Report from the Institute for

ISSN
1067-2478

Volume 15

Number 4

PHILOSOPHY & PUBLIC POLICY

Special Issue

Fall

1995

School of Public Affairs • University of Maryland
College Park, Maryland 20742 • 301-405-4753

THE ETHICS OF CONSUMPTION

In the fall of 1994, the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy hosted an interdisciplinary conference on "Consumption, Global Stewardship, and the Good Life." The conference, organized with the support of the Global Stewardship Initiative of the Pew Charitable Trusts, brought together philosophers and theologians, economists and environmentalists, sociologists, historians, political scientists, policy analysts, and social activists interested in understanding and assessing levels and patterns of consumption throughout the world. Participants addressed such questions as, Why do people consume the goods and services they do? How is consumption influenced by social contexts and public policy? What is the relation between lavish consumption by some people and the impoverishment of others? Are current consumption levels and patterns environmentally sustainable? Does our consumer society enable people to lead satisfying or virtuous lives?

The essays in this special *Report*, adapted from conference presentations as well as working papers by Institute research scholars, approach these questions from a variety of perspectives. For all their diversity, however, the various writers share at least one characteristic: they respond, in self-aware and often detailed ways, to a tradition of reflection and debate on political economy and social justice, the human relation to the natural world, and the role of commodities in promoting (or subverting) individual and communal well-being.

In This Issue

Endorsement and Critique

The theme of consumption has a special resonance in American society, where a historical tension exists between religious appeals for austerity and celebrations of material abundance, and where observers have struggled to define the effects of consumption on the public realm and the life of the spirit. On the one hand, commentators such as Alexis de Tocqueville have seen the rise of a mass consumption society as a triumph of and necessary condition for democratic rule. In *Democracy in America* (1835), Tocqueville applied a lesson political theorists since Hobbes had taught: citizens with a modicum of wealth would find that their interests lay in restraining political, religious, nationalistic, and other passions. A great American middle class, by this reasoning, would guarantee social stability. On the other hand, Tocqueville described materialism of the sort he witnessed in America as "a dangerous disease of the human mind." He warned that the "love of well-being has now become the predominant taste of the nation... and sweeps everything along in its course." Over time, Tocqueville suspected that American acquisitiveness would threaten the promotion of the public good; the loss "of self-restraint at the sight of the new possessions they are about to obtain" would cause citizens to "lose sight of the connection that exists between the private fortune of each and the prosperity of all."

The cultural critique of American commercialism and materialism, which reached its literary apogee in Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), constitutes a remarkably enduring tradition in American scholarship, arts, and letters. Its essential features were in place by the late seventeenth century, when preachers to the second and third generations of Puritans reproached their congregations for their loss of "heat toward religion" and their "undue affection for the things of this world." Gradually the critique of the culture of mass consumption made its way down from the pulpit and become a standard subject of academic research and political debate. For example, the economist Francis Wayland, in his astonishingly popular book *Elements of Political Economy* (1838), wrote that the productivity of American industry provided great temptations to "reckless expense," "thoughtless caprice," and "sensual self-indulgence."

Yet Wayland and others also believed that with the proper cultural and political leadership, the American economy might provide great opportunities to develop the "higher pleasures" and improve the lot of the poor. To its defenders, economic growth has often seemed the progressive path by which laboring people

Doonesbury BY GARRY TRUDEAU

could enter the middle class, thus improving both their moral and material condition. Daniel Webster was among those who believed, even as the Civil War loomed, that material abundance could create the "City on a Hill" that John Winthrop and the Puritans who came to America with him hoped to establish.

In his classic study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (first English translation, 1930), Max Weber argued that individuals in post-feudal societies, as they engaged in productive work, saw themselves as pursuing a "calling" that brought them dignity within their community, while the success they achieved manifested their prospect of salvation in the world to come. At the same time, the Protestant work ethic, with its emphasis on thrift, saving, and conservation, was incompatible with self-indulgence (and even with leisure). In Weber's theory of the Protestant basis of capitalism, people are not consumers so much as stewards of what they possess. Indeed, Weber observed that "the idea of man's duty to his possessions, to which he subordinates himself as an obedient steward... bears a chilling weight on his life."

The Promise of Abundance

In the eighteenth century, philosophers argued that if there were no scarcity — for example, if nature provided for all our wants — then human nature could be perfected: selfishness and possessiveness would disappear, along with the evils of contention. In "such a happy state," as David Hume famously argued, there would be no need for the virtue of justice, but "every other social virtue would flourish, and receive tenfold increase." During the same period, Enlightenment philosophy held out the promise that science and technology, by releasing the productive capacity of industry, might satisfy all our material wants even if nature by itself would not. By the end of the eighteenth century, philosophers and economists were beginning to expound a secular vision of salvation — one that promised a heaven on earth based on universal prosperity. As theologian Paul Tillich observed: "The idea of providence is secularized in the Enlightenment," and "the first clear expression can be seen in the area of economics."

For Adam Smith and his contemporaries, moreover, consumption became one of the pillars of prosperity — a way to create rather than destroy value. "Instead of disparaging the tendency to want more than we need," the late Christopher Lasch explained, "liberals like Adam Smith argued that needs varied from one society to another, that civilized men and women needed more than savages to make them comfortable, and that a continual redefinition of their standards of comfort and convenience led to improvements in production and a general increase of wealth."

