

CHAPTER 10

Consumption— The Social Roots of the Environmental Crisis

*Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything
that counts can be counted.*

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

*After reading this
chapter, you will
understand:*

1. Commodity Fetishism,
2. The social context of human behavior
3. The social-psychological roots of consumer spending
4. The Neoclassical Utility Function
5. Weber's critique of consumerism
6. The Easterlin Paradox
7. The Relative Income hypothesis
8. Thorstein Veblen's Theory of the Leisure Class
9. The Culture of Narcissism
10. The Hidden Injuries of Class
11. The capitalist squirrel cage
12. Buddhist Economics
13. Biophilia
14. Voluntary Simplicity
15. Growthmania

Sick souls may indeed be the fruit of a sick families and sick societies; but what, in turn, is the measure of sickness for society as a whole? While many criteria might be nominated, there is surely one that ranks above all others: the species that destroys its own habitat in pursuit of false values, in willful ignorance of what it does, is "mad" if the word means anything.

—THEODORE ROZAK 1992

AFFLUENZA: NEVER HAS SO MUCH MEANT SO LITTLE TO SO MANY

It's flickering, ephemeral, just out of reach. We climb social ladders grasping for it, we run endless rat races hoping to find it waiting for us at the end, like a hunk of cheese. We travel to foreign lands looking for it, we switch spouses, hoping the new wife might have it in her handbag.

Happiness: it's such an elusive goal that Thomas Jefferson, in the Declaration of Independence, promised Americans the right to its pursuit, but not necessarily to its possession. More and more, we in the industrialized world seem to be failing in that pursuit, like a pack of overfed, listless greyhounds at the track, watching the mechanical hare leap away ahead of us. According to Gregg Easterbrook, author of *The Progress Paradox, How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*, ten times as many people in the western nations suffer from clinical depression than did in 1950. In a 1997 poll, 66 percent of Americans said they believed the lot of the average person is getting worse.

These statistics initially puzzled Easterbrook, who thrusts the big picture in the reader's face and reminds us that in almost every way, the average person in the western world is better off than ever before. We live longer, have more equal access to health care and education, suffer from less discrimination, have more personal freedom and leisure time, and make more money: the typical American's income has more than doubled since 1960 (that's after adjusting for inflation).

So why the malaise and ennui? Easterbrook posits plenty of causes, including the obvious: our consumption-obsessed society encourages us to try to buy happiness.

If any further proof is needed of the hopelessness of this strategy, a quick read of Tim Kasser's *The High Price of Materialism* should suffice. Kasser, a social psychologist, combs through the accumulated data on people with materialistic values and finds that they feel neither secure nor good about themselves, that they have fewer intimate relationships, and feel little control over their lives.

The subjects of Kasser's inquiry are never satisfied; rather, they're always looking towards the next promotion or purchase, goaded by a ceaseless barrage of advertising. Easterbrook agrees, and it may be one of the most fundamental reasons we're in this mess: we're so obsessed with looking for happiness in the future that we forget to enjoy the present.

Easterbrook goes so far as to say that Americans expressed more positive views about life in the 1950s than today because people then felt they had more to look forward to. The war was over, and American men buckled down at their jobs with the firm expectation that grit and determination would buy a bigger house for the missus, fill it with the newest appliances, buy a Chevrolet and send little Johnny to college. Today, the typical American grew up in that bigger house, with not one, but two cars in the garage, and electric can-openers aplenty. Sure, many people now aspire to a third car and an even bigger house, but others are wondering just how many can-openers can a person have?

Obviously a change in both values and aspirations is needed. Kasser and Easterbrook differ slightly on their prescriptions for happiness, but they agree that we need to feel that our lives have a purpose beyond the acquisition of stuff. By focusing more on self-expression, friendship, love, and our place in the community, we'll find life's deeper meaning, they say, and be happier. But there's nothing particularly shocking in these assertions, any one of a thousand self-help books would tell you the same thing. So why do we need to be told again?

It seems the hardest thing to do is to change someone's mind about what they want. Usually it's only through harsh experience that we begin to learn: we get what we desire, find that our needs are not met, and only then, if we're smart and somewhat analytical, do we begin to question, and perhaps change.

This is clearly the case with the desire for material goods. You can see it if you flip through generations: a man born in poverty spends his life making money and providing every comfort to his son, but the son grows up wishing his dad spent more time with him, and determines to raise his own child differently. You can see it if you look around the world: ask a typical woman in Ghana if she'd be happy in a house with a refrigerator and a television, and chances are she'll say, yes indeed. Yet millions upon millions of women in America are miserable with all that and more.

You can't deny people the chance to try the material road to happiness, if that's what they're set on. You can only hope that once they've been on it for a while they'll realize there's no end in sight, and step off onto a footpath that leads in an entirely different direction.

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KARL MARX attached the term “commodity fetishism” to the perceived blindness of people to the fact the goods they consume are in fact produced by other people, and thus they were blind to the “social relationships” involved in every act of production and consumption. People did not perceive these relationships because, in industrial systems, the producers and consumers never interacted in the face to face manner that characterized earlier forms of production organization. To use the expression made famous in the film *The Godfather*, in the modern world, consumption is “nothing personal, just business.” As they are unaware of these social relationships, good and bad, it is not likely there will be any moral response to them from people.

We can extend Marx’s concept to incorporate ecological relationships. Just as consumers are generally unaware of the social relations of production they are typically unaware of the biophysical or social biophysical or social basis of production. Hence, just as consumers were unaware that the clothes they were buying from a company owned by Kathy Lee Gifford, and sold through Wal-mart, were produced in “sweatshops,” using child labor, they might also be unaware of the ecological costs and energy depletion involved in producing goods anywhere but locally.

A recent poll (1994) indicates that some American’s are aware of the ecological implications of consumerism. Some 37% of Americans indicated that they “strongly agree” that “American overuse of resources is a major global environmental problem” [reported in Schor p. 70]. But, these are small numbers, and as economist Juliet Schor has emphasized, it may be a long road between this realization and a change in behavior.

To make something a fetish is to invest it with powers it does not have. In a world where work and social life is less than satisfying, where people are bombarded with selling messages, it is not surprising that commodity consumption has been invested with great powers.

Thus, “altering the trajectory of private consumption,” Schor warns, “is not an easy task.”

To the modern consumer commodities seem to appear *ex nihilo*, devoid of any social or ecological or energetic relationship. The fact of the matter is, however, that both production and consumption are very social and very ecological and consume energy and produce wastes..

The monetary sector where production takes place and the non-monetary sector are connected by the link of the household to both sectors. The firm and the household are social organizations and most individuals exist to some extent in both. How these “institutions” are organized has a powerful impact on social-psychological behaviors of the individuals involved. One important part of the latter is consumption.

WORK IN AMERICA

Work in a firm may be a psychologically rewarding experience where individuals participate in an enriching community life and where they have the opportunity to develop

their ability and creativity. Moreover, the “job” can provide compensation adequate to fund a happy life in the household. Or, as is more typical, individuals work in an authoritarian environment that is devoid of any sense of community, where the work is boring and offers no opportunity for personal intellectual development or the expression of creativity. Moreover, the compensation for such jobs is insufficient to provide even the basic standard for a satisfying life. Sociologists generally refer to such jobs as “alienating” meaning that they tend to separate the individual from society rather than integrate the individual into society. The individual perceives himself in mechanistic way as powerless, a mere cog in a giant machine unconnected to other humans in any significant way. Adam Smith recognized this at the dawn of the industrial age when, in 1776, he observed that the “division of labor” (rigid hierarchy and the fragmentation of repetitive, trivial work) of the modern industrial firm made people as “stupid and boring as it was possible for a human being to become.” Little wonder then why people make a fetish of consumption.

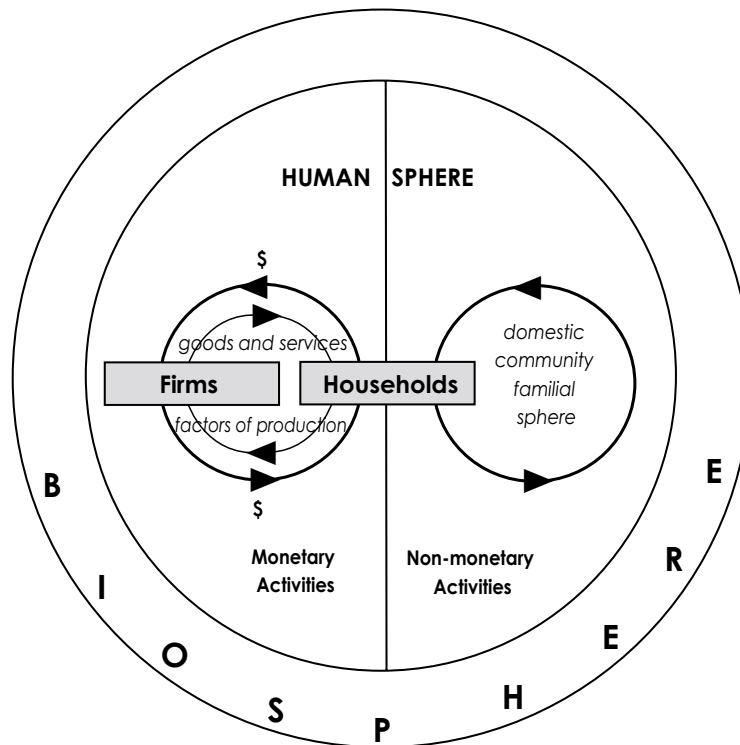
The extent of worker alienation was documented by a report ordered by the US Department of Health Education and Welfare and published in 1973. The report found that the majority of white collar jobs and $\frac{3}{4}$ of blue-collar jobs were “alienating.” The need of workers to be “masters of their environment” to feel that both they and their work were important was simply not being met. This was true of “blue-collar” workers, “white-collar” workers and even workers at the managerial level. The Report observes

The root of consumerism, then is the attempt on the part of alienated individuals to find happiness by the only means available to them—consumption of goods. Being devoid of any personal validity derived from their productive life, they attempt in a Narcissistic way to project the reflection of some valid “success image” to the world. Even people with satisfying work lives may fall into this pattern as it is the only way they can project the image of their real success to others. One simply can’t overestimate the power of social pressures on consumer behavior.

When the work day consists of “dull, repetitive, seemingly meaningless tasks, offering little challenge or autonomy,” workers are discontent and the effects of this are likely to become manifest “in other parts of the social system” [Special Task Force on Work in America [1973] p. xv]. The report documents the deleterious effects of alienation on worker longevity, heart disease, mental health, substance abuse and suicide.

One important root of consumerism, then, is the attempt on the part of alienated individuals to find happiness by the only means available to them—consumption of goods. Alienation in America has many dimensions. Many researchers have shown that “low levels of life satisfaction in social and family relationships are strongly correlated with high levels of materialism. Faced with the loneliness and vulnerability that come with deprivation of the securely encompassing community we have sought to quell the vulnerability through our possessions. What is often interpreted as materialism is in reality a demonstration of the pathologies of social deprivation. What is really

FIGURE 10.1 MONETARY AND NON-MONETARY ACTIVITIES



Reprinted with permission from Harris and Codur (1998), *Macroeconomics and the Environment* (Tufts University Global Development and Environment Institute, <http://www.ase.tufts.edu/gdae>).

being sought is participation in authentic social and natural worlds [Alperovitz, p. 224]. According to one marketing expert, the “real reasons,” (as opposed to the rational reasons) people make purchases are “hot button emotional needs including desire for control, family values, the nurturing response and the need for belonging [Alperovitz, p. 224]. We are all narcissists at some level. We all crave admiration, attention and affirmation. We want to see an appealing reflection in the social mirror. Absent the normal ways of getting such feedback—self-esteem from meaningful and secure work, a satisfying social and community life that is more than “posing” as the kids say—people seek pathological means to meet those ends.

Being devoid of any personal validity derived from their productive and social life, people attempt in a Narcissistic way to project the reflection of some valid “success image” to the world in order to get some validation. They become pathological narcissists; they crave status and engage in the ruthless pursuit of material gratification. Even people with satisfying work lives may fall into this pattern, as they would succumb to a disease epidemic, as it is the only way they can project the image of their real success to others in a narcissitic world. One simply can’t overestimate the power of these “social” motivations on consumer behavior.

The Interdependence of Wants and the Futility of Materialism

As we have stressed above, humans are social animals, far more social than neoclassical economists are inclined to believe. First, neoclassical economics assumes that individuals are “wholly self-interested” and have goals (tastes or preferences for goods and services) which are arrived at independently. The “principle of action,” asserts James Coleman, that drives these individuals is the desire to maximize utility. This presumption is contrasted to that of sociology which assumes individual actions are “governed by social norms, rules and obligations” that are either internalized through the socialization process or enforced by some sort of system of sanctions. In short, an individual’s norms are not arrived at individually. Moreover, as there is no individual “principle of action,” it is impossible to understand any individual’s behavior outside of “social context.” Arjo Klamer, professor of art, economics and culture at George Washington University insists that the “blindness for the social dimension in the bastion of Economics is becoming scandalous.” What is needed is that the “automatons” that inhabit conventional economics need to be brought “alive with moral sentiments and social ambitions.”

