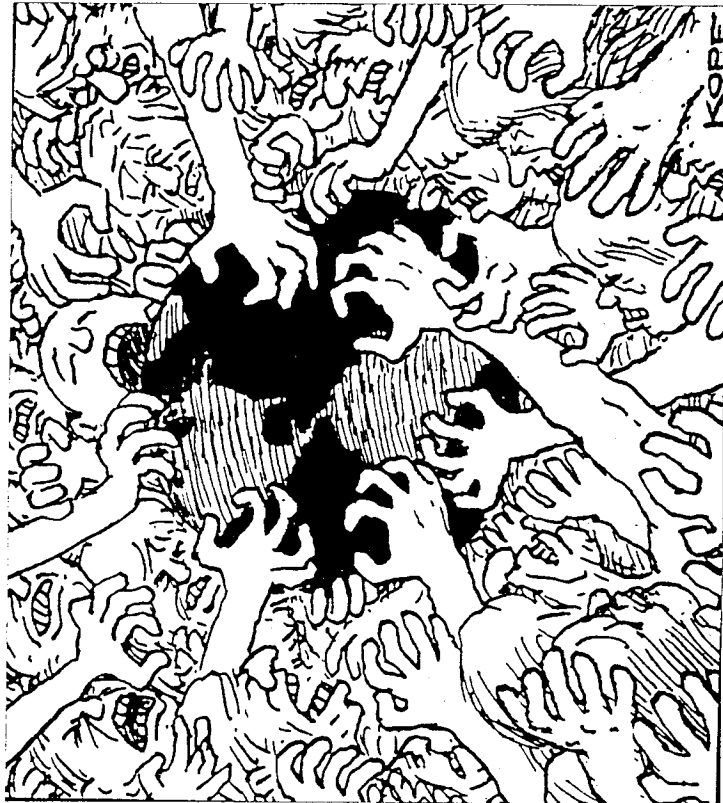


The Not-So-Hidden Costs of Consumption

by Stephanie Kaza

Abstract: High rates of consumption in the industrialized nations drive high rates of resource extraction and ecosystem degradation. Market theory assumptions justify relentless production, especially of mass-produced items that generate a high profit margin. Globalization of American products and advertising stereotypes can displace local cultures and values, promoting a social monoculture based on consumption values. The production and consumption of large quantities of material goods leaves behind an enormous ecological wake of habitat destruction, toxic waste, and species decimation.

The global consumption system is perpetrated by five major players: producers, advertisers, media, government, and transnational corporations. Together they have placed global trade and the cultural ideology of high consumption at the top of the world agenda. Projects challenging this agenda include education, active resistance, changing structural policies, and rebuilding culture and community.



Hummingbird placemats, an iguana mouse pad, a stuffed bald eagle toy... I glanced through the latest compendium of consumer baubles from the National Wildlife Federation. It's fall catalog season and I'm inundated by slick stacks of alluring advertisements. Who makes all these things, I wonder? Who needs them? And why, pray tell, are there so many of them? Just this week at my local right-thinking food co-op, I was assigned to stock dozens of flavors of spritzers and then even more varieties of tea. Spare me! The mad plague of consumerism seems to be everywhere. In an airline magazine I read how even REI and L.L. Bean are aggressively seeking to attract customers. The new Seattle REI store (a \$28 million project) has increased business by offering in-store entertainment—a climbing wall, a campstove lab, adventure travel computer center, a rainiest room, a mountain bike track, and a hiking trail, plus a 100-seat cafe. Not to be outdone, L.L. Bean has opened a 17,000 square foot L.L. Kids store, complete with 40 foot waterfall, resident trout, interpretive trails, and mountain bike simulators. Like Niketown and Planet Hollywood, these magnetic shopping lures are the latest escalation in the challenge to keep consumer dollars flowing.

Illustration by L.J. Kopf

Figure 1. Per Capita Resource Consumption in the United States, Mid-1990s

Material	Pounds Per Day
Stone and cement	27
Coal	19
Miscellaneous minerals	17
Oil	16
Farm products	12
Wood	11
Range grass	10
Metals	8
Natural gas	1
Total	121

from *Stuff: The Secret Lives of Everyday Things*, Ryan, John C. and Durning, Alan T., 1997, *Northwest Environment Watch*, Seattle.

How much do we shop? In one year (1990), over 12,000 new products were introduced to American drug-stores and supermarkets alone—an average of 33 per day (Kanner and Gomes 1995). The World Resources Institute calculated that each American, German, Japanese, and Dutch person uses the weekly equivalent of 300 shopping bags of natural resources or 45-85 metric tons per year. Americans consume about their average body weight—120 pounds—every day in materials extracted and processed from farms, mines, rangelands, and forests (Ryan and Durning 1997 p5). [See Figure 1.] In the United States, the number of shopping malls (close to 35,000) eclipsed the number of high schools in 1987 (Durning 1992 p130). The largest shopping center in the world is in Bloomington, Minnesota and offers four department stores, 400

specialty shops, a walk-through aquarium, a Camp Snoopy theme park, a two-story miniature golf course, and 13,000 convenient parking spaces (Durning 1992 p130).

