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## Identity

### Having and wanting

This book arose out of asking a simple but unexpectedly radical question: What makes people contented? At one level, the answer is also simple: The distance between what people have and what they want determines how contented they are. This distance—which Mishan referred to as the ‘margin of discontent’—can be closed either by increasing one’s possessions while keeping wants constant or by maintaining one’s level of possessions and reducing one’s desires. Here, the notion of ‘possessions’ is best thought of as the ability to have access to goods and services or, simply, income.<sup>1</sup>

Economic growth is usually characterised as the process whereby people satisfy their wants by increasing their possessions, thus becoming happier. But this presumption raises some

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awkward questions. How are people's wants determined? Is there a difference between what people say they want and what they really want? Does 'what people have' include only things that can be bought and sold? Does what people have actually satisfy them? Is what people want independent of what they have or does more 'having' drive up the level of wanting, so that the two can never meet and consumption is doomed to be a labour of Sisyphus? If so, are the sages right when they say that the only way to be happy is to give up wanting?

As is often the case, the best way to start answering these questions is to see what the economists say: deeper insight often begins from a critique of the conventional view. The neoliberal economists' view appears strange to ordinary people, but the reality is that the world is, in large measure, organised according to it. This is not so much because the economists have influenced the world (although that is certainly true); rather, it is because the economists have created a story about how the world works based on certain aspects of human behaviour—self-interested calculation, individualism and materialism. The strangeness of the economists' world arises from the fact that they recognise only this form of behaviour as valid and insist on imposing it on everything that people do.

The idea of 'consumer sovereignty' is the foundation of the economists' faith in the market and, indeed, the starting point for any challenge to economic liberalism. Neoliberal policies are based on the philosophical assumption that the right of adult individuals to make choices about how to pursue their welfare, even if they are the 'wrong' choices, is sacrosanct. This is a question of individual freedom, they argue, hence the term

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‘neoliberalism’ (in which the ideas of classical political liberalism are extended into new realms of activity). The economists’ response to the evidence presented in the last chapter would be: ‘What you say may be all very well. It may be true that more money does not make people any happier. But if that is what people want, right or wrong, who are we to deny them that choice? If people cannot choose properly for themselves, no one else can do a better job’. This idea is the basis of neoliberal political philosophy, as articulated by writers such as Ayn Rand, Milton and Rose Friedman and Friedrich von Hayek.

Of course, neoliberalism is based on the very strong assumption that people’s preferences—preferences that determine what they consume and how much they strive to become rich—are simply a given and not the subject of social control or manipulation by others. If this assumption does not hold, then the behaviour of consumers reflects not their own preferences but the preferences of the organisations and institutions that influence them. Even the most ardent neoliberal must admit exceptions to the rule. It is conceded that children should not be permitted to choose to eat only fast food, spend their inheritance, or inject themselves with heroin. But, as long as they remain sane, once children reach their majority they are taken to be fully conscious of their interests and wholly responsible for any decisions that turn out to be contrary to their interests. Any decision they make, as long as it does not impinge on the rights of others, is deemed to be beyond reproach.<sup>2</sup> However, as the exceptions already begin to suggest, an analysis of the structure, meaning and political implications of consumption behaviour demonstrates that the idea of consumer sovereignty is very shallow.

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Economics goes further than maintaining that the consumption choices of individuals are sacrosanct by defending the benefits of choice itself. It argues that an extension of the range of choices available to consumers in itself improves wellbeing because it enables each consumer to match more nearly their consumption spending to their wants. One immediate problem here is that the idea covers only one type of choice, the choice between different goods for sale. It excludes the possibility that consumers may prefer to limit the choices available to them—because, for example, it is too hard to choose from too great a variety or because they have a moral objection to some of the choices on offer. It also excludes the preference of some consumers to live in a society free of a vast array of trivially differentiated products, pervasive advertising, and unrelenting attempts to persuade them that their consumption choices can make them happy.

The more important fault in the argument, however, is the assumption that consumers come to the market with their wants already determined, and the only question is how best to satisfy them from the range of goods and services available. It is perverse to characterise the market as a want-satisfying mechanism when we are exposed every day to attempts by the market to influence what we want. Consumers' preferences do not develop 'outside the system'; they are created and reinforced by the system, so that consumer *sovereignty* is a myth. The question is not one of personal consumer choice versus elitist social engineering; it is one of corporate manipulation of consumer behaviour versus individuals in society understanding what is in their real interests. For most people this is an obvious point, but, as we will see,

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its implications are far-reaching. The issue goes well beyond the role of advertisers in shaping consumer preferences and purchasing behaviour: we must consider the social and psychological milieu of consumer society that teaches people how to think about themselves and their goals. The influence of the marketing society actually undermines the foundations of philosophical liberalism because, instead of society being populated by free agents rationally maximising their welfare through their consumption choices, it is peopled by complex beings whose tastes, priorities and value systems are, to a large degree, manipulated by the very 'markets' that are supposed to serve them.