Surely, Harvard Economist, James Dusenberry went too far when he summed these distinctions with the quip, “economists study how people choose, sociology studies why they have no choices.” Of course, people are “free to choose” but they are not unconstrained by their social context. It is important, for example, to note in this context that, according to Klamer and McClosky, 25% of US GDP is spent on some form of persuasion so as to help us “know what we want.” In light of the obvious social and cultural content of our behavior, Diedre McClosky demands that mainstream economists stop “sneering” at those who wish to make Economics a true social science by incorporating the social, the cultural and the psychological into its explications of human behavior. Economists are highly resistant to such suggestions, of course, because the incorporation of such factors makes the mathematics messy.

Regarding selfishness, it is important to note that there are many people who for various “ethical” reasons refuse to act in a socially irresponsible way. For example, many refuse to purchase a Sport Utility Vehicle. Such individuals, for example, are concerned about road safety, and the environmental and political aspects of the use of fossil fuels. Instead, they pay a premium, far in excess than what can be justified by any gasoline savings, for a hybrid car that does not pollute. Many others simply refuse to be caught up in “fads,” or to be the pawns of the advertising of the automobile industry. Indeed, there is far more morality-based behavior in the economic realm than most economists are willing to recognize. Amatai Etzioni places such behavior in what he calls the “moral dimension” where “people seek to do what is right and what is pleasurable,” and frequently find themselves “in conflict when moral values and happiness are in conflict.” Etzioni contends that we are “first of all,” “normative-affective beings” whose deliberations are deeply affected by our values and emotions” who also “rely on evidence and reason to chose our course.” We are also, he contends, “beings [who] see themselves as members of a community

and as self-seeking individuals” and are often torn by “our commitment to the commons and to one’s self.” In short, Etzioni “sees individuals as able to act rationally and on their own, advancing the self or “I,” but their ability to do so is deeply affected by how well they are anchored within a sound community and sustained by a firm moral and emotive personal underpinning—a community they perceive as theirs, as a “We,” rather than an imposed, restraining “they.” In this construction of reality, human beings pass judgment over their urges. People pay taxes, he contends, “not merely because they fear penalties, but also because they consider government to be a legitimate institution.”

Clearly, the characterization of human behavior as being unselfishly and emotionally motivated is as deficient as that which has it as totally selfish and rational. At the very least then, following Etzioni’s line of thought “individuals are, simultaneously, under the influence of two major sets of factors—their pleasure, and their moral duty,” and “both reflect their socialization.” Hence, “a study of the dynamics of the forces that shape both kinds of factors and their relative strengths is an essential foundation for a valid theory of behavior and society, including economic behavior.”

The extent to which humans can be motivated by moral concerns transcends a mere academic squabble. It was once said that “politics in academia are so vicious because the stakes are so low.” In this case the stakes are quite high. The concept of sustainability, as we have seen ultimately rests on a moral foundation. If people cannot be motivated by a moral obligation to future generations, to other species, and to others in their own generation, then frankly the game is lost.

Our focus here is going to be on how social life impacts on the biosphere by way of its impact on the desire to consume. Increased consumption requires increased throughput which produces more waste and depletes resources. Economists as we have noted have simply assumed that the “wants” of people are unlimited. While this may be effectively true, it may not be an existential truth. It may instead be a historically and culturally specific behavior that is subject to modification. After all, if a soap opera could change the fertility behavior of Mexicans, can’t we find a way to alter the mad and environmentally perverse consumerism of Americans and others in the developed world and perhaps head it off in the developing nations? Perhaps, but as this chapter will show the consumerism has deep social-psychological roots that are related to very fundamental aspects of how our economy is organized.

Utilitarianism

Alfred Marshall understood the first law of thermodynamics when he noted that humans cannot produce either matter or energy, we can produce only “utilities.”

Man cannot create material things . . . His efforts and sacrifices result in changing the form or arrangement of matter to adapt it better for the satisfaction of his wants . . . as his production of material products is really nothing more than a rearrangement of mat-

ter which gives it new utilities, so his consumption of them is nothing more than a dis-arrangement of matter which diminishes and destroys utilities. —Quoted in HERMAN DALY (1987), The Economic Growth Debate, *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management*, 14, p. 326

For the most part, however, standard economics ignores the first and second law of thermodynamics. Economics never questions how these utilities can be continually produced over time in a “steady state” much less in a growing economy.

Undaunted, Economists adopt a utilitarian view of human needs, expressing human welfare as follows:

$$U = U(X_1, X_2, \dots, X_n)$$

where U means utility or satisfaction and the X's are goods consumed. The form of the utility function is unknown as it depends purely on the subjective tastes of the individual. In short, a person's well-being is one-dimensional depending only on the quantity of goods she/he consumes. Economists do not specify the origins of these tastes, they insist only that they are “exogenous,” that is they are independent of the process of production and consumption or more broadly, an individual's economic life. In other words, these tastes are not influenced, for example, by social class, or by advertising, or by the nature of one's work. Some economists imagine these tastes as stemming from a person's bio-psychological constitution or some such inherent force. Therefore, these tastes are primal, integral and morally unquestionable aspects of the human personality. One does not question the legitimacy of a person's “tastes” any more than one would question a person's desire to eat. There is, thus, a high moral priority attached to the satisfaction of human “tastes” or wants-needs. Indeed, the national well-being is accounted as being no more than the sum of the value of final goods and services produced to serve the tastes of consumers in a year. It is called the Gross Domestic Product. Economists recognize that this representation is far from inclusive of all aspects of life that may influence well being, but as a practical matter, they are willing to assume that a change in economic (utilitarian) welfare implies a change in total welfare at least in the same direction. To say it is a practical matter, however, is to miss the point. Economists have no choice but to make this assumption because, as a discipline, Economics has neither the ability nor the interest to incorporate more arguments (Xs) into the utility function. *Thus, beyond the rather limited accounting for “externalities”, there is no room in this framework to allow that while Xs are increasing the same process may be destroying ecosystems and the lives of communities, families and individuals.* Indeed, these disintegrative processes might actually increase some of the Xs; for example psychiatric and medical care, expenditures on alcohol, guns, door locks, mace, divorce lawyers, tranquilizers, anti-depressives,¹ and counseling for shopping addicts, credit abusers and shoplifters. The construction of jails, landfills, sewage treatment plants, the clean-up of oil spills and hazardous waste dumps likewise increment the Xs. Recently, the nation obsessed on the O. J. Simpson

trial, but most did so for ghoulish reasons rather than the fact that the circus surrounding the trial added billions to the GDP.

Another instance of the misleading nature of growth in GDP is the “growth” related to the rising labor force participation of women. During the 1970s and 1980s GDP exploded as mothers plunged into the labor market. With mother out of the home fast food and day care replaced services mother used to provide in the home, that was never counted in GDP. Day care alone adds \$4 billion to GDP [Cobb et al p. 67], but day care has not increased it has merely changed its form and it is not clear whether it was to the better. Similarly, the growth of “out of home dining” raises the measured GDP, but real GDP has risen quite a bit less as, again much of the change was in form rather than substance.

The central issue is, however, does incrementing the Xs increase the general welfare? Is there more to happiness and satisfaction than utilitarian consumption? Economists claim that people know what is best for them, so it is not up to them to judge what is “good” and should be counted and what is “bad” and should not be counted in GDP. Cobb et al along with many other critics of GDP accounting, consider such respect for individual rationality peculiar in light of the evidence indicating a wide range of addictive behaviors. Some 40% of the nation’s drinking exceeds the level of “moderation,” defined as two drinks per day. Credit card abuse has become so pervasive that local chapters of Debtors Anonymous hold 45 meetings a week in the San Francisco Bay Area alone. Close to 50% of Americans consider themselves to be overweight. When one considers the \$32 Billion diet industry, the GDP becomes truly bizarre. It counts the food that people wish they didn’t eat, and then the billions they spend to lose the added pounds that result. The coronary by-pass patient becomes almost a metaphor for the nation’s measure of progress: shovel in the fat, pay the consequences, add the two together, and the economy grows some more [Cobb et al p.67].

If all the money that is spent on heroin, cocaine, LSD, crack and other abused substances could be counted² and added in to GDP it would, in principle, be added in along with Valium and Prozac and alcohol—its what the people want! In 1962, Nobel Prize winning economist, the man who invented the GDP accounting system, warned that the system needed to be used with care:

Distinctions must be kept in mind between quantity and quality of growth, between its costs and return, and between the short-run and the long-run. Goals for “more” growth should specify more growth of what and for what. —Quoted in COBB ET AL p. 67

When coal is mined out of the ground the coal company will subtract the value of the coal from its balance sheet; its main asset, its stock of coal, has been diminished and this needs to be accounted for. Indeed, any business will treat the depletion of its inventory as an expense. When coal is mined GDP rises, but there is no accounting of the fact that the natural stock of coal has been depleted. When coal is used air and water pollution result, but no accounting of this damage is reflected in GDP. Indeed, when people are treated for black lung disease or emphysema consequent to mining

coal or breathing polluted urban air, GDP rises. Economists have long pointed to the need to amend GDP to allow for resource depletion and pollution, but have not made much headway. Recently, the Clinton Administration suggested exploring this option, and the Bureau of Economic Analysis began work on the idea to integrate clean water, air and climate in the national accounts. In 1994, the BEA published the numbers on the social value of mineral extraction which showed that when the true costs of coal were fully accounted for, the social return on coal was actually quite low. The work was immediately stopped by Congressional intervention. A statement by Congressman Alan Mollan of West Virginia (a coal state), who was Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, explains concisely why. If we were to account for depletion and pollution, he claimed “somebody is going to say . . . the coal industry isn’t contributing anything to the country” [quoted in Cobb et al p. 70]. Mollan used his clout to stop any further work on environmental indicators.

As discussed in an earlier chapter, a group of Economists have developed a measure they call the “genuine progress indicator”(GPI) which includes some 20 indicators that the GDP ignores. For example, it deducts for resource depletion (minerals, timber etc) pollution costs (e.g. clean-up of toxic waste dumps, water purifiers), the costs of fighting crime (door locks, “the club, etc). On the positive side it adds in factors that GDP excludes such as the services of housewives and volunteers. The resulting numbers resolves the contradiction of the apparent economic prosperity and the general malaise that seems to be afflicting the American people; the GPI fell between 1975 and 1995 and has been virtually flat since 1973.

IS THAT ALL THERE IS?

Max weber, in the *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, written in about 1920, paints a grim picture of a society that has devolved from one based on “worldly asceticism” into one based on “pure utilitarianism”—consumption for its own sake [Weber p. 183]. A society, Weber asserted, where the pursuit of wealth, had been stripped of the religious and ethical meaning given to it by Protestants of Calvin’s time, and has tended to “become associated with purely mundane passions, which often give it the character of sport.”

No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For the last stage of this cultural development, it might well truly be said: “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.” —WEBER p. 182

Weber obviously took a very jaundiced view of a society that directed its energies only in the pursuit of the pleasure of individualist consumption for its own sake and,

would, most surely have been appalled by the way we reckon our national well-being. But, this is clearly a value judgment made by a man of great culture and erudition who took his pleasures from the world of ideas and was, due to inheritance, free of concern over material needs. If people do indeed achieve happiness through consumption, one might ask, who is he to judge? But, one must take to task the unargued assumption here. Does rising income and consumption produce happiness?

THE EASTERLIN PARADOX

In 1974, economist R.A. Easterlin published a paper that challenged the notion that “economic growth improves the human lot.” The Easterlin Paradox is this: in any given country at any given time, the rich report themselves “very happy” at rates greater than the poor do—a not really unexpected result. However, when one compares rich and poor nations, reported differences in self-rated happiness are small. Moreover, within a single nation there is no increase in reported happiness consequent to economic growth.

This paradox was confirmed by a student of mine recently returned from a visit to Costa Rica. He was perplexed by his observation of the poverty of the people and, simultaneously, their complete happiness. Based on his experience he believed that Americans were a lot less happy than the impoverished Costa Ricans. The connection between consumption standards and happiness appears tenuous at best. People in rich countries, and people in a country experiencing rising consumption appear no happier. Why then are the rich in a given country happier than the poor? The answer has little to do with the absolute level of consumption, but to its relative level.

THE THEORY OF THE LEISURE CLASS

The idea that happiness was relative was put forward by Thorstein Veblen in the early 20th century, in the *Theory of the Leisure Class*. James Dusenberry, following Veblen, introduced the concept of relative deprivation in his study of aggregate consumption. More recently, Barbara Bergmann in *Women in Economics* and Juliet Schor, in the *Overworked American*, have noted the “cycle of work and spend” or the so-called “capitalist squirrel cage” where people work more to get more to spend, but are unsatisfied so they work even more. In the process Bergmann points out their lives may crumble around them. Married middle-class women do not “need to work” she argues, they choose to in order provide for a higher level of family consumption. *The fundament of all of these perspectives is that consumption above certain levels entails more costs than benefits to the individuals who consume. Consumption of goods constitutes a sublimation of real, social needs into a process that cannot satisfy them.* The only benefits of consumption accrue to the capitalists because high mass consumption is essential to the maintenance of capitalism.