Though the impacts of consumption are mostly invisible to consumers, they are more than obvious in the far-flung resource bases beyond the shopping malls. Clearcut forests replace paper plantations in Thailand, toxic oil pollutes native lands of Ecuador, women earn poverty wages to produce computer chip boards in Malaysia—the stories are not as pretty as the products. Since the Rio Summit in 1992, representatives of southern countries have spoken up loudly, insisting the North examine its high rates of consumption. This, they say, is driving the escalating resource extraction and ecosystem degradation across the planet far more than population rates.

In this article I explore the current conversation about consumption and its global impact. Much is involved here. To look closely at consumption means to look closely at capitalism and market theory, as well as the highly developed manifestation of greed in the human character. Drawing on the very recently emerging literature, I will review some of the economic assumptions behind consumerism and the proliferation of consumer products and values across the globe. In a preliminary systems analysis, I describe the agents most responsible for driving consumption toward its inevitably destructive end. It is important to recognize that those who benefit most from this system—the world's 202 billionaires and over three million millionaires—wield great political and economic power. To resist their agenda is daunting but critical environmental work. I conclude by reporting on some of the creative efforts now underway to provide a different vision of the future.

The ecological wake of consumption is enormous: example after example delineates the destruction of habitats, the breakdown of ecological processes, the increase in toxic waste and pollutants, and the rise in carbon emissions.



CONFRONTING MARKET THEORY

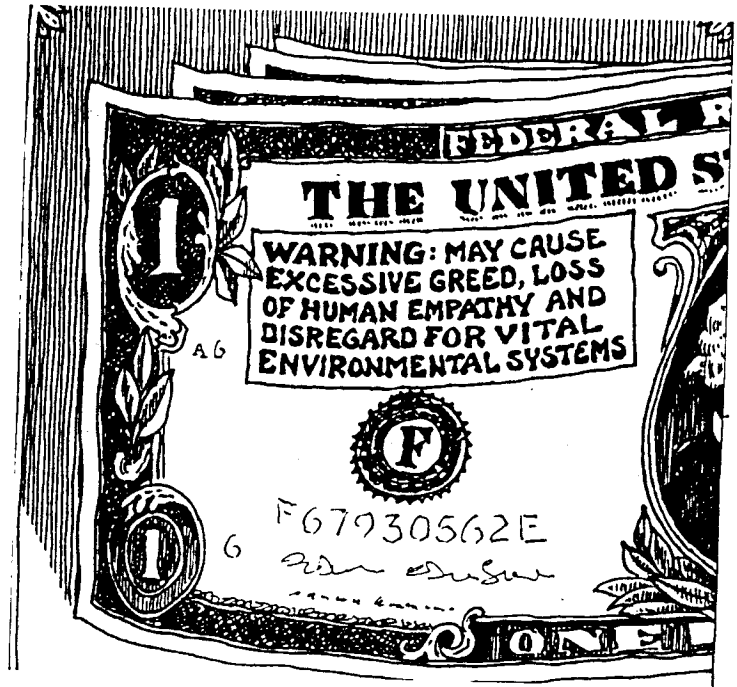
Behind the familiar consumer sales pitches are some serious flaws in market theory assumptions. Neoclassical economics emphasizes efficiency as a core value, the means to “maximization of utility.” This has historically held pervasive moral appeal: being efficient meant less waste and more effective delivery of necessary goods and services. But utility, in practice, is hard to define or measure, so economists substitute instead “maximization of consumption” (and therefore production). In other words, the amount people buy indicates how satisfied they are. More is always better on these terms. The economic system thus presses ever forward with “a goal of increasing consumption with no built-in concept of ‘enough’” (Goodwin 1997 pxxx).

A strong market relies on a series of assumptions about consumers that helps to rationalize the relentless production of stuff. Market theorist Raymond Benton Jr. (summarized in Goodwin et al. 1997 p201) lists seven key assumptions:

1. Consumers derive satisfaction from consumption.
2. Consumers seek to maximize satisfaction given their income constraints.
3. Consumers act rationally.
4. Consumers are capable of judging their tastes and preferences for all products under consideration.
5. Consumers use the price of a good as the sole measure of the sacrifice involved in obtaining it, and price plays no other role in the purchase decision.
6. Consumers develop individual preferences, which are not influenced by other people.
7. Consumers' wants and needs are unlimited and can never be fully satisfied.

