



“Summary of article by Raymond Benton, Jr.: Work, Consumption, and the Joyless Consumer” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. 50-52.

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[T]here 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. (247)

This essay was written as a corrective to the philosophical narrowness of the marketing field. It seeks to remind members of the marketing profession that "economic growth and goods consumption is not necessarily correlated with the feeling of well-being by the people who participate in the process," (235) and argues that consumerism has developed in response to the lack of meaningful work in contemporary American society.

On Work and Consumption: The Rhetoric

The distinction between labor and work is crucial for understanding the theoretical relationship between "work" and mass consumption. The etymological roots of *labor* connote pain and trouble, while those of *work* connote creativity. Labor produces goods that satisfy bodily needs and are quickly consumed, whereas work produces goods that are long-lasting and purposeful. Thus, the animal and human dimensions of "work" are represented, respectively, by *animal laborans* who is responsible for providing the means of human survival, while *homo faber* produces goods that contribute to a purpose beyond that of material necessity.

Throughout history, humans have struggled to emancipate themselves from the labor required to satisfy the material necessities of life. While ancient Greeks used human slaves for this end, the modern industrial approach was intended to render labor obsolete through the mass production of basic goods. Emancipation through abundance has required the fragmentation of production into highly regimented, mechanized and laborious processes. Mass production employs on a grand scale the labor skills of *animal laborans*, rather than the craft work of *homo faber*. As a result, mass production fails to achieve freedom from the labor required for material necessity.

Since labor rather than work is the source of mass produced goods and *labor* produces goods that are intended for quick consumption, the current addiction to consumption follows naturally from an abundance of labor-produced goods. Unfortunately, the relative paucity of craft goods lends itself to a growing disrespect for durable objects (e.g., furniture), which are now consumed almost as quickly as foodstuffs.

The Primacy of Work over Consumption

Every person is both a producer and a consumer; however, neoconservative economic analyses give a central role to the consumer in each of us. Witness Adam Smith's comment that consumption is the sole end of all production. This type of view stands in stark contrast to the belief expressed by all religions that production or work is more important than consumption. For example, the Roman Catholic church distinguishes between objective and subjective work goals. The objective aim of work – the production of necessary goods – is the one alluded to by Smith. But the more important aim of work is the subjective development of oneself and the achievement of one's humanity. In the Church's view, work is a fundamental dimension of human existence and a vehicle for self-fulfillment. Similarly, Protestantism asserts that work is a duty to the community and a service to God.

The American work ethic combines the views on work embodied by Protestantism and the Roman Catholic church. People want and expect work to be a source of autonomy and creativity, an arena of self-development and a process that is itself meaningful. In other words, Americans want to be craftpersons who have control over their work and can see the relation between their exertions and a finished product.

Historical Aspects of Work and Consumption

In contrast to opportunities available in preindustrial economies, the contemporary mass production work force holds jobs that limit workers' input to the formulation and adjustment of tasks and goals. The reduction of work to a meaningless, industrialized routine led to new forms of labor discipline to compensate for low motivation and to the introduction of institutions that encourage consumption as the route to life's satisfactions and meaning. Increasing consumption levels required abandonment of the Protestant ethic of frugal living. This involved the education (if not creation) of the American consumer through advertising, the introduction of credit financing, and the development of a novel cultural definition of achievement.

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. (247)

Unfortunately, consumption pales in comparison to work as a means of achieving happiness and fulfillment.

In order to understand consumption patterns we must gain a historical perspective that reaches beyond the restricted sphere of consumption to include the moral and psychological milieu in which consumer culture developed. Efforts to transform our consumer society into one that serves distinctively human aspirations requires first and foremost a change in the nature of work.