



“Summary of article by Raymond Benton Jr.: Alternative Approaches to Consumer Behavior” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 201-204

**Social Science Library: Frontier Thinking in Sustainable Development and Human Well-being**

## **“Summary of article by Raymond Benton Jr.: Alternative Approaches to Consumer Behavior”**

This article contrasts three distinct paradigms for understanding consumer behavior: the traditional approach of the economics and marketing professions; the critical approach exemplified by the work of Galbraith and Leiss; and an ethical approach that develops norms for the evaluation and reform of current patterns of both consumer and business behavior.

### **TRADITIONAL APPROACH TO CONSUMER BEHAVIOR**

The study of consumer behavior has not progressed steadily or continuously. Rather, certain concepts have burst upon the field, each initially arousing great excitement but then subsiding. Such changes in the popularity of individual ideas do not constitute a true paradigm shift, but are variations within an established paradigm. Although the field of consumer behavior is multidisciplinary and more or less fragmented, research is framed in terms of an underlying theoretical model – usually derived from economics.

The assumptions of the economic model, as described by researchers in consumer behavior, include the following seven statements:

- 1) consumers derive satisfaction from consumption;
- 2) consumers seek to maximize satisfaction given their income constraints;
- 3) consumers act rationally;
- 4) consumers are capable of judging their tastes and preferences for all products under consideration;
- 5) consumers use the price of a good as the sole measure of the sacrifice involved in obtaining it, and price plays no other role in the purchase decision;
- 6) consumers develop individual preferences, which are not influenced by other people; and
- 7) consumers' wants and needs are unlimited and can never be fully satisfied.

In consumer behavior studies, references to the economists' model are often followed by criticisms, but not by alternatives.

### **THE CRITICAL APPROACH TO CONSUMER BEHAVIOR**

The most familiar social critic of our marketing system is John Kenneth Galbraith. Much of Galbraith's criticism is levied against economic theory, especially the theory of demand.

Galbraith and marketers agree that it is unrealistic to assume that consumers develop their own tastes and preferences without influence from others. The function of modern marketing activities, Galbraith charges, is to create wants that did not previously exist.

Marketers' reactions to Galbraith have been complex; they agree with his basic premise, but claim that his understanding of needs is inadequate and that he misapplies economic concepts to social and moral issues. One marketing critic argued that Galbraith's distinction between natural and artificial needs was inaccurate, since the means of satisfying even the most basic needs are socially determined by advertising and other socialization processes. However, this is, in fact, an affirmation rather than a rejection of Galbraith's position.

Striking parallels can be found between some of Galbraith's strongest statements and the marketing literature. Yet marketers cannot extol Galbraith too highly without eliminating themselves a sense of meaning or purpose since his analysis undermines the traditional rationale for capitalism.

William Leiss differs from Galbraith in that he attacks the seventh assumption listed above – the doctrine of human insatiability – which both economics and marketing find to be indispensable; it serves both as an explanation and a justification of business activities. Leiss does not question the idea that needs and wants in the abstract are insatiable. What he examines is the assumption that needs and wants *for material things* are unlimited and insatiable. Leiss begins by rejecting the dichotomy between real and manipulated, or true and false, needs. For him, every need has both a material and a symbolic aspect. Since commodities are intended to satisfy needs, they too embody a duality of material and symbolic meanings – an idea that is familiar to marketers.

Consumers are faced with the problem of matching their needs to the ever-growing number of goods available to satisfy them. Attaining the "craft knowledge" necessary to be a competent consumer is difficult because production processes and products have grown so complex. Consumer decision-making becomes an increasingly random process, as the number of decisions increases while the time spent on any one decision decreases. The result is that individuals become confused about the nature of their own needs and about the goods that are supposed to satisfy them.

This state of confusion does not arise because people fall victim to artificial wants. Nor is it a result of advertising, although ambiguous advertising messages about wants and their satisfaction may compound the confusion. The confusion originates in the consumption process itself, compelling people to search more extensively for the commodities that will yield satisfaction. Far from a rational search for information followed by a selection of the product that offers the greatest satisfaction, "the image that emerges is one in which people pursue income to buy more and more things to consume and, feeling dissatisfied but not quite sure why, set out after still more income and consumption." (209)

## **ETHICAL APPROACH TO CONSUMER BEHAVIOR**

Increasingly, some marketers ask not only "Can it be sold?", but also "Should it be sold?" The latter question implies the existence of ethical criteria by which marketing can be judged.

The traditional ethical stance has been that anything people buy contributes to their well-being, because people know what they, as individuals, want – and because those wants are insatiable. Questioning whether something should be sold, however, implies that under some conditions marketing managers should limit consumers' freedom of choice or redirect purchasing into more socially meaningful areas. This discussion has begun to find its place in the pages of marketing textbooks.

As E.F. Schumacher points out, qualitative, not just quantitative, development is needed in order to choose the direction of society's movement as well as measure its speed. The search for the necessary qualitative concepts can begin with the existing body of social criticism. For example, consumer researchers could respond to Leiss' challenge and analyze the relationship between commodities, health, and human and social well-being. Critical analysis of the formation of consumers' tastes would also be helpful.

Another place to begin is with the presumption, dating back to Adam Smith, that consumption is the sole purpose of production. Work is generally held to have no intrinsic value, and is therefore only a means toward the end of acquiring consumption goods; the possibility of meaningful or satisfying work is therefore impossible. But as Hannah Arendt has shown, every European language has two unrelated words for labor and work. The former connotes pain and trouble; the latter, creativity.

All societies have attempted to eliminate labor; in our era, mechanization of the productive process has all but destroyed work as well.

If work is a necessary attribute of the human personality while limitless consumption is not, and if the degradation of work is inseparably related to the economy of high mass consumption, then an increasing awareness of the meaninglessness of consumption may be expected to have its reflection in an increased awareness of the importance of "work" ... We are dealing with whole people and not split personalities that are at one moment consumers, at another moment citizens, and at still another moment workers. (214)