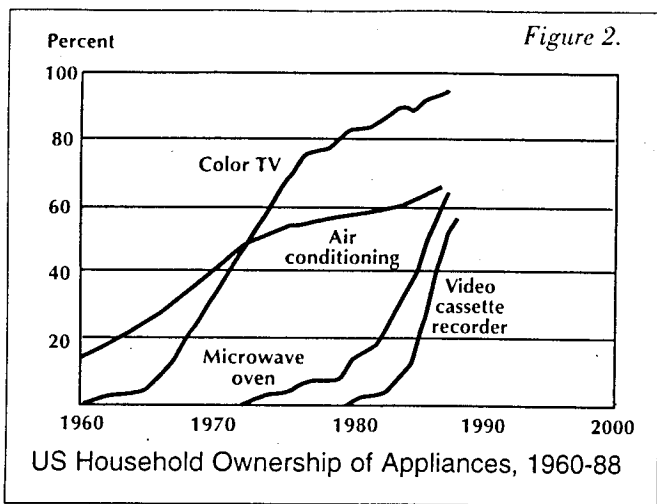
Every one of these assumptions can be challenged. By deluging consumers with an overwhelming selection of choices (the teas and spritzers, etc.), advertisers confuse consumers' sense of wants and needs. How can they know which product will satisfy them when there are so many to try? Certainly people need the basics of food, water, clothing, and shelter in order to survive. But *how much* is enough? In the state of confusion and insecurity induced by consumption itself, people easily fall prey to artificial wants (Benton in Goodwin et al. 1997). Since producers assume from the start that consumers can never be satisfied (#7 above), they churn out an endless variety of goods to tempt the never-quite-content consumer. Range of choice is then identified with the rhetoric of freedom, confusing politics with economics, and any sense of "enough" is eradicated by ideologically promoted greed.

David Loy (1997) suggests that consumption may receive less attention in the I=PAT environmental impact equation because it has become the new world religion. The two unshakable and unchallengeable statements of faith in this religion are 1) that growth and enhanced world trade will benefit everyone, and 2) that growth will not be constrained by the inherent limits of a finite planet. Loy challenges the so-called "natural" or inevitable character attributed to our economic relationships, describing the current system instead as singular



emphasis on one particular way of valuing the world. From a religious perspective, the power of this worldview lies in its extremely effective conversion techniques. "Buy me and be happy"—the seductive message of product after product captures the secular masses, replacing other religious approaches to the pursuit of a satisfied life. Calvinist Protestantism even aligns itself with the new religion, reinforcing economic success as a demonstration of God's favor. According to Loy, one basic flaw of economic religion is that it depletes "moral capital" (p283). Though the market requires character traits such as trust in order to be efficient, it simultaneously tends to erode personal responsibility for other people such as laborers, consumers, and communities affected by toxic by-products. Loy points out that much as the market depends on the biosphere to regenerate natural capital, it also depends on the community to regenerate moral capital (1997 p283). To confront the impacts of consumption is to confront this moral deterioration, and this would threaten the very underpinnings of the entire system.

If the market system is not necessarily "natural," then how did it come to dominance? The consumer society we know today took shape in the 1920s with the emergence of brand names and packaged, processed foods for a growing urban culture. Economic theory supported mass consumption beyond basic needs as key to economic and political success for the United States. Supporting the economy was (and still is) painted as a patriotic duty. During the Depression and World War II the rising tide of consumption stalled temporarily—but



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after the war, the boom was on. Spurred on by the stunning success of wartime production, government leaders expanded their vision of the US as a major world economic leader. President Eisenhower's chief economic advisor proclaimed that the ultimate purpose of the American economy was "to produce more consumer goods" (Durning 1992 p30). With vast forests in the south and west, untapped mineral sources, a hefty supply of oil and hydroelectric power, and a breadbasket to feed the world, the US economy seemed unstoppable.

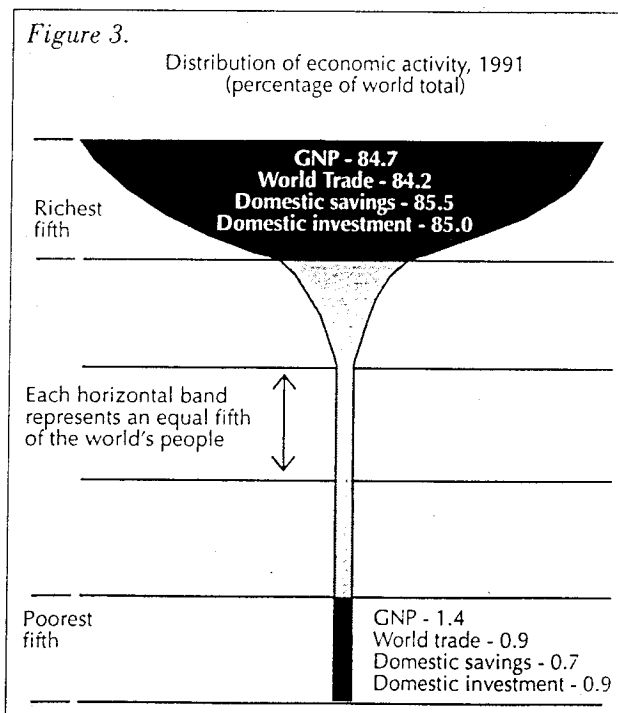
A significant factor driving increasing consumption has been the steady commercialization of the household economy. In earlier days, people managed their own laundry, cooking, gardening, food storage, and clothes-making. Now, as women householders have shifted into the labor market, these production functions have been assumed by the money economy. Car trips to day care, foil and foam-wrapped takeout meals, disposable diapers, designer running shoes—each of these adds to the impacts on the natural world. The increase in home appliances reflects this trend. [See Figure 2.] By 1987 two-thirds of American homes had air conditioning, which depended on ozone-depleting chemicals and used 13% of US electricity (Durning 1992 p32).

