

# Consumerism: an Historical Perspective

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The Pacific Ecologist, whence this article came, provided this editorial note: Sharon Beder explores the history of consumer societies from the 1920s when over-production of goods exceeded demand. Instead of stabilising the economy, reducing working hours, and sharing work around, which would have brought more leisure time for all, industrialists decided to expand markets by promoting consumerism to the working classes. The social decision to produce unlimited quantities of goods rather than leisure, nurtured wastefulness, obsolescence, and inefficiency and created the foundation for our modern consumer culture. People were trained to be both workers and consumers in a culture of work and spend.

Consumption was promoted through advertising as a "democracy of goods" and used to pacify political unrest among workers. With the help of marketers and advertisers exploiting the idea of consumer goods as status symbols, workers were manipulated into being avaricious consumers who could be trusted "to spend more rather than work less." But if we admired wisdom above wealth, and compassion and cooperation above competition, we could undermine the motivation to consume.

The development of consumer societies meant the erosion of traditional values and attitudes of thrift and prudence. Expanding consumption was necessary to create markets for the fruits of rising production. Ironically this "required the nurture of qualities like wastefulness, self-indulgence, and artificial obsolescence, which directly negated or undermined the values of efficiency" and the Protestant Ethic that had originally nurtured capitalism.<sup>1</sup> Advertisers sought to redefine people's needs, encourage their wants and offer solutions to them via goods produced by corporations rather than allowing people to identify and solve their own problems, or to look to each other for solutions. <sup>2</sup>

Consumerism also played a major role in legitimising a social system which rewards businessmen and top corporate executives with incomes many times those of ordinary workers. The consumer society gives ordinary workers some access to the good life. Surrounded by the bounty of their work -- the television set, stereo, car, computer, white goods -- they are less likely to question conditions of their work, the way it dominates their life, and the lack of power they have as workers. Advertisers constantly tell them these are the fruits of success, that this is what life is all about. To question a system that delivers such plenty would seem perverse.

## Over-production and the shorter working week

The growth in production in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries required growing markets. This meant expanding the consuming class beyond the middle and upper classes to include the working classes. Production between 1860 and 1920 increased by 12 to 14 times in the US while the population only increased three times.<sup>3</sup> Supply outstripped demand and problems of scarcity were replaced by problems of how to create more demand.

By the early 1920s, when American markets were reaching saturation, "over-production" and lack of consumer demand were blamed for recession. More goods were being produced than a population with "set habits and means" could consume.<sup>4</sup> There were two schools of thought about how this problem should be solved. One was that work hours should be decreased and the economy stabilised so production met current needs and work was shared around. This view was held by intellectuals, labour leaders, reformers, educators and religious leaders. In America and in Europe, it was commonly believed consumer desires had limits that could be reached and production beyond those limits would result in increased leisure time for all. <sup>5</sup>

The opposing view, mainly held by business people and economists, was over-production could and should be solved by

increasing consumption so economic growth could continue. Manufacturers needed to continually expand production so as to increase their profits. Employers were also afraid of such a future because of its potential to undermine the work ethic and encourage degeneracy amongst workers who were unable to make proper use of their time. Increasing production and consumption guaranteed the ongoing centrality of work. 6

Keen to maintain the importance of work in the face of the push for more leisure, businessmen extolled the virtues and pleasures of work and its necessity in building character, providing dignity and inspiring greatness. Economists too argued that the creation of work was the goal of production. John M. Clark, in a review of economic developments, stated: "Consumption is no longer the sole end nor production solely the means to that end. Work is an end in itself..." Creating work, and the right to work, he argued, had a higher moral imperative than meeting basic needs. 7

Manufacturer, H. C. Atkins, along with president of the National Association of Manufacturers, John E. Edgerton, warned a five-day week would undermine the work ethic by giving more time for leisure.<sup>8</sup> If work took up less of the day it would be less important in people's lives. Edgerton, observed: "I am for everything that will make work happier but against everything that will further subordinate its importance.... the emphasis should be put on work - more work and better work, instead of upon leisure." 9

