

INTRODUCTION

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Pour yourself a glass of water. From the tap. Take a nice big drink, roll it around in your mouth like a connoisseur tasting some grand vintage. You've just done the one thing all animals that share the land or the air must do, the one bottom-line requirement for the maintenance of cellular life. Butterflies collecting at muddy puddles. Wildebeest trekking to waterholes. Coyotes slipping down to creeks at dusk. Don't dry out!

Now consider this. Recently, an internal Coca-Cola company website leaked into public view, detailing a new effort of the company, in conjunction with the Olive Garden restaurant chain, an effort it called H₂No. As in, drink Coke instead. "Research was conducted to better understand why tap water consumption is so prevalent and why consumers are making this beverage choice." Happily, the social scientists concluded, "It is possible to make other beverage choices more relevant to consumers." The "conversion strategies" included not giving people water when they sat down, and if they asked for it, informing them instead of "value offers like free refills that positively influence a beverage decision in favor of a soft drink."

In fact, the strong efforts of Olive Garden staff (who competed to win luxe vacations) managed to "reduce tap water incidence" dramatically. Not only that, by offering more choices, they claimed to be improving the lives of their patrons. In fact, said Coke, "The Olive Garden has sent a powerful message to the entire restaurant industry—less water and more beverage choice mean happier customers."

Here, perhaps, is the proper place to begin thinking about our lives as consumers—about what it means to live in the most advanced consumer society that there ever was, a culture that fills almost every cranny of our lives with a message, a product, an image. A place where everything but the air we breathe comes branded and hyped. (The water that we drink, certainly. Coke, for instance,

now sells a water product called Dasani, a computer generated name picked after consumer testing showed it to be "relaxing and suggestive of pureness and replenishment." It is, in fact, whatever tap water is available locally—the bottler "enhances" it with minerals and subjects it to a process called "reverse osmosis" before pouring it into a blue-tinted vessel.) This book is an attempt to figure out what that society is doing to our economies, our planet, our families.

And to our souls—to our sense of who we are and why we are. Those senses drive our behavior, and so billions upon untold billions have been invested in understanding and appealing to our psyches. Most people now believe that the advertiser's understanding of our species is in fact a reasonable portrayal of "human nature"—that at bottom we are grasping machines, ever eager for more, supremely concerned with status, highly competitive. That we are, at bottom, *consumers*.

And this, in fact, is true. In every human brain I've ever come across, preeminently my own, there is a rather large chamber reserved for precisely this kind of self-absorption. Who knows what in our evolutionary saga drew the blueprints for this corner of our minds, but it is there. No use denying it—wise people never have. Indeed, most of our religious and ethical systems are attempts to deal with its reality, to tame and to limit it. What is different about a consumer society, though, is its celebration of this grasping quality, its insistence that this is the sum total of us. And its rebellion at the idea that we might limit ourselves in any way. Limits are anathema to homo-economicus—they threaten to slow down the constantly accelerating machine that we call our economy, a machine that can seemingly do anything except brake.

Another way of putting all this: Some years ago, in the process of writing a book, I watched every minute of television that streamed across the world's largest cable TV system in a single day: 2,400 hours of videotape, from country music videos to Abdomenizer infomercials, from the nightly news to the televangelists. The experiment yielded a fair number of useful insights, but the central idea that flowed through that coaxial cable, and that flows also through the shopping mall and the suburb and the theme park

and the other crystallizations of our consumer culture, was this: You are the most important thing on earth. That is the central organizing principle of our age.

One would think that from such a starting place it would be only a short leap to happiness, to fulfillment. And indeed the consumer society has given us much: slightly longer lives (most of the big gains came from public health and sanitation laws); endlessly greater diversity of products, from food to cars; an unprecedented supply of entertainment; the freedom to travel great distances quickly, obliterating the constraints of time. We like these things—these things are woven into the fabric of our lives. And yet do they make us demonstrably happy?

That's an interesting question, rarely asked by economists, who assume the sum total of our purchases must inevitably equal contentment. Once a year since the end of World War II, however, pollsters have inquired of Americans whether they were happy or not. And the results are interesting: The number of people who described themselves as very satisfied peaked sometime in the mid-1950s. Since then, even as our material abundance has expanded exuberantly (one car became three, a three-channel TV in the living room morphed into a monitor in every corner of the house), our spirits have slowly but steadily flagged. It's as if we'd conducted a large-scale experiment to answer the question: Do riches bring happiness? Whatever else the economy can claim, widespread fulfillment is not on the list.