Consumerism has now moved far beyond American borders. Per capita consumption of processed foods doubled in Europe in the 1980s; the Japanese now own four times as many cars per capita as in 1950 and eat double the amount of meat they ate in 1975. Coca-Cola products can be found in over 170 countries around the globe; each day McDonald's opens a new fast food diner somewhere in the world (Durning p31). Mass marketing techniques perfected in the US are now employed on every continent, pushing not only American products but the American way of life. Globalized American products and advertising stereotypes often displace local cultures and values, eroding individual and cultural self-esteem.

For example, to meet the white western urban model, women around the world use chemicals to lighten their skin and hair; Asian women have surgery to make their eyes more western. In rural areas of the Philippines, any city over 20,000 will have a supermarket, offering such products as Spam lunchmeat, Pringles potato chips, Hershey's Kisses, Cheeze Curls, and Colgate toothpaste (Gallagher in Goodwin et al. 1997 p301).

Helena Norberg-Hodge has documented the rapid erosion of local values in Ladakh and Bhutan (1997). Here contact with goods from outside the culture has increased the desire to buy them: this is the so-called "demonstration effect" (Duesenberry in Goodwin et al. 1997). Local people come to see their internal standards of value as secondary to the high status represented by American goods. Locally adapted agricultural practices are being replaced by industrial scale, chemically dependent cash cropping systems to supply consumer desires in northern countries. For Norberg-Hodge, economic globalization through promotion of consumer goods is establishing a social monoculture, destroying cultural as well as ecological diversity in its wake.

But let's look closely here—*whose* consumption is having the greatest impact? In 1991, the United Nations Human Development Program charted the world economic activity by five income sectors. [See Figure 3.] The top or richest fifth accounts for 85% of global income, trade exchange, and savings. After that it drops



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dramatically. Members of the top fifth are mostly from the northern and western industrialized nations, where comfort and choice are everyday givens. Global marketers are especially interested in the rapidly expanding second fifth that represents parts of Brazil and Costa Rica, much of Eastern Europe, and rising East Asian nations such as Thailand and Malaysia.

Alan Durning (1992) characterizes these groups into three broad classes based on degree of environmental impact: what he calls the consumers, the middle income, and the poor. [See Figure 4.] He sees the very wealthy as a subset of the consumer class, even though many in the top fifth feel deprived in comparison to the rich. It is the top and bottom fifths that have the greatest ecological footprint—the top for its extravagant use of resources, the bottom for its desperate poverty and overuse of limited local resources. He argues that sustainability for everyone might be achievable if the rich reduced consumption to emulate the middle income class and the poor were assisted enough to become more self-supporting.

Figure 4.

Category of Consumption	Consumers (1.1 billion)	Middle (3.3 billion)	Poor (1.1 billion)
Diet	meat, packaged food, soft drinks	grain, clean water	insufficient grain, unsafe water
Transport	private cars	bicycles, buses	walking
Materials	throwaways	durables	local biomass
Lodging	climate-controlled electrified buildings	some electricity	huts and shanties
Income/year	above \$7500	\$700-7500	below \$700
% World Income	64%	33%	2%

from How Much is Enough?, Alan Durning, 1992, W.W. Norton, New York.



ECOLOGICAL IMPACTS OF CONSUMPTION

What exactly are the ecological costs of producing and consuming so many material goods? The impacts are widespread and well-documented, though the links are not always traced back to specific products or consumers. Air, water, and soil are polluted and rendered dysfunctional from petroleum by-products, pesticides, nuclear waste, and acid precipitation. Natural habitats are disrupted and degraded by dams that generate energy for production, roads that transport wood products, farms for growing food. Human health is eroded by sweatshop labor conditions and pesticide-induced sterility. The rich evolutionary gift of untold millions of species in complex ecosystems is sacrificed to make paper, plastic, potato chips, and Barbie dolls. Each product creates a significant ecological wake in its trail of production and distribution. The combined impacts are well on their way to generating a global ecological holocaust. Meanwhile, on the micro-scale, people keep making small everyday choices that nibble away at the not-so-infinite web of life.

