



“Summary of article by William Leiss: Limits to Satisfaction: Diagnosis”
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This paper argues that the fast pace of commodity circulation in the modern marketplace inhibits personal striving by making it difficult for individuals to form judgments concerning how to satisfy their needs with goods and services.

In advanced economies, consumption becomes important to the pursuit of well-being as the marketplace systematically orients all needs toward an increasingly complex commodity realm. In a setting where advertising arouses dissatisfaction with existing products, while urging the consumption of the newest products as the best path to happiness, both perceptions of need and judgments concerning the means to their satisfaction become confused. As the consumer looks to the market to satisfy perceived needs, messages that are associated with goods change rapidly as marketers seek the most persuasive advertising strategies. The marketplace requires the consumer to perform a grand experiment in choosing amongst its wares and services, equipping the consumer with little information about the products themselves while providing vivid descriptions of how mundane goods are supposed to satisfy complex desires. For example, consider an advertisement that associates the taste of menthol in cigarettes with the taste of spring: is the cigarette purchase supposed to satisfy one's desire for nature?

The tendency of advanced economies to direct the satisfaction of all needs through the market poses two important problems: 1) it diminishes, by neglect, the role of non-market routes to satisfaction of needs; and 2) the rapid turnover of goods and their associated symbols intensifies the ambiguous character of both human needs and commodities. Judgments relating perceptions of needs and how best to satisfy them in the market become more difficult as the material and symbolic aspects of both needs and commodities become increasingly complex.

NEEDS

All human needs are culturally mediated impulses that are influenced by social and environmental factors. Needs have material and symbolic components that are irreducible to one another. In traditional, pre-industrial societies material scarcity and rigid norms (e.g., myths, legends, taboos) structured the expression of needs and determined the significance of objects, creating stable categories of need. There once was a tight linkage between a given need, its cultural expression, and particular goods. In contrast, advanced market economies afford individuals free play in interpreting their needs and how to meet these needs with goods, thereby destabilizing need categories. For example, advertising that links the purchase of an automobile

with the acquisition of a new personality takes an ambiguous need or desire and creates an illusory connection between it and a product.

Some critiques of modernity object that inducing wants for more and more goods leads to the ephemeral satisfaction of inauthentic needs. This type of criticism, however, begs more questions than it answers. Focus on the distinction between either true and false needs or needs and desires tends to exaggerate the importance of the quantitative aspects of need (e.g., for shelter or nutrients), and detracts attention from the qualitative or cultural dimension of needs (e.g., shelter with which qualities?, nutrients in which forms?).

Recent advances in the human ability to transform the planet and effect global environmental changes introduce an historically novel basic human need: to understand and manage the relationship between humanity and the natural environment. Efforts to categorize basic needs have failed to accommodate the ecological dimension of human needing.

To conceptualize human needs simply with reference to the individual and social dimensions of their formation, in abstraction from their grounding in an orientation to the environment that is unique among all living species, is to obscure one of their most significant aspects. (70)

COMMODITIES

In pre-industrial cultures, the types of available goods remained relatively stable over time. Correspondingly, classical economic theory presumed the existence of objective standards that assessed the appropriateness of a good for an individual's needs. In contrast, modern industrial settings are characterized by a furious pace of exchange, which puts into constant flux both types and meanings of goods. Correspondingly, modern economic theory accommodated the growing complexity of the relationship between commodities and needs by asserting that only an individual could judge the suitability of commodities for the satisfaction of his or her needs.

Kelvin Lancaster improved upon early marginalist theories, claiming that individuals have a direct interest in the characteristics of goods and only a secondary interest in any particular commodity. Individuals "order their preferences directly in relation to collections of characteristics and indirectly in relation to the goods that possess those characteristics." (80) According to Lancaster, any characteristic might be obtained from any good. So, for any commodity there are two relationships, between goods and their characteristics and between individuals and such characteristics. The first relationship consists of objective information, while the second consists of imputed characteristics.

Individuals formulate beliefs about imputed characteristics based on a variety of sources many of which send unstable, temporary and ambiguous messages -- a prominent example is advertising. In an advanced market setting, the number of messages in the social environment is staggering. For example, individuals are exposed to hundreds of thousands of television commercials before the age of twenty. Individuals necessarily become less familiar with the symbolic and material characteristics of objects as commodities are linked with an endless stream of associations. The consumer is faced with the problem of interpreting which needs are supposed to be met by any

particular ensemble of goods. "When goods become rapidly changing collections of characteristics, the individual's judgments about the suitability of particular objects for particular needs are destabilized." (88)