One of the ironies of the modern world is that choice has been elevated to supreme status precisely at a time of social and cultural homogenisation across the globe. Henry Ford famously said of his automobiles that customers could choose any colour they liked so long as it was black. Today we are told that we can choose any goods we like so long as they meet the norms of US consumer culture. The 'choice' of the economics texts and the neoliberal political philosophers is not true choice: it is manufactured variety. Rather than providing a range of possibilities tailored to meet individual needs, the variety of products serves to confuse consumers, not only about what will satisfy their wants but also about what their wants actually are.<sup>3</sup>

## Consumption and the modern self

While economics imagines that consumption of goods is a straightforward process of satisfying human wants or desires, in

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fact people's relationship with their possessions is full of psychological complexity. Objects are not just useful: they have meaning. We do not have difficulty recognising this with certain objects in some cultural contexts. It is a cliché to observe that for men cars are often 'power objects', symbols of virility, strength, achievement and coolness, and that they may use cars to project this image to compensate for feelings of inadequacy. Economics is stuck in a pre-consumerist belief that people buy goods to satisfy basic human needs, but modern consumers no longer consume the 'utility' of goods and services: they consume their symbolic meanings. It is almost impossible today to buy any item that its producer has not attempted to invest with symbolic meaning. Clothing, for example, is designed to send signals. Even underwear that might be seen by no one is bought and sold because it makes the wearer feel a certain way about themselves. It can be sexy, sensible, muscular, vibrant, suave or whimsical and can communicate a variety of sexual connotations—demure but willing, titillating, brazen, romantic or naughty. The signals it is designed to send are the subject of meticulous commercial calculation.

In pre-industrial societies, a range of physical objects communicated status and power—shells, penis gourds, feathers, orbs, jewellery, and so on. In modern consumer society the essential symbol of status has taken the most abstract form, the form of money. The social function of the power of money was particularly apparent to chroniclers of society in the period of transition from feudalism to capitalism. Karl Marx was one of the most astute observers of the change. In his *Economic and Philosophic*

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*Manuscripts of 1844* he wrote of the power of money in the new society in the following terms:

The extent of the power of money is my power. Money's properties are my properties and essential powers—the properties and powers of its possessor . . . I am bad, dishonest, unscrupulous, stupid; but money is honoured, and therefore so is its possessor. Money is the supreme good, therefore its possessor is good. Money, besides, saves me the trouble of being dishonest: I am therefore presumed honest.

But even before the emergence of industrial society the transformative power of money was a common theme. In *Timon of Athens* Shakespeare wrote:

Gold? Yellow, glittering, precious gold? . . . Thus much of  
this will make black white, foul fair,  
Wrong right, base noble, old young, coward valiant.

In one study of the relationship between people and their possessions, the researchers used psychological measures to categorise families' homes as 'warm' or 'cool', depending on the strength of 'emotional integration' within the family. They found that people from warm homes are much less attached to the objects in their homes and, where objects do have value, their worth depends on the meaning they carry as signs of relationships between people. People from cool homes are much less likely to talk of the emotional significance of objects for their relationships, and indeed often dislike being questioned about their possessions, claiming that people are more important than things:

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This rejection of the symbolic mediation of things in favor of direct human ties seemed plausible at first, until we began to notice that people who denied meanings to objects also lacked any close network of human relationships. Those who were most vocal about prizing friendship over material concerns seemed to be the most lonely and isolated.<sup>4</sup>

Psychologists have confirmed the relationship between family structure and consumption behaviour. One study showed that young adults who had been reared in disrupted families are more materialistic and display higher levels of compulsive consumption than young adults reared in intact families.<sup>5</sup> Compulsive consumption may be a coping strategy, in which material goods compensate for the relative absence of emotional warmth.

The authors of the 'warm homes, cool homes' study ask what explains the modern addiction to material things: 'A great deal of the energy we consume goes to providing comfort: more and more elaborate houses, clothes, food, and gadgets. The energy we use still serves ends that mimic basic needs—food, warmth, security, and so on—but have now become addictive habits rather than necessities'.<sup>6</sup> This, of course, is in sharp contrast to the official story promoted by neoliberal economists, in which goods are the bearers of 'utility', objects that simply satisfy human needs. While we are increasingly dependent on the market economy, the nature of our lives makes it more difficult for us to express our identity and be acknowledged for who we are. This engenders a sense of impotence, an unheard cry for recognition from the 'joyless consumer', so that material possessions serve as 'pacifiers

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for the self-induced helplessness we have created'.<sup>7</sup> Consumption becomes an emotional habit in which the consumer is repeatedly trying to restore the tenuous bonds of self. When this is understood, the idea that people acquire goods to satisfy their material needs becomes a parody of itself.

For people without wealth in pre-industrial society, personal identity was derived from their daily activities, from their occupations. Family names such as Smith, Fletcher, Farmer and Cutler remind us of this. Today this is no longer true: in consumer society people attempt to create an identity not from what they produce but from what they consume. People were once comfortable deriving their identities from their productive activity, but people today must hide the fact that they manufacture their selves from what they consume. We do not expect that people will take to naming themselves 'John Sports Utility' or 'Barbara Georgian Mansion', yet in consumer society we behave in ways that are only marginally less obtuse. In the words of one of the world's largest producers of consumer products:

. . . the brand defines the consumer. We are what we wear, what we eat, what we drive. Each of us in this room is a walking compendium of brands. The collection of brands we choose to assemble around us have become amongst the most direct expressions of our individuality—or more precisely, our deep psychological need to identify ourselves with others.<sup>8</sup>

While we tend to think of the pursuit of status as the pre-occupation of the wealthy, the poor may be just as smitten. Consider young urban African-Americans in the United States

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who have created an industry aimed at projecting a certain image of laid-back coolness with a hint of menace.

Advertisers understand the power of this. A few years ago, the marketing experts at Cadbury decided to reposition for the teenage market the children's lollipop sold as Chupa Chups. Recognising that teenagers resist being advertised to, Cadbury produced a series of abstract television commercials that were irreverent and striking.<sup>9</sup> The campaign has been phenomenally successful. But sales of Chupa Chups—the name means 'suck a lot' in Spanish—have boomed largely because of the product's association with drug use. Teenagers taking amphetamines and ecstasy, especially at rave parties, suck the lollipop to stop themselves from grinding their teeth and biting the inside of their mouth. Some rave venues sell Chupa Chups as an essential accessory. In teenage culture, the product has now become associated with non-conformity and having a good time outside the law. This 'bad' image is a priceless marketing asset that gives the product credibility in the teenage market, one that spills over into everyday purchases by those who simply associate it with being cool, that hard-to-define personal characteristic that is essential to successfully navigating teenage years.