In the *General Theory*, Keynes presented a foundational macroeconomic concept he called the “consumption function.” Keynes believed that people would spend more as their income increased, but the fraction spent would decline as people became more affluent. Eventually people would have satisfied their basically physiological needs for material goods, he argued, so any further increase in income would be saved. Such high and growing saving rates presented a real problem for capitalism as profits depended on large scale production and consumption. In the face of slowing consumption growth there would be fewer opportunities for investment and profit so the system would stagnate. Fortunately, for capitalism, the growth of the savings rate as affluence increased never happened. Households continued to spend about the same fraction of income in 1994 as they did in 1894 despite a considerably higher real income. Writing some two decades before *The General Theory*, Thorstein Veblen provided the explanation for the paradox.

According to Veblen, the society of the US at the turn of the century was dominated by the mores of the “predatory class” i.e. capitalists. Since this class received its income from the ownership of resources, not from labor, he called it the “leisure class.” In the past the “predatory prowess” of accomplished men, often military men, was evident to all and incited admiration. But the capitalists, who are remote from the scene of production, and whose success is less evident, have to find another way to incite admiration. According to Veblen they do it with “conspicuous consumption” or more specifically, “conspicuous waste.” The more useless a thing was the more highly prized it is by the wealthy as an article of conspicuous waste. Thus the “pecuniary culture” is one of “invidious distinction” where the wealthy are ranked according to the degree to which they can waste money. Personal worth and self-esteem came to be measured in terms of property:

A certain standard of wealth and of prowess . . . is a necessary condition of reputability, and anything in excess of this normal amount is meritorious.

Veblen believed that since the cultural standard of consumption was established by the Capitalists, the general population attempted to emulate the consumption of the rich. “Emulative consumption” became the standard by which the common folk established their self-esteem. Following Marx and Smith, Veblen recognized the “degradation of labor” as part of the reason why people felt miserable. But, unlike Marx, who believed that consumption made workers better off. Veblen added the notion of “chronic dissatisfaction” with emulative consumption as a factor, not diminishing, but instead, adding to worker misery and discontent. Although the misery is psychological, Veblen insisted it was real nonetheless and was “all the more irremediable and substantial on that account.”

The basic idea of competitive emulation enters modern economics in the form of the relative income hypothesis of James Dusenberry. Economists were perplexed by the Keynesian paradox, that is, the failure of the saving rate to rise over time as society became more affluent. Dusenberry following Veblen reasoned that people

will save if they feel more affluent, but the feeling of affluence is a relative thing. People judge their well-being in terms of what other people have. Thus, even though one might accumulate more things over time, this provides no satisfaction if others, above and below you, are also accumulating. It is possible for people to feel deprivation even as they consume more goods and services if they are not “keeping up with the Joneses.” Dusenberry reasoned that as long as income is unequally distributed and the distribution remains roughly the same (which it has, at least until the last 10 years) income growth and consumption will not satiate the emulative drive so spending will continue. Thus, as long as the rich are getting more and better goods everyone else will try to follow. Indeed, if the “rich get richer” relative to the poor, the poor will feel poorer even as their real incomes rise. Thus, no matter how much income rises, or how much they consume, they will be no happier. Thus, it would appear that “wants’ are indeed unlimited. Yet, there may be more than purely social forces at work

IT PAYS TO ADVERTISE

In his 1969 book, *Technology and Growth: The Price We Pay*, the English economist E. J. Mishan, described the American economy as a “bizarre spectacle of growing resources pressing against limited wants” [p. 164]. That is, the demand for consumption goods was not keeping up with the ability to produce them. Mishan contended that wants nevertheless would continually grow “in response to the techniques of industry,” meaning advertising, and hence “the basis necessary to infer a per capita rise in welfare over time simply does not exist.” The needs being satisfied are ones that were created so no increase in satisfaction was possible. A person that satisfies a created need can be no better-off. Indeed, Mishan insisted that the “rising tide of consumer goods” produced “as much “diswelfare as welfare” [p. 164].

Expanding wants are, according to Mishan, engendered by “the institution of commercial advertising” which “accentuates the materialistic propensities of men and promotes the view that the things that matter are the things money can buy.” Most notably, Mishan laments the deleterious effects of “rapid technological innovations” including “automobilization,” long-commutes, and television on “family separation,” “communication with neighbors” and, more generally on “affection and intimacy.” In giving up the latter, for the “things money can buy” people have exchanged “substance for shadow” [p. 164].

More broadly Mishan alludes to the fundamental macroeconomic problem. Capitalism is a system that is driven by expanding production capacity. Even Marx admired capitalism for its capacity to greatly expand the productive powers of a society. But the great capitalist machine fails when there are insufficient markets for the goods it produces. Should capitalism ever encounter “limited wants” it will crash—and periodically it does just that. The continued health of capitalism, as we shall

learn in macroeconomics, requires the expansion of wants to absorb the ever growing product of accumulating capital. Mishan calls the result, “growthmania:”

There may be doubts among philosophers and heart-searchings among poets, but to the multitude the kingdom of God is to be realized here, and now, on this earth; and it is to be realized via technological innovation, and at an exponential rate [1969 p. 4]

The “growthmania,” in turn, is sustained by the “want-creating mechanism.” Put simply, consumer sovereignty, the idea that consumers choose freely based on their inherent tastes, is a “myth:

Over time, an unchanging pattern of wants would just not suffice to absorb the rapid growth in the flow of consumer goods coming onto the domestic markets of rich countries . . . The sustained rise in consumption expenditure at all levels of society depends largely on the unflagging zeal and enterprise of the advertising industry. In its absence leisure would certainly be increasing faster than it is [1969, p. 95]

Of course, this social process has been aided and abetted by the business world. Over the last two decades of the 19th century the scale of production increased dramatically. The producers were worried about consumers becoming saturated with goods. The 1920s was the first decade of modern advertising, that is the use by the industry of “scare copy.” The basic idea of “scare copy” was to convince the consumer that they will risk becoming losers in life if they do not consume the company’s product. Thus, self-esteem, status, the need for friendship and even love (sex?) come to be associated, through advertising, with consumption of products. The goal of advertising is to create “dissatisfied consumers” and then to supply a product to satisfy them. Of course, it must be assured the product does not satisfy for too long; styles must change constantly, a new model automobile each year, and not to worry if things don’t work very well or for very long, the consumer will just have to buy another. Advertising thrives on the insecurities, the frustrations, the aspirations and even the successes of people to “huckster” goods to them.

In 1914 Henry Ford established a Sociological Department to enhance worker productivity. Ford believed he had to control the worker’s private life to insure that the worker would be “sober, thrifty, industrious producers.” In short, Ford preached the basic Protestant Ethic [Lasch p.71]. At the same time many employers were beginning to realize that workers were also necessary to the firm as consumers:

that he needed to be imbued with a taste for higher things; that an economy based on mass production required not only capitalistic organization of production but the organization of consumption and leisure as well. —LASCH p. 72

The mass production of commodities in ever-increasing abundance demands a mass market to absorb them, but with basic needs satisfied an ever expanding demand for goods is not easy to manage:

When economic necessity yields to the necessity for limitless economic development, the satisfaction of basic and generally recognized human needs gives way to an uninterrupted fabrication of pseudo-needs. —LASCH p. 72

In the *Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch penetrates the method of advertising's manipulation of the alienated worker. Workers are urged to work not on the basis of the Protestant work ethic, but so he can "partake of the fruits of consumption." Not so he might be a contributor to community well-being, but so he might salve the open, festering wound of his alienation :

In a simpler time, advertising merely called attention to the product and extolled its advantages. Now it manufactures a product of its own: the consumer, perpetually unsatisfied, restless, anxious, and bored. Advertising serves not so much to advertise products as to promote consumption as a way of life. It "educates" the masses into an unappeasable appetite not only for goods but for experiences and personal fulfillment. It upholds consumption as the answer to the age-old discontents of loneliness, sickness, weariness, lack of sexual satisfaction; at the same time it creates new forms of discontent peculiar to the modern age. It plays seductively on the malaise of industrial civilization. Is your job boring and meaningless? Does it leave you with feelings of futility and fatigue? Is your life empty? Consumption promises to fill the aching void; hence the attempt to surround commodities with an aura of romance; with allusions to exotic places and experience; and with images of female breasts from which all blessings flow.

The propaganda of commodities serves a double function. First, it upholds consumption as an alternative to protest or rebellion. Paul Nystrom, an early student of modern marketing, once noted industrial civilization gives rise to a "philosophy of futility," a pervasive fatigue, a "disappointment with achievements" that finds an outlet in changing the "more superficial things in which fashion reigns." The tired worker, instead of attempting to change the conditions of his work, seeks renewal in brightening his immediate surroundings with new goods and services.

In the second place, the propaganda of consumption turns alienation itself into a commodity. It addresses itself to the spiritual desolation of modern life and proposes consumption as the cure. It not only promises to palliate the old unhappiness to which flesh is heir; it creates or exacerbates new forms of unhappiness—personal insecurity, status anxiety, anxiety of parents about their ability to satisfy the needs of the young. Do you look dowdy next to your neighbors? Do you own a car inferior to theirs? Are your children as healthy? as popular? doing as well in school? Advertising institutionalizes envy and its attendant anxieties. —LASCH pp. 72–73

As they are the major managers of consumption, advertising has been particularly directed at women, and in a most manipulative and cynical way. The industry that has systematically displayed women as sex objects to sell everything from beer to mechanics tools and that has played on women's insecurities to sell cosmetics, diets, fashion and breast implants, now takes "the side of women against male oppression" [Lasch p. 74]:

The logic of demand creation requires women smoke and drink in public, move about freely, and assert their right to happiness instead of living for others. The advertising industry thus encourages the pseudo-emancipation of women, flattering them with its insinuating reminder, “You’ve come a long way, baby,” and disguising the freedom to consume as genuine autonomy. —LASCH p. 74

In 1985 advertising expenditures were nearly \$95 billion [Simon & Eitzen p. 104]. These expenditures were wasteful in at least three ways. First, they create a demand for consumption that only exacerbates environmental problems. Second, they increase the cost of products which harms the often financially strapped consumer. Third, advertising is deceptive and manipulative preying on people’s social insecurity and may exacerbate any problems they may have. For example, how does an unemployed father feel when he cannot provide his children with the status symbols such as trendy clothing his children demand? The man’s self-respect is already undermined by his loss of employment. The advertising induced demands of his children are just another nail in his coffin.

In the *Affluent Society*, John Kenneth Galbraith identifies limited blessings of private consumption. In one vivid paragraph he shows the suburban family in their “mauve and cerise power steered, power braked automobile” driving through a crime-ridden, dilapidated city, on congested, pot-hole filled roads, to a campground filled with litter that sits by a polluted river. Galbraith asserts that most of what people want is not original with themselves, but created by advertising, so filling of people’s “wants” is of no normative consequence:

So it is that if production creates the wants it seeks to satisfy . . . the urgency of wants can no longer defend the urgency of production. Production only fills a void that it has itself created. [p. 125]

But, the problem is more fundamental and pernicious than an advertising system out of control or even perverse social behaviors. While alienated labor is central to the problem of consumerism it is only part of the core of the issue. In the final analysis consumerism is a produced form of class psychology. In a classic work of sociology, the *Hidden Injuries of Class*, Richard Sennet and Jonathan Cobb claim that in the American social-economic system a certain class benefits when it makes people feel anxious, defeated, and self-reproachful because self-doubt stimulates patterns of spending necessary to sustain the American economic system [Pfeffer p. 312]. The system requires that goods be distributed unequally so the factories can stay open:

only by allotting goods and services unequally to a few, who appear more comfortable than the rest . . . the people below work to consume more in an effort to narrow the margin of inequality in the enjoyment of comforts; the factories then produce for mass demand. As a result, however, those at the top get still more goods and services, or new ones, and the cycle begins again . . . Whatever plateau of material circumstance a person

achieves seems to him inadequate by comparison; he wants to be like them, and so he moves on to consume more and more. The vision of an inadequacy in one's standard of living suggests that . . . class psychology is at work here. The construction of class and personal worth . . . serve a purpose in motivating people to consume through destructive replacement.. —SENNET AND COBB QUOTED IN PFEFFER p. 313

Self-esteem and self-respect are rooted, in America, in the liberal ideology of individual independence and freedom, which was, in turn rooted in the experience of the community of small farmers and businessmen. How is the individual in a modern society working as an appendage to a machine or like a robot, who is treated like dirt, and who is powerless going to achieve the sense of independence and freedom necessary for self-respect?

THE VICIOUS CYCLE

Christopher Lasch has argued that consumerism is even more deeply rooted than in mundane alienation. The attachment of people to consumerism is a manifestation, he claims, of a narcissism that has been born of a millenarian, apocalyptic “sense of ending.” According to Lasch, “[s]torm warnings, portents, hints of catastrophe haunt our times” [Lasch p. 3]. In particular, “the threat of nuclear annihilation, the depletion of natural resources, well-founded predictions of ecological disaster have fulfilled poetic prophecy,” and provide “concrete historical substance to the nightmare” scenario of the end of the world as we know it [Lasch p. 3]. Thus, the ecological abuse of the past drives the ecological abuse of the future.