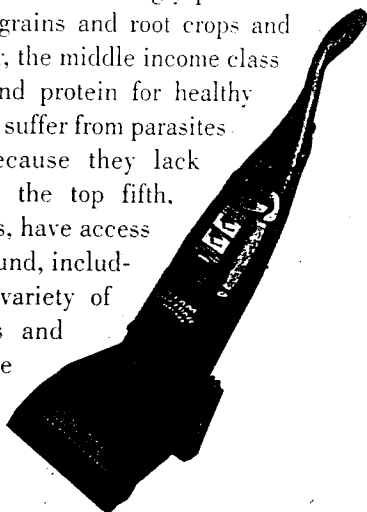
Let us consider two examples from Ryan and Durning's book *Stuff* (1997) that illustrate the far-reaching impacts of North American consumption. Many hard-working dedicated environmental activists (among others) drink coffee to keep going. Two cups a day requires 12 coffee trees producing 18 pounds of beans per year. To keep these personal addictions satisfied, coffee farmers



will apply 11 pounds of fertilizer and pesticides to these trees each year. Forty-three pounds of coffee pulp will be released into rivers, consuming oxygen needed by fish as it decomposes. The beans will travel to the US and be roasted using natural gas from Texas. After being packed in multi-layer bags, they will be shipped by trucks (getting six miles to the gallon) to a regional warehouse. Coffee is the second leading export crop after oil and is the second largest source of foreign income for developing nations. So these cups of coffee mean a lot for cash croppers. In the cool highlands of Costa Rica, Brazil, Columbia, and other Latin American countries, thousands of acres of biologically rich tropical forest have been cleared to support the current boom in espresso shops.

How about the daily newspaper? An average newspaper is printed on a half pound of newsprint with two grams of petroleum and soy-based inks. Tracing production routes in the Pacific Northwest, Ryan and Durning (1997) found that half the newsprint was from recycled sources, the other half from Engelmann spruce or sub-alpine fir trees in central British Columbia. Ninety per cent of Canadian logging takes the form of clearcutting, with the attendant logging roads, erosion, and polluting pulp mills. Half of each log is cut into lumber; the remaining chips and sawdust are cooked into a pulp and bleached with chlorine dioxide. Some of the chlorine reacts to form highly carcinogenic dioxins and furans. At the paper mill in Spokane, virgin pulp is combined with recycled and de-inked pulp and spun into one ton rolls of paper that are then hauled by truck to Seattle and Portland. While 38 million newspapers are recycled every day in the United States, 22 million others are thrown away. The US consumes 72% of the world's supply of newsprint (Ryan and Durning 1997 p68).

What about food? While the hungry poor in the bottom fifth subsist on grains and root crops and often contaminated water, the middle income class have enough calories and protein for healthy nutrition. They, however, suffer from parasites and food poisoning because they lack refrigeration. People in the top fifth, Durning's consumer class, have access to fresh safe food year round, including an ever-increasing variety of processed foods, meats and beverages. By eating the lion's share of the world's meat, this top class consumes in one



form or another 40% of the world's grain (p68). Thus they are responsible for almost half the eroded soils, depleted aquifers, and pesticide-polluted streams in the US. Food processing, packaging, distribution, and storage in the US use 17% of all energy (p69). One-fourth of US aluminum is used to make cans for food and almost half of these end up in landfills. Food packaging makes up 20% of US municipal solid waste by weight (p70). An average bite of American food travels 2000 kilometers from field to fork (p73). Orange juice from Brazil, grapes from Chile, apples from New Zealand, cocoa from Malaysia, bananas from Costa Rica—all are shipped to the United States for our dining pleasure while pesticides pollute soils and streams and petroleum supplies burn up in jet deliveries.



CONSUMER CLASS CULPABILITY

In *How Much is Enough?*, Alan Durning (1992) compares the consumption rates and ecological impacts of various materials and resources for each income class. The evidence mounts up to point a strong finger directly at the top fifth—the consumer class. Compare the rates of carbon dioxide emissions, for example: the poor release .1 ton/person/year, the middle income group .5 ton/person/year, but the consumer class releases seven times this or 3.5 tons, or 11 tons if you're among the richest tenth of Americans. The average resident of an industrial country consumes three times as much fresh water, ten times as much energy, and 19 times as much aluminum as someone in a developing country (p51). The consumer class is responsible for 90% of the chlorofluorocarbons destroying the ozone layer, and 96% of the world's radioactive waste. Fossil fuel use for energy is conspicuously highest in the United States. Habitat loss and pollution as well as the toxic wastes from refining such fuels are extensive and increasing. If everyone in the world used the same amount of metal, lumber, and paper as the consumer class, mining and logging activities and their devastating ecological consequences would more than triple.