Market ideology asserts that free choice allows consumers to express their 'individuality'. Extending the essence of liberalism, libertarian political philosophy counterposes the freedoms of the individual against those of the collective, and especially the state. Consumer capitalism trades on the modern desire for individuality, to mark oneself out from the crowd. However, as the sociologist George Simmel told us many years ago, the individuality of modern urban life is a pseudo-individuality of

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exaggerated behaviours and contrived attitudes. The individuality of the marketing society is an elaborate pose people adopt to cover up the fact that they have been buried in the homogenising forces of consumer culture. The consumer self is garishly differentiated on the outside, but this differentiation serves only to conceal the dull conformity of the inner self.

In fact, to discover true individuality it is necessary to stage a psychological withdrawal from the market economy, since that is a place where one can buy only manufactured identities—masks bought to provide clones with the appearance of difference. The market is a place where compulsive differentiation becomes a substitute for the individual. For some people, an inability or unwillingness to meet the demands of manufactured identity becomes too much to bear. Reaction against pseudo-individuality can sometimes take extreme forms, such as escape into cults that control and crush the true individual by different means.

Nowhere has the existential ennui of consumption been more apparent than in Japan, where the search for some sense of reality and authentic selfhood intensified as the decades of economic success passed, until finally it was engulfed by the economic malaise and political soul-searching of the 1990s. As Gavan McCormack, one of the sharpest Japan watchers, observes, in the early 1990s Japan had reached the pinnacle of growth—vastly outstripping the income of all other Asian countries, exceeding the United States in income per person, with no unemployment, boasting the world's nine biggest banks, and funding the current account deficits of countries around the world. Japan was on track to become the world's biggest economy 'thus matching, and exceeding, the highest ambitions, and the wildest dreams, of not

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only the preceding fifty years but of the century and a half since Japan began to pursue the path of Westernization and modernization'.<sup>10</sup> According to some of the more perceptive Japanese observers, though, after this fantastic success Japanese society has been left with an emptiness that no amount of consumer goods can fill and a nagging question that bedevils public discourse: What have we sacrificed to have the world's nine biggest banks?

In the 1980s Japan's search for something beyond work and consumption centred on the development of theme parks, with Tokyo Disneyland, founded in 1983, proving enormously successful. These diverting endeavours have been attacked by Japanese critics as attempts to create a 'hyper-reality' to escape from the anxieties and stresses of ordinary life. McCormack paraphrases one critic's scathing analysis of Tokyo Disneyland, 'a central cultural symbol of the new Japan':

This 'Happiest Place on Earth', which is gradually being replicated in the shopping malls and exhibition centers of the 1990s, allows visitors to consume the prepackaged American symbols of fantasy, love, and adventure passively, while depriving them of opportunities for spontaneous festivity and human interaction.<sup>11</sup>

In this infantile world, adults escape into a make-believe land whose predominant characteristic is 'cuteness', as if the pointlessness of adult life can be forgotten through a reversion to childishness.

The pseudo-individuality of modern consumer culture is isolating. The more isolated we are, the more we are preoccupied with what other people think of us and the more inclined we are

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to manufacture an identity to project onto the world. The dramatic increase in the incidence of depression in the last few decades seems to be directly associated with loss of social networks and personal closeness, which in turn are the products of mobility and the substitution of shopping and commercial entertainment for community-based activity. According to Robert Lane, 'Three factors contribute to social isolation within market economies: television viewing, the shopping experience and the nature of what is consumed'.<sup>12</sup>

When a terrorist attack caused the twin towers of the World Trade Center to collapse on 11 September 2001, killing almost 3000 people, within days President Bush was telling the American public that the best way they could show that they would not be cowed by terrorism was to go out and shop. Although this was partly a response to fears that a collapse in consumer confidence would prompt a prolonged recession, the advice was presented as a means by which Americans could demonstrate their defiance. Consumer spending was characterised as a 'patriotic duty' for those who wanted to demonstrate that America would not be diverted from its way of life. In other words, the most normal act in the United States is to consume. The presidential blessing of shopping helped 'to counteract the worries, the gloom, the feelings of guilt aroused by shopping in a time of trauma'. The guilt associated with shopping is an acknowledgment of the selfishness and triviality of the act. Evoking the well-worn words of a previous president, PBS reporter Paul Solman concluded, 'Shopping may not only be what you can do for your country, but . . . what you can do for yourself as well'.<sup>13</sup>

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After September 11, shopping was the drug administered to heal the nation's wounds, a process of collective retail therapy that revealed the profound psychological and social importance of the act of consumption. Although aware of it only subliminally, President Bush was quite right to understand that the myriad acts of everyday consumer spending are inseparable from the ideological reproduction of consumer capitalism.

We know that depression is an increasingly common experience for people in Western societies. It is often associated with a feeling of meaninglessness, a niggling sense that there is no point. Such a feeling is often embarrassing to admit to in a social milieu where life is supposed to be an endless round of good times, and this silence does much to explain the horrifying rise in youth suicide. A common response to this existential depression is to go shopping. Shopping, especially for items other than daily necessities, has a range of powerful associations that have seeped into our consciousnesses. We are subtly schooled to feel that to possess is to capture power; indeed, that possessions are the source of power in our society. A subconscious association tells us that if we have power over goods we will have power over life—at least over our own lives.