Millenarian movements are not unprecedented in human history; it is not the first time humans have worried that the world was going to end. But, the rise of millenarian fervor in the United States since the 1970s was fundamentally different from that of earlier epochs. The millenarian movements of the middle-ages were fundamentally collective, revolutionary social movements based on the expected deliverance by a messiah who would then establish a new social order that would put an end to private property and level society to one where there were no longer rich and poor.

The American social scene has shown signs of millenarian religious revivals since the 1970s. Marvin Harris notes that it “would take a small telephone book just to list all the swamis, Gurus, Sris, Bubas, Bawas, Yogis, Yogas, Marharishis, and Marharagis who began to find disciples in America, not to mention the Jesus freaks, encounter groups, UFO cults, and the rest [Harris 1981 p. 142]. The so-called,” Third Great Awakening, according to Harris, is

“primarily a desperate response to the unsolved problems of malfunctioning consumerism, inflation, the eroding of sex roles, breakup of the single-breadwinner family, alienation from work, oppressive government and corporate bureaucracies, feelings of isolation loneliness, fear of crime, and bewilderment about the root cause of so many changes happening at once. Given all these unsolved problems, perhaps the question we

should have been considering is not why the cults have spread but why they haven't spread more. —HARRIS 1981 p. 165

Robert Bellah explains the cults in terms of a disillusionment with “worldly striving” under the regime of “utilitarian individualism”:

Careerism and status seeking, the sacrifice of present fulfillment for some ever-receding future goal, no longer seemed worthwhile. —Quoted in HARRIS 1981 p. 144

Bellah claimed that malaise was a symptom of the success of society in providing the material well-being and affluence that proved ultimately to be unsatisfying. But, as Harris has argued “much of the post-World War II rise in living standards was illusory” [1981 p. 145]. The cause of the Third Great Awakening is the search for the solution to real economic and social problems:

Married women were not pushed into the labor force by spiritual questing, but by unpaid bills. The single-breadwinner family and the marital procreative imperative were not destroyed by affluence but by an inability to reconcile the costs of child-rearing with the maintenance of middle-class standards of consumption. Was it the quest for ultimate meaning that put millions on the dole, and turned America's cities into crime-ridden combat zones? [1981 p. 145].

The problems of the present are not those peculiar to the affluent and complacent middle-class, but stem from desperation that is not confined only to the middle-class:

The collapse of personal life originates not in the spiritual torments of affluence but in the war of all against all, which is now spreading from the lower class, where it has long raged without interruption, to the rest of society . . . The poor have always had to live for the present, but now a desperate concern for personal survival, sometimes disguised as hedonism, engulfs the middle-class as well. —LASCH pp. 26–27

We did not get greater participation in “religious” groups, according to Lasch, because people took the individualistic, narcissistic³ path or what he called “transcendental self-attention” [Lasch p. 6]:

People today hunger not for personal salvation, let alone for the restoration of a former golden age, but for the feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal well-being, health and psychic security . . . Americans have retreated to purely personal preoccupations. Having no hope of improving their lives in any of the ways that matter, people have convinced themselves that what matters is psychic self-improvement: getting in touch with their feelings, eating health food, taking lessons in ballet or belly-dancing, immersing themselves in the wisdom of the east, jogging, learning how to relate. —LASCH pp. 4, 7 emphasis added

While harmless enough when viewed out of context such a mentality indicates “a retreat from politics” and a repudiation of the past and the future of society—“live for yourself, not for your predecessors or for posterity” is the beat to which the contemporary narcissist marches; a beat which is out of synchrony with an environmental con-

sciousness [Lasch p. 5]. The dominating sense is that politics in general, and environmental politics in particular is futile offering only a “change in the management of the disease.” “Its amazingly simple,” one writer quips. “Things fall apart. There’s nothing you can do. Let a smile be your umbrella” [Lasch p. 6].

The unpleasant fact is that most individuals are powerless, they have no real autonomy whatsoever:

Having surrendered most of his technical skills to the corporation, he can no longer provide for his material needs. As the family loses not only its productive functions but many of its reproductive functions as well, men and women no longer manage even to raise their children without the help of certified experts. The atrophy of older traditions of self-help has eroded everyday competence . . . and has made the individual dependent on the State, the corporation and other bureaucracies. —LASCH p. 10

According to Lasch, “narcissism represents the psychological dimension of this dependence”. For the narcissist, the world is a mirror . . . “the narcissist depends on others to validate his self-esteem” [Lasch p. 10]. In effect people become the image they see reflected in the eyes of others; an image they can control with the appropriate selection of consumer goods including the very image of their bodies which are now sculpted either in health clubs or in the operating theaters of cosmetic surgeons. The advertising business has not missed the opportunity to exploit such narcissism. Individuals are encouraged by Nike advertisements to claim power over their lives and “just do it” being certain to wear the appropriate costume, of course. Other advertisements seek to empower individuals by encouraging them “to break the rules” by speeding in an automobile or drinking a certain beer.

But it is not the individuals and their narcissism that needs to be “criticized and condemned” but the institutions of a corporate, industrial capitalist society that devastate personal life. Not only is the narcissist path of privatism environmentally destructive, it is self-defeating. It is corrosive of both our civil and personal life.

Ecopsychologist Theodore Rozak in *Voice of the Earth*, tells the story of Anna, a Polish Solidarity activist, and her first confrontation with a U.S. Supermarket. As she walked up and down the aisles, “tears of amazement” streamed down her face. But, these were not the tears of the frustrated consumer who had finally reached the promised land; they were tears of deprivation indeed, but not the deprivation of goods. Rozak explains:

As Marx himself knew, sheer physical discomfort is not the worst form of suffering; Greater by far is the hardship that results when privation is due to injustice, incompetence and corruption. Then the pain is compounded by the indignity of victimization —ROZAK p. 22

As Rozak sees it, there is a kind of material hunger, “that transcends the needs of the body. In this sense, access to material goods, even of the most frivolous kinds, junk food, blue jeans, transistor radios, T-shirts, can sometimes be an assertion of

self-respect and independence. It is not just raw, self-indulgent consumption.” [Rozak p. 22] What does it do to people who are denied material goods when they realize that others, no more deserving have them? [Rozak p. 22]:

the market economies of the world are so riddled with greed and vicious competition that it is easy for critics to overlook the possibility that, after a contorted fashion, they meet significant human needs. We are so used to seeing our economic system exploited by profiteers that we may be tempted to treat the needs people bring to the market place with the same contempt that we heap on the hucksters that manipulate those needs. But it's the first rule of a humane sociology to distinguish the aspirations of people from the distorted way in which those aspirations may be expressed. An activity as simple as, and seemingly as purely acquisitive shopping may provide the opportunity for making choices, asserting taste. Admittedly, it is a low grade exercise of social power; it has clearly come to exert a powerful attraction upon millions in the modern world. —ROZAK p. 22

Those social critics that have an attitude of “environmental puritanism that delights in castigating our sins of self-indulgence and the environmental movement, which uses “scolding and shaming,” to produce consumer guilt are, according to Rozak, attacking the wrong target. Rozak complains “is it just me, or does everyone else feel guilty for being alive too? The fact is “every consumer is inherently anti-environmental: consumption is the green equivalent of original sin.” [Rozak p. 37]. It may be true, that in some sense, much of human consumption is “unnecessary” [Lee p. 3]. It is certainly true that human consumption is at the root of the environmental problem. It is not, however, inherent human perversity that is the problem. The problem is human alienation and its consequent narcissism.

The average American consumes more than twice what he did in 1946 (\$6,000 v \$14,000 for every man woman and child). Is s/he twice as happy? Actually the percentage of the population reporting themselves “very happy” peaked in 1957. This is despite the fact that there is now 16 sq. ft. of shopping mall for every man, woman and child in the U.S. [Schor 107–108]. Indeed, shopping is now the main cultural activity in the United States. People have more money to spend than ever, but people are not happier. In particular, people complain that they do not have enough time for themselves and for their families.

Harvard economist Juliet Schor believes that the problem is two-pronged. One, people are caught up in the cycle of conspicuous consumption and invidious distinction—work and spend. But, unlike Veblen who sees this as a human problem, Schor sees it as a system problem—people are not choosing to work more, they are being forced to work more. So much for freedom and independence! While it is true that by working more they earn more income, the only source of satisfaction they can get is through consumption as they have no time for anything else. Their attempt to increase happiness by working more to earn more to spend more is analogous to a squirrel in a squirrel cage, running faster and faster, getting exhausted, but getting nowhere.

THE EASTERLIN PARADOX—A SUMMARY

We have covered a great deal of literature on the roots of the “postmodern malaise,” that is why people who have more do not seem to be any happier, and indeed in many respects feel worse than those with less goods.

The roots of Easterlin’s paradox are:

1. People cannot meet the need for meaningful work by consuming more goods. What they need is not more money, but better jobs.
2. More consumption cannot increase happiness because it is, to a large degree, mere emulation and matching of what others have. People can’t get satisfaction as long as others have more and better goods. As long as there is inequality in the distribution of income and wealth, and thus, ongoing conspicuous consumption by elites, relative deprivation will persist.
3. Many goods are positional in nature so increased consumption will not “add-up” to more well-being.
4. People have to work more to spend more. This undermines family and community engagement and this results in more unfulfilled needs that cannot be satisfied by consumption.
5. Much of consumption is driven by advertising which preys on unmet emotional and social needs to sell goods that cannot satisfy these needs.
6. Increasing consumption creates a degraded environment which reduces people’s sense of well-being, not to mention the threat it poses to their health, and that of their children.

At the very least it seems evident that more is no better than less, and it may be worse. Is it possible to imagine a world where less is thought to be better than more. A world where people strive to get by on less, and are happier for it?

Leisure time is for the most part less damaging to the ecosystem than consumption. If people were willing to work less and earn and spend less, it might help reduce the severity of many of the environmental problems we face. There is some evidence that people would prefer to work fewer hours even if it means less income and consumption. In dual-earner families the time pressure is intense and not surprisingly 38% of men and 52% of women in these families responded affirmatively to a poll question asking if they were willing to trade income for family time. Another poll asked people if they would trade some income for more leisure time. Some 70% of people with incomes over \$30,000 responded affirmatively as did 48% of those with incomes below 20,000. Similar results appear in Europe even though hours worked were lower than in the United States [Schor p. 76–77].

THE OTHER “WAY”

Anthropologist, Marshall Sahlins, in his book, *Stone Age Economics*, writes:

“... primitive economies are under productive. The main run of them, agricultural as well as pre-agricultural, seem not to realize their own economic capacities. Labor power is underused, technological means are not fully engaged, natural resources are left untapped.”

So understood, “underproduction” is not necessarily inconsistent with pristine affluence. All the material wants might still be easily satisfied even though the economy is running below capacity. Indeed, the former is rather a condition of the latter. .

In 2004, Europeans work about some 20-30% fewer hours each week than Americans and take more vacations. The French and Germans can have 5–9 weeks of vacation each year. Overall, the French average 1453 hours per year, the Germans about 1429 compared to 1792 for Americans. As a consequence, Europeans have a lower money income. Indeed all of the GDP gap between Europe and America is explained by the difference in hours worked—not differences in hourly productivity. One cannot infer, however, that Europeans have a lower standard of living. Europeans shun the idea of working

like materialistic Americans and have been gladly willing to sacrifice earnings for the sake of leisure and less pressured lives. To Europeans there are simply many things more important than money. Unfortunately the leisurely life of the European worker is under siege by the corporations that employ them. Put simply, these companies are holding the jobs of these workers hostage with a threat of “outsourcing” to Eastern Europe. Of course, the unions are fighting back. But should they lose, the GDP in Europe will rise, but no one will believe that the European people will be better off.

. . . The [primitive] hunter . . . is “uneconomic man.” . . . he is the reverse of that standard caricature immortalized in a *General Principles of Economics*, page one. His wants are scarce and his means (in relation) plentiful . . . It is not, Sahlins insists, that hunters and gatherers have curbed their materialistic “impulses;” they simply never made an institution of them [Sahlins 1975]. Every introductory economics course begins with the same definition of scarcity; the excess of man’s “unlimited wants” over that which he can produce with his “limited means.” That is, humans do not have the knowledge or the resources to produce all that they “want” and thus scarcity is an existential condition. Sahlins claims that the example of “primitives” makes clear the “unlimited wants” postulated by mainstream economics is not a natural human condition but a social process created and sustained by humans in a certain time and place and is far from universal or inevitable. Indeed, underproduction and underconsumption is the basis of Buddhist philosophy and economics.

