



“Summary of article by Jerome M. Segal: Alternatives to the Mass Consumption Society” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp. 345-348

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This paper examines the economic implications of two alternatives to the mass consumption lifestyle of rich industrial nations: "graceful simplicity" and "creative work."

There are at least three respects in which a society may be consumption oriented. First, a *non-sustainable* society consumes and pollutes, or otherwise damages the natural environment, so much that it undermines its own survival. Second, a *consumerist* society makes the development of and desire for new consumer goods into a central part of life; an individual's status is tied to his or her level of consumption relative to that of others in the society. Third, a *mass consumption* society is one in which most of the population consumes at high levels, and economic success implies maintenance of those high levels.

These three forms of consumption-oriented life are not mutually exclusive; for example, the United States today might be said to exemplify all three. However, they are also conceptually distinct; any one of them could, at least in theory, exist without the other two.

CHANGING CONSUMPTION PATTERNS

Some critiques of consumerism emphasize not that we consume too much, but that we consume the wrong things for the wrong reasons. Suppose, for example, that millions of people lost interest in television and turned instead toward performing classical music or engaging in amateur astronomy. Some would see it as a move in the direction of excellence in the expression of human capabilities. But, it would not necessarily represent a decline in the aggregate level of mass consumption; new expenditures on musical instruments, telescopes, and courses and private tutors might simply replace the former spending on television.

Other critiques, however, address this dilemma by posing alternatives to both consumerism and mass consumption society itself.

ALTERNATIVES TO MASS CONSUMPTION AND CONSUMERISM

The mass consumption orientation and its alternatives can be compared along four dimensions. In the mass consumption orientation, the prevailing vision of economic life, it is assumed that 1) the economy contributes to the "good life" primarily through the goods and services it provides; 2) economic performance is assessed primarily by the level and growth of output per person; 3)

employment is a means to attaining the income necessary for consumption; and 4) the standard of living is measured solely by per capita GNP.

One recurrent theme among advocates of alternatives to mass consumption is the need for a simpler, less harried form of life. This alternative, which may be called "graceful simplicity" or "simple living," should be distinguished from austerity and self-denial. In contrast to mass consumption, graceful simplicity assumes that 1) the primary role of the economy is to satisfy our basic needs for a healthy and secure existence; beyond meeting these needs, the economy contributes to the good life by reducing work and expanding leisure; 2) the economy's performance is assessed by its success in meeting real material needs, and in providing leisure time; 3) employment is a means to attaining the income required to meet our needs; and 4) the standard of living is measured by success in attaining ample leisure and using it well.

A second alternative may be called the life of "creative work." Along the same four dimensions, creative work assumes that 1) the economy contributes to the good life by providing us with work that brings intrinsic satisfaction and social respect; 2) economic performance is measured primarily by the extent to which most people have intrinsically rewarding, socially respected jobs; 3) employment should be assessed by whether it enhances or stifles human creativity and development; and 4) the standard of living is measured by the quality of the work lives that the economy creates.

Graceful simplicity and creative work are both non-consumerist, offering alternatives to mass consumption. Neither alternative uses productivity gains to provide ever-increasing output and consumption levels. However, technological advance and productivity growth are just as important to the alternative outlooks as to mass consumption society. Graceful simplicity demands productivity growth in order to expand leisure time and improve the public services that support simple living while maintaining output. Creative work requires productivity growth in many areas to offset the productivity declines that may result from making some jobs more craft-oriented; the goal is not aggregate productivity growth, but continual improvement in the quality of work.

Either to achieve graceful simplicity or to create work, it is necessary for society to control the increase in the cost of meeting basic needs, and to stop the continual expansion in the definition of those needs. These are done more easily in a growing economy, which can more readily shift resources to public programs in support of new objectives; in a shrinking economy, there is a reluctance to support any new initiative.

POLICIES FOR ACHIEVING GRACEFUL SIMPLICITY

Juliet Schor has detailed important elements of a policy agenda for expanding leisure (see Schor summary in section 10 of this volume). One could go beyond her suggestions and mandate a four-day work week and a shorter work day. This restriction of personal freedom could make us all better off--to the extent that we are working largely to keep up with each other in the competitive pursuit of status, we all gain if we collectively turn toward more leisure rather than income.

Another approach is to redistribute labor and leisure over a lifetime. Extending labor force participation by another ten years but reducing the time worked in any given year could create a more leisurely society while leaving total labor unchanged over an individual's lifetime.

The most rapidly growing area of labor is unpaid or personal work time – commuting, child care, household chores and maintenance, and the like. As women have entered the paid workforce, the amount of personal work they perform has decreased, though not as fast as their paid hours have increased. Total work effort, paid and personal, has increased for both women and men over the past 30 years. Thus, public policy could, for example, focus on reducing commuting and travel time by redesigning urban environments, educational systems, and workplaces. Labor-saving technologies appear to save time, but their effect is ambiguous, particularly if additional hours must be worked in order to pay for them.

POLICIES FOR ACHIEVING A LIFE OF CREATIVE WORK

Much greater economic transformation is required for creative work than for graceful simplicity. In a society based on creative work, a good life is an active one, and the central output of the economy is meaningful and rewarding work, rather than goods and services. By this standard, there are no existing economic successes; there is a shortage of "good" jobs virtually everywhere.

A policy framework for moving towards an economy of creative work includes both the elimination of the worst aspects of the worst jobs, and the improvement of the quality of all jobs. The former has been a traditional objective of the labor movement, and has faced serious obstacles even in more promising political environments than the 1990s. Progress is not likely to occur in a piecemeal fashion; rather, an inspiring vision of transformation is required. The objectives of such a transformation would be to expand the supply of creative jobs, to reduce or eliminate jobs that cannot be made satisfying, and to ensure that the remaining mundane and arduous work tasks are equitably shared.

The transformation of work requires a transformation in the consumption of the products of work. Consumers must be interested in the quality of goods and services that result from creative work. "The extent to which the labor force contains teachers and artists, poets and potters depends on the magnitude of the demand for what they produce." (301) Valuing work, in the end, requires a new interest in what we consume – a true materialism in which we awaken an aesthetic interest in the things we see, hear, taste, and feel.