Those privileged enough to be in the consumer class do, of course, have the option to choose low-ecological impact products and services. One can buy in-season fruit grown locally rather than exotic imports flown in from the tropics. One can buy locally produced furniture rather than tropical hardwood products. One can even choose voluntary simplicity, like Thoreau, and limit the sheer quantity of owned items. But consumer

choice depends on consumer knowledge and motivation. Too often, greed, gullibility, impulse, and ignorance are the primary determiners of consumer purchases. Consumption for personal pleasure and self-soothing supports tremendous markets for small and large indulgences—from designer clothes to specialty wines.

Behind each product sold to the consumer class lies a significant “wake,” casting an ecological shadow on the middle income and poor classes. Very few items in the US have not drawn on labor or natural resources from the global reaches of the world. Producing countries may even raze their own forests to attract First World business. Transnational corporations specialize in finding the cheapest labor, most accessible resources, and most lax regulations across the span of the globe, moving jobs easily where they can save money. The ecological wake of consumption is enormous: example after example delineates the destruction of habitats, the breakdown of ecological processes, the increase in toxic waste and pollutants, and the rise in carbon emissions. Social impacts only compound the tragedy: environmental injustice in global sweatshops, erosion of local culture and community, loss of moral resources—all are justified in the goal of feeding the spiraling addictions of the consumer class.



DRIVING FORCES ACCELERATING THE SYSTEM

How is the colossal consumption system perpetrated and accelerated? The emerging literature on consumerism and globalization points to five major groups of players who collude in various ways to promote ever-increasing levels of consumption. These are 1) the producers—i.e., businesses “serving” consumers, 2) the advertisers—the public relations arm of business, 3) the media—the cultural homogenization agents, 4) governments—negotiating favorable trade agreements, and 5) transnational corporations—the global corporate elite determining the flow of resources around the globe.

The role of the producers is often camouflaged by neoclassical economics rhetoric about “the sovereign consumer.” In this model, consumer preferences are said to determine the products industry chooses to make. While businesses do respond to consumer feedback, they are also responding to stockholders who want to see a strong bottom line. There is much ado these days about the green sovereign consumer who can choose to switch to green products, thereby decreasing environmental impact. Towards this end, consumer activists promote nontoxic cleaners, recycled paper products, and organic food. The sovereign consumer model assumes consumers make rational choices, but Schnaiberg (in Goodwin et al. 1997) says this cannot be true since consumers know so little about the manufacturing processes behind the products they buy. For example, if producers don’t offer cars that run on alternative fuels, how can consumers “choose” them? Schnaiberg argues that consumption levels in industrial countries are determined by producers who

Per Capita Consumption of Steel, Paper, Cement, and Energy, in Selected Countries, Late Eighties¹

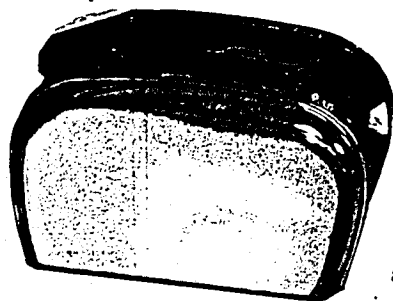
Country	Steel (kilograms)	Paper	Cement ²	Energy ³
United States	417	308	284	10,127
Soviet Union	582	36	470	6,546
West Germany	457	207	476	5,377
Japan	582	222	665	4,032
Mexico	93	40	257	1,689
Turkey	149	8	436	958
China	64	15	185	810
Brazil	99	27	167	798
India	20	3	53	307
Indonesia	21	5	73	274
Nigeria	8	1	31	192
Bangladesh	5	1	3	69

1 Steel, 1987; paper, 1989; cement, 1990; energy, 1989.

2 Per capita production.

3 Kilograms of coal equivalent.

Reprinted with permission from *How Much is Enough?*
Alan Durning, 1992, W. W. Norton, New York.



know that mass-produced items generate the greatest profits. To assure this profit, producers must create consumer interest in these cheaply produced mass market items. Information about the production process must be kept hidden from consumers, especially where it is resource and labor abusive. Schnaiberg urges activists who want to reduce environmental degradation to focus on the production systems rather than on consumer behavior (p30). It is the producers' drive for profit that permits and justifies ecosystem destruction, in the long run overriding consumers' basic life needs for safe water, food, and shelter.

Advertisers have the job of promoting these mass-produced products designed to generate profit for industry. By now it is quite clear that advertisers have been extremely successful at swamping and confusing buyers with product hype. Consider the sheer volume of ads: the average American is exposed to 3000 ads per day (Kanner and Gomes 1995). In 1994, businesses in the United States spent \$147 billion for advertising—more than the country spends on all of higher education. This sum paid for 21,000 television commercials, a million magazine advertising pages, 14 billion mail-order catalogues, 38 billion junk-mail ads, and another billion signs, posters, and billboards (Loy 1997 p287). Advertisers will go everywhere and anywhere to sell their products: not content with radio, television, and billboards, they now print slogans on hot dogs and eggs (Durning 1992 p188). With competition so fierce for the consumer dollar, people are barraged by sales pitches on subways, at cash registers, in airports, and on ski lifts. Even if people don't remember specific ads, they get the message over and over again that there is a product to solve life's every problem.