If shopping has become the activity through which we try to give meaning to our lives, the shopping malls that now embellish every city are the shrines we build to this power. Ostensibly, shopping malls are no more than a convenient way to gain access to a variety of services. But there is a powerful and carefully manufactured psychology to the shopping mall. Unlike the traditional market, the bazaar or even the suburban high street, shopping malls are devoted exclusively to consumer activity—to spending

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money. The shopping mall feels quite different from the world outside. We enter a trance-like state when we enter one, a sort of meditation in which the mantra that focuses our attention is the promise of acquisition. The mall provides insulation against a hostile world. In a perverse way, shopping malls are liberating; we feel that all those goods, all that power, are there for us.

One powerful confirmation of this psychological function of the act of purchasing is the attitude we adopt to goods that we have acquired free of charge. Somehow we have less regard for freely given goods than for goods we have acquired through spending our own money. When we spend our own money we feel we are investing part of ourselves in what we buy, so that we can spread the power of our egos beyond the confines of our bodies. The devaluation of free goods is often overridden by other cultural norms or feelings, such as the satisfaction derived from eating something grown in a home garden. But in children it is quite apparent. Modern children crave things that have been bought in a shop. Meals cooked at home, clothes sewn at home and toys made at home lack the magic of consumption. Children learn that a thing they have saved their own money to buy or a thing for which their parents have 'sacrificed' their money has enormous value; it gives them a taste of the personal power conferred by purchasing power.

The shopping mall has none of the communal functions of the marketplace; its sole function is to sell, and in so doing it strives to give meaning to alienated lives. Contradictory as it may seem, shopping is an attempt to recapture a sense of community. Fox and Lears trace the changes in the social functions of consumption:

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Life for most middle-class and many working-class Americans in the twentieth century has been a ceaseless pursuit of the 'good life' and a constant reminder of their powerlessness . . . Although the dominant institutions of our culture have purported to be offering the consumer a fulfilling participation in the life of the community, they have to a large extent presented the empty prospect of taking part in the marketplace of personal exchange.<sup>14</sup>

People naturally pursue a sense of community and belonging. With the breakdown of old communities and the emergence of the economic individual under industrial capitalism, the new sense of society embraced whole countries rather than local communities. People began to perceive that the path to acceptability in the new society was to adopt, as always, the socially appropriate forms of behaviour. These new forms of behaviour stressed income and material acquisition. Since everyone seemed to want this above all, acquisitiveness became the means of finding a sense of community. But what a solitary sense of community it turned out to be! It was to be had not by interacting with other people but by purchasing disembodied, impersonal products in the marketplace—as if by purchasing socially sanctioned goods we could buy a sense of belonging. Ignoring those around us, we came to look for a sense of community on the shelves of the supermarkets and the clothing stores.

Shopping is a response to our existential depression, when the world seems to overwhelm us, when we feel we have been put on Earth only to drag ourselves through a life of drudgery. Fleeting, we can break out and rebel by going shopping.

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Shopping is even tinged by a sense of challenge to the world, to the lives we are stuck in; it is a rebuke to the system that tries to engulf us. 'I can't afford it but, damn it, I'll buy it anyway.' Ultimately, though, shopping can be no release; it can only enmesh us further. The fleeting sense of power that comes with a purchase simply leaves a greater void to be filled. It is like struggling to get out of quicksand—by struggling, we just sink deeper into the mire. In the end, to consume is to concede defeat; to consume like this is to slowly die.

The cry for riches to fill the existential void is not of course a wholly modern phenomenon. For centuries it has been understood that the hope invested in material wealth can only turn into greater hope, leaving happiness a dream. Goethe knew:

Blundering with desire towards fruition,  
And in fruition pining for desire.<sup>15</sup>

But, whereas this futile activity was reserved for the few in previous ages, today it is the province of the mass of ordinary people. While the personal evidence of the futility of material acquisitiveness mounts, we continue to be assailed everywhere, every day of our lives, by messages that affirm the power of money. The power of money is true enough: people with money are powerful in Western society. But they are only powerful in the particular sense of having control over material resources and over other people. Those who are driven to ever greater accumulation of things are driven by inner urges and unmet needs that they neither understand nor control.

Consumption today is marketed as a means of participating in society. Telephone services, telecommunications and the

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Internet are promoted as means by which people can keep in touch with the world. But, as E.J. Mishan remarked in the 1960s, with all the enormous advances in communications, people know less of their neighbours than ever before in human history.<sup>16</sup> The absence of real contact induces desperate attempts to fill the silence with trivial noise and distractions—the muzak of the malls, commercial radio, and televisions in airport lounges.<sup>17</sup> This unease with silence and stillness is a modern phenomenon, but it has been developing at least since the time of rapid urbanisation. John Stuart Mill was one of the first to notice the psychological impact of increased population density and the urbanisation of society: ‘It is not good for a man to be kept perforce at all times in the presence of his species. A world from which solitude is extirpated is a very poor ideal. Solitude, in the sense of being often alone, is essential to any depth of meditation or of character’.<sup>18</sup>

One might say that this is the affliction of our age—too much loneliness and not enough solitude.

## Marketing

Modern consumer capitalism will flourish as long as what people desire outpaces what they have. It is thus vital to the reproduction of the system that individuals are constantly made to feel dissatisfied with what they have. The irony of this should not be missed: while economic growth is said to be the process whereby people’s wants are satisfied so that they become happier—and economics is defined as the study of how scarce resources are best

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used to maximise welfare—in reality economic growth can be sustained only as long as people remain discontented. Economic growth does not create happiness: unhappiness sustains economic growth. Thus discontent must be continually fomented if modern consumer capitalism is to survive. This explains the indispensable role of the advertising industry.