BUDDHIST ETHICS AND ECONOMICS

India is of interest to students of Ecological Economics for two reasons. First, it will not be long before India surpasses China and has the world’s largest population. Second, India has produced the philosophical core of the many so-called radical green movements. The ecocentric ethic at the center of these movements has its intellectual roots in the Buddhist concept of *Ahisma* or *nonviolence*. Most strictly interpreted *Ahisma* assumes the “unity of all life” and thus, ideally, prohibits the killing of any living thing. *Hisma*, the “destruction of life” is a fact of existence that follows from “eating and drinking and moving about.” The follower of *Ahisma*, “shuns to the best of his ability the destruction of the tiniest creature.” [Gandhi quoted in Doctor p.308]. To varying degrees the Buddhist believes that all things, even stones and metals, have souls and therefore it was the ultimate sin to take any kind of life. For the Buddhist all creatures share the suffering in the world and are, therefore, worthy of human compassion. Like humans, all creatures go through endless cycles of existence and misery. Humans, however, are unique in that they

Americans who suffer from “hurry sickness” don’t need to be told what it is. It is the daily struggle to squeeze 65 minutes out of every hour. It means rushing around from day care to job to supermarket — while agonizing over every moment stuck in traffic. It’s a life of multitasking: eating and phoning while driving.

The disease affects men and women, married people and singles, but it hits working mothers the hardest. A woman knows she’s got hurry sickness when she regards ironing shirts on the weekend without distractions as a kind of vacation.

Pressure in the workplace costs the nation more than \$300 billion a year, according to the American Institute of Stress. This is money spent on stress-related health problems, missed

work and efforts by employers to pacify the troops. I don’t know whether this number includes the millions spent on aromatherapy candles, machines that make soothing ocean sounds or other calm-down products, but it might as well.

The load seems to get only heavier. Some 62 percent of workers say that their job demands have grown over the past six months, according to a survey by Kronos, a human-resources company. American workers now average 350 more hours a year on the job than do their German counterparts. Americans outwork even the Japanese—reprinted with permission from the Providence Journal (9/12/04) the article was written by Froma Harrop..

can, by becoming enlightened, escape the cycle of reincarnation [Ponting 152]. Buddha urged humans to show compassion to all living things and to not take life unnecessarily.

The most well-known aspect of this part of the practice of Hindu (basically Buddhist) religion is the sacred cow. A Hindu will never kill a cow or eat a cow. The processing of dead cattle is a task relegated to the caste of “untouchables” and vultures. The meat of the dead cattle is eaten by Christians.

Radical greens advocate a political economy that is also derivative of Indian political-economic philosophy of Gandhi.⁴ Gandhi’s political economy developed within the context of his opposition to the Raj, the British occupation of India. Gandhi believed that industrial civilization was an oxymoron and the attempt of England to industrialize India would ruin Indian civilization:

I believe that the civilization India has evolved is not to be beaten in the world. Nothing can equal the seeds sown by our ancestors. Rome went, Greece shared the same fate; the might of the Pharaohs was broken; Japan has westernized; of China nothing can be said; but India is still, somehow or another sound at the foundation. The people of Europe learn their lessons from the writings of men of Greece and Rome, which exist no more in their former glory. In trying to learn from them, the Europeans imagine that they will avoid the mistakes of Greece and Rome. Such is their pitiable condition. —GANDHI quoted in A. H. DOCTOR, Gandhi’s Political Philosophy, The Ecologist 5(8):300-18 p. 318

Many Radical Greens find much truth in Gandhi’s sentiments. They reject modernization and in some cases even civilization. They prefer instead to “dwell in the land” much in the manner of the Indian villager. Indeed, a case can be made that the Indian village economy is the prototype of the radical green utopia. As an ideal it is perhaps commendable, but as a practical matter the attainment of such a voluntary change in human behavior is unlikely. Of course, it may be the way the story ends if any of the catastrophic scenarios often proffered by some environmentalists are realized.

My (Next) Life as a Dog

Buddhist/Hindu philosophy encourages individuals to withdraw from the material world to escape from a continuing cycle of miserable existence. It is truly ironic that some westerners turn to the mystical philosophies of India for solace and for exemplars to help them cope with the problems of modernity. In particular, the environmental movement has drawn on Buddhism as the philosophical basis of “sustainable development” and ecocentric ethics. Ironically, India’s economic development process has been an ecological disaster.

Bad Karma

The hard life of the Indian tiller of the soil is manifest in early philosophical texts (the Upanishads) which are as old as any western philosophy and older than most. These texts reveal the basis for the traditional Hindu revulsion toward life reflected in the fear of being reborn and the acceptance of the inability of human intelligence to comprehend the world [Durant p. 411]. In the Upanishads the philosopher, “knower of the soul,” is asked by the King to explain the soul’s true nature, he responds:

Sir, in this ill-smelling, unsubstantial body . . . which is afflicted with desire, anger, covetousness, delusion, fear, despondency, envy, separation from the desirable, union with the undesirable, hunger, thirst, senility, death, disease, sorrow . . . what is the good of enjoyment of desires? And we see the whole world is decaying like these gnats, these mosquitoes, this grass, and these trees that arise and perish . . . In this sort of cycle of existence what is the good of enjoyment of desires, when after a man has fed upon them, there is seen repeatedly his return here to the earth? —DURANT p. 411

Some centuries later, Buddha also sought the source of misery in the world, he found it: the origin of evil was birth.

Thus with my mind concentrated, purified, cleansed, . . . I directed my mind to the passing away and rebirth of beings . . . I saw beings reborn, low and high, of good and bad color [reference to caste system, Varna means color], in happy or miserable existences, according to their karma.

In other words, life is a meaningless, incomprehensible disaster and we are cursed to have to relive it in each reincarnation. Buddha believed that “pain so over-balanced pleasure that it would be better for humans never to have been born” [Durant 430]. But Karma dictated reincarnation as a way of atoning for past sins. Reincarnation can be avoided only by the practice of denial of personal desire so one can be united with the Soul of the World. Individual consciousness must be denied as it alienates one from the Whole [Durant p 414–15]. The pessimism and the notions of the virtue of mortal asceticism and mystical and impersonal immortality have dominated Hindu thought from Buddha to Gandhi [Durant p. 415].

An economics based on Buddhist ethic would advocate restricting wants to the level that can be satisfied with renewable sources of materials and energy. The Buddhist ideology evolved in an agrarian economy under tremendous population pressure and, therefore, a profound scarcity of resources. The land was farmed by people who were permanently attached to it and, therefore, had an interest in sustaining its fertility and who had a deep moral commitment to pass the land on to the next generation. Production in this system is instrumental, the means to the end of survival, it is not the end in itself. The consequences of practices inconsistent with sustainability faced them personally on a day to day basis with a threat to their survival and the survival of their children. In India and China, agriculture is still primarily organized this “natural” way.

Like Weber’s Protestants, the Buddhist is motivated primarily by metaphysical goals. The Protestants saw the potential of their individual salvation in their worldly success and asceticism. The Buddhist must survive in the material world, but ignores it as much as possible. His goal is to obliterate the “false notion of a separate self” and become part of the oneness of life in the state of Nirvana and to act toward others out of love and compassion along the way [Capra p. 84]. In each case consumption is not only subordinated to other metaphysical goals, it is deplored as an obstacle to achieving the spiritual objective. Needless to say, westerners, including the Protestants have come to define happiness in more worldly and individualistic, and hence more environmentally destructive terms.

Implicit Value Judgments—“Greed Is Good”

The implicit value judgment made in the Neoclassical model are the polar opposite of those of the Buddhist ethic. Neoclassical economists assume that human welfare is measured by an individual’s command over commodities, and that more of these commodities is better than less. Both are taken to be universal values. These values easily translate into selfishness and “greed”—the endless desire for more and more for oneself. The market is driven by the greed of consumers and the avarice of producers. The efficient economy then gives the consumer as much well-being, and the producer as much profit as is possible given resources and technology.

In a classic book, titled *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*, E. F. Schumacher takes to task the notion that “greed and envy” can be the basis of a socially satisfactory economy. How, he asks, can such vile means as the “frenzy of greed and the “orgy of envy” produce any socially desirable ends? There can be no doubt they have been “the very causes of the expansionist success” of the modern economy. The question is, however, whether such causes can be effective for long, or whether they carry within themselves the seeds of destruction.” None other than the great Keynes saw the contradiction. In considering “the economic possibilities for our grandchildren” he declared that for the time being, until we are all rich, “foul is useful, and fair is not.” In other words, not until we experience universal prosperity shall

we “once more value ends above means and prefer the good to the useful.” Until then, he laments, “avarice and usury must be our Gods, for only they can lead us out of the tunnel of economic necessity into daylight.” Of course, Keynes was merely restating the oft-quoted doctrine enunciated several centuries earlier by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*. The lesson, according to Schumacher, is clear “Beware! Ethical considerations are not merely irrelevant, they are an actual hindrance. The road to Heaven is paved with bad intentions.”

Schumacher, a Buddhist at heart, takes a jaundiced view of such a perspective:

If human vices such as greed and envy are systematically cultivated, the inevitable result is the collapse of intelligence. A man driven by greed or envy loses the power of seeing things as they really are, or seeing things in their roundness or wholeness, and his very successes become failures. If whole societies are infected by these vices, they may indeed achieve astonishing things but they become increasingly incapable of solving the most elementary problems of everyday existence. The Gross National Product may rise rapidly, as measured by statisticians, but not as experienced by actual people, who find themselves oppressed by increasing frustration, alienation, insecurity and so forth.

These feelings in turn produce a “creeping paralysis of non-cooperation, as expressed in various types of escapism on the part, not only of the oppressed and exploited, but even of highly privileged groups. “The grave social diseases infecting many rich societies today are [not] merely passing phenomena, but the consequence of “intelligence being dimmed by greed and envy.”

Schumacher is particularly dismissive of the notion that the “soundest foundation for peace would be universal prosperity.” First, he notes that the assertion lacks empirical validation as “one may look in vain for historical evidence that the rich have regularly been more peaceful than the poor.” Indeed, even a cursory exploration of the history of the United States lays this myth to rest. Second, he observes that he “foundations of peace cannot be laid by universal prosperity because such prosperity, if attainable at all, is attainable only by cultivating such drives of human nature as greed and envy, which destroy intelligence, happiness, serenity, and thereby the peacefulness of man.”

Schumacher approvingly quotes Gandhi: “Earth provides enough to satisfy every man’s need, but not every man’s greed.” Schumacher insists that we have to explore “the growth of demand upon the world’s resources which arises when everybody simply strives hard for ‘more.’”

ARE WE ALL BASICALLY BUDDHISTS?—BIOPHILIA

Woody Allen, the quintessential “New Yorker” has stated in any number of his films, that he is afraid of “the country.” Allen expresses a neurotic fear of insects and animals and wild things that can be called biophobic. But, Woody Allen is not represen-

tative of humans in this regard. “Modern Humans, according to a University of Texas behavioral psychologist, “retain a partly genetic predisposition to like or visually prefer natural settings,” especially those that resemble the environment in which early humans evolved, i.e. savannah or grassland settings. Why after all do humans, even New Yorkers, pay a premium for a “room with a view” of a park or a wild setting? [Kinch p. 9]. Rather than fear nature, most humans are emotionally connected to nature. Conservation biologist, E. O. Wilson defines Biophilia as the “inately emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms.” While biophilia is not a “hardwired-instinct” nor is it genetic, it is nonetheless a “biological tendency” or “predisposition” that evolved in humans during the 100,000 generations (99% of human history) that humans lived in a “biocentric world” [Kinch p. 9]. Biophilia can be encouraged by learning and experience and then become fully manifest, or, as is the case in industrial society, it can be discouraged and “frustrated” [Kinch p. 9]. But one may legitimately ask, as does Herman Daly, if biophilia is in us “why are we killing other species wholesale” [Ecological Economics, 1999, p. 179]. If biophilia is a human predisposition it has been more than merely “frustrated.” Stephen Jay Gould has warned that “we cannot win the battle to save species and environments without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and nature as well—for we will not fight to save what we do not love (but only appreciate in some abstract sense)’ [quoted in Daly, 1999, p. 183].

John Locke, one of the founding philosophers of capitalism, equated liberty and the pursuit of happiness with the endless acquisition of goods. For Locke, as we have seen earlier, nonhuman nature was merely instrumental to the accumulation process, as no more than a means to human ends [Eckersley p. 23]. According to Locke, human’s took nature which was “valueless” and through the application of labor produced property of value. “From Hobbes and Locke through Marx, the notion of human self-realization through the domination and transformation of nature persisted as an unquestioned axiom” [Eckersley p. 25]. For all of them, the solution to all human problems is the abolition of scarcity (the excess of wants over the ability to satisfy them) via technological innovation and industrial growth.

Modern environmentalists assert the practice of such a philosophy alienates man from himself, other humans and the natural world, frustrating basic psycho-emotional human needs. What after all is the “meaning of life,” what are we living for? It would appear that the logic of capital accumulation and the related “acquisitive values of consumer society” are destructive of very basic human needs, most notably our biophilia, and constitute the problem rather than the solution [Eckersley p. 21].

Herman Daly posits that the roots of the problem lies in the nihilistic postmodern philosophy which in turn is based on modern science—the theory of evolution. A religiously minded person sees the world as God’s creation and as such feels an obligation to preserve and protect it—to love it as one loves God. All traditional religions “are enemies of the modern idolatry” of Locke, Marx and the others, that man

“through economic growth based on science and technology, is the true creator” [Daly, 1999, p. 185].

