
Alternatives to the Mass Consumption Society

Critiques of American consumerism abound, and are often directed at the quantities of useless things we consume. But often the real objection seems to be not that we consume too much, but that we consume the wrong things for the wrong reasons. For instance, arguments that Americans are too materialistic, or too wrapped up in gadgetry, are not best characterized as calls for lower levels of consumption. Rather, the critics are expressing a desire for a radically different *pattern* of consumption — one that reflects a non-consumerist orientation or that embodies a richer form of life.

The distinction is critical because changes in consumption patterns do not necessarily entail reductions in consumption levels. Suppose, for example, that we were to trade in our TV sets for harpsichords, and that rather than spend our income on expensive cars, motorboats or clothes, we instead sought out tutors who would help us cultivate our talents in a wide range of artistic and intellectual pursuits. We might employ a vast army of instructors in cooking, in painting, in art appreciation, literature and music; we could devote hours to seeking out new knowledge, taking courses in archeology and astronomy. Now of course, harpsichords and personal libraries, field trips and telescopes all cost money, and the production of them represents new economic growth that might bring new problems of sustainability. Yet there are few social or cultural critics who would take issue with a major expansion in the mass consumption of goods and services to promote these life-enhancing studies.

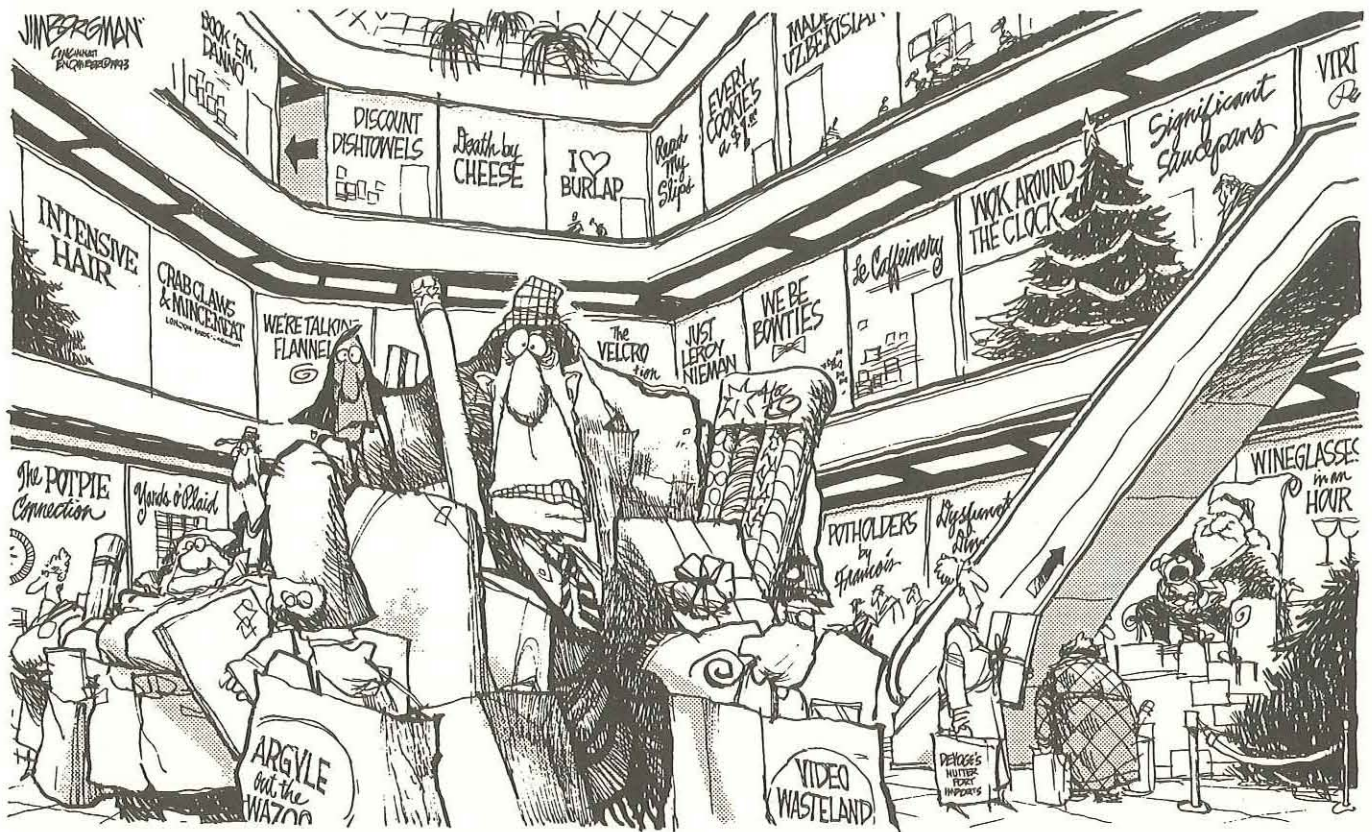
Another way of making this point is to say that limiting or reducing *consumption levels* must be distinguished from reducing *consumerism*. Though reduced consumption and increased sustainability may be compatible with a major shift towards more humanly satisfying patterns of consumption, they are not the inevitable result of such a transformation. We might ask, however, whether alternative conceptions of the economic realm might lead to more sustainable and more satisfying consumption patterns.

