

nant economic model, a culture of consumerism became necessary to support it.

Time Versus Stuff

With the “technological cleverness” of the Industrial Revolution—the shift from hand-crafted goods to assembly-line mass production, powered by steam engines—industrialized countries became much more efficient at producing Stuff. In 1913, it took a worker 12.5 hours to make an automobile chassis; by 1914 it took 1.5 hours.⁴⁵ The cost of producing one megabit of computing power in 1970 was about twenty thousand dollars; by 2001, the cost had sunk to two cents.⁴⁶

With this huge increase in productivity, industrialized societies faced a choice: keep producing roughly the same amount of Stuff as before and work far less, or keep working the same number of hours as before, while continuing to produce as much as possible. As Juliet Schor explains in *The Overworked American*, after World War II, political and economic leaders—economists, business executives, and even labor union representatives—chose the latter: to keep churning out the “goods,” keep working full time, keep up the frenzied pace of an ever-expanding economy.⁴⁷

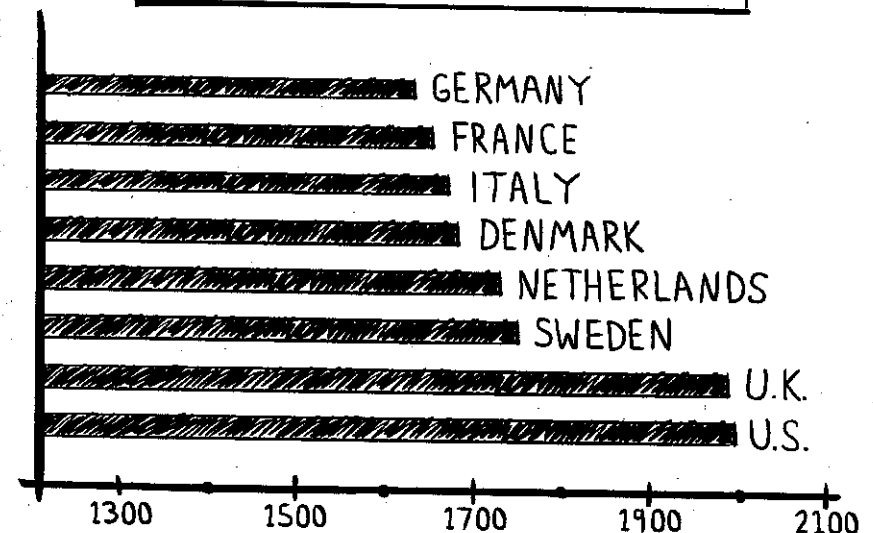
Faced with the same decision, Europe veered towards the first option, prioritizing social and individual health and well-being over hyperconsumption. There were a number of historical and cultural factors that led to Europe and the United States charting such different paths. In Europe, governments were generally more socially focused (or people focused) than business focused. European trade unions, political parties, and other civic groups—inspired by their wartime experience and a more socially oriented culture—were similarly focused on public benefits rather than pure business interests. Remember this was the postwar era: much of Europe was decimated and needed to take care of its people (and by the way, Big Business—including IBM, GM, Kodak, DuPont, GE, and Shell⁴⁸—had aligned itself with the Nazis, so it was a bit discredited at this point). Meanwhile, in the United States, factories were producing at an all-time high, generating employment and boosting national morale such that few wanted to question this economic model. Slogans like “Better dead than red” and McCarthy-era persecution further discouraged voicing alternative viewpoints on the economy.

If you’ve visited friends in Europe, I’m sure you’ve noticed that they have smaller homes, refrigerators, and cars. They use mass transit far more than we do. They have those well-designed folding racks that hang over doors and radiators to air-dry their clothes. They have fewer, smaller TVs that air

fewer commercials. Their food is fresher, more local, less packaged, often bought from a shopkeeper with whom they share a conversation, both because they know him and because they aren’t in such a darn rush. Paying for a university education and health care is not a major source of stress, as it is in the United States. Most European countries have a smaller environmental footprint and a higher quality of life, too.