How could that be? Perhaps because that grasping part of ourselves is not "human nature" at all, or at least not all of human nature. There are other corners of our brain as well, other parts of our nature. Evolution has left us with quite a lovely collection of limbs and senses, muscles and emotions, intelligences and passions—we were not designed for lying on the couch and clicking the remote alone. And not designed for ourselves alone. At other times, in other places, other things have been at the center of our lives—the tribe or the community, nature, God. These central organizing principles yielded other worlds. Worlds that doubtless had problems all their own, and that we don't want or need to return to—but worlds that might give us real clues about how to rebuild our own society

so that it worked a little better. Clues about how to rebuild our lives so they might fit us a little truer.

Those other worlds are a little hard to remember, caught as we are in the self-reinforcing marketplace ethos. Most critiques of consumerism have been pretty quickly co-opted. In the 1950s, for instance, there were plenty of people talking about conformity, about soullessness. But their prescription was usually more personal liberation, a suggestion that played into the great strength of the marketers, with their eternal emphasis on You. That is to say, "the sixties" as an idea was being sold persuasively before the decade was two-thirds over, a process that continues to this day, as boomers buy cars to the strains of "Revolution." If the focus on You has yet to make you happy, the logic of the consumer machine is simply to get something more. Surely it will do the trick—and if not it, then the next thing. Surely.

Think of it as an enchantment, a long, sweet incantation. If someone struck a discordant note, it was quickly incorporated into the lulling chant. The first real glass of cold water (or beverage of your choice, with free refills) poured over heads came from environmentalists, who had a few hard and straightforward questions to ask. Not about happiness, but about burning rivers, smoggy skies, disappearing landscapes. Did this, perhaps, have something to do with our "ways of life"? Were we consuming the planet?

Their queries, too, were deflected, at least in part. Engineers stuck filters on smokestacks and sewer pipes and insisted we could have it all, an unthreatening answer that appealed to many, since it put off the difficulty of thinking up some new way to organize our lives. But there were harder environmental questions to come. Take, for instance, global warming—it's less a result of some technical malfunction than simply of the sheer volume of our numbers and appetites. When we burn fossil fuel, we inevitably release carbon dioxide—there's no filter to put on the exhaust pipe. And we're now burning enough of it that scientists believe the planet's temperature will rise five degrees this century. If true, we'll live on a new earth, and not an improved one. The only ways to prevent it? Convert to new fuels like wind and solar, and use less energy—change technologies and change lifestyles. And do it fast.

If you want to understand what it means to be a consumer species, here is a number for you. Humans now consume 40 percent of the planet's photosynthetic productivity. Of the sunlight that falls on land and creates plant life, we take 40 percent. Barely half is left for the rest of all creation. Here's another number: By some accounts, human beings have used more material resources since the end of World War II than in all the time before. And so much of it has just been . . . well . . . silly.

Consider the sport utility vehicle. SUVs barely existed in 1990; by 2000, along with pickups, they comprised half the vehicles sold in the United States. Not because people suddenly needed to drive on rutted dirt roads—95 percent of them never ventured off pavement, which was just as well, since they showed an alarming propensity to tip over. Simply because the marketers had been at work, spending billions to spread the notion that You would be more manly (or, depending on your gender, safer) if you drove a Rover or a Blazer or a Navigator. And that, in any event, you would be more mystically in touch with the natural world. (Which in point of fact you were busy destroying—converting from an average car to an SUV and driving it a single year was the equivalent, in energy terms, of opening your refrigerator door and leaving it open for six years.)

The environmental attack opened the door, and other critiques followed. For instance, as people spent more and more time consuming entertainment, mostly from a feet-up position, Americans began literally to expand. Soon doctors were warning that, save perhaps for cigarettes, the greatest threat to public health was an epidemic of obesity. Overweight was no longer an aberration but a norm, as we converted to a diet consisting largely of foods that spent more on advertising than on ingredients (or, to put it another way, as we stoutly reduced tap water incidence). Another set of marketers was busy making us feel bad about the pounds their brethren had insisted we put on—soon "eating disorders" and "poor body image" were parts of a normal vocabulary.

Others began to worry about the effect of our way of life on our sense of community. In the small rural town where I've long lived, the older people can remember the advent of television—the way

that "visiting" suddenly dropped way down the scale of interesting activities. It's hard to knock on the door when you see the blue glow coming through the screen, and harder still to carry on a conversation with someone who is glancing between you and the tube like a spectator at Wimbledon. But who really needs neighbors in a consumer society anyway? If there was something you couldn't do yourself (and there were more and more such things), you simply purchased what you needed. A man with a fiddle who used to play for dances was no longer in such demand because there was a phonograph/8-track/CD/Net appliance sitting in the corner.

