



“Summary of article by T.J. Jackson-Lears: Introduction to Fables of Abundance” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 251-254

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

### **“Summary of article by T.J. Jackson-Lears: Introduction to Fables of Abundance”**

What do advertisements mean? Many things. They urge people to buy goods, but they also signify a certain vision of the good life; they validate a way of being in the world. (1)

The Protestant ethic gave way to a therapeutic ethos in early twentieth century America, but has persisted in a subtle, influential form, encouraging personal growth through the management of desire. Advertising embodied this transition, ordering its various themes through the icons of self-realization. This paper argues that the agenda of advertising institutions, in connection with other cultural forces, has been organized around a rhetoric of control, rather than of hedonistic release. Advertising promotes visions of personal striving isolated from or antagonistic to the environment, contributing to "an unexamined commitment to economic growth despite worldwide depletion of nonrenewable resources; [and] preoccupation with an empty pursuit of efficiency that impoverishes personal as well as public life." (11)

### **EARLY ADVERTISING CRITICS AND THE PRODUCTIVIST ETHOS**

Early advertising critics, notably Thorstein Veblen, John Kenneth Galbraith, Stuart Chase and Vance Packard analyzed the cultural significance of advertising in secular terms that drew inspiration from the Protestant plain speech tradition as well as from fears that the marketplace reduces personal liberties. Together they embraced a “productivist” ethos that exaggerated the producer's ability to influence preferences while underestimating the cultural and personal significance of consumption.

A productivist ethos cannot sustain a critique of advertising, especially in light of the environmental consequences of continuing increases in production. An alternative critique can be grounded in the recognition that advertising is one of the cultural forces that actively disconnect human beings from the material world. Marxist theory offers partial support for such a view. On the one hand, Marxist theory implies that with the rise of industrialized capitalism, production is divorced from consumption, things are isolated from their origins, and desire is directed toward the acquisition of things but not their leisurely enjoyment. Capitalism "underwrote a Cartesian vision of an isolated self in an inert world of objects." (5) On the other hand, the Marxist view relies on the productivist ethos by asserting that work is the most significant way of connecting with the world.

### **PRODUCTIVISM: CRITIQUES AND ALTERNATIVES**

A common theme among critics of the productivist view is that increasing production has not met its early promises of greater leisure. American anti-modernists from Henry Adams to Lewis Mumford attacked faith in progress. The Frankfurt School theorists, including Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse, maintained that the performance principle that governs the markets of industrial capitalism also constrains the enjoyment of leisure.

Alternatives to the productivist view of the meaning of consumption include ideas inspired by anthropology on gift exchange, and Hannah Arendt's discussion of craftsmanship. George Bataille, Jean Baudrillard, and the poet Lewis have contrasted the prudence of commodity exchange with the energetic release of gift-giving. Hyde argued that gift-giving can create feelings of abundance amid poverty just as commodity exchange can reinforce a sense of scarcity amid material abundance.

Arendt, in distinguishing work from labor, argued that the consumer society promotes indifference to the material world through the production and consumption of throwaway goods. Individuals labor to make a living rather than work to create goods that stabilize human life through their durability. Her opposition to modern consumption stemmed less from a concern over materialism than from the contemporary failure to fabricate, maintain and care for a durable world of things.

At the heart of Arendt's critique lies an animistic sensibility which values the connections between self, goods and the world. The collector, either the connoisseur of rarities or the devotee of kitsch or camp, represents one idealized version of the kind of person Arendt envisioned as craftsperson - one who constructs meaning from his or her work, creating permanence through collection. Similarly, creative play and artistic expression permit the construction of meaningful connections with the material world, but are stigmatized as frivolous with the collapse of work into labor. "This animistic sensibility poses fundamental challenges to the subject-object dualism at the heart of Western culture -- including the culture promoted by advertising. (8), Through its secular idioms of desire management, advertising conjures and sustains health and personal growth, in a world-view that isolates personal striving from the environment.

## **ADVERTISING AND THE RHETORIC OF CONTROL**

A Protestant-inspired rhetoric of control modulated the agenda of national advertising as it developed in the twentieth century. To be sure, advertising stirred desires and elevated pleasure and its symbolic expression, but in general the managerial values of self-realization and health, both individual and national, structured and constrained the more hedonistic icons. This view contrasts with the common assumption (one the author himself once espoused, see summary in section 5) that advertising contributed to the development of a hedonistic consumer culture.

Consumer culture there was, from the 1910s to the 1970s , but it was less a riot of hedonism than a new way of ordering the existing balance of tensions between control and release. During its heyday, the post-World War II decades, consumer culture was based on an unusual set of institutional circumstances: a system of

tradeoffs between labor and management (labor discipline in exchange for steady, high wages), and the temporary global ascendancy of the U.S. economy. As capital became more mobile and management began looking overseas for cheap labor, consumer culture lost its institutional base. Without a well-paid working population, mass consumption could no longer serve as the integrative glue of civil society. Americans could no longer count on a steady increase in their standard of living. (10 - 11)

In more recent times, advertising has grown more flashy and pervasive, but has maintained the same underlying themes. "Despite their sensuous surfaces, most brand-name advertisements remain dominated by the ethos of personal efficiency. They continue to construct a separate self in a world of fascinating but forgettable goods." (11)

However, there exists a countertendency among advertising themes, embracing an animistic sensibility expressed through magical and carnivalesque symbols. This sensibility captures the mystery of the cosmos, transcendence, and a feeling for the human organism connected to the world. It suggests an alternative to the values of efficiency that dominate the marketplace and personal striving.