Traditionally, as Weber pointed out, Protestants approved only the "rational and utilitarian uses of wealth which were willed by God for the needs of the individual and the community." As the nineteenth century progressed, however, people increasingly learned to attach symbolic meaning, and with it emotional significance, to consumer objects, the possession of which might give them status in the community.

Modern economists and other analysts concerned with consumption have taken as the central question not how goods come to be produced but how they take on meaning. Thorstein Veblen, in his *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), associated the meaning of consumer goods — and therefore the desires and other emotions they released — with social status. In modern society, Veblen observed, "members of each stratum accept as their ideal of decency the scheme of life in vogue in the next higher stratum." As a result, people perceive as decencies what they once thought were luxuries, and what were once decencies become regarded as necessities.

In the spirit of Veblen's critique, many social analysts have investigated the effects of mass consumption on human autonomy — that is, on our ability to act on our own values rather than those imposed by others. In particular, these critics have castigated advertising as the means by which industry manipulates our conceptions of the good life. John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society* (1958) and Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957) observed that capitalism must create demand in order to sell goods and services; the very desire to consume must be produced. The mass consumption society, these critics argued, robs us of our individuality and leads us to lives of standardization, emulation, and conformity.

More recently, however, writers such as Michael Schudson, Colin Campbell, and Stanley Lebergott have mounted a vigorous challenge to the standard critiques of consumption. Schudson has argued that advertising is a far less potent force than its critics believe, paling in comparison to the cultural influences of home, school, workplace, and church. Social scientists such as Paul Lazarsfeld and Herbert Gans have concluded more generally that the "culture industry" is not manipulative but reflects a multitude of popular tastes endogenous to the middle and working classes. In this view, people do not have to be manipulated into wanting cars, refrigerators, comfortable and spacious homes, and so on. Stanley Lebergott's data show that Americans spend their income on appliances that reduce household chores, on better health care, on education, and on items such as musical instruments and sports equipment. It is far from clear that they would be better off without these things. And despite concerns about standardization, defenders of consumer society insist that markets are more segmented than ever before and do more to accommodate regional and ethnic tastes.

A Livable World

Moral, social, and cultural critiques of consumption continue to appear in the literature of economics, psychology, and other disciplines. At the same time, fears about the environmental "sustainability" of affluence have assumed a new importance in the centuries-long debate about consumption. The destruction of nature, the depletion of resources, and signs of global ecological stress suggest to many that American levels and patterns of consumption, if extended to the rest of the world's people, would overwhelm the earth's capacity to provide resources and assimilate wastes. Whether or not we must produce and consume *less*, we must surely produce and consume *differently* if we are to protect nature and leave to the future a livable world.

This *Report* begins with two contrasting essays on the environment and the question of limits. It then takes up the themes of individual well-being and social justice, emulation and autonomy, social reform and public policy that dominated the Maryland conference.

We wish to thank the Global Stewardship Initiative of the Pew Charitable Trusts, and its director, Susan Sechler, for their support of the conference, this special *Report*, and the Institute's continuing work on the ethics of consumption. The National Endowment for the Humanities provided additional support under Grant #RO 22709-94. David A. Crocker was the conference director. The organizational staff included Barbara Cronin, Carroll Linkins, L. Anathea Brooks, Teresa Chandler, Maria Davila, and Amanda Wolf. A book inspired by the conference and subsequent research is planned for 1997.

— Mark Sagoff

Sources: David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (first edition, 1751; Hackett, 1983); Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending* (Johns Hopkins, 1985); David M. Potter, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character* (University of Chicago Press, 1954); Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics* (W. W. Norton, 1991); Michael Schudson, *Advertising, the Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society* (Basic Books, 1984); Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Blackwell, 1987); Stanley Lebergott, *Pursuing Happiness: American Consumers in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton University Press, 1993); Gary Cross, *Time and Money: The Making of Consumer Culture* (Routledge, 1993); Herbert Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste* (Basic Books, 1974); Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications* (Free Press, 1955).

Consumption and the Environment

There are limits to the total amount of resources that the human economy can consume from the ecosystem that contains it; for the ecosystem — both as supplier of resources and as absorber of waste products — is itself limited. The earth-ecosystem is finite, non-growing, and materially closed. Though it is open to the flow of solar energy, that flow is also non-growing and finite, even if quite large and currently underutilized. Historically, the limits of the ecosystem were not binding upon economic growth, because the economy was small relative to the total ecosystem. The world was "empty." But now it is "full," and the limits are more and more binding — not necessarily like brick walls, but more like tightly stretched rubber bands.

The total flow of resource consumption, or throughput, is the product of population times per capita consumption. John Stuart Mill, writing in 1857, foresaw that increasing the resource flow, and thus moving from an empty to a full world, would eliminate more and more of life's pleasantness and eventually lead to impossible demands upon the earth:

> Nor is there much satisfaction in contemplating the world with nothing left to the spontaneous activity of nature; with every rood of land brought into cultivation, which is capable of growing food for human beings; every flowery waste or natural pasture plowed up, all quadrupeds or birds which are not domesticated for man's use exterminated as his rivals for food, every hedgerow or superfluous tree rooted out, and scarcely a place left where a wild shrub or flower could grow without being eradicated as a weed in the name of improved agriculture. If the earth must lose that great portion of its pleasantness which it owes to things that the unlimited increase of wealth and population would extirpate from it, for the mere purpose of enabling it to support a larger, but not a better or a happier population, I sincerely hope, for the sake of posterity, that they will be content to be stationary, long before necessity compels them to it.