

drawing explicit bridges between our principles and our practice surely offers the greatest promise. Such an effort, however, will require herculean exertions on the part of public officials, religious and civic groups, educators, philanthropies, and the media. Otherwise, sane consumption policies must be rammed down the throats of unwilling populations by central authorities, and that means the end of democracy.

— David Luban

Sources: Mancur Olson and Hans H. Landsberg, eds., *The No-Growth Society* (W.W. Norton, 1973); Herman E. Daly, *Steady-State Economics: The Economics of Biophysical Equilibrium and Moral Growth* (W. H. Freeman, 1977); Robert L. Heilbroner, *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect* (W. W. Norton, 1975); Kenneth E. Boulding, "The Shadow of the Stationary State," in *The No-Growth Society*, edited by Olson and Landsberg; Paul Kennedy, *Preparing for the Twenty-First Century* (Random House, 1993); Lester C. Thurow, *The Zero-Sum Society: Distribution and the Possibilities for Economic Change* (Basic Books, 1980); Marc Galanter and Thomas Palay, *Tournament of Lawyers: The Transformation of the Big Law Firm* (University of Chicago Press, 1991)

Consumption as a Theme in the North-South Dialogue

In connection with consumption, three issues seem especially relevant for the North-South dialogue: (a) What is the relation between mass consumption in the North and mass destitution in the South? (b) Is there an ongoing discussion in the South on the influence of patterns of Northern consumption and, if there is one, what can we learn from it? (c) Is there something like a perspective on consumption typical of the South?

Two remarks may be useful before any answer to these questions is attempted:

(1) "North" and "South," like "West" and "East" before them, are to be taken as very imprecise designations. In addition to the truism that there is no correspondence between geography and economics (New Zealand is in the geographic South but in the economic North; Russia is in the geographic North but in the economic South), there is another, more important fact: intra-regional differences are almost as great as regional ones. Any characterization of "the South," then, must be understood as an approximation. The only justification for the use of such terms is usual practice and lack of a better terminology.

(2) Twenty years ago in Latin America, many theorists tried to explain the underdevelopment of the South by pointing to its extreme dependency on developed countries. One answer to this dependency, they argued, was the creation of a non-consumerist society.

Such a society would affirm local traditions against the encroachments of modernization, and insist that development in imitation of the North was not necessarily the best course for the non-industrial world.

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This "dependence theory" was undoubtedly one-sided. In stressing Southern dependency, it failed to consider the ways in which relations between developed and underdeveloped regions are reciprocal; and in placing so strong an emphasis on external dependency, it tended to miss the internal contradictions that are characteristic of the developing world. Nonetheless, the theory performed a useful function by asking what an alternative model of development, and thus an alternative society, might look like. It is not difficult to locate examples of wasteful consumption, on the one hand, and severe deprivation, on the other. But is there not a third option, one that would be open to the majority?

Real Options and Unfulfilled Desires

Unfortunately, in the South today, a privileged minority engage in ostentatious consumption while large sectors of the population remain in dire poverty. Patterns of wasteful consumption by elites in the South have come to mimic and exaggerate usual consumption in the North.

The promotion of high consumption in the South is, of course, advantageous to Northern industrial and service companies. It has been argued that consumption patterns in the North are likewise beneficial to Southern countries, since exports sold in the North provide developing countries with badly needed hard currencies. Indeed, one rationale for signing North-South trade agreements like NAFTA is that an increase in international commerce is good business for all concerned.

However, the fact that international trade may lead to more consumption in the South does not necessarily mean that poverty will be reduced. For millions of destitute persons in the world, consumption is primarily something that a few inhabitants of their countries can engage in as a privilege; with respect to the majority, it is denied or severely restricted — either because of rampant unemployment or because of great disparities between wages and prices. From a Southern perspective, then, what is of primary interest is not so much the distinction between good and bad consumption, but the distinction between consumption as a real option for some and as an unfulfilled desire for most.

This approach to the issue gives us a start toward an answer to the third of the initial questions. As seen from the North, consumption is largely associated with the pleasures of shopping, and perhaps with the depression resulting from not finding happiness in what can be bought. As seen from the South, consumption is connected to the ostentation of the rich, daydreams of the poor, and food riots by hungry crowds.

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In the South, the external signs of the latest onslaught in the battle for a consumer society are very visible. Huge closed malls take the place of open shopping centers, which in turn had taken the place of small grocery stores; flashy cars substitute for inexpensive public transportation; designer clothes are worn by a small minority. Malls are especially interesting because they represent such a massive disruption of local conditions — both climatological and social. Only

a profound distortion of the economy and of social values (together with a modification of political conditions) can explain the existence of these huge air-conditioned buildings in countries where the temperature is comfortable all year round. Within the shopping malls, English is the written language, even in countries where people do not speak it; giant parking lots accommodate dozens of cars, while outside most of the roads are filled with potholes.