Pollay (in Goodwin et al. 1997), among others, has enumerated some of the dangerous unintended consequences of advertising. Not only do advertisers deliberately obscure the environmental costs of their products, they foster a climate of self-involvement revolving around one's material desires that distracts people from actively caring for the environment. Ads rely on setting up idealized stereotypes that foster greed, status-envy, hyperstimulation, health fears, and at root, a sense of dissatisfaction and inadequacy. Children are particularly vulnerable to commercial brainwashing, too easily

replacing their authentic needs and wants for what they've been told to want. "Shopaholism" has become a national disease where people turn to shopping to alleviate or bury their suffering, not unlike patterns in drug and alcohol consumption (Kanner and Gomes 1995). Addiction to material satisfaction precludes healthy development of social, psychological, and spiritual capacities that could be engaged in supporting the life of this planet.

Advertisers and producers benefit tremendously from the third system player—the media. Commercial television actively reinforces consumer values, promoting consumer class lifestyles with its programming. Many people watch four or more hours of television per day, and many households leave the TV on night and day. According to Durning, "aside from sleeping and working, watching TV is the leading activity in most consumer societies, from the United States and the United Kingdom to Japan and Singapore" (p125, 1992). US programming has wide receptivity in many countries, where the dazzle of "Dallas" and "Baywatch" replace local community and culture.

At least two dangers flow from the global lure to television: 1) cultural homogenization, and 2) corporate control by a media monopoly. As lines blur between news, ads, opinion pieces, and entertainment, advertising and lifestyle propaganda creep into more and more hours of airtime. Rick Crawford describes the new media environment as promoting *anti-environmental* education through its heavy emphasis on the "gospel of consumption." From McLuhan's concern that the medium is the message, Crawford argues the media have *become* the environment, the primary cultural filters across classes and continents. As he points out, "for the first time in human history, most children are born into homes where most of the stories [our main source of learning] do not come from their communities, schools, churches, or parents...but from a handful of conglomerates with something to sell" (p1).

The combination of these three powerful industries alone has become a relentless force promoting consumerism as the number one global cultural influence. Hidden behind the rhetoric of trickle-down economics—"growth is good for everyone"—the spiral of greed, production, and shopping seduction continues to spin into ever-widening circles. As each of these three has gained in corporate and financial strength, they have quite naturally used their political clout to influence government policy to support the consumption agenda. Their own survival is at stake; of course they will do what they can to assure it. National governments pro-

vide the political structure for negotiating inter-governmental agreements such as NAFTA and GATT which expedite trade flows. Opening up new global markets can be seen as yet another wave of conquest colonialism, benefiting the economically powerful. Structural adjustment loans to poor countries are often tied to trade requirements such as reduced tariffs, renovated banking systems, or specific production guarantees that benefit the more powerful trade partner. Within the US, government policies contribute to the system of consumption through tax regulation, loans, and subsidies. Gasoline prices, for example, have been kept artificially low to keep consumers buying gas and oil company profits growing. The net effect of these government policies and trade agreements is not only to mask the serious environmental costs but to rationalize them in the name of consumption (re: trade).

This condensed systems view of consumption would not be complete without recognizing the dominant influence of the transnational corporations (TNCs). David Kortens (1995) describes in detail how TNCs have come to form global for-profit superstructures, carrying more political and economic power than many individual nation-states. Leslie Sklair (in Goodwin et al. 1997) documents the recent rapid growth of a transnational capitalist class consisting of TNC corporate executives and those who support their interests—high ranking brokers for consumption among national government and media institutions. This class transcends state boundaries and perhaps also state loyalties, placing global corporate relations as top priority. The top executive class of the TNCs now form a kind of First World within Third World countries as well, consuming at the highest levels and making it their business to promote environmentally high impact lifestyles for the masses.

Taken altogether, the global system of businesses, advertisers, media, governments, and TNCs have very successfully colluded to bring global trade and the cultural ideology of high consumption to the top of the world agenda. The environmental impacts of these increasing rates of production and consumption are well documented. But to keep trade and economics top priority, these costs must be hidden from public view; the cruelty of sweatshop labor and massive clearcuts is jarring, breaking the illusion of the shiny product, gift of technology. Players in the consumption system have a great deal staked on globalization of consumer values. Their success utterly depends on the systematic destruction of the Earth's natural systems. They will do what they need to in order to keep their agenda the primary force in the world.

