards for economic benefits. The export of industrial waste threatens global resources while political and economic pressures place the burden of proof on environmentalists to show that environmental problems will result from a given activity or policy. Consequently, the dangers of uncertain, long-term environmental costs are underplayed to keep costs down and sustain short-term product development for the consumer.

Nonhuman Nature

In order to understand the character of human needs in a high intensity market setting it is essential to appreciate the nature of our dependence on the natural environment, the ultimate source of consumed goods. The modern day realization that industrial wastes burden a limited resource base has been slow to address the prevailing philosophical view that nature exists to serve man's purposes. This perspective can be traced back at least as far as Sir Francis Bacon who believed that human nature is distinct from that of non-human nature and that non-human nature has no inherent purpose. This belief provided the moral foundation for exploiting the environment for whatever purposes humans deemed appropriate. In Bacon's view, conquering non-human nature could allow humans to release their innate, destructive passions without hurting anyone. "Non-human nature 'pays the price' for achieving peace and serenity in human society." (42)

The idea that the rational control of nature through science and technology could be accomplished by a species that does not have control over its own nature is fundamentally paradoxical. In exploiting resources to manufacture goods to satisfy needs, we avoid careful examination of the nature of our material interests and ignore the basic confusions and ambiguities that exist in the complex relationship between needs, their satisfaction and commodities.