Economic ideology contends that consumers with pre-existing preferences come to the market to choose from what is available. In reality, the advertising industry exists because the reverse is true. Most frequently, corporations manufacture a product, usually just a variation on an existing product, and then set about creating a market for it. Innocent of the economics texts, the marketing experts know there are no consumer products today that are bought solely for their usefulness. They are all purchased for the contribution they are expected to make to the consumer's self-image or lifestyle, whether it be a 'new' design for jeans, a repackaged tub of margarine, an exciting new financial product, or a car that may or may not perform better but will undoubtedly make the owner feel more potent, laid back, liberated or worldly.

The greatest danger to consumer capitalism is the possibility that people in wealthy countries will decide that they have more or less everything they need. For each individual this is a small realisation, but it has momentous social implications. For an increasingly jaded population, deceived for decades into believing that the way to a contented life is material acquisition, the task of the advertising industry becomes ever more challenging. As a result, a large portion of the creative energy of wealthy nations is channelled into the marketing machine, leaving us to speculate

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on the truly enriching cultural outpouring that would be possible if this energy were devoted to more productive ends.

Advertising long ago discarded the practice of selling a product on the merits of its useful features. Modern marketing builds symbolic associations between the product and the psychological states of potential consumers, sometimes targeting known feelings of inadequacy, aspiration or expectation and sometimes setting out to create a sense of inadequacy in order to remedy it with the product. On the face of it, a kitchen-cleaning product is promoted for its ability to clean, but in reality it is sold because it provides the customer with the sense of being a devoted homemaker or because a single person is reminded of how it was at home. If this fails to generate enough sales, an advertisement can create anxiety in people by suggesting that their kitchen is seething with 'hidden germs' that could at any time infect their children. Most four-wheel-drive vehicles never leave the city: they are sold to people who want to create for themselves and others the image that they are outgoing, adventurous types, able to cast off the shackles of urban living and 'rough it' with nature. Increasing numbers of people pay large sums to live out this fantasy, despite the well-established environmental damage and accident mortality rates associated with four-wheel-drive vehicles.

So much is obvious. Other products are targeted at particular groups, to take advantage of and reinforce their distinctness—'platinum' credit cards, to make people at the top end of the market feel special about themselves; outdoor clothes, for people who think they are rebelling against consumerism; city runabouts, for young adults with a need to be seen to be having fun. To acquire a place in the social structure, each person must

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express a particular set of values. Money gives more options for expressing a desired set of values, but it is not essential. Expressing a set of values shows others who you see yourself to be. The art of the successful modern consumer is to consume in a way that says 'this is who I am' without it being apparent that the statement is being made. So we snigger at those who declare themselves too blatantly, the innocent consumers who expose the system by not understanding the rules.

When consumers are at the point of making a purchase they are subliminally asking themselves two questions: Who am I? Who do I want to be? These questions of meaning and identity are the most profound questions humans can pose, yet today they are expressed in the lines of a car and shape of a soft-drink bottle. The advertising industry demands such creativity of its employees because the creeping sense of failure associated with consumption requires continual invention of new ways of appealing to the need for personal identity.

Thus the task of the advertising industry is to uncover the complex set of feelings associated with particular products and to design marketing campaigns to appeal to those feelings. This is a challenge: consumers, for the most part, do not consciously understand what they want or why they want it. One of the newer techniques to elicit information is known as 'metaphor marketing'.<sup>19</sup> Developed by Harvard polymath Jerry Zaltman, the technique is based on the recognition that, while most market research relies on words, human beings think in and react to visual images. Metaphor marketing asks potential consumers to select from magazines and other media images that, for whatever reason, they associate with certain products. The rationale is

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encapsulated in a quote, used by Zaltman, from the surrealist painter René Magritte: 'Everything we see hides something else we want to see'.

Subsequent reflection on and interpretation of the images selected by the potential consumers reveal unexpected associations and desires. For example, women hate wearing panty hose because they are hot and uncomfortable in summer. But reflection on the pictures women associate with panty hose reveals that they also like wearing them because they make them feel thin and tall and therefore alluring. A Nestlé candy bar was found to have the expected associations with a quick snack, but analysis of the images consumers picked out showed that the candy bar is also a powerful icon of time, one that evokes images of a simpler era of childhood. When researchers investigated the metaphors associated with a new home-security system they were surprised to discover how often consumers chose images of dogs, which for the interviewers symbolise comfort and security. Instead of the device being marketed as a high-tech electronic system, dogs provide a powerful image that evokes the feelings that persuade consumers to buy security systems.

Prodigious intellectual and creative effort is poured into marketing, driven by the imperative of consumer capitalism. All aspects of human psychology—our fears, our sources of shame, our sexuality, our spiritual yearnings—are a treasure house to be plundered in the search for a commercial edge. Thousands of the most creative individuals in modern society, such as Zaltman and his colleagues, devote their lives to helping corporations manipulate people into buying more of their brand of margarine or running shoes at the expense of another corporation selling a

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virtually identical product. This is not just a waste of talent. The work of Zaltman and many like him is at best meaningless and at worst a subtle form of cultural brainwashing whose purpose is to sustain a system that leaves people miserable. This fact is widely understood but elicits no condemnation. It is regarded as normal.

The sophistication and subtlety of some advertising campaigns should not be underestimated. A television advertisement for a brand of margarine takes the viewer through a series of carefully constructed images designed to evoke a particular mood. Backed by an evocative song, the advertisement tells the story of a modern working mother, a nurse returning home from work through the bustle of the city to the arms of her four-year-old daughter. Shot through orange filters to give a sense of warmth and closeness, mother and daughter talk while mother prepares a meal in the kitchen. The child makes a phone call to her daddy, who we see works on an oil rig somewhere out in the ocean. Each camera shot evokes the sense of an intimate, loving family temporarily separated and longing to be reunited. The woman takes the phone and talks to her man. She is stoic in his absence; he is a new man, masculine but soft and loving, and there is a hint of the sexual in their expressions. We know this adoring family will be reunited in their home and all will be right with the world. The purpose of the commercial is to leave the viewer with a set of associations between the ideal family and this brand of margarine.

