



“Summary of article by Colin Campbell: Modern Consumerism and Imaginative Hedonism” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 238-242

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

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The "puzzle of modern consumerism" lies in its combination of insatiable desires and constant pursuit of novelty. These chapters review and criticize the explanations of consumerism offered by economists such as Galbraith, and propose an alternative theory of consumption as a process of imaginative hedonism.

THE PUZZLE OF MODERN CONSUMERISM

The mystery of modern consumer behavior is the apparent insatiability of wants in general. This differs from traditional patterns of greed or addiction, which focused on a single object of desire. Today, no sooner is one need satisfied than another takes its place, typically involving novel products or services. Mainstream economics cannot explain this insatiability since it does not attempt to account for the origins of needs. Nor can economics explain the pursuit of novelty: since old goods produce known satisfactions while new ones have uncertain benefits, it is puzzling to see consumers constantly abandoning the old in favor of the new.

John Kenneth Galbraith is a well-known critic of conventional economics who has offered an alternative explanation of consumer behavior. He argues that increased production is desirable only if it satisfies wants that originate within the individual. It cannot be urgent to fulfill wants which are contrived by the same process of production that satisfies them. In developing this argument, Galbraith employs three main strands of thought on the origins of consumer wants: the instinctivist tradition, which identifies some wants as inherent biological needs; an emphasis on deliberate manufacture of wants through advertising and marketing; and the Veblenesque perspective on wants arising from imitation or emulation of others. None of these approaches, however, provides a completely satisfactory account of modern consumerism.

INSTINCTIVISM

The instinctivist perspective is built into the language of economics, as seen in references to "latent demand" for new goods or the "unleashing of acquisitive instincts" due to changes in the marketplace. This view gains plausibility from the obvious fact that human behavior does have a biological basis. However, the behavior motivated by biological needs for food and shelter, for example, is unspecific and does not define wants for individual products. It is impossible to identify any particular consumer behaviors that are instinctual in form, as opposed to underlying

motivation. The existence of instincts cannot explain interpersonal variation or change over time in consumer desires.

The related idea of a hierarchy of higher and lower needs is also problematical. It is simply not true that needs are always satisfied in sequence, beginning with basic biological requirements. There is plenty of evidence to show that people will override biological imperatives for the sake of needs such as love or self-respect.

MANIPULATION

At the opposite extreme from instinctivism lies what has been called the "hypodermic" model of consumers and the mass media. This theory holds that, lacking any preformed desires, individuals are inactive as consumers until they are injected with advertising messages. Some versions of this theory suggest that consumers are persuaded or forced to act against their own inclinations or contrary to their own best interests, for the benefit of producers.

Criticisms of the hypodermic model include the observations that advertisements are only one among many cultural influences at work upon consumers; that the audience for advertising is not homogeneous and individuals do not all react identically to commercial messages; and finally that evidence shows consumers respond to advertising in a selective and purposeful manner. Manipulation can only succeed when there is something there to manipulate -- which explains why advertisers spend money studying consumer motivation. Through advertising, producers directly manipulate the symbolic meanings attached to products; this process may exploit consumer dreams and desires, but does not create them.

The widespread concern about manipulation of consumers by advertisers rests on two utilitarian assumptions: first, that the only genuine gratification provided by goods stems from their intrinsic utility rather than their symbolic meanings; and second, that whenever emotion and imagination enter the process of consumer choice, manipulation or exploitation must be involved. Yet goods are consumed for symbolic as well as intrinsic values, and emotion as well as calculation is a pervasive part of consumer motivation.

THE VEBLENESQUE PERSPECTIVE

A third approach sees consumers as actively engaged in the creation of their own wants as a byproduct of the pursuit of status. This perspective derives almost entirely from the writings of Thorstein Veblen. Unfortunately, Veblen was too single-minded in his consideration of the possible social meanings of consumption. The further collapse of Veblen's analysis into Leibenstein's "bandwagon, snob, and Veblen effects" is notable for its extreme simplicity, failing to grasp the range of symbolic meanings of goods or the social dimensions of the act of consumption.

There is an ambiguity at the core of Veblen's account of conspicuous consumption. The same term, emulation, at times refers to competitive striving for status and attempts to outdo one's peers; at other times it refers to aspiration to the ideal way of life exemplified by the leisure class. Veblen reconciles the two meanings by assuming that each class tries to imitate the one

just above itself, so that upper class standards are conveyed downward throughout society. However, this account neglects the fact that many people are satisfied with their standing relative to their peers. And it overlooks the possibility that status can be obtained through innovation, or even through contesting the criteria that define status.

Many specific objections can be raised to Veblen's analysis of status. Wealth is not the only source of status; modern societies do not have monolithic status hierarchies; the very rich may have less influence on styles than professionals such as architects and fashion designers. Most important for our purposes, Veblen does not distinguish traditional from modern consumer behavior. In fact, his theory of conspicuous consumption was inspired by analysis of traditional rituals. Ultimately Veblen only explains insatiable consumption by assuming insatiable competitive status-seeking, which is no more useful or convincing than the older assumption of insatiable greed.

MODERN AUTONOMOUS IMAGINATIVE HEDONISM

Imagination has a part to play in the hedonism that has always characterized consumption. In traditional hedonism, images from memory create effective anticipation of the expected pleasure of consumption. But these images are seldom crafted self-consciously by the individual; the hallmark of tradition is that anticipatory images are taken from the past and employed as they are. In contrast, modern self-illusory hedonism involves the individual as an artist of the imagination, taking images from memory or the environment and rearranging them in a more pleasing manner.

We may distinguish pure fantasy, which involves imagination unrestrained by reality, from daydreams involving imaginative elaboration of possible, even if highly improbable, outcomes. In this sense the modern hedonism of consumption rests on daydreams of desire. Novel products provide new material for the imagination; the experience of desire itself becomes pleasurable. Contrary to popular wisdom, pleasure-seeking is not in opposition to deferred gratification, for it is the deferral that allows the imagined pleasure to develop. The act of purchase, attaining the object of desire, replaces the anticipatory daydream with the real satisfaction provided by the good -- which may not measure up to the perfected pleasure of the imagination. The consumer who is dissatisfied with reality may then transfer the daydream to a new object of desire, creating a continual longing for the new and the unknown.

THE SPIRIT OF MODERN CONSUMERISM

The view of consumption as based on modern hedonism provides a clear explanation of both insatiability and the pursuit of novelty. The consumer is always vaguely dissatisfied with reality and yearning for something better. Wish-directed daydreaming turns the future into a perfectly illusioned present. The illusion is always better than the reality, the promise more interesting than actuality. Window-shopping becomes understandable from this perspective, as does the widespread consumption of cultural products that serve as aids to the construction of daydreams, such as novels, paintings, records, films, and television programs. Portrayal of consumer goods, not only in advertising but also in magazines, posters, and even works of art, serves to entertain as well as to advertise; in fact, the two objectives are barely distinguishable. The importance of

daydreaming and novelty provides an explanation of consumer acceptance of ever-changing fashions, since the only fixed standard is the desire for change.

The inexhaustibility of wants which characterizes the behavior of modern consumers has to be understood as deriving from their permanent desiring mode, something which, in turn, stems from the inevitable gap between the perfected pleasures of the dream and the imperfect joys of reality. No matter what the nature of the dream or, indeed, of reality, the discrepancy between them gives rise to a continuing longing, from which specific desires repeatedly spring. (95)