



“Summary of article by Paul Wachtel: The Poverty of Affluence: New Alternatives” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 2: The Consumer Society. Island Press: Washington DC, 1997. pp.358-361

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The consumer way of life is deeply flawed, both psychologically and ecologically.... I would like to see less emphasis on the economic dimension of our lives... and more on the psychological: the richness of subjective experience and the quality of human relationships. (141)

This chapter explores the individual, cultural, and institutional changes needed to create a more psychologically satisfying alternative to the "consumer way of life."

TOWARD A PSYCHO-ECOLOGICAL POINT OF VIEW

A shift toward psychological goals and values is important both for the direct satisfaction it would yield and for its effects on the environment. Most environmental advocacy is associated with images of austerity and belt-tightening – images that are unlikely to ignite the imagination or encourage change. In contrast, a redefinition of success and the "standard of living" has quite different implications, encouraging us to think of new opportunities rather than what we are giving up.

Psychological development is attainable only to a limited degree through individual efforts. Much more important are the outlooks people hold on their lives, the quality of interactions with others, and the social and institutional structures that shape their experience. Some firms, offices and neighborhoods make their participants feel much better about themselves than others, revealing the importance of the social context of our lives.

Individual and systemic values have a reciprocal, reinforcing relationship with each other. A competitive system leads to competitive individual behavior, which reinforces the system; the same is true for a cooperative system. Without a change in individual values, political and institutional changes will be superficial and ineffective. To create an alternative to consumer society, a shift away from the profit motive and toward communal ownership will have to occur. But, the Soviet experience demonstrates rather unambiguously that ending private ownership alone is no panacea.

DEPLOYMENT OF RESOURCES

Current uses of resources that would change in a more psycho-ecologically oriented culture include the huge expenditures on advertising and sales promotion, costs attributable to style

changes and planned obsolescence in such industries as clothing and automobile production, and the enormous size of the defense budget. In place of these unproductive efforts, resources could be devoted to health, education, scientific research, arts and entertainment. Greater attention to individual health and the environment could lead to lower medical costs.

It is sometimes claimed that concern with exercise, diet, and health foods represents an individualistic effort to save oneself rather than change the social causes of dangers to our health. But there is nothing to prevent people from both eating health food and working to change the conditions that may make some ordinary food unhealthy. Changing one's diet may be a first step toward questioning the values of affluence.

Some solutions address more than one problem at once. For example, much better facilities for bicycle commuting, perhaps including covered roadways for protection from the rain, would promote exercise and reduce air pollution, as well as reduce traffic congestion for those who still must drive. Another transportation scheme, short-range electric car rentals with hourly charges and numerous convenient drop-off sites, could reduce pollution, congestion, and vehicle ownership costs; individuals could rent the size of car needed for each trip, eliminating the need for commuters to own oversized vehicles year-round. All that is lost is the exclusivity of ownership, one of the psychological features of consumer society most in need of change.

THE MEANING AND NATURE OF WORK

[Work] is not just "input," to be manipulated in the service of some higher aim, but a part of life experience in itself, to be examined as an activity that occupies many hours of the day. Any gains in available consumer goods must be weighed against the extra pressures and deprivations undergone during the heart of the day when we are at work. (156)

Economic theory habitually assumes that maximization of output is the be-all and end-all of production. However, increasing numbers of individuals are interested in other values, such as preserving time for family life or working in a relaxed, sociable manner, values that undoubtedly lead toward lower worker output but greater satisfaction.

The goal is neither to work less and get paid less, nor to "go back" to the hypothetical good old days. Rather, it is to incorporate and transform older amenities so that they can be combined with the best of the new, to use modern technology properly with a better appreciation of its relationship to human needs. For many people time is becoming more precious than goods; if we barely have time to use the things we already can afford, we need increased leisure more than increased income. Opting for more leisure rather than more goods would provide both psychological and ecological benefits.

However, as Tibor Scitovsky has noted, it takes certain skills to enjoy some consumers goods, or leisure. Lacking these skills, many people are vaguely dissatisfied and occupy their time seeking more income and goods.

Even more important is the sense of psychological restrictions and inhibitions that reflect both social custom and our prolonged dependency in childhood. Our views of the world are largely shaped when we are young, helpless, and uncomprehending. To escape from the endless accumulation of material goods, we need to overcome the constrictions that derive from childhood fears and fantasies. Trends such as the "human potential" movement, which offers "therapy for the healthy," are a promising step toward change in this area. But, there are limits to what an individual can do alone; widespread psychological change is needed in entire families, networks, and communities.

THE RENEWAL OF COMMUNITY

Restoration of the sense of community and connectedness to others must be at the heart of an alternative to the consumer way of life. When economic growth breaks down formerly tight-knit communities, people often feel adrift and afraid rather than affluent. As a result, our society faces a virtual epidemic of loneliness. The deep-felt need to be part of something is sometimes mentioned as a reason why Japanese businesses, with their strong sense of community, have proven to be so economically successful. Although Japan is also a competitive, capitalist society, it is at the opposite end of the cultural continuum from the United States with regard to communal feelings.

The kind of community feeling that is suited for our affluent and technologically oriented culture will probably be quite different from the ties we nostalgically remember or imagine. Moreover, we are faced with having to learn again about interdependency and the need for rootedness after several centuries of having systematically – and proudly – dismantled our roots. (169)

To make use of technology in a way that enhances our lives, we must account for ecological limits and interdependence, and learn to provide the luxury of time to examine our lives, enjoy ourselves, and enjoy each other.