Robert Putnam, the Harvard researcher who documented the decline in civic involvement in his book *Bowling Alone*, searched far and wide for the reasons: More women working? Less time? By far the strongest correlation was with increased TV-viewing—with the embrace of the central machine of the consumer age, the one that keeps whispering sweet nothings to you.

Oh, you could write a longer list than this. Violence, misogyny, depression—all seem to have some real and deep connection with this I-dolatrous way of life. But it is enough to say that nearly everyone has at least a few doubts about what our culture is up to. Survey after survey shows parents, for instance, believe their kids have become too materialistic—though perhaps the difference in the generations is not as great as some of those parents might wish to believe. Some of the shine has worn off the consumer machine; doubts are muttered about the true faith.

Still, as any economist would tell you, we *choose* to behave this way. We like this stuff. It's how we want to live our lives. Or is it?

Reading a business magazine recently, I came across a fascinating article. It was about "smart" homes, those "homes of the future," with remote-control everything that have been a staple of world's fairs for two generations. This one was "web-enabled," meaning that when Jared Headley, director of "consumer solutions" for Cisco Systems, taps on his computer tablet, "the window blinds in the room begin to lower, the overhead lights dim, and the TV set cuts out, as light jazz begins to emanate from grilles in the ceiling." "It's a date machine!" he says with a grin, going on to de-

scribe his wired dishwasher, his E-mailing fridge, his wired picture frame with updated images of the kids.

The interesting part of the story, though, is that it's not Amana or Proctor-Silex that is sponsoring the new work-it's companies like Cisco, Intel, 3Com, IBM, and Sun. "Though these products are accompanied by hype about saving consumers' time, giving them peace of mind, and even bringing families and communities closer together, the changing high-tech market is the main reason these companies are invading the home." What happened was that big chip makers and server manufacturers noticed that corporate customers were not upgrading their computers as often as before, leading to flat sales. In the words of one industry analyst, "These companies want to look at new territories to conquer. And that's the consumer market."

So, for instance, "By Net-enabling everything in the home, Sun hopes to create ever more Internet traffic. And more Net traffic means more servers—Sun's bread-and-butter products—purchased by broadband service providers. That's definitely the sweet spot for us."

The magazine points out the one weakness in the whole scheme: "Do consumers want all this interconnectivity? Will we ever really need our fridge to E-mail us that our milk is past its prime?" And the answer, of course, is no. No human being not suffering from some profound disability needs a machine to lower the window shades, turn off the TV, and turn on the light jazz. When IBM ran an ad showing a dishwasher that automatically phoned the repairman when it thought it was broken, consumers in focus groups rebelled—they didn't want the appliances making calls.

Nonetheless, the "service providers" seem confident that they can overcome consumer resistance, reducing the incidence of manual light dimming as effectively as the incidence of tap water drinking. "We'll sell a security solution, an entertainment solution, a messaging solution," says Michael Moone, VP of consumer business at Cisco. "There isn't a CIO or CTO of the home, so we have to give this to people in terms of things they already want and are familiar with."

And perhaps—quite likely—they will succeed. Not because we want or need these things; clearly we don't. But time and again we have bought into new technologies, new toys. How is this possible? Part of it is the skill of advertisers, who will surely figure out a way to link web-enabled homes to the love of our children, our fears for our security, and so forth. But part of it, too, is the simple volume of advertisement and hype in our lives, which in some deep way may make it harder for us to think clearly about what we actually do want.

Henry David Thoreau, in *Walden*, of course sounded the first real alarms about this coming culture. Not that nineteenth-century Concord featured the Internet or the satellite TV. Its main communications medium, in fact, was the wooden sign, one of which hung above each store and tavern. We would regard them as incredibly quaint—Thoreau, who had sensitive antennae, avoided the main street of town because they seemed incredibly intrusive, designed to “catch him by the appetite, as the tavern and victualling cellar; or by the fancy, as the dry-goods store and the jewellers . . .”

And he was right, I think. In a world like the one we live in, it becomes hard to hear your own desires. If you feel yourself wanting something, is that *you*, or is it the effect of a million commercials? For the sake of argument, use the following metaphor: Each of us has a small broadcast coming from our souls, telling us who we really are, what we really need. It plays constantly, but at an incredibly low volume. So low that it is jammed with ease by the static and noise of our information era. We do not know what we want—we are cut off from ourselves. Quiet, solitude, dark—all the conditions that might make it easier to hear that broadcast—are the scarcest commodities in this time and place.