The essence of the theory of evolution is that what we observe in the world shaped by natural selection (random genetic mutations selected by the environment), both Man and Nature, is the product of chance, an accident. So Daly queries, “is it possible to love an accident? For an accident to fight for another accident?” The fact that so many life scientists do indeed love nature stands in stark contradiction to their academic teaching of evolution which holds that the world is purposeless and accidental. The problem is compounded by postmodern nihilism which translates the accidental nature of evolution into a philosophy asserting the absolute meaninglessness of existence. Under the grip of such a scientific and philosophical mentality where “the natural world is just a pile of instrumental building blocks to be used in furthering the arbitrary projects of one purposeless species.” Daly contends that if we cannot forge a more “coherent cosmology than that, then we might as well close the store and all go fishing—at least while the fish last” [1999, p. 185].

CAN WE CHANGE?— THE VOLUNTARY SIMPLICITY “MOVEMENT”

Since the 1950s with the “beat generation,” and the 1960s with the “hippie generation,” and probably since the advent of industrialization there has been some sort of counterculture that stood in criticism of the “materialism” or the “consumerism” of “bourgeois” society. These countercultures “sought a lifestyle that consumed and produced little, at least in terms of marketable objects, and sought to derive satisfaction, meaning and a sense purpose from contemplation, communion with nature, bonding, mood-altering substances, sex, and inexpensive products” [Amitai Etzioni, *Voluntary Simplicity: A New Social Movement?*, p. 107]. There is mounting evidence that such attitudes are spreading. A survey conducted in the early 1970s, found that “83% of Americans believe that the United States consumes too much,” and “8% shared the belief that “protecting the environment will require ‘major changes in the way we live’” [Etzioni, p. 108]. A 1991 survey of the United States and other modern nations discovered that 18% of respondents held values the researchers characterized as “post-materialist”—the emphasis rather than being on things, is on “the quality of life, self-expression, participation with ever less weight given to traditional values” [Etzioni, p. 108]. This was compared to only 9% in 1972. At the other pole, those with clearly materialist values dropped from 35% to 16% [Etzioni, p. 108]. While the explosion in consumer spending and consumer debt in the 1980 and 1990s shows there is clearly a long way to go before American attitudes are substantively transformed, there appears, nonetheless, to be a small but growing movement toward more psychically and environmentally healthy attitudes towards consumption. One such resistance point to the consumerist current is known as “voluntary simplicity.”

It uses the adjective “voluntary” to distinguish it from the “simple” life imposed by poverty and material deprivation. In voluntary simplicity, deprivation is voluntary, but it is not extreme. At one level, called “downshifting” it may involve individuals who are quite comfortable, but who avoid conspicuous consumption. Such individuals may, for example, drive older, modest automobiles, avoid fashionable dress, have comfortable but unostentatious homes, and on Saturday night it is “pot luck” instead of elaborate entertaining, and dining out is “take-out.” [Etzioni, p. 110].

More serious advocates of simplicity will choose a smaller income to have a more simple life. This may involve reducing labor supply, or taking jobs with lower wages, or leaving the labor force to stay at home. In 1996, a poll revealed that “48% of Americans had done at least one of the following [in the past five years] cut back hours at work, declined or did not seek promotion, lowered their expectations about what the need out of life, reduced their commitments or moved to a community with a less hectic way of life.” “Another survey reports that “one in every three adults say they would accept a smaller paycheck in exchange for having a simple lifestyle” [Etzioni, p. 111]. Moreover, although not widely evident in terms of behavior, “earning a lot money” takes second place in terms of expressed values, to having a “happy family life” [Etzioni, p. 111]. “Numerous women and some men prefer part-time jobs or jobs that allow them to work at home, even if better-paying full-time jobs are open,” because they want to “dedicate more time to their children and be home when the children are there [Etzioni, p. 111].

Advocates of voluntary simplicity are emphatic in the distinction between a “simple” life and a life of poverty. A life of poverty, it should be emphasized, is by no means simple. Poor people must struggle everyday just to survive both absolute and relative material deprivation. The life is stressful, is both psychologically and physically taxing, and hence, conducive to physical illness and mental problems. Little wonder that substance abuse, family disintegration, and other social pathologies are disproportionately prevalent among the poor. As one advocate of voluntary simplicity has asserted: “poverty is involuntary whereas simplicity is voluntarily chosen. Poverty is repressive; simplicity is liberating. Poverty generates a sense of helplessness, passivity and despair; simplicity fosters personal empowerment, creativity, and a sense of ever present opportunity” [Etzioni, p. 112].

If we are going to rely on the emergence of a “post-materialist” mentality to reduce consumption there are going to be several problems.

Schor’s research found that values regarding the materialist—post-materialist attitude toward consumption are formed in the pre-adult years. People who grew up in years of economic deprivation, e.g. the people who were young during the Great Depression, or the decade of the 1970s, tend to be more “materialist. People who grew up in the prosperous post-war years, on the other hand, tend to be more “post-materialist.” Moreover, the likelihood of a person having post-materialist values increases with the income and education of their parents and with their own education [Schor p. 81].

Generally, people don't change their value orientations as they age. However, while post-materialist attitudes are "generational" and somewhat persistent as one ages, Schor found that they are subject to reversion to materialism when the economic insecurity rises. These changes are usually temporary and reverse when economic conditions improve. But, Schor worries that a period of prolonged economic stagnation caused by the "challenge of international openness and competition" brought about by "the globalization of the economy" may produce a major reversion to materialist values. "People who are feeling powerless in the face of a global market economy" are going to be less likely to willingly "downshift" and "underachieve."

Secondly there are major institutional obstacles to the adoption of a post-material lifestyle. Employers make it very difficult for employees to reduce their hours of work. Well educated people who desire to make less money and have more time may have a difficult time finding work comparable to their education and ability. Post-materialists do indeed sacrifice earnings. Post-materialists reports Schor have "2.5 times the educational level of materialists, and 3 times the occupational prestige, but only 1.25 time the income." Only 21% of post-materialists were in the top income quartile, as compared to 31% of materialists" [p. 81].

Whatever Neoclassical economists say about "worker sovereignty" when it comes to selecting hours of work the evidence suggests otherwise. Employers have powerful incentives to force employees to work long hours.

Fixed employment costs are those that do not vary with the number of hours worked; they include health benefits, contributions to pension funds, workman's compensation premiums and some employment taxes. These costs can account for as much as 40% of total compensation. The hourly compensation cost of employers thus falls the more hours an employee works. Employers who favor extracting as many hours as possible from existing workers to hiring more workers. Job hours, especially in the job market for educated workers are typically offered on a "take-it-or-leave-it" basis. These people, rather than being able to smoothly adjust hours to their post-materialist preferences, face sharp discontinuities in their options. Most educated workers seeking a decent job are confronted with the 40 hour week and "involuntary overtime." Those seeking more flexibility have to make a considerable sacrifice of both wages and benefits. Several years ago, for example, many law firms instituted the "mommy track" for their female lawyers who wished fewer hours so they could spend more time with their families. They women earned sharply lower salaries, were given only grunt work, and, it was understood that such women would never progress in the firm hierarchy.

One is inclined to believe that whatever potential there is reducing consumption by a spontaneous shift in values has been realized, and even that is under threat as the economy, drained of good jobs by "outsourcing" moves toward another extended period of stagnation. Even in Europe, where "voluntary simplicity" has been a cultural feature for decades, workers are being forced into more hours of work under the threat of losing their jobs to workers in low wage countries in eastern Europe and Asia.

If there is going to be any change in consumption we are going to have to rely on more than changing “attitudes.”

One option, according to Juliet Schor is to make health and pension benefits a government responsibility. Not only will this solve many of the problems that private provision for the benefits poses (people without health insurance, and firm defaults on pensions, compromised international competitiveness), it will also allow firms to offer more flexibility in hours worked. Fewer hours worked in exchange for less income would translate into less consumption. Schor also suggests ending the tax deduction for advertising expenses and imposing a special tax on luxury items such as gold and diamond Michael Perchin fountain pens that sell for \$45,000 or bejeweled Nokia cell phones that sell for \$20,000.

Second, as proposed by John Kenneth Galbraith back in 1958, a nation can discourage consumption by taxing it. Galbraith suggested a national sales tax to replace the income tax. The taxes people owe will depend only on what they spend, not what they earn. Such taxes are undesirable because they are considered regressive—they place a greater relative burden on low income people than the affluent who do not spend all of their income and, hence are tax exempt on the saved portion. The tax can be structured in a “progressive” way that raises the tax burden as consumption rises. Robert Frank proposed a progressive consumption tax. The tax exempt \$7,500 of consumption for each person (\$30,000 for a family of four). After that the tax rates on spending would rise to a maximum of 70%. Thus, the sales tax paid by Arnold Schwarzenegger on his tenth “hummer” will be considerably higher than that paid on his first. People can now avoid taxation by not spending and with no income tax can now get the same income without working as many hours.

Finally, since the grossly unequal distribution of income and wealth lies at the root of competitive consumption, a more direct assault on concentrated wealth with more aggressive taxation is warranted. As, Gar Alperovitz has noted such a strategy will undermine the “social dynamics” that promote consumption in two ways. First, it will reduce the ability of elites to engage in conspicuous consumption and, perhaps more importantly, “it will give content to the ecologically, and morally important principle that at some point enough is enough” [Gar Alperowitz [2005], *America Beyond Capitalism*, p. 219]

There are many other government policies that can contribute toward solving our environmental crisis and we shall explore them as we proceed through the course. Technical solutions to specific environmental problems are part of the solution, but ultimately we shall see the solution is political. Tax programs like those mentioned above are simply not possible within the existing political framework in the United States. Elites and the corporations they control are simply too powerful and would block any move in this direction. Indeed, the Republican-controlled Congress, under the initiative of George Bush (II) just (May 2005) abolished the federal Estate Tax and further cut income taxes on wealthy individuals and corporations. The cost of these tax cuts over the next 20 years will be about \$1 trillion! Simply, di-

verting the money from these tax cuts to the social security system would have gone a longway toward putting that program on a sound financial footing. The top 1% of wealthy individuals gets more annual income than the bottom 100 million people and they own “50% of all outstanding stocks, financial securities trust equity and business equity” and thus have more than ample resources to fend-off any populist or democratic move in the direction reducing income and wealth differentials in the United States [Alperovitz, p. 1, 5].

As our analysis of worker alienation suggests the impulse toward consumption is driven by the way work is structured. The workplace needs to be restructured so as to provide more meaningful and engaging work for workers.

Of course, this author’s favorite proposal is to blow up every TV set in America. Not only will this remove people, especially our children from the clutches of advertisers, and for profit programming which only stimulates the materialist mentality, it will force people to go back to bowling with friends, to attend the local high school hockey game, to volunteer at the hospital during former “soap opera” hours, to rescue a dog and get out and walk it, and talk to neighbors, and to join civic organizations. TV has caused the death of American civic culture, our social world, and with its unrelenting message of “Buy, Buy, Buy” it is destroying the natural world. As it cannot be emphasized, the TV, the “new governess to our children” is challenging the lesson we teach them with “bedtime stories—“money doesn’t buy happiness.” [Juliet Schor (1998), *The Overspent American*, p. 165]. How can we expect our children to resolve the dissonance of the mixed messages we send them with our behavior, the relentless assault of the TV, and the “traditional wisdom” we know to be valid? And we blame the children, that we sit in front of TV for 6–8 hours per day, for “nagging” and for “scenes” at Wal-Mart—get real.

CONCLUSION

It would appear that the world community is increasingly adopting what we have called the western way, that is to achieve “happiness” through an upward spiral of consumption. This is despite the fact that much evidence points to the failure of the growth of material goods consumption to produce more happiness and at the same time destroys the natural world to which we have a primeval attachment. It thrives despite the fact that the “life-style” engendered by the work process attached to mass consumerism appears to produce alienation on a massive scale. And, this is despite the fact that the growth of production is ecologically quite destructive and probably is not sustainable. Yet the world seems to be unable to put the industrial-consumerist genie back in the bottle. The affluent countries will not sacrifice their standard of living and the poor countries will not sacrifice the opportunity to become rich. The work place becomes more demanding and totalitarian, especially in the “sweat shops” of the emerging countries. Like the squirrel in the cage we run faster and

longer but do not seem to get anything but tired, worn out and frustrated. Our families disintegrate, our communities deteriorate, both out of sheer neglect due to the time pressures and demands on us of the production system. We are engaged in a “status” arms-race that no one can win. Under the relentless pressures and assaults of the advertising industry we purchase goods that cannot satisfy the needs that are being stultified by the production system. Little wonder that people seek the solace of cults, drugs and alcohol or wrap themselves up in their own little narcissistic world oblivious the catastrophe going on around them. Nero fiddled while Rome burned around him—Americans shop.

Garrett Hardin, has demonstrated how humans in pursuit of their selfish interest will exploit an unregulated commons to the ruin of all. In effect, that the exploitation of the commons is a “war of all against all.” He insists that the solution lies in a new social contract based on “mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon by the majority of the affected people” presumably implemented by a Leviathan of sorts [quoted in Eckersley p. 14].