Most businessmen believed shorter hours meant less production, which would limit the growth of America's business enterprise. They argued they could not afford shorter work weeks, that they would become uncompetitive and go bankrupt. They also feared that given extra free time, people would spend it in unsociable ways, turning to crime, vice, corruption and degeneracy and perhaps even radicalism. "The common people had to be kept at their desks and machines, lest they rise up against their betters." 10 And Edgerton, argued "nothing breeds radicalism more quickly than unhappiness unless it is leisure. As long as the people are kept profitably and happily employed there is little danger from radicalism." 11 In the US consumption rates were increasing in the mid-1920s and the "new economic gospel of consumption" gained many adherents. 12 The idea there were limits on consumer wants began to be eclipsed by the idea such wants could be endlessly created. In 1929 the President's Committee on Recent Economic Changes stated: "wants are almost insatiable; one want satisfied makes way for another... by advertising and other promotional devices, by scientific fact-finding, and by carefully pre-developed consumption, a measurable pull on production... has been created." 13

The public was urged by the National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) to "end the buyers' strike." 14 However the desire to consume did not come naturally, it had to be learned: "People had to move away from habits of strict thrift toward habits of ready spending."<sup>15</sup> From the 1920s corporations began advertising to the working classes in an effort to break down these old habits of thrift and encourage new consumerist desires. At the same time they sought to counter anti-corporate feelings generated by the conditions of work in their factories. 16

### Hooking work and leisure to consumption

Higher wages helped in this shift from the Protestant ethic of asceticism to one of consumerism that fitted with the required markets for mass production.<sup>17</sup> In boom times, workers were given increased wages rather than increased leisure. Between 1910 and 1929 the average purchasing power of workers in the US increased by 40%. 18 With these rising wages they bought more and the upward spiral of production and consumption was maintained. In earlier times higher wages might have encouraged workers to work shorter hours, but once workers had been coached into becoming consumers there was little danger of this. With the help of marketers and advertisers, workers could be trusted "to spend more rather than work less." 19

In this context it was important leisure was not an alternative to work and an opportunity to reflect on life but rather a time for consumption. In this way the forty-hour week, rather than threatening economic growth would foster it. Leisure goods such as radios, phonographs, movies, clothes, books and recreational facilities all benefited from increased leisure time.<sup>20</sup> At the same time leisure had to be subordinate to work and importantly, a reason to work.

Business people still wanted to limit the reduction of work hours and believed that by 'educating' workers to become consumers, the demand from workers for reduced working hours would also be limited. 21 Manufacturers expanded markets by expanding the range of goods they produced, moving from the basic requirements of living such as food, clothing and building materials to items such as cars and radios that provided entertainment and recreation. 22 US unions fell in with the consumption solution to overproduction in the late 1920s and concentrated on fighting for higher wages. Union leaders promoted increased production and economic growth as a way of increasing wages. It was not till the Great Depression of the 1930s that they again fought for a shorter working week as a solution to unemployment. 23

After the Second World War the idea of solving unemployment by reducing working hours disappeared from mainstream thinking. During the war a demand for consumer goods built up and following it workers tended to prefer wage rises to shorter hours. 24 Unions no longer pressed for shorter working hours and workers themselves became wedded to a consumer lifestyle that required long hours to support. Many unions in fact gave up their fight for control of production in favour of a share of the fruits of production and "ever-increasing levels of material well-being for their workers." 25

The promise of full-employment assuaged fears that long work hours might create unemployment. Leisure became consumer-oriented, revolving round the home with its entertaining and convenience goods and the vacation where workers could enjoy living in luxury for a short time. 26 As Cross noted: "The identification of leisure with consumption won many to hard and steady work in disagreeable jobs." 27

Juliet Schor noted in her book, *The Overworked American* that by 1991 productivity in the US had increased steadily from the 1940s: "we could now produce our 1948 standard of living (measured in terms of marketed goods and services) in less than half the time it took in that year. We could actually have chosen the four-hour day, or a working year of six months...." Instead, workers work more hours now than in 1948 and consume more than twice as much. 28 It was the "social decision to direct industrial innovation toward producing unlimited quantities of goods rather than leisure" that created the foundation for our modern consumer culture, "a culture of work and spend." The movement for more free time for workers and leisure time free of market forces, was defeated by the middle of the 20th century when mass consumer culture took off. 29 The consumer culture, rather than eroding the work ethic, tied people even more closely to working long hours in order to earn the money for their consumer desires.