Other Conceptions

There are many possible conceptions of the economic realm, each of which incorporates an image of the good life, a view of how the economy is related to the good life, criteria for assessing economic performance, and an understanding of what it is to live at a high economic standard. For example, in the prevailing vision — which we may call the “mass consumption” orientation — the economy contributes to the good life primarily through the goods and services it provides for our consumption and from which we gain pleasure, utility, or want-satisfaction. Economic performance is assessed primarily by the level and growth of real output per person. Employment is perceived as a necessary means to attain the income necessary for consumption, both individually and in aggregate terms.

*Changes in consumption patterns
do not necessarily entail reductions
in consumption levels.*

Viewed from this perspective, the United States, as compared to other societies and other times, is a relatively successful mass consumption society. Yet throughout the history of thinking about the economic realm, and certainly at different points in American history, there have been advocates of a different orientation altogether. One alternative, which I term “graceful simplicity,” rejects open-ended acquisition and intense careerism in favor of an unharried, harmonious existence centered on the unchanging essentials of human life. This conception does not insist upon austerity and self-denial, but argues that the primary role of the economy is to satisfy those basic needs that must be met if we are to enjoy a healthy and secure existence. As in the mass consumption model, employment is a means to an end, providing us with the



A MALL AND the NIGHT VISITORS

Jim Borgman

Reprinted with special permission of King Features Syndicate

income required to meet our needs. But from the perspective of graceful simplicity, economic progress enhances the good life insofar as it eliminates work and expands our leisure time. Income above the level required for meeting material needs is relatively unimportant and a sign that we are working too much. The amount of true leisure time — time not at work or performing personal household tasks — is a major index of economic performance. The ideal use of this time is to engage in relatively simple activities that require little by way of income and leisure commodities, but that are rich in contact with friends and loved ones.

A second alternative to the mass consumption society, one that focuses not on leisure and its use but on work itself, may be called "the life of creative work." Though related to the work-centered ethos of early Protestantism, the life of creative work proceeds on the assumption that work is potentially rewarding in itself, rather than either a means to success or a sign in relation to life in the hereafter. On this view, the

economy is above all the realm in which work lives are created and shaped, and our enjoyment of the good life depends on the intrinsic satisfaction and social respect associated with the work we perform. Economic performance is measured primarily by the extent to which most people have jobs that are intrinsically rewarding and a source of social esteem. In this understanding of what it is to live at a high economic standard, income levels are secondary; the key factor is work, and work is to be assessed by whether it enhances or stifles human creativity, development, and mental health. From this perspective, consumption levels have relatively little to do with living at a high economic standard. The goods and services we purchase are seen largely as inputs; the real outputs of an economy are the forms of life activity it creates.

The two alternatives just delineated, graceful simplicity and creative work, offer models of society in which individuals would be less concerned with their or others' levels of consumption. Each alternative

holds that seeking ever higher levels of consumption should not be the motive for the individual's economic activity. Intellectually, they offer alternative criteria for assessing the performance of an economy. In principle, at least, the societies that these alternatives promote could be achieved without high levels of consumption on the household level, though this issue is more complex than may at first appear.

Productivity and Economic Growth

We might imagine that only the mass consumption orientation favors technological advancement and the growth of productivity, and that graceful simplicity and the life of creative work dismiss productivity gains as unimportant or even harmful. But this is incorrect. Growth in productivity is critical for all three orientations; the differences lie in how they deal with productivity and economic growth.