Robert Heilbroner, a very thoughtful economist and no radical apocalyptic by any means, presented his evaluation of the “Human Prospect” when he asked “Is there hope for humanity?” Unlike E.O. Wilson, he was not optimistic. Like Wilson he believes that humans are basically so selfish and hedonistic (he is an economist after all) that only the power of a centrally-planned, authoritarian state can extract the sacrifices necessary to bring civilization into conformity with ecological sustainability [Eckersley p. 14]. Heilbroner advocated, a return to human life on a smaller scale. Heilbroner would dissolve the nation-state and replace it with communities on the scale of the Greek “polis,”⁵ but he regards such an eventuality as improbable in any relevant time frame [Eckersley p. 15]. In Heilbroner’s opinion people, especially those in relatively privileged positions, will not voluntarily give up their “way of life” [Eckersley p. 15]. As one writer put it, Heilbroner, in the face of the possibility of nuclear apocalypse, exploding human population and accelerating ecological devastation, sees humanity as having two choices, “Leviathan or oblivion” [Eckersley p.14–15].

Heilbroner, and others like him in the so-called “survivalist school,” have come under heavy criticism. The survivalist assertion that freedom and democracy must be sacrificed to assure the survival of humanity is founded on a fundamental mis-diagnosis of the problem. The critics locate the problem in ‘the erosion of liberal democracy that has enabled powerful elites to pursue environmentally destructive growth, in their own interest and at the expense of the commonwealth, with the backing of the State,. *The appropriate role for government, from this perspective is not to repress growth, but to stop forcing it* [Eckersley p. 18]. What is needed is more rather than less participation in government” through the institution of decentralized government with the full participation of the people who will impose “limits to industrial growth” as a consequence of their gradual realization of the “limits to consumption” as a path to a quality life [Eckersley pp. 16, 18]. We need then to “reexamine the psychological



CHANGE FROM WITHIN?

"We pride ourselves on being informed consumers, making careful assessments of the items we purchase and how much we need them, and on comparison shopping for the best bargains. Some brands are selected more frequently than others, reflecting better value, better quality, or better marketing. We have lots of choices. Or do we? My argument is that what and how much we consume stems more from unconscious choices than from mindful deliberation. Most consumer behavior is automatic. In general, people do not realize how much they consume or how much they have come to rely on consumption as a means of recreation or temporary fulfillment, because they examine neither their actions nor the underlying needs that are temporarily satiated by buying things. Advertising, in particular, uses non-conscious processes to make us want to consume based on our tendency to be automatic rather than mindful buyers.

Mindfulness is a powerful antidote to this tendency. People can become more aware of psychological processes that previously may have been automatic, such as conditioning, and less susceptible to advertising gimmicks that prey on mindless processing of information. If people are more attentive to their own experiences, they will be able to choose more carefully what to buy and when to buy it and less liable to manipulation. This means understanding one's true needs (i.e., we really don't need everything that is marketed to us).

I am also concerned with the idea that the consumption of goods quickly but temporarily satisfies an underlying need for fulfillment. Psychologist Phillip Cushman has argued that many of the ills of modern western society such as low self-esteem, conspicuous consumption, absence of personal convictions, drug abuse, and eating disorders may be linked to inner emptiness.

The empty self needs filling, so it is easy to influence and control. This is a major mechanism encouraging consumerism. Advertisers and major corporations seek to reassure or soothe us with products. Yet advertising offers an illusory cure. Advertising cannot create a web of meaning like a rich communal, shared culture can, and so it substitutes "lifestyle" solutions.

Mindfulness means living in the moment. By learning to savor conscious experience as it happens, people can learn to appreciate the wonder of life and find a deeper sense of fulfillment with their daily lives, one that external pleasures such as possessions, drugs or sex—cannot provide. As Pema Chödrön wrote: "Mindfulness is loving all the details of our lives, and awareness is the natural thing that happens: life begins to open up, and you realize that you're always standing at the center of the world."

Typically, mindfulness training involves extended contemplative practice, but it need not be Buddhist or spiritual. One simple way of cultivating mindfulness is to sit quietly and to concentrate on the breath coming in and out of your body. If your attention wanders to a thought, then do not engage with it, simply note the sensation and return to the breath. Another is to engage in a body scan, moving one's attention down the body, from head to toe and attending to the various sensations. Various movement practices, such as certain types of yoga, also encourage mindful awareness.

Ultimately these ideas must be brought into the educational setting; children can be taught methods for mindful thinking and awareness of consumerism. Research underway now is attempting to show that children are happier and healthier if these principles are encouraged when they are young.

When we are more aware of our thoughts, feelings, and actions, it becomes more difficult for us to ignore the feelings and circumstances of others. In this way, increased mindfulness lays the foundation for increased compassion. Mindfulness and compassion work together here: When we are truly awake and open our hearts to the conditions of others, we cannot ignore the effects of mass consumption. At that point it is hard not to act."

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costs of the competitive and expansionary ethos of our materialist culture [and] our imperialistic attitude toward other species" [Eckersley p. 19], Theodore Rozak is encouraged that since the "needs of the planet and the needs of the person have become one" and that people have "begun to act upon the central institutions of our society with a force that is profoundly subversive, but which carries the promise of cultural renewal" [quoted in Eckersley p. 19]. In 1972 the world's first "Green" political party was formed in New Zealand. In its manifesto it spoke of a national depression that had overtaken the nation. It was a "depression that arises not from a lack of affluence

but almost from too much of it. It is a depression of human values, a downturn not in the economy but in the national spirit” [quoted in Eckersley p. 20]. This suggests the problem of the environment is far more profound than the management of “externalities.” It suggest we have to ask and answer much more fundamental questions that go toward the very way we structure our needs and way of life: “what is human life? What are we living for? [Eckersley p. 20]. The ecological problem does not exist in a vacuum. It is intimately related to the issues of inequality, patriarchy, imperialism, racism and specieism. Given the complexity of the problem and the enormity of the potential consequences it is not too soon to think about it and act on it. There is still time brother, but no one really knows how much. I would venture to assert, however, that acting too soon is better than acting too late.

THE STATIONARY STATE

In the 19th century economists were concerned about the growth of the economy being insufficient to either raise or maintain living standards. For the most part, and somewhat paradoxically, most economists believed that a high rate of population growth was necessary to facilitate growth. It seemed self-evident that as production required labor, increased production would require a growing population. As the classical economists believed that each worker produced more than he consumed, a growing labor force would raise, not lower living standards. Some of the economists of the period, however, were concerned that the pressure of growing populations on limited natural resources would sooner or later, due to the inexorable law of diminishing returns, make it impossible to grow the labor force or the capital stock any further, and thus the economy would slip into a stationary state. In short, progress would cease. Most economists took a pessimistic view of this turn of events, but some, including John Stuart Mill were able to see the positive side of this eventuality.

John Stuart Mill was a leading “Utilitarian,” but we shall not hold that against him for he was surely one of the most brilliant men of the 19th century. He not only held many very progressive views, but publicly, and avidly pronounced them. Mill, for example, along with his brilliant wife, Harriet Taylor, was a staunch advocate of women’s rights. Mill also stood fast against slavery and racism defending the rights “Negroes” both enslaved and emancipated.

Mill was not concerned about the stationary state of “capital and population” because to him it did not imply a “stationary state of human improvement.” He was certain, indeed, “that there would be as much scope as ever for all kinds of mental culture, and moral and social progress; as much room for improving the Art of Living as much more likelihood of its being improved, when minds cease to be engrossed by the art of getting on.” Indeed Mill worried that the scale of the economy may exceed the sustainable level and the earth might lose a “great portion of [its] pleasantness.” It was his preference that humanity opt to stationary “before necessity compels them

to it.” Should humanity take this course, while it may have less capital and a smaller population, it will nevertheless have a “happier and better” population [quoted in Daly and Farley (2004), *Ecological Economics*, p. 55]. Of course, it is precisely this stationary state that is advocated by Ecological Economists today. The ideal is a “circular flow” that uses only sufficient throughput to maintain a constant population (balanced at a low death rate and low birth rate), a constant stock of physical capital, and a constant stock of natural capital. As Daly and Farley [2004, p. 55] put it, the main idea of a stationary-state economy “is to maintain constant stocks of wealth and people at levels that are sufficient for a long and good life. “The path of progress” in the stationary-state is no longer to get bigger, but to get better.”



SUMMARY

1. **What is Commodity Fetishism?** Marx believed the purpose of science was to uncover the “reality” behind “appearances.” By commodity fetishism, Marx meant the failure to see the social relationships involved in the production of goods and services. As a consequence they fail to see the production as a cooperative human enterprise in which each person plays some part. They also fail to see that these social relationships can sometimes be quite exploitative. One might argue analogously that humans also fail to realize that they are in a cooperative relationship with nature. Yet, because these relationships are unknown, humans consume goods unaware that they are causing ecological havoc. People need to understand that nature contributes as much to their lives as do other people and thus they should relate to nature in terms of cooperation rather than exploitation. Finally, one should note that to make a fetish of something is to invest it with powers it does not possess. Thus, one could extend Marx’s concept to include the “false consciousness” that commodities have the power to substitute for meaningful work and social relationships as the source of human well-being.
2. **The social and moral context of human behavior.** Neoclassical economists assume as an operational principle that people are selfish automatons who act only to maximize their own utility. Sociologists, and Socio-economists argue that this characterization of human behavior is shallow and generally wrong. Socio-economists hold that through their socialization humans internalize a set of norms, and rules which they try to follow, and people will often act in unselfish ways out of sense of duty or moral obligation. There are many important behaviors that simply cannot be explained with out recourse to social or moral factors.
3. **What are the social-psychological roots of consumption?** Basically, it is believed that much of people’s spending is directed at meeting needs that cannot be filled by the consumption of goods. People want a satisfying work life. Unfortunately work is alienating. So people consume in an attempt to fill the void.

4. **What is The Neoclassical Utility Function?** The utility is the formal way that economists present the basic premises of their model of consumer behavior. It simply states that “Total Utility” depends on the quantities of the material goods and services individuals consume period. It is assumed that each person’s utility depends only on what they, not others consume. The mathematical form the utility function actually has is essentially an empirical matter and will not detain us here. Critics of the Neoclassical formulation claim that the utility a person achieves depends on much more than the consumption of goods, and it depends on the consumption of others as well as himself.
5. **What was Weber’s critique of “pure utilitarianism?”** Pure utilitarianism to Weber meant simply the idea that all that mattered for well-being was the consumption of goods and services. Weber prized the “worldly asceticism” of the Protestants in Calvin’s time who worked hard, earned well, but lived simply. The rewards they sought were of a higher order and would be garnered only in the next world. To Weber the mere accumulation of wealth for its own sake was a “nullity.” Matters of the mind and the spirit were the source of true achievement and contentment.
6. **What is Easterlin Paradox?** R.A. Easterlin focused his research on the very simple question, “does rising income and consumption produce more happiness?” The answer was no. The paradox came from the fact that in every country the rich were happier than the poor. However, as the rich became richer they did not get any happier. The paradox is resolved by the observation that happiness does not depend on what you consume, but on what you consume relative to others. Even as absolute consumption rises, as long as relative consumption does not, people are no happier. The lesson is that economic growth will not make people happier so why bother. Why not be satisfied and save the planet at the same time.
7. **What is the relative income hypothesis?** This theory was put forward by Harvard economist James Dusenberry in 1949 before Easterlin did his research. Dusenberry wanted to explain why American consumption spending did not decline the way it was expected to as income rose. In 1949 economists based their prediction of falling consumption on the Neoclassical utility function and the law of diminishing returns. To put it briefly the more goods people had the less they would spend on more goods as their income rose. The prediction was contradicted by the evidence. Dusenberry explained this by asserting that while total income was rising relative income, that is income inequality remained constant. Higher incomes then did not provide any social advantage to the recipients. Those above them had more, and those below also had more, so they had to spend more to hold their position.
8. **What is the *Theory of the Leisure Class*?** Thorstein Veblen wrote this book in the Great Gatsby days of the 1920s. Central to the book are the concepts of conspicuous consumption and emulation. Consumption is driven by a process where the rich spend conspicuously in order to “shock and awe” the masses, and the masses spend more in an attempt to emulate the lifestyle of the rich. The rich despise the masses but thrive on their adulation. The masses do indeed adore the rich despite being despised by them. It is all very sick and goes on to this day.
9. **What is the Culture of Narcissism?** Narcissism is an obsession with self to the exclusion of social relationships and concerns. The generation of youth that entered the job market in the 1980s were so focused on themselves, their

wealth, their consumption, to the exclusion of marriage or any personal commitment to another, they were called the “me generation”—narcissism personified. The people in a narcissist culture, according to Christopher Lasch, being alienated from the community and personal ties, seek gratification thorough consumption. As Lasch puts it “consumption promises to fill the aching void.” Lasch asserts further that advertisers prey on such people offering consumption as the answer to age-old discontents.”