Consumerism as opiate of the masses

Stuart Ewen in his book *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* showed that advertising for mass consumerism was not only aimed at increasing markets for goods but also at shifting the locus of discontent from people's work to arenas that advertisers could promise would be satisfied by consumption. Their frustrations and unhappiness could then be directed towards buying rather than political protest against working conditions or other elements of industrial society. 30

Ewen claims that consumerism: "the mass participation in the values of the mass-induced market," was not a natural historical development but an aggressive device of corporate survival." Discontent in the workplace could lead to a challenge to corporate authority but discontent in the consumer sphere provided an incentive to work harder and reflected an acceptance of the values of the capitalist enterprise. 31 Similarly Robert Lane claims in his book on *Political Ideology* that: "The more emphasis a society places upon consumption-through advertising, development of new products, and easy installment buying-the more will social dissatisfaction be channeled into intraclass consumption rivalry instead of interclass resentment and conflict... the more will labor unions focus upon the 'bread and butter' aspects of unionism, as contrasted to its ideological elements." 32

If people were dependent on the products of the factories they were less likely to be critical of the appalling working conditions within them. The good life attained through this consumption was also compensation for the unpleasantness of work and distracted attention from it. Advertisements were careful not to depict people working in factories. A leading

copywriter in the 1920s, Helen Woodward, advised consumption could help sublimate and redirect urges that might otherwise be expressed politically or aggressively. "To those who cannot change their whole lives or occupations," she argued, "even a new line in a dress is often a relief." 33

Department store merchant Edward Filene, a spokesperson for industrialists in the 1920s and 30s, spoke frankly about the need for social planning in order to create a consumer culture where industry could "sell to the masses all that it employs the masses to create" and the need for education to train the masses to be consumers in a world of mass production. He argued that consumer culture could unify the nation and, through education, social change could be limited to changes in the commodities that industry produced.<sup>34</sup>

Consumption allows people at the bottom of the social hierarchy to feel they have some measure of access to the good life for all their troubles. The escape from real life provided by leisure activities allows people to continue what might otherwise be a dreary and downtrodden existence. Lisa Macdonald and Allen Myers from Green Left Weekly, claim workers attempt to gain ownership of what they produce and overcome their alienation through consumption: "it is only as purchasers, 'shoppers', that we are treated with the courtesy worthy of a human being."<sup>35</sup> Employers encouraged workers to think of consumerism as the rationale for their work but measures of success were moved from the realm of production and work to the realm of consumption. Advertising messages affected people's aspirations. They portrayed a bounty of consumer goods as the fruits of the American Dream. Rather than aspiring for their children to become leading businessmen or top executives or political leaders, advertisements offered messages such as "Some Day your Boy will own a Buick."<sup>36</sup>

Advertisers also undermined the nineteenth century "culture of character" which was the basis of the myth of the self-made man, someone who succeeded as a result of hard work, morality and discipline. In its place a "culture of personality" evolved which promoted the importance of presentation and appearance, things that advertisers were so helpfully offering to assist with. What mattered in getting ahead and influencing people was the impression a person made on others. Things like their clothes, their home furnishings, their personal cleanliness were all used by others to judge their character.<sup>37</sup> Also advertising and consumerism played a major role in the acceptance of the capitalist vision and its associated inequalities. Roland Marchand in his book *Advertising the American Dream* argued advertisers repeatedly used "the parable of the democracy of goods" to sell their products to the middle classes. In this parable, although there was a social hierarchy with wealth concentrated at the top, ordinary people could enjoy the same products and goods that the people at the top did. Joe Blo could drink the same brand of coffee as the wealthiest capitalist. Mary Jane could buy the same soap as the lady with the maid in waiting. The most humble of citizens (although not the poor who were not the targets of these advertisements) could afford to purchase the same quality products as a millionaire. <sup>38</sup>

The social message of the parable of the Democracy of Goods was clear. Antagonistic envy of the rich was unseemly; programs to redistribute wealth were unnecessary. The best things in life were already available to all at reasonable prices. Incessantly and enticingly repeated, advertising visions of fellowship in a Democracy of Goods encouraged Americans to look to similarities in consumption styles rather than to political power or control of wealth for evidence of significant equality. <sup>39</sup>

According to Filene, the process of buying goods was a means by which people were supporting industry and thereby electing the manufacturers, who made the goods, to a government which would satisfy their needs. They were voting industry leaders into positions of leadership in society. In this way "the masses have elected Henry Ford. They have elected General Motors. They have elected the General Electric Company, and Woolworth's and all the other great industrial and business leaders of the day."<sup>40</sup> Not only was the desire for social change displaced by a desire for changes in commodities, but political freedom was equated with consumer choice and political citizenship with participation in the market through consumption. Consumption was promoted as democratising at the very time it was being used to pacify the political unrest of workers.<sup>41</sup> According to well-known sociologist Daniel Bell: "If the American worker has been 'tamed' it has not been through the discipline of the machine, but by the 'consumption society,' by the possibility of a better living which his wage, the second income from his working wife, and easy credit all allow."<sup>42</sup>