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The visual impact of these monstrous buildings is likewise remarkable: both their size and style — or lack thereof — amount to a violent imposition on the landscape. To attract customers, they are often built in populated neighborhoods, which instantly become noisy, exhaust-filled places and lose any human intimacy they may have had in the past. Everything inside the malls is geared toward selling and buying; all human transactions are reduced to a single function, and the scale of the whole enterprise seems to foster no behavior other than buying as much as possible. However, the prices tend to be astronomical for a substantial majority of the population, who are reduced thereby to gawking without buying.

The few remaining traditional grocery stores, and even the more modern supermarkets which began to sprout in the 1950s, were and continue to be visited by people with specific needs and wants, as well as the money to pay for what they buy. The malls, on the contrary, give rise to a new phenomenon: the reduction of most people to passive onlookers, who dream of the day when they will be able to buy many gadgets whose purpose they do not fully understand. If *Homo sapiens* becomes *homo economicus* inside the malls, there by necessity appears what Ivan Illich calls *homo miserabilis* — persons who are reduced to a marginal condition, not because they cannot perform as an economic agent in another type of society, but because the social conditions are such that they are forced to remain on the periphery of the new economy. It is hard to imagine hordes of visitors getting into supermarkets and grocery stores just to look and to long for the time when they will be able to buy. Yet this has become the everyday occurrence in Third World malls. Physically similar to those in the North, socially they are very different.

The combination of closed spaces, a great variety of imported goods, and English labels is probably intended to give visitors the impression that they are some-

where in the North and not in a country where shantytowns and beggars are all too common. For many years now, movies, magazines, and television shows have depicted a blissful part of the world where most people live in happiness amid plenty of goods and services; now the malls are just those places. The North has moved South.

The South in the North

But now let us take a look at the other side of the coin. If the presence of Northern consumption patterns in the South is so blatant and disruptive, is there something like a Southern presence in the North? Here I can only offer a highly speculative suggestion. It is likely that for many people in the North, the picture of the destitution in the South operates as a deterrent to change, as a powerful image of what they might

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become if they do not keep doing what they do every day — working endless hours in jobs they find meaningless or oppressive, jobs whose only justification seems to be the income they provide. So, in the same way that consumption in the North has become a utopian dream for the South, perhaps Southern destitution has become a dreaded possibility for the North. This symmetry is worth exploring. In both cases, an image of life as it is lived elsewhere in the world provides the motive for misguided sentiment or action: a pursuit of the worst features of industrial society for some, a reluctance to change toward more meaningful lives for some others. There is a more tangible symmetry as well: just as showy shops full of consumer goods are the visible part of the North in the South, homeless people and inner-city slums may be taken as the South in the North.

Mechanisms of Survival

The questions I have addressed about the relation between North and South have largely been bypassed, unfortunately, in recent discussions and debates. What we often find in their stead is the complaint that the South has too many people and the North too much consumption. This slogan has become a powerful political weapon because of its simplicity and its facile use of imagery. It has been voiced in important international gatherings and in policy documents. As usu-

ally happens with oversimplified visions, it hides a complex web of related problems, while at the same time it becomes either an excuse for avoiding action or a device for the justification of hasty policies. The North is said to consume more than it needs and the South to need more than it consumes. But since there is a North in the South, external problems of unequal relations become internal contradictions.

Expensive consumption has been looked upon with suspicion by many Latin American thinkers as one of the causes of recurrent economic crisis. It is seen as a grave danger for the well-being of society, which is thought to be more secure in a simple life of frugality. One finds such a concern in the 1973 book *The Poverty of Nations*, by the late Costa Rican politician José ("Pepe") Figueres (1906-1990), twice President of his country. Figueres saw the consumption of expensive imported goods as an obstacle to the all-important task of creating decent jobs for the population, especially for landless peasants. The cover of his book — a reproduction of a 1936 drawing by a local artist — summarizes this idea. In the drawing, a barefooted peasant, bearing a heavy sack of coffee beans on his back, tries to cross a city street while a luxury car passes by. Coffee exports make it possible to buy the imported car, but this luxury item contributes nothing either to the productive capacity of the country or to the improvement of the conditions of the peasant.

There is one final aspect of the Southern perspective which merits some attention. In spite of all the adverse conditions in which they live, millions of poor people survive with very low levels of consumption. How do they manage to survive? How is it possible to find laughter and joy in poverty? If their mechanisms of survival were well understood in the North, perhaps the fear associated with personal and social change, sometimes perceived as threatening, would abate. Consumption, then, provides a point of entry to a complex set of realities — especially in a world where survival may well be a shared problem.

— Luis N. Camacho

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