

Consumerism: an Historical Perspective - part 2

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- continued from webpage #1 -

Jimmy Carter, as President of the US noted: "Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns."⁵⁵ Consumption has become a more important source of self-identity and status than work for many people. Compton Advertising undertook a survey of public attitudes to the economic system in 1974 and found two thirds of those surveyed identified their role in the economic system as that of "consumers and spenders of money" rather than workers or producers. This included one half of those in the labour force. ⁵⁶

More recent opinion surveys show that in countries like the US and Japan, "people increasingly measure success by the amount they consume."⁵⁷ In a society where people don't know each other very well, appearances are important and social status, though more securely attained through occupation, can be attained with strangers through consumption. When people are uprooted and move to the cities they are strangers to each other. Previously everyone knew one another's business and the status that should be accorded to each person. In an anonymous city a person can adopt a certain lifestyle, clothes, car that is higher up the status ladder than their occupation would indicate, particularly if they are willing to go into debt to do it. Consumption then becomes an indicator of achievement.⁵⁸

The desire to consume is often portrayed as a natural human characteristic that cannot be changed. However it is clear populations have been manipulated into being avaricious consumers. What people really want, more than the multitude of goods on offer, is status. History has shown the determinants of status can change. If we want to live in an ecologically sustainable society, then we need to award status to those who are happy with a basic level of comfort rather than those who accumulate possessions. If, as a community, we admired wisdom above wealth and compassion and cooperation above competition, we would be well on the way to undermining the motivation to consume.

This article was first adapted for publication in Pacific Ecologist from chapter 12 of the book *Selling the Work Ethic: From Puritan Pulpit to Corporate PR*, by Sharon Beder, Publisher Scribe, Melbourne 2000. Professor Sharon Beder is head of the Science, Technology and Society Programme at the University of Wollongong, NSW, Australia. She writes a regular column for *Engineers Australia* and has written several books including *Power Play* *Toxic Fish* and *Sewer Surfing*; *The Nature of Sustainable Development*. Professor Beder was awarded the 2001 World Technology Award in Ethics.

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