In order to promote a life of graceful simplicity, productivity growth can be used in a variety of ways: (1) to enable people to work fewer hours while maintaining a constant level of output; (2) to support public investments and policies which promote simple living; and (3) to expand the private consumption of time-saving and life-simplifying technologies while keeping hours of employment and other consumption unchanged.

The work-centered alternative, a life of creative work, uses productivity growth to increase the direct satisfaction that people receive from their work life (or to decrease the dissatisfaction associated with it), thus transforming work from a burden to a central positive activity that directly embodies the good life. Productivity-increasing advances are offset by justified productivity decreases; these decreases are changes that increase the direct satisfaction of work at the expense of output. Suppose a company achieves a productivity gain in one aspect of its operations by adopting new computer technologies. Such a gain might then be used to offset a "productivity loss" elsewhere. For instance, the company might forgo some of the advantages of uniform service delivery so that workers can give some individuality to their work effort, or it might sacrifice some degree of "efficiency" so that service employees can treat their customers as human beings.

In some respects, graceful simplicity is compatible with a work-centered life. One might view the two as mutually reinforcing. A person whose life centers on a meaningful productive task is not apt to be consumerist. Yet the two orientations are distinct and can easily diverge. For example, each gives a different answer to the question of how to respond to productivity gains. The first says, "Expand leisure"; the second says, "Transform work."

Both alternatives envision a world in which personal consumption is relatively stable at a moderate level. In neither case is the good life thought of as a matter of acquiring consumer goods. Rather, goods and services are required to meet certain core needs; once these needs are met, the good life is not pursued by channeling productivity growth into increased consumption.

Directions for Social Policy

As a social ideal, graceful simplicity can only be achieved through an interaction of changes on the personal level — changes in how we live — and changes in social policy. In broad terms, the social policy component chiefly involves the reduction of working hours, and a process of simplification which creates the possibility of an unharried, quieter space within which individuals and families can find the good life. The specific elements of a leisure-expansion policy agenda might include reduction of overtime work, expansion of part-time options, and establishment of a legal right of workers to decide how much of productivity gains they will take as reduced time.

We do not have to agree on a specific income level or amount of leisure necessary for the good life.

The changes required by a life of graceful simplicity — in the amount of time we work, in the quantity of household goods we consume, and in the extent to which we are burdened by an overload of demands we cannot meet — are all quantitative matters, matters of more and less. Essentially, graceful simplicity is a pole towards which we can move if we choose to do so, both individually and collectively. For this purpose, we do not have to agree collectively on a specific income level or amount of leisure necessary for the good life. What is required is a rough vision of our objective and a program for change which makes sense for the majority of the population — an approach that not only meets our private needs but also addresses our public needs.

Moving toward an economy of creative work, however, would be a much more complex, comprehensive, and problematic task, involving as it does a radically new conception of economic life. In the familiar paradigm, labor is an input, and goods and services are the output; consumer goods and services produce utility, or preference satisfaction, and thus the good life. In the new conception, the good life is the active life, and the central output of the economy is rewarding work lives. Goods and services are now understood as inputs which allow individuals to attain the degree of physi-

Rethinking Human Welfare

In modern industrial economies such as ours, it may seem perfectly rational to accept a philosophy of consumerism. People have little opportunity to choose meaningful work, because the nature of jobs is determined by competitive pressures. The demand for labor mobility disrupts a satisfying sense of community. And the enjoyment of nature is attenuated by urbanization and environmental degradation. Thus, the only thing left under the individual's control is consumption. And it is true that consumption can substitute, however inadequately, for the loss of meaningful work, community, and a decent environment. With enough income people can take long vacations, place their children in private schools, or buy bottled water and a mountain cabin.

Nonetheless, human welfare cannot be measured solely by the ability to acquire goods and services. In addition to consumer sovereignty, our conception of human welfare must be expanded to include *worker sovereignty* and *citizen sovereignty* as well. Worker sovereignty means that people have a choice of jobs — jobs they find meaningful and that enhance their human capacities. Citizen sovereignty means that people can act to create the kind of community and environment they want.

Unfortunately, our present economic system makes it difficult to achieve human welfare in the broad sense. Let me take the provision of meaningful work as an example.