In the marketing of margarine, the product's contribution to the wellbeing of the consumer is wholly divorced from any of its physical properties. The actual usefulness of the product has

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become irrelevant, so that the consumer does not buy something to spread on bread but a concatenation of feelings associated with idealised family relationships. The complex, clever symbolism of the advertisement is designed to convince the viewer that a tub of vegetable fat that is identical to half a dozen other brands of vegetable fat can give us something very special, something we really need. A moment's reflection by even the most gullible consumer reveals the absurdity of this, but the strategy works because it is built on two facets of human psychology. In a world of social disintegration, modern consumers have a powerful need for family warmth, and humans, just like Pavlov's dogs, make unconscious associations. Unmet emotional needs and unconscious association are the twin psychological pillars of the marketing society.

However, some forms of marketing have now entered a new phase that no longer targets specific emotional needs. In the last fifteen or so years corporations have taken marketing beyond the particular product by creating an entire culture associated with their brand; the product itself needs only to have features that are consistent with the lifestyle or attitude the brand represents. Naomi Klein argues in *No Logo* that, 'Rather than serving as a guarantee of value on a product, the brand itself has increasingly become the product, a free-standing idea pasted onto innumerable surfaces. The actual product bearing the brand-name has become a medium, like radio or a billboard, to transmit the real message'.<sup>20</sup> The product itself is incidental to the company and indeed in many cases its manufacture is contracted out to factories in the Third World. Klein refers to this as a 'race towards weightlessness', in which the company distances itself from the

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manufacture of a product and becomes a shell devoted to marketing. In the world of the weightless corporation, the real work is to build a brand rather than make a product. This represents a shift from the product itself being of true value: what is of true value is 'the idea, the lifestyle, the attitude', and it is these associations with a product that require the real investment and creativity.

The expense associated with creating and sustaining a brand, including advertising and sponsorships, explains the cavernous gap between what it costs to actually manufacture a pair of shoes, for example, and the price the consumer pays. The consumer is paying for an attitude as well as for footwear, and most of the money is spent on attempting to invest the shoes with attitude. This sophisticated process involves the modification of culture; Klein describes it as the 'cultural looting of public and mental spaces':

Power, for a brand-driven company, is attained not by collecting assets per se, but by projecting one's brand idea onto as many surfaces of the culture as possible: the wall of a college, a billboard the size of a skyscraper, an ad campaign that waxes philosophic about the humane future of our global village.

While traditional marketing is aimed at creating associations between a product and personal attributes, branding goes beyond association: 'The goal now is for the brands to animate their marketing identities, to become real world living manifestations of their myths. Brands are about "meaning", not product attributes'.

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The search for a marketing edge has meant the colonisation of all cultural forms. Even the opposition to this cultural looting represented by the anti-globalisation movement, for which *No Logo* has become an iconic text, is now exploited. Italian clothing company Diesel advertises directly to the anti-globalisation demographic, even going so far as to describe its brand as a 'movement', with images of Diesel-clad protesters dressed in a post-punk Euro-alternative style. The images—with the Diesel logo discreetly placed because this group reacts badly to being advertised at—are targeted at customers aged 20 to 29 who are so cool that being cool does not matter any more. The 'no logo' generation itself, whose ironic attitude to popular culture separates it from the teenage market, has become the latest cultural mine for marketers.

The beauty of this approach is that consumers can never get what they want. Products and brands can never give real meaning to human lives, so modern consumers lapse into a permanent state of unfulfilled desire. This, of course, is the essential state for consumers in modern capitalism. Reversing the traditional process of first developing a product and then considering how best to market it, it is not uncommon today for a corporation to come up with an idea for a promotion before the product itself is developed. The product is then designed to fit the idea. In the case of the marketing of pop groups, the music can be written, sometimes electronically, so that it appeals to a predetermined demographic with certain cultural aspirations; the songs are recorded by session musicians, and only later are the members of the band chosen and made over to fit the planned image.

There is, however, a fragility built into the structure of branding. For marketing that focuses on a product, when the

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product has a problem it simply fails as a product and the corporation that made it can move on; the Ford Edsel is often used as an example of an expensive flop. But when Nike's use of sweatshops in Indonesia is exposed, when McDonald's is accused of destroying Amazon rain forests and exploiting its teenage workers, and when Shell is shown to be associated with state-sanctioned murder in Nigeria there is no escape. As Klein points out, 'Many of the people who inhabit these branded worlds feel complicit in their wrongs, both guilty and connected. And this connection is a volatile one, akin to the relationship of fan and celebrity: emotionally intense but shallow enough to turn on a dime'.<sup>21</sup> This fragility provides a target for activists: the creation of a brand image invites iconoclasm, and this has spawned a new method of resistance known as 'culture jamming'.<sup>22</sup>

Contrary to the fiction of the economics texts, in which independent consumers go in search of the products that will satisfy their needs, humans have become extensions of the products they consume. When people assume manufactured identities, instead of searching for their real selves, they come together as collectivities of attitudes and elaborate poses rather than real flesh and blood, and this has profound implications for the nature of social interaction.

What is it that has turned consumers of products into consumers of lifestyle and seekers of attitude? The answer is clear: it is the emptiness of modern life that leads people on a vain search for the thing that will fill the void. It is a need to create an identity, as much to know oneself as to have something to project onto the world, in a society in which the growth fetish has trivialised, marginalised or destroyed many of the things that truly can

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provide fulfilment. What is the impact of the tyranny of brands on those whose lives are governed by them—gullible consumers—which must include almost everyone in Western societies? It is to reinforce the insidious sense that something is missing, to create the conditions for serial disappointment, yet to sustain hope that more of what has so far failed will ultimately succeed.