10. **What are the hidden injuries of class?** Sennett and Cobb in this sociological classic show how employment in America robs workers of their self-esteem and self-respect. Self-doubt drives people to spend in an attempt to demonstrate their worth.
11. **What is the capitalist squirrel cage?** As workers suffer from the “hidden injuries of class” they strive to compensate by spending. But to spend more they must work more which only increases their alienation so they spend even more. So they work more. . . .
12. **What is Buddhist Economics?** Buddhism teaches that the “way” to achieve the ultimate peace of spiritual annihilation is to honor all living things and to eliminate desire. Buddhist teaching tells us that “less is better than more.” Rather than “institutionalizing” consumption it discourages it. It encourages selflessness and scorns the desire for worldly success. Obviously this philosophy encourages an ecologically friendly life-style and there is much we can learn from it without giving up a modern life. We must after all make our way in the world, but we should try to ignore it as much as possible.
13. **What is Biophilia?** Biophilia is the emotional connection that humans have with nature. It is not genetic, according to E.O. Wilson, but it is a powerful “predisposition” that is the result of humans

having evolved in a “biocentric world”—humans were not always “master’s of the universe. This predisposition is frustrated by modern living, and as human expansion further reduces biodiversity it may be precluded altogether.

14. **Voluntary Simplicity.** Voluntary simplicity is a phenomenon (I hesitate to say movement) where people have opted to minimize consumption in order to have a less pressured, more satisfying life. While one might call it downward mobility, it is not, most assuredly, falling into genteel poverty. It is instead a recognition that there is far more to life than what money can buy, and that earning money is more psychically costly than the benefits of consumption.
15. **What is “growthmania?** E.J. Mishan coined this term to describe the need for capitalism to continuously spur consumption by means of advertising in order to absorb the goods produced by its ever-growing productive capacity.
16. **What is the stationary state?** The stationary state is one where the economy, due to a lack of resources, cannot continue to grow. Most of the classical economists saw this as stagnation. Mill on the other hand saw that people could continue to develop even if the growth of their material consumption was limited. Mill argued then, just as proponents of “sustainable development” argue now that the indulgence in art, literature, community and family activities, and spiritual matters does not require resources and are more rewarding than consuming goods. With less focus on production people will be better able to focus on things that are more important.

CASE FOR DISCUSSION

They stand tall and salient against the desolate background of the tiny Island. There are about 1000 of

them, carved cylinders of volcanic stone, standing as high as thirty-three feet and weighing as much as 90 metric tons, they are the megaliths of the Rapa Nui of Easter Island. The statues, called *Moai*, range in age from 800 to 1300 years old.⁶ They stand in clusters at ceremonial sites on platforms called *Ahu*, that are placed around the island perimeter which, in most cases, is a great distance, indeed as long as twelve miles from the quarries at which they were cut and carved. How they were carved out of the stone and moved to where they were found was a great mystery for many years. Moreover, the fact that many were found incomplete or tossed down suggested that the culture that had produced them came to an abrupt and chaotic end. What was not understood until fairly recently was how the *Moai* cult played an important role in the decline of the *Rapa Nui*. The *Moai* cult exacerbated the ecological crisis stemming ultimately from overpopulation that eventually made it impossible to sustain life of the population both in terms of quality and quantity.

Easter Island is one of the most isolated places of human habitation on earth. Radiocarbon dating of artifacts indicate the Island was first settled in 400AD. The Island is less than 64 miles square and, based on estimates of the ability of the Island to produce food (note here this is not carrying capacity) never could have had a population greater than 7000-9000 souls. This population maximum occurred at about 1550AD. According to some, this Island's history constitutes "a grim warning to the world." Archaeologist, William Molloy, writes:

The history of Easter Island is of unusual interest, because it shows what happened in one of the most isolated laboratories of human achievement to be found anywhere in the world. Here some of the most basic problems that beset mankind as a whole were confronted by a small group of vigorous and industrious people lacking the stimulation of outside ideas so typically fundamental to most human ac-

complishment elsewhere in the world. They arrived at many solutions and eventually reached a level of cultural complexity most unexpected in so isolated a community. In typical human fashion their success appears to have carried with it the seeds of its own destruction. In the horrifying disintegration of the culture of this proud and successful people is reflected in microcosm the essence of the dilemma of twentieth-century man. —Foreword to S. ENGLERT [1970] *Island at the Center of the Earth*, p. 15

When discovered by Europeans in 1722 the Island was "open and treeless" and was inhabited by about 2-3000 people reported to be living in the most squalid conditions, many lived in caves, and were allegedly constantly engaged in warfare and cannibalism. The people were often stark naked and their entire body was covered with tatoos of birds and other bizarre creatures. The perception of the savagery of these people was enhanced by the sexual behavior of the women. While there were few women to be seen, according to Dutch reports, "they were more than cordial" to the visitors without eliciting the slightest sign of jealousy from the men. Within a few decades, however, the sexual adventures of sailors were sharply curtailed due to the high risk of contracting syphilis and other venereal diseases brought to the island by their predecessors.

What struck the first observers in 1722 was the mystery of how such a degraded people could have ever found the Island as they appeared to have no knowledge of seafaring. Moreover, it had to be wondered how these people could have carved and transported the magnificent and gigantic statues found all over the Island with only stone tools and without the sophistication needed to organize the substantial labor force obviously needed.

The puzzle facing twentieth century anthropologists, was "who produced the megaliths?" The mystery only deepened when signs, in the form of wooden tablets that appear to be carved with a form

of hieroglyphic writing, called Rongo-rongo were found in caves.⁷ Apparently, a more complex form of civilization once existed on the Island. What had become of it? According to archaeologist Thor Heyerdahl, the answer lies in class warfare.

The legends of the Rapa Nui recount a civil war between the “Long-ears” and the “Short-ears” that resulted in the virtual extermination of the Long-ears. The Long-ears, were according to Heyerdahl an “energetic people” who commanded the labor of the short-ears to make walls and statues and other public works. The breaking point in the relations between these two groups came when the long-ears ordered the short-ears to remove all the stones from Easter Island “so that all the earth could be cultivated.”

It would appear that the Rapa Nui were running short of agricultural land and of food. There are terraced fields supported by stone walls all over the island that suggest that the Rapa Nui had long been under pressure to expand the amount of arable land. In any case, Heyerdahl proposes that the Short-ears chose rebellion rather than work. This story, of course has Marxist overtones: the exploited workers rebelling against their oppressors as it were.

There were other pressures, both external and internal pressures, put on the civilization of Rapa Nui which could explain its degeneration with out recourse to class war. Ecologists have argued that the eco-system of Easter Island was degraded by population growth and the deforestation of the Island. Whatever social friction emerged on the Island was the consequence of an ecological catastrophe.

In the Ecological explanation, the key to the puzzle is the forest. Pollen studies on cores extracted from a lake indicated that the Island was once densely forested. Yet when “discovered” there was not a single tree to be found.

It has been contended that the construction of *Moai* was part of a competition to determine which chief would be the *Ariki*, or paramount chief. The *Moai* were in one view part of ancestor worship in

another they were incarnations of Rango, the Polynesian God of agriculture “whose voice was heard in the thunder.” In any case, the construction of the megaliths was done at significant real opportunity costs. That is, the Rapa Nui, because of the resources devoted to megalith construction had to give up other things, most especially food and leisure in the present, and perhaps considerably more in the future.

The average *Moai* was 14.5 feet tall and weighed 14 tons and over 600 were produced. UCLA archaeologist, Jo Anne Van Tilburg, estimated it would require the full time labor of 8 or 9 extended families to move a single *Moai*. Thus, she estimated that a Chief had to devote the output of 50 acres of land to the production of a single *Moai*; *just about twice what it took to support that number of families under normal circumstances*. Recalling our discussion of carrying capacity, it would appear that *Moai* construction significantly raised the human impact on the ecosystem of the Island. And, if living standards and carrying capacity are inversely related, the material standard of living of the Rapa Nui had to have been substantially reduced as a consequence of the *Moai* cult.

The megaliths were moved using trees as rollers. The trees were destroyed in the process so trees had to be cut for each new megalith. The most visible side-effect of tree cutting was the loss of access to pelagic fish such as Tuna and Porpoises. For centuries, the Rapa Nui fished for Tuna, Porpoises and other large fish from boats made from the trees of the Island. The boats were owned by the paramount chief and distributed to the fishermen. However, by about 500 years ago (about 300 years before European contact) it is evident in the archaeological record that access to such fish had ceased because of the lack of trees suitable for building boats.

Trees serve other functions. Trees store nutrients. When the trees are burned some of these nutrients are returned to the soil. Indeed, this is how swidden agriculture is practiced all over the world;

burn the trees and plant in the ashes. When trees are cut and destroyed this store of nutrients is lost. Trees also protect soil from wind and water erosion. Without the windbreak and the root systems of trees to hold it, the Rapa Nui soil was blown by the wind, and washed by the rain into the sea. The rain that usually replenished springs also ran into the sea causing a shortage of water. Over the centuries the Rapa Nui destroyed their soil and depleted their springs. Early visitors to the Island found many *Moai* almost buried by soil that had been washed down hillsides by rain.

Under the pressure of a ten fold increase in the population over the centuries the Rapa Nui went over the threshold of the Island's carrying capacity. Eventually the Rapa Nui exhausted shellfish beds, shellfish beds were also ruined as they were covered by eroded soil. The *Moai* cult only added to the ecological pressures of this population growth. Chaos set in. Rival clans began to desecrate the *Moai* of others and by 1864 all had been pulled down. The endemic warfare that followed only exacerbated the environmental problems on the island. War produces fires which destroy trees and ground cover and promote further erosion of the soil.

I once saw a bumper sticker that read, "At the end of the game he who has the most toys wins." The Megaliths of Easter Island were the "toys" of that culture, consumer goods are the "toys" in ours. The lurking tragedy, as the inhabitants of Easter Island discovered, is that life is not a game. The choices a society makes regarding its goals can have profound consequences. Moreover, it takes more than an awareness of the contradictions embodied in the social/economic system to solve the ecological problem.

Conservation biologist, E.O. Wilson has posed the question, "Is humanity suicidal." Are humans so selfish and shortsighted that they are incapable of seeing the terminal trajectory on which the system moves? As Clive Ponting observes the lesson of Easter Island is not encouraging:

The Easter Islanders, aware that they were almost completely isolated from the rest of the world, must surely have realized that their very existence depended on the limited resources of a small Island. After all it was small enough for them to walk around the entire Island in a day or so and see for themselves what was happening to the forests. Yet they were unable to devise a system that allowed them to find the right balance with their environment. Instead vital resources were steadily consumed until finally none were left. Indeed, at the very time when the limitations of the Island must have become starkly apparent the competition between the clans for the available timber seems to have intensified as more and more statues were carved and moved across the Island in an attempt to secure prestige and status. The fact that so many were left unfinished or stranded near the quarry suggests that no account was taken of how few trees were left on the Island [p.7].

In short, "the environmental crisis is not a new problem. While perhaps some societies were able to develop sustainable relationships with their environments, the most common outcome has been quite the opposite. "The archaeological record is strewn with the wrecks of communities that obviously had not learned to cope with their environment in a sustainable manner" and thus "seriously degraded their environments, thereby threatening their continued survival" [Redman, 1999, p. 4–5]

QUESTIONS

1. How does Veblen's theory of the Leisure Class apply to Easter Island?
2. What was the form of conspicuous consumption the Island?
3. How would you apply the relative income hypothesis to Easter Island?
4. How did the squirrel cage work on Easter Island?

5. Do you think the short-ears would have preferred fewer Moai and more leisure?
6. After reading this case are you more or less hopeful about the human future?

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ENDNOTES

1. Prozac alone adds 1.2 Billion to GDP. Of course, Prozac helps people feel better about all of the progress [Cobb, Hasteed, Rowe p.67]
2. GDP does not include these items or prostitution and illegal gambling for obvious "technical reasons." To the extent that these items have been legalized GDP has increased.
3. In the Greek Myth, Narcissus spurns the love of Echo. He is punished by the Goddess Nemesis who makes him fall in love with his own reflection from a pond. So enamored is he of his image that he cannot leave the reflecting pool. He dies there and a flower named after him grows on the spot.
4. Gandhi was born into a Jain family, but early in life rejected religion. At university in London he discovered Christianity and, most particularly, the Sermon the Mount. "Turning the other cheek," laid the foundation for his nonviolence [Will Durant [1935] *Our Oriental Heritage*, Simon & Schuster, p. 628].
5. As students of eco-history you might ponder just what environmental good might come of these options given the dismal ecological record of the Greeks, and the Soviet Union and Mao's China.
6. The Moai were a rather late arrival. Radiocarbon dating of excavations indicate the Island was first settled by Polynesians at around 400 A.D. [Charles Redman, Human Impact

on Ancient Environments, p. 8]. The first Moai date to the 10th century, but most date from the 14th and 15th century [Orilac p.88].

7. These tablets have never been deciphered. To date there is some evidence that they are a series of glyphs that served as mnemonics to facilitate reciting oral histories and genealogies. Some lines appear to be a lunar calendar. Most of the

glyphs are anthropomorphic and many are zoomorphic. One recent interpretation claims to have found the regular appearance of a “phallic suffix” suggesting a record of “begatting” consistent with genealogies. Current opinion holds that this “writing” is not indigenous; rather it is was “inspired” by a treaty signed with the Spaniards in 1770 [Orilac p. 64].