

## Foreword

On no matter is economics more in contradiction with itself than in its view of consumer behavior and motivation and the consumer-oriented society. With increasing consumer well-being, it is held, the urgency of consumer goods production does not diminish. There is no concept of enough or more than enough. In technical terms, while the marginal utility of the particular product does decline, that of goods in general and specifically the money income that procures them are broadly regarded as constant. Systematically ignored is the evident fact that above a certain level of income it is also expected that some part will be saved and--greatly in the public interest--will be invested for more production.

Equally, perhaps even more strenuously, resisted is the notion that consumer wants are, in any substantial measure, created by the firms that supply them. It is commonly known that with the production of goods goes the persuasion that assures their purchase. Advertising, as in several essays here told, is an essential feature of the economic process. But this economic reality has long been denied. In the orthodox view consumer sovereignty reigns supreme. Questioning this some years ago, I was powerfully assailed in textbooks for failing to note that the Ford Motor Company had once produced a vehicle, the Edsel, which consumers, exercising that sovereign choice, chose not to buy. That quite a few other models were successfully promoted went unmentioned. Economists, one could only conclude, did not (still do not) watch television.

From the foregoing come two consequences of especially urgent effect. As the need for goods in the modern consumer economy lessens and becomes more contrived, the economic system achieves its importance, even urgency, not for the goods and services it produces but for the work and income it provides. The modern politician, quite regardless of party or political faith, never speaks of the need to produce more goods and services. Plenitude is here assumed. Reference is always to the jobs provided. Everyday political expression corrects the basic economic theory, emphasizing not the goods created, or the service rendered, but the employment provided; not the wants satisfied but the income made available.

Related is the way in which the modern consumer economy is locked into the social need for steadily expanding output. Absent this expansion, there is stagnation, recession, depression, unemployment, and, perhaps, acute political and social tension. The stable or reduced supply of goods and services causes no pain, no deprivation; it is the reduced flow of income, the unemployment, the effect on business income and solvency that is cited and feared. The modern consumer economy is tied in unrelenting fashion to the need for steadily expanding production. Consumption, once the purpose of economic life, has now a supporting role. One can suffer a shortage of income; one never, in all ordinary circumstances, suffers a shortage of goods to buy.

A further point--speaking of the market economy. In the modern society there is also the role of the state. Essential functions--a safety net for the poor, education, low-income housing, essential regulation, and much else--come from government. Private goods and services have enormous and costly promotional support: the advertising and salesmanship of the market sector. Public services, especially those for the poorer citizens, enjoy no such promotion. As a result, the modern economy has an inherently unequal and unsocial distribution of resources between its private and public sectors--wonderfully expensive television programs, poor schools; spacious,

handsomely furnished houses, filthy streets; abundant automobiles, dense traffic jams and poor public transportation.

With the development, perhaps one should say exploitation, of the modern consumer economy has come a marked change in social concern as regards consumer products. There was once the consumer movement--a determined investigation of, and report on, the value and utility of various consumer products and supporting public regulation and education. This continues but with a diminished sense of social urgency. The poor still need guidance on what they buy, including protection against consumer scams. For the more affluently supplied there is no similar urgency. There is no social need for according guidance on the purchase of a Cadillac or a Mercedes Benz. Or for that matter, designer jeans or a vast range of other affluent products. As consumer necessity yields to fashion and persuasion, concern for consumer protection and choice inevitably recedes. This is recognized in part, but far from fully, in either public discourse or practice.

But enough. The foregoing will tell why I am attracted to this book as, I trust, will be many others. It is a diverse, technically competent, and intellectually compelling look at the modern consumer economy. It brings the modern consumer economy into focus in all its many aspects, including the highly important question of environmental effects. The consumer society, it makes clear, is peculiarly the good fortune of the fortunate. Were it at a similar level of production and resources use for all the people of all the poor lands, life on the planet would be endangered, perhaps impossible. Pollution would be insufferable; so also the use of space and, as noted, the depletion of natural resources. The Dalai Lama, a friend of mine from my India days, put the matter with wonderful precision in conversation a few weeks ago: "What would the world be like if everyone drove a motor car?"

In recent years, Tufts University, long a place of diverse interests, wisely has added to its distinction by its teaching, research, and outward education on pressing social concerns at home and abroad. This has included and indeed emphasized environmental issues but also much else of urgent public concern. A committed, articulate, and distinguished group of scholars has come together for this effort, as this, and the series of studies of which it is a part, amply reveal. As I have made sufficiently clear, the matters here discussed have long reflected my particular interest. But that is a small part of the present effort. This (and companion volumes to come) is work of breadth, depth, and diversity, displaying a strong sense of social responsibility. For all concerned with the urgent questions of modern economic life, this volume is to be read, admired, and, I trust, made a source of strong comment and national and international motivation.

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