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“Consumption in the Affluent Society¹” by David Kiron

In industrialized countries, the costs of affluence are coming into focus. In 1989, the average American consumed twice as much as his or her counterpart in 1969, while the average worker labored 160 more hours -- equivalent to an extra month of full-time employment.² The expectation that productivity increases would eventually translate into a life of leisure for the masses has not been realized. As communities become more fragmented, status consumption has intensified rather than diminished. The fruits of economic growth -- more consumption, a growing strain on the natural environment, but no more happiness all around -- raise serious questions for our economic agenda.

This part analyzes rising consumption levels in affluent societies during the twentieth century and their effect on both the public sector and the experience of consumers. The summarized articles address various aspects of the relationship between production and consumption. The first five papers focus on the relation between work life, consumption, and issues of personal identity. The next four look at the social impact of increasing consumption levels.

THE AMERICAN DREAM

The relationship between producers and consumers is essential to understanding consumption in the affluent society. One of the most influential writings on this topic is John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society*.³ Galbraith questioned one of the basic tenets of neoclassical economic theory: the assumption of consumer sovereignty, which implies that tastes are exogenous to the economic system. His concern was that creating and satisfying wants through the market would not lead to greater well-being. The issue of consumer sovereignty subsumes a number of questions about the nature of choice in industrialized societies. Did individuals choose to work longer hours in order to afford the good life promised by marketers, or were they lashed to the work wheel by their employers for the sake of competition, costs and profits? Is it possible for consumers to create for themselves a strong sense of self through consumption if creative work is unavailable? Has interest in maintaining the public sector waned because people have chosen to meet an increasing number of wants and needs through the market, or is it that pressures to support public goods are not as strong as those that support the provision of private goods?⁴

This list of questions contains a notable omission. After an exhaustive search, our research turned up few articles since the 1970s that examine the effects of consumer culture on the poor. A number of recent authors point out the existence of a problem and suggest that it is growing in

scale, but no one seems to have focused on this topic. What happens to consumers who cannot afford the standard of respectable membership that is set by a consumer society? Many cultural critics have taken issue with the role of status consumption among the middleclass, but the impact of status goods is felt nowhere more strongly than among poor urban teens who have been murdered for their fashionable jackets and sneakers. Many of the manufacturing jobs that once allowed movement out of poverty have vanished, leaving the poor with a drive to consume but with few legitimate routes to incomes that support higher consumption levels.

During the 1920s, pressures to consume were harnessed and given expression through images of the American Dream, a producer inspired vision that included a single family detached house in the suburbs, an automobile, a radio (and later, a television) and various household appliances. The Great Depression and World War II delayed the active pursuit of this image, though during the war the government prepared Americans for a big splurge with messages of imminent mass distribution of abundance. After the war, the GI bill and subsidization of a suburban infrastructure laid the groundwork for wide-spread, middle class home ownership. More homes with more room for more stuff were crucial elements of the push toward higher consumption levels. A consumerist consensus emerged, reaching something of a zenith in 1950s when more people rated themselves as "very happy" than at any time before or since.⁵

Clearly, the interests of both producers and consumers have contributed to changes in consumer behavior over the course of the twentieth century. The elaboration of the American Dream by mass producers in the 1920s was in part a response to uncertainty over whether consumers would buy enough to sustain economic growth. At the same time, consumer demand that was pent-up during a successful war effort in World War II was unleashed during the euphoria that followed in the postwar decades.

In the heyday of the post war boom (the 1950s), labor was more interested in higher wages than in more free time, but today the reverse is true. Contemporary workers are willing to give up career advancement in order to spend more time with their families.⁶ The use and value of time in the affluent society has followed a complicated trajectory since union efforts in the early part of the century won a standard eight hour work day. In the first article summarized in this part, Gary Cross argues that the consumerist tendencies that emerged after World War II had their roots in the Depression, which left many workers disillusioned with free time and intensely concerned with economic and job security. Work and higher wages appeared much more attractive since they delivered to wage earners what leisure could not: status, stability and security.

Is economic insecurity or adaptation to progressively higher living standards the central force behind consumption in contemporary affluent society? Answers to this question acknowledge that, for most people, jumping off the work-spend cycle is an option that has been given little support within the current economic system. Full-time employment rather than shorter hours and shared work has always been preferred by business. As capital has become more mobile and global, firms have turned to cheap overseas labor and domestic temporary services.⁷ Corporate downsizing has become commonplace as competitive pressures leave fewer top jobs and create greater economic insecurity for all. In the second summary in this section, Juliet Schor analyzes this trend, arguing that middle-class wage earners have been trapped in a cycle of work and

spend, having become habituated to greater levels of affluence and lacking part-time employment alternatives that could preserve living standards at fixed levels. In opposition to the neoclassical assumption that workers get the hours they want, Schor contends that in reality firms set the work schedules, and workers wind up having to accept the terms they are offered.