The advertising industry is the primary agent of this massive deception. To protect itself it hides behind an elaborate facade. The official story is that advertising helps discerning consumers make informed choices about how best to spend their money. This ideology of consumer sovereignty is used to establish and maintain a taboo. We are not allowed to point out that advertising, and the pervasive commercialism of everyday life, influences ordinary citizens to behave in ways that are contrary to their interests. The fiction is maintained in advertising codes of practice that verge on the laughable. As in other wealthy countries, in Britain the Code of Advertising Standards and Practice declares, 'No advertisement may contain any descriptions, claims or illustrations which expressly or by implication mislead'. In particular, 'No advertisement may misleadingly claim or imply that the product advertised, or an ingredient, has some special property or quality that is incapable of being established'. If governments were serious about this criterion of ethical behaviour, the advertising industry would effectively be abolished. For is not the purpose of advertising to give people the impression that the product has some special property or quality that is in fact entirely unrelated to the product itself? Do not advertisers attempt to persuade us that cars can give us sexual potency or express our level of achievement, that a detergent can allow a woman to demonstrate that she is a

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loving mother, that those who buy a particular brand of margarine can create happy and loving families, that a certain brand of beer confers hard-working manhood, that a leather briefcase can provide a sense of power in the world of business, and so on ad infinitum? These claims are all blatantly and demonstrably misleading. The Code of Advertising Standards and Practice goes on to assert that advertisements 'must not seek to exploit public ignorance or to perpetuate popular misconceptions'. Apart from the specific popular misconceptions associated with, for example, ownership of a Ferrari or wearing Diesel jeans, the social function of advertising is precisely to perpetuate the popular misconception that life satisfaction can be increased by way of consumption of material goods.

The United States has similar provisions guarding the consumer against 'misleading and deceptive' advertising, despite the fact that it is hard to find any advertisement that is not grossly misleading as to the effects of the product and that is explicitly designed to deceive. Indeed, an advertising agency that failed to mislead potential consumers into believing that they could derive enhanced personal qualities from a product would not be in business for long. US law appears to have an escape clause for the industry: an act must not mislead the 'reasonable consumer', and an advertiser is not liable for 'every conceivable misconception, however outlandish, to which his representations may be subject among the foolish or feeble-minded'.<sup>23</sup> It would not occur to the legislators, regulators and jurists who might be called on to make a judgment that today's average consumer may be an everyday victim of foolishness and feeble-mindedness in their consumption behaviour.

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Any reasonable assessment must conclude that the vast majority of advertising 'exploits public ignorance and perpetuates misconceptions'. It is deliberately designed to mislead the reasonable consumer, so should be banned. Moreover, given that the bulk of advertising aims to persuade consumers to change from one brand to another where the material differences between the brands are minimal, the resource savings would be enormous if advertising were banned. The resources that are currently eaten up in a zero-sum game could be devoted to spending that could make a large contribution to human well-being—through, for example, public health programs in the Third World. In addition, banning advertising would begin the process of undoing the association between material consumption and happiness, an association that, because it is untrue, causes so much personal disappointment. One result would be that over time people would simply consume less, a process that must begin sooner rather than later if there is to be any hope of sustaining the material basis of human existence on Earth. By persuading people to buy more and more, advertising promotes continued degradation of the environment. While governments exhort their citizens to protect the environment through the slogan 'reduce, re-use and recycle', a huge advertising industry persuades people to 'increase, discard and dump'. Needless to say, this is a very unequal battle, particularly because it is a matter of life or death for the corporations, whereas, for most governments, urging people to 'do the right thing' is little more than a cheap sop to voter concern about the parlous state of the environment.

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Returning to Chapter 2's discussion of the meaning of wellbeing, we are reminded that deeper states of contentment are associated with states of psychological maturation and self-actualisation, or individuation, in which unconscious drives and motivations are brought to consciousness and, through a process of psychological integration, harmonised with one's conscious goals and principles. Thus advertising will continue to be effective as long as people are driven by unconscious desires and motivations, but it begins to fail for those who have reached a more advanced state of self-awareness. In other words, advertising promises things to make people happy, so it works only as long as people are unhappy. When people reach a state of integration, they can stage a psychological withdrawal from the market and begin to create themselves just as they please.

## Overconsumption

Nutritionists describe obesity in terms of energy imbalance, usually caused by excessive calorie consumption and insufficient physical activity. In a previous era it might have been described, perhaps more usefully, in terms of gluttony and sloth.<sup>24</sup> As with other excesses, promotion of gluttony—a form of overconsumption that directly affects the body—is a product of consumer society. Food manufacturers compete fiercely to win market share by engineering foods that appeal to the palate. The result is that most of the foods offered today in supermarkets and fast-food outlets are laced with fat, sugar and salt. This fierce competition does not simply persuade consumers to change from one product

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to another: it also means that consumers eat more. Sixty-one per cent of American adults are now overweight (defined as having a body mass index over 25) or obese (body mass index over 30); 14 per cent of adolescents are in the same category. This is a new phenomenon. The prevalence of obesity among adolescents has trebled in the past two decades.<sup>25</sup> As with many other aspects of social change, the United States leads the way, showing the future of the rest of the industrialised world.