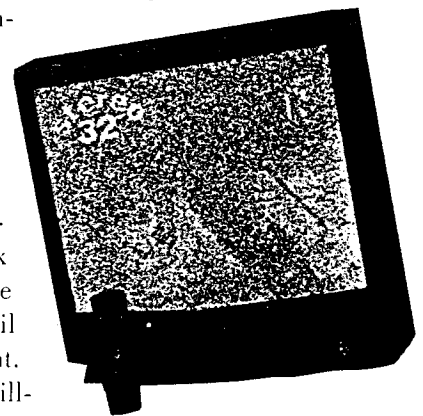


CONSTRUCTING ANOTHER VISION

Anything this out of balance generates a corrective systems response. There are active projects underway to rethink the scale of consumption in northern industrialized nations. In one study (Yearning for Balance 1995), Americans expressed concern that "materialism, greed, and selfishness increasingly dominate American life, crowding out a more meaningful set of values centered on family, responsibility, and community." Focus group surveys showed Americans strongly agreed that "the way we live produces too much waste...and consumes too many resources." The report spurred the Merck Family Fund to set up a new non-profit, The Center for a New American Dream, whose mission is to reduce resource consumption in the US while improving the quality of life.

Other new groups have taken up the task of education and exposure: Northwest Environment Watch has researched and published short handbooks on cars, energy, and toxics in their bioregion. *Stuff* is one of their triumphs, telling the true stories of computers, bicycles, french fries, and hamburgers—including all the hidden links from cradle to grave. The Center for Media Literacy based in Los Angeles works with children and teens to raise consciousness about television programming and advertising. In the emerging field of ecopsychology, therapists expose the destructive beliefs of inadequacy generated by advertising, applying healing approaches from addiction/recovery models.

Some are engaged in active resistance to the various colluding elements of the consumption system. The "Unplug your TV" group has launched a national campaign to support television-fasts and encourage experiments with alternative community-building social activities. Local voluntary simplicity groups around the continent are organizing "Buy Nothing Day" events the day after Thanksgiving, challenging shoppers' habits on the highest sales volume day of the year. Organic food producers and advocates urge people to buy local and resist the temptations of long-distance food. Anti-junk mail campaigns have reduced personal mail flows to some extent. Vermont has banned bill-



boards from the state—how refreshing! I am personally plotting a campaign to get rid of airport waiting area TVs—who asked for this escalation of the invasion?

Education and resistance expose the scale and influence of consumerism, revealing the necessity to work at the structural level, and change systemic patterns. Norberg-Hodge urges people to break the runaway spiral of "bigness" by diversifying local economic activity—building bike paths instead of roads, improving spaces for small-scale public markets, decentralizing energy development. Structural policies that favor "localization" can counter the overwhelming trend toward globalization. Likewise, policies that favor reduced use of raw materials can help reduce environmental impact. Denmark, for example, successfully banned throwaway soft drink containers (Durning 1992 p93); German industry must now collect or recycle their packaging materials as well as parts in a number of consumer goods such as cars and appliances.

One of the most radical structural proposals is the replacement of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) with GPI (Genuine Progress Indicator). Redefining Progress, based in San Francisco, points out that the GDP simply measures the amount of money changing hands—whether that money goes for new goods, divorce mediation, medical care, or prison building. The GDP not only "masks the breakdown of the social structure and the natural habitat upon which the economy—and life itself—ultimately depend; worse, it actually portrays such breakdown as economic gain." (Cobb, Halstead, and Rowe 1995 p3). In fact, the GDP *serves* industries based on resource depletion by counting their earnings as a gain rather than a loss of natural capital. GPI, in contrast, includes in the tally the positive value of the household and volunteer economy, and subtracts the cost of air and water pollution to human health. Challenging the misleading figures of the GDP is a strategic way to change the feedback mechanisms in the system.

A fourth response to this juggernaut of consumption is to build community and culture that offer alternative sources of satisfaction. In northern Vermont and New Hampshire, "The Upper Valley: 2001 and Beyond" group facilitates community forums to help small towns articulate their values. They then set action priorities based on collaborative decision-making. Northwest Earth Institute volunteers participate in work exchange weekends to share large household projects and build friendships. A number of towns like Burlington, Vermont offer nonalcoholic First Night alternatives to traditional New Year's parties, using the event to share local talent with the community.

Wendell Berry writes eloquently of an alternative vision when he speaks of the true pleasure of eating (1990). Our enjoyment of food should not have to depend on our ignorance, he says. Rather, we can most freely enjoy what we eat if we truly know the whole rich story behind each bite—the faces of the farmers, the texture of the soil, the shape of the year's growing season, the source of the seed. We have a long way to go to get out from under the environmentally devastating thumb of consumerism and overconsumption, but there are many people making a start.

I have a button I picked up somewhere—it says "Heavily into Nothing." I think I'll wear it on Buy-Nothing Day. Want to join me? ■

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