Schor brings into relief a problem with our freedom to choose that echoes the voices of critics like Andrew Bard Schmookler. Schmookler argues that greater choice among goods comes at the expense of choice in other more important areas of life.⁸ Whether the choice is between work time and leisure time, or this good or that, the market assumes that if you do not like something, you can show your disapproval by not choosing it or not buying it. As Michael Schudson suggests, "We learn to dissent by exit rather than by voice. We are instructed in choice but not in living with or against the choices we make."⁹ That we are steeped in an ideology of choice, but do not structure the agenda within which choices are made, is a theme that reverbrates throughout Schor's book.

CONSUMPTION AS A SOURCE OF MEANING

Jobs that provide meaningful work are becoming more scarce. Education is no longer a guaranteed ticket to better, more interesting jobs. Mass production requires a form of labor participation that makes it difficult to value work as one of the most important sources of meaning in life. It is ironic that the noted decline of a work ethic has coincided with people being forced to work longer hours. Can the lack of meaningful work be fully countered through consumption? Raymond Benton, Jr. says no, in a summarized article that extends Hannah Arendt's critique of the routine labor process that underlies much of mass production. Benton argues that mass consumption cannot be a satisfying goal of an economy, especially one dependent on labor that produces primarily throw-away goods.

Anthropologist Daniel Miller argues the opposite position, contending that it is possible to counter the alienated conditions of the workplace through consumption practices. In doing so, Miller develops a thesis that reflects a growing consensus among academicians in fields other than economics, namely that consumption plays an important role in the cultivation of a sense of self. He rejects the view that consumption is an activity that is primarily about tastes. Miller is skeptical of the contemporary relevance of an analytic tradition that originated with Thorstein Veblen's seminal *Theory of the Leisure Class*,¹⁰ which framed much of this century's sociological research on consumption. Veblen, and more recently Bourdieu,¹¹ observed that taste is a function of the ability to distance oneself from work. Where Veblen demonstrated that conspicuous consumption among American social elites in the late nineteenth century established a standard of emulation that trickled down through the classes, Bourdieu analyzes the pluralism of tastes that abound among French subcultures, citing education and position in the production process as the central determinants of taste. In recognizing that many consumption activities, such as hobbies, enable identity-building projects that may be either individualistic or social, Miller challenges those sociologists who view consumption as a function of taste.¹²

Alan Warde represents a new breed of sociologists who, like Miller, view consumption as a process that is much more complex than is recognized by the field of economics. "No longer is it possible to think of consumption in a simple, one-dimensional way. It is not just something that happens within the household contributing to the reproduction of labor power, nor can it be

reduced to the distribution of assets, nor simply treated as an area of choice."¹³ Warde presents an analytic framework for understanding both the experience of consumption and the role of production in the consumption process.

SOCIAL IMPACTS OF CONSUMPTION

Two of the more notable social consequences of higher private consumption levels are the decline of free time and a deterioration in the quality of public goods and services. It is curious that the most important economic writings on the former were produced before the 1980s. Among the authors represented here, Harry Johnson, Staffan Linder and Fred Hirsch each argue that economic growth creates pressures to economize on time outside of work. Johnson provides theoretical support for Schor's contention that people really do not want to be working as much as they are. He notes that, with increasing affluence, individuals will want to spend less time at work to enjoy their growing collection of goods.

Staffan Linder points out that productivity increases make time more valuable at work, and, since leisure time and work time are substitutes for one another, the price of leisure time should rise correspondingly. Both Linder and Hirsch point out the consequences of economizing leisure time by increasing the number of goods consumed. Linder emphasizes that less time may be spent with each good. Hirsch extends the point to sociability, arguing that if we spend more time with goods, especially time-saving goods that require individual usage, less time will be spent with other people. In a society with greater social mobility, we run a greater risk that acts of friendliness and social obligations will be unreciprocated or unfulfilled.¹⁴

With consumer interest directed toward spending more time with more private goods, it is perhaps unsurprising that less effort is directed toward promoting and sustaining public goods and services. Contemporary resistance to the allocation of resources to the public sector supports Hirsch's view that deterioration in the public sector stems from the economics of individualistic demand. With rising affluence, more people have access to status goods that are valued for their exclusive qualities, a category that Hirsch calls "positional goods" (discussed further in Part VI). If a vacation home with a private beach is affordable and desirable, why go to a public beach or be interested in paying taxes that support one? Greater competition for positional goods, which requires an unequal distribution of resources, is a zero-sum game that eventually diminishes the interest in and quality of public goods.