Although genetic and metabolic factors play a role, the principal causes of the spread of obesity are behavioural and socio-cultural.<sup>26</sup> Some people are better able to resist the temptations offered by food manufacturers. The overwhelming majority of obese people overeat for psychological reasons, just as other people indulge in overconsumption of cars, clothes and houses for psychological reasons. The so-called epidemic of obesity has occurred only in the last twenty or, at most, thirty years. Yet, as with other addictions and social pathologies (including ADD), it is safer to medicalise the problem and thus refer to it as an 'epidemic'. The North American Association for the Study of Obesity insists that 'we must begin to view obesity as a medical problem'.<sup>27</sup> Of course, medical problems are ones sorted out between patient and doctor and are best cured by drugs and surgery, especially drugs, so that the pharmaceutical industry can expand to undo the effects of the food industry. (One of the primary demands of the obesity lobby is for obesity to be given formal medical status so that health insurance companies are required to pay for treatment.) Both the pharmaceutical and the food industries profit from obesity and, once again, the medical profession and drug companies play a crucial role in diverting us

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from asking what it is about our society that gives rise to these pathologies.

The medical profession thus helps to validate overconsumption. According to the authors of an article in the *British Medical Journal*:

. . . the driving force for the increasing prevalence of obesity in populations is the increasingly obesogenic environment rather than any 'pathology' in metabolic defects or genetic mutations within individuals. A paradigm shift to understanding obesity as 'normal physiology within a pathological environment' signposts the directions for a wider public health approach to the obesity problem.<sup>28</sup>

This is a striking notion. Obese people may be thought of as behaving normally in a sick social environment, although characterising obesity as a public health problem should not conceal the fact that it is in reality a social pathology that spills over into health problems. Like all species, humans instinctively conserve energy, expending just what they need to feed and breed. Our instinct is to minimise activity, something the modern sedentary lifestyle in rich countries permits as never before. Obesity, then, is an environmental health problem reflecting both the range of food choices available and the opportunity to reduce physical activity. Medical solutions to obesity will not work because they fail to tackle the causes. Prevention requires wholesale change in the culture of consumption, which itself is a reaction to the emptiness of affluence. This is not meant as an attack on people who have succumbed to obesity; they, after all, are the victims. Yet overweight people are often vilified; not, one

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suspects, for being too weak to resist temptation, but for revealing in such a confronting way our dirty secret of overconsumption.

We have stressed that consumption no longer occurs in order to meet human needs; its purpose now is to manufacture identity. The nature of consumption spending has changed from an activity aimed at acquiring status through displays of wealth to one of creating the self through association with certain products and brands. We no longer want to keep up with the Joneses; we want to trump the Joneses by differentiating ourselves from them. The transformation of useful goods into lifestyle accessories has implications for production as well as consumption. In order for goods to serve as the accoutrements of lifestyle they must have additional qualities built into them, and the extra costs form part of their value. These extra costs are partly those of product differentiation and partly those of creating and renewing the image and the brand. Almost all consumer goods now have luxurious or stylistic aspects built into them that inflate their prices. This price inflation sometimes raises the cost of a product several times beyond the level required to make an item that satisfies some reasonable need for sustenance, shelter, clothing, education or entertainment. Watches that sell for \$2000, sunglasses with \$700 price tags, running shoes and shirts that cost \$200, highly engineered and luxuriously appointed cars for \$50 000 and more, houses with double the necessary floor space—all these have features that are redundant and some have features that are undetectable even to the consumer. A fake Rolex is indistinguishable from a genuine one, except that the wearer knows he is only pretending to be the person he wants to pretend to be. Next to a photo of a stylish young mother with a smiling baby

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on her back, a magazine advertises ‘what every mother and baby wants for their afternoon stroll’, a chinchilla baby backpack selling for \$12 000 (plus a matching chinchilla collar and cuffs for mother, priced at \$4995).

This value-inflation process is essential, since in its absence consumers would be unable to spend the incomes that have resulted from decades of sustained economic growth. In other words, in those parts of the world where most people have everything they could reasonably want in order to satisfy even sophisticated needs, people are faced with a conundrum: they must keep spending, and they must be persuaded to spend more. Indeed, much consumer spending today is not aimed at acquiring goods and services but is itself a form of entertainment. A doctor, for instance, is bored with his job and his family and must always have a project to keep himself entertained—a second house that needs renovation, another house at the beach, a farm outside town, an overseas trip for ‘professional development’, a share in a racehorse, extensions to the family home. This is the pattern of restless overconsumers, who deploy their wealth as a means of avoiding confrontation with the essential meaninglessness of life that they fear may lie just below the surface. They keep themselves amused by changing the form of their assets.

Consumer society is built on self-delusion. As Juliet Schor observes, ‘American consumers are often not conscious of being motivated by social status and are far more likely to attribute such motives to others than themselves. We live with high levels of psychological denial about the connection between our buying habits and the social statements they make’.<sup>29</sup>

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It cannot be otherwise, for in creating an identity consumers believe they are living out authentic selves. If they admit that their purchasing decisions are social statements they are admitting that they are living false lives. Most consumer spending is therefore defensive in character; it must be maintained in order to avoid the realisation that we have no place in society, that we do not fit anywhere and so have no real self. Regardless of the longevity of the products purchased, the need to constantly recreate identity is relentless, and this fact is the psychological *sine qua non* for the reproduction of modern consumer capitalism.

Wastefulness is thus essential to sustaining modern consumer capitalism. But it is a new form of waste: it is not the waste of packaging or built-in obsolescence; it is waste arising from the fact that the physical properties of the goods purchased are not the things being consumed. It is the style, the attitude and the image associated with the product that is consumed. The product itself is redundant. The ultimate product would be one with no substance at all but that could nevertheless be displayed; an invisible item whose symbols alone could be attached to the purchaser. Platinum credit cards come close to this. But most display involves the generation of huge amounts of waste, and the natural environment pays the price. There is, therefore, an intimate relationship between the creation of self in consumer capitalism and the destruction of the natural world. This is the unbridgeable gulf between the 'sustainability' that politicians and business people talk about and the deep ecology of the environmentalists. Protecting the natural world requires not only far-reaching changes in the way we use the natural environment: it calls for a radical transformation of our selves.