Because of competition, one firm cannot improve working conditions, raise wages, or democratize the workplace if the result is an increase in production costs. Since competition is now worldwide, even a whole country faces difficulties in mandating workplace improvements. It turns out that what people want as consumers — lower prices — makes what they prefer as workers — better working conditions and wages, more meaningful work — less obtainable. This bifurcation is the result of relying on the market as the primary decision-making mechanism.

As a society, we can devise mechanisms for expanding worker and citizen sovereignty. Economists can suggest tools, such as market incentives and taxation schemes, to influence consumption practices. But the first challenge is to expand our view of human welfare, so that we no longer define the individual as a simple consumer of goods and consumer sovereignty as the goal of economic life.

— Charles K. Wilber

Charles K. Wilber is professor of economics at the University of Notre Dame and author, with Kenneth P. Jameson, of *An Inquiry into the Poverty of Economics* (Notre Dame, 1983).

cal and mental well-being necessary to live those lives, and economic performance is assessed not by the quantity of goods and services produced, but by the quality of the jobs it gives rise to. By this standard, there are at present no successful economies in the world; in virtually all countries, there is a shortage of "good" — that is, inherently rewarding — jobs.

*Placing the inherent value of work activity
at the core of our economic life
is one way of moving beyond
a consumption-oriented society.*

The ultimate goal of a transformation of work lives is to elevate work to the level of a "calling" — a change that goes to the heart of our culture. John Dewey said that the happiest day of his life was the day he discovered that it was possible to make a living doing what he most loved to do. A work-centered economy would seek to develop work activities that engage our creative energies and are directly life-enhancing rather than life-depleting. Such an economy would take as its *productive objective* the expansion of the supply of jobs involving such activities, and the progressive reduction and elimination of jobs that are not or cannot be inherently satisfying. It would take as its central *distributional objective* ensuring that all members of the society have some degree of calling within their work lives, and that the remaining mundane and arduous work tasks are equitably shared.

Several points should be made about such a transformation:

1) Equitable distribution of work that is not highly esteemed or inherently rewarding would have a very powerful impact. No one needs to be engaged in creative activity at all times, and there is nothing inherently destructive about work that is routine or purely physical, so long as it is a limited part of what people do and does not serve as the basis for their social identity. Just as the more mundane aspects of housework must be shared, so too should other tasks necessary to a functioning economy.

2) The redefinition of an economy's ultimate output as work itself carries with it the objective of the radical redirection of technology. The old utopians believed that once workers were no longer made to bear the brunt of the social cost of technological transformation, automation would be viewed as a blessing that eliminated the worst kinds of work. Today, however, there is a need for technologies that will re-create the work experience itself. That is to say, we need *tools* that allow the individual to impart his aesthetic values into

his work product, and not just *machines* that restrict the qualitative range of labor inputs.

3) If there is to be a radical transformation of the supply side (the qualitative nature of work activity), then this requires a transformation on the demand side. For instance, cooking and everything associated with restaurants has a different meaning in France than it does in the United States. The reason that quality cooking is a central part of the work life of those employed in French restaurants (and that French chefs are regarded as members of a profession) is that the French consumer of food is very different from his American counterpart — more discerning, more selective.

Generally, we can say that moving towards a work-focused conception of the good life requires the aesthetic, moral, and intellectual enrichment of everyday existence. In order to change the modes of production and service delivery so as to allow for individual value input into goods and services, we must enhance the consumer's aesthetic interest in the goods and services themselves. We cannot have an economy which employs people in making beautifully crafted goods if the consumer is incapable of appreciating them; small farmers who take pride in growing genuinely tasteful and healthful fruits and vegetables cannot maintain a viable market share if few consumers care about the difference. The extent to which the labor force contains teachers and artists, poets and potters depends on the magnitude of the demand for what they produce.

Placing the inherent value of work activity at the core of our economic life is one way of moving beyond a consumption-oriented society. And yet, this alternative actually requires a new interest in what we consume. We might even speak of it as a true materialism, in which we would actually taste what we eat, and perceive what we buy. Thus understood, consumption would involve a value revolution within ourselves — an awakening of aesthetic, moral, and intellectual interest, a change in the way we see and hear and taste and feel.

— Jerome M. Segal

Jerome M. Segal is the author of *Agency and Alienation: A Theory of Human Presence* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1991).