It used to be that the desirability of automobile use and suburban living was linked to the ideals of escape and freedom. But as more people acquired access to suburbia, roads became crowded, time travelling to work increased, and overall time pressures mounted. When looking at the social geography of America, it is apparent that Hirsch's analysis has gone unheeded. In the final article summarized in this section, Alladi Venkatesh examines recent trends in consumer culture in Orange County, California and finds that the legacy of post-war suburbanization has taken on a life all its own. Suburbia is no longer exclusively residential, quiet and white. In the new suburbia, busy, dual-income families from different classes and ethnic backgrounds come together at restaurants, shopping malls, and in front of the television, when they come together at all.

In 1991, Venkatesh could not have foreseen that bankruptcy was ahead for Orange County, one of the wealthiest metropolitan regions in the country and well known for its conservative values, status consumption and revolt against higher taxes. Orange County typifies a national political trend toward downsizing the federal government and cutting its social programs: a movement that reflects both the desire to preserve income and a concern with the efficient resolution of issues related to a growing underclass. Part of the motivation for preserving income is due to the economically sanctioned pursuit of an ever expanding vision of the good life. Yet this goal seems to be achieved at the expense of increasing socio-economic stratification, which is widely believed to promote social ills. Consequently, reshuffling public spending will not solve the persistent social problems that are created by high levels of private consumption in certain economic sectors.

Notes

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1. The title of this section reflects the distinction between consumer societies, like the United States, where affluence is widespread and those in developing countries where affluence is concentrated among elites and a growing middle-class.
 2. Juliet Schor, The Overworked American, (New York: Basic Books, 1992).
 3. (First published in 1958; this is partially summarized in Section 5.)
 4. Underlying each question is the idea that the meaning of consumption is inextricably linked to both the types of good consumed and the purposes of consumption. For instance, What makes a good an item of necessity or luxury? What aspects of goods are actually consumed? Are goods consumed primarily for their status qualities or other reasons? Does the consumption of certain goods have an impact on the quality of their future use? The economic view that consumption relates only to the satisfaction of preferences or generation of utility is systematically challenged by the works collected here.
 5. Easterlin, Richard. "Does Economic Growth Improve the Human Lot? Some Empirical Evidence." in Nations and Households in Economic Growth. Paul David and Melven Reder eds., (NY: Academic Press, 1974).
 6. Schor, Juliet. The Overworked American. (NY: Basic Books, 1992).
 7. Jackson Lears' paper in section 7 suggests that this trend is responsible for corporations leaving their base of mass consumption in national locales. With mass consumption readily available in the global market, there is less pressure to maintain high wages at home to buy their products.
 8. Andre Bard Schmookler, The Illusion of Choice: How the Market Economy Shapes our Destiny, (Albany: SUNY Press), 1993
 9. Michael Schudson, "Delectable Materialism", *American Prospect*, 1991.
 10. Veblen, Thorstein. The Theory of the Leisure Class. (London: Unwin Books, 1899).
 11. Bourdieu Pierre, Distinction : A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste. (Paris, 1979).
 12. Miller also rejects Jean Baudrillard's view that contemporary consumption has little to do with the functional uses of goods. As a critic of modern consumer society, Baudrillard's analysis of the symbolic role of goods has been very influential among semioticians and postmodernists; however, his turgid writing makes his work difficult for the lay person.
 13. Warde, Alan. "Notes on the Relationship Between Production and Consumption," in Consumption and Class. Burrows and Marsh (eds), (NY: St. Martin's, 1992), 13-32.
 14. In a recent work, Daniel Miller critiques a caricature of this objection to sociability, missing the thrust of Hirsch's argument. In describing a sequence of myths raised by critics of the consumer society, Miller identifies the objection from sociability in the following terms: "consumption is opposed to sociality since it is premised on a concern for goods which replaces a previous concern for people." (Acknowledging Consumption, New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 23) This "myth" is a red herring since it fails to acknowledge the role of time, which is at the heart of Hirsch's argument.