We are frazzled, time-starved, isolated from our neighbors (three-quarters of us don't know those who live next door!). Those very conditions make us all the more vulnerable to the next pitch. A wired house? It will save time! (Though of course it won't—the time spent turning down the lights will be spent searching for the remote.) I can see the ads now: our homes as islands of calm, filled with light jazz emanating from the ceiling grilles (and nothing of the

hours spent at work to pay for this vision, or the electricity sucked from coal and oil to make it all work). Were our feet firmly planted on the ground, such hype couldn't succeed. In fact, it took centuries to convince Americans to consume frivolously: The Puritan values of frugality and thrift were so strong that frippery and fashion were scorned. But all that has changed.

Or maybe, just maybe, not quite.

In the last few years, in place after place, small numbers of people have begun to try and fight back against the hyper-consumerism all around us. It is a hard job—less like battling air pollution than battling air—but activists, usually working outside the big environmental or social justice groups, have made their mark. Consider, for instance, the Center for a New American Dream, which has emerged as the central clearinghouse of a nascent movement, its website (www.newdream.org) the hub of many actions. But it is not alone—other groups and movements, working in an increasingly easy collaboration, suddenly abound. Just for example:

- TV Turnoff Week, after a decade of hard work, now reaches about five million schoolchildren annually. They and their families agree to turn off the tube, and at least for seven days get some sense of the unelectronic world, the one we used to call “real.” Organizers have won the endorsement of a wide variety of groups—not just environmentalists and antiviolence campaigners, but also religious conservatives. Even more importantly, they've persuaded pediatricians—worried among other things about neural development and the link between TV and obesity—to issue guidelines urging that parents not expose their kids to TV at all before the age of two and limit it closely thereafter.
- Adbusters, a slightly anarchic Canadian collective dedicated to “uncooling” major brands, has made International Buy Nothing Day (that's the day after Thanksgiving, otherwise known as the start of the holiday shopping season) into a widely celebrated affair. Their mock billboards have spread far and wide, and they've helped spearhead the campaign to stop Channel One, the TV news-and-commercial network supplied to school homerooms across the continent.

- Co-housing, the European movement to build communities instead of detached homes, where families share meals and child care, is spreading even in individualistic North America. Community-supported agriculture—where folks pay a sum to farmers in the spring and then share in their harvest all year—has grown even faster.
- Churches, synagogues, and mosques are increasingly entering the debate. Heirs to traditions that emphasize God not mammon, they are starting to emerge as sources of potentially powerful critiques. For instance, a small but growing number of Christians are now celebrating alternative Christmases. In one such effort, which some of us christened “Hundred Dollar Holidays,” pastors urge their flocks to spend just that sum—about a tenth of the American average—on gifts, and instead to look for joy in other, deeper rituals. A growing anti-SUV movement has drawn wide support from other Christians worried about stewardship of the earth: At one demonstration outside a row of dealerships near Boston, we held signs reading “What Would Jesus Drive?,” an image that appeared in newspapers and on TV screens across the country.

This list could stretch on. Bike activists have organized Critical Mass rides in major cities to demand a share of the road. Others have targeted junk mail, or taken on the soda companies when they try to turn public schools into exclusive domains (reducing fountain-drinking incidence), or set up car-sharing pools. None of it has yet dented the statistics that really count in our society: Wal-Mart sells more each season, credit-card debt keeps rising. But it is hard to escape the sense that a new critique is emerging, not confined to (or even really noticed in) academic or intellectual journals but instead acted out in a hundred earnest and sometimes even good-humored ways. Those who have tried to label it have called it “voluntary simplicity”—the giving up of some potential wealth, some possible stuff, in return for time or fulfillment. In the words of author Vicki Robin, “Your money—or your life.”

But it remains an inchoate world view, only occasionally swimming into focus. A few years ago, in Seattle, protesters descended on a meeting of the World Trade Organization. There was a certain

amount of chaos, a few ugly anarchists, but mostly there were tens of thousands of people who peacefully took to the streets to proclaim a simple message: There are other bottom lines than the ones we’ve been told about. It’s not just the economy, stupid, however much our leaders may insist otherwise.

Floating overhead the festivities, a large balloon carried the slogan: “Wake Up, Muggles.” For any Harry Potter fan, no translation is required. But for those who haven’t read them yet, Muggles are pretty much like us. They’re the people who watch the TV, who run to the mall—and who somehow don’t notice the loopy, wonderful world of wizards and dragons and general magic that exists all around them. A Muggle would be a perfect target for the H₂No campaign; a Muggle might even install remote-control operated light jazz-emulating stereo grilles in his ceiling.

But if the authors of this book are to be believed, we’re not doomed to endless Muggledom. Perhaps it is just a passing phase. Perhaps the incantation can be ended, the enchantment broken. Raise a glass of cool clear water and toast the possibility!