## Production, consumption and status

Vance Packard, in his book *The Status Seekers* argued the use of consumer goods as status symbols was a deliberate strategy of advertisers, or "merchants of discontent," who took advantage of the "upgrading urge" people felt. The message that workers could improve their status through consumption was particularly aimed at people who had little chance of raising their status through their work because opportunities for promotion were slim.<sup>43</sup> Employers sought to divert the dissatisfaction of workers with the nature of their work into a more personal dissatisfaction that could be fed with consumer goods: "offering mass produced visions of individualism by which people could extricate themselves from the mass."<sup>44</sup>

The advertiser offered workers the possibility of gaining social status through buying goods that were better than their neighbours. With the help of installment plans and credit, they could purchase the signifiers of success even if they weren't achieving success in their workplace. This was not something that came naturally to working people who were, for the main part, resigned to their position in life. According to Packard "they need prodding and 'educating' to desire many of the traditionally higher-class products the mass merchandisers want to move in such vast numbers, such as the electric rotating spits or gourmet foods."<sup>45</sup>

Car manufacturers, particularly, exploited people's desire for status, spending "small fortunes exploring the status meaning of their product." They found, for example that people in housing developments where all the houses looked similar, were most likely to leave their large new cars parked on the street in front of the house rather than in the garage where no-one would see them. Plymouth advertisements pictured a family in front of their car saying "We're not wealthy... we just look it!" Dodge advertisements featured a man saying to a Dodge car owner "Boy, you must be rich to own a car as big as this!" And Ford advertisements showed the back of one of their cars and stated "let the people behind you know you are ahead of them!"<sup>46</sup>

Such advertising was so successful people began diverting funds from other purchases into the purchase of a car to enhance their status, and by the end of the 1950s Americans "were spending more of their total income on the family chariot than they were in financing their homestead, which housed the family and its car or cars."<sup>47</sup> Not to be outdone home builders and sellers ensured the home became a status symbol that rivalled the motor car.

Chinoy observed consumption provided automobile workers in the 1950s with a way of rationalising their failure to advance in their work: "Advancement has come to mean the progressive accumulation of things as well as the increasing capacity to consume... If one manages to buy a new car, if each year sees a major addition to the household—a washing machine, a refrigerator, a new living-room suite, now probably a television set—then one is also getting ahead."<sup>48</sup> Rather than question the American Dream, workers would either blame themselves for their failure to live up to it, or find other ways to interpret it.

Such trends were not confined to the US. The consumerism that proliferated in the US in the 1920s and 1930s, spread to other industrialised nations after the Second World War, particularly in the 1950s. <sup>49</sup> In his book on the rise of a consumer society in Australia, Greg Whitwell said: "The ownership of certain sorts of consumer goods, each ranked according to brand names, came to be seen as guides to an individual's income which in turn, so it is believed, said something about his or her inner worth. Consumer goods became external signs, used to give a sense of hierarchy by members of a society characterized by an emphasis on change and on social and geographical mobility."<sup>50</sup>

More pay needed to buy "goods"

In a British study of the working class in the 1950s Ferdynand Zweig found: "a steep rise in acquisitive tendencies and

pre-occupation with money in work attitudes." There was far less difference between middle class and working class purchase of consumer durables (cars, white goods, electrical appliances) than previously and class self-identification had come to depend more on factors such as house ownership than type of work. In fact Zweig found workers impatient with questions about class. They were more interested in status as a way of organising the social spectrum.<sup>51</sup>

Increased consumerism led to an increased emphasis on the importance of pay. Many people work so as to earn the money to buy consumer goods and some measure of status that accompanies them. A European study by the Henley Centre in 1991 found "better pay" was the priority for new jobs for 70 percent of those surveyed, compared with enjoyable work, which was a priority for 58 percent.<sup>52</sup>

A U.S. study found those who believed "having lots of money" was "extremely important" had gone up to almost two thirds in 1986 from less than half in 1977. It ranked higher than any other of goal in life.<sup>53</sup> Americans born since 1963, those referred to as generation X, are more likely to agree that: "The only really meaningful measure of success is money" than any previous generation. They spend more money on stereos, mobile phones, beepers and cars than older people and are more likely to take a less interesting job if it pays well.<sup>54</sup>

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