Are they sad to live in smaller quarters, drive smaller cars, and be surrounded by less Stuff? According to all the data on national happiness, clearly not. With a less consumption-focused society, accumulating more, bigger, newer Stuff isn’t the be-all and end-all. For example, instead of watching hours of TV alone in their big houses among all their possessions, in Europe people spend more time hanging out in public places and socializing with friends and neighbors.⁴⁹ When I visited Turkey last year for a meeting and a screening of *The Story of Stuff*, I spent many hours sitting in sidewalk cafés with my new Turkish friends. We had long, spirited, and often loud conversations, filling a whole row of tables, with people coming and going, dropping in to join us. I commented on how unfortunate it is that we don’t have a café culture in the United States, where we can linger and discuss politics and art and love and plans to make the world a better

HOURS WORKED IN THE YEAR
(FULL TIME WORKERS, 2002)



Source: R. Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (2006)

place. My Turkish friends were surprised and wanted to know why we don't. I realized that it's because in the United States, we're too busy, too stressed to sit around and just converse. Maybe as college students we hung out and talked in cafés, but we seldom do as adults. And in those rare instances when we do meet friends at a café, we increasingly have to talk really quietly or all the people plugged into laptops will glare at us.

Indeed, Americans now work harder than the citizens of nearly any other industrialized country.⁵⁰ We're caught in what I call the work-watch-spend treadmill: exhausting ourselves at work, then decompressing in front of the TV, which blares commercials telling us we need to go shopping, which we do, only to find we need to work even harder to pay for it all, and so the cycle continues. And what do we have to show for it? Monster houses, bigger cars, and a growing lack of physical, mental, and environmental health (not to mention a ton of trash and CO₂).

As a result, nearly everyone reports an increasing sense of anxiety. I was recently at a public lecture on food issues. One of the speakers was Mollie Katzen, author of our college kitchen bible, the *Moosewood Cookbook*. She explained that she's been writing recipes and sharing cooking advice for more than twenty five years, and she has witnessed a huge change in our relationship to food preparation. Years ago, she said, she received fascinating questions about what to do with particular spices or unusual vegetables. Nowadays, she said, the most frequent request she gets is for quick and easy meals that require few ingredients and take as little time as possible. That's what we get—stress and fast food—in return for working like dogs?



A growing movement of people in the United States and internationally have chosen to opt out of the relentless treadmill. This approach—known variously as downshifting, enough-ism, or voluntary simplicity—involves embracing a shift toward working and spending less. Sometimes it happens voluntarily, other times after someone loses a job but decides to make it the start of a new relationship to work. Downshifters choose to prioritize leisure, community building, self-development, and health over accumulating more Stuff. Some make slight adjustments such as buying used clothes, growing some of their own food, and biking instead of driving to work. Others take greater steps, such as adjusting spending patterns to live well on far less money so they can work part-time. Some share housing, cars, and other big-ticket items with other people. The focus is not on doing without, but on enhancing nonmaterial aspects of their lives, which they believe—and evidence supports—are greater sources of happiness and security anyway. As Duane Elgin, author of *Voluntary Sim-*

plicity, explains, “The objective is not dogmatically to live with less, but it is a more demanding intention of living with balance in order to find a life of greater purpose, fulfillment and satisfaction.”⁵¹

Downshifters are sometimes criticized for lacking awareness about the role of privilege in their big life change: they tend to have more education (often at the graduate level), connections, and confidence in their ability to navigate the system, all of which sets them apart from the poor, who *involuntarily* live with less. After “escaping” the system, many downshifters fail to engage politically. I would argue, as Professor Michael Maniates does in *Confronting Consumption*, that a portion of the hours downshifters win from working fewer hours should be dedicated to the “collective struggle aimed at transforming institutions that drive consumerism and overconsumption.”⁵² Some of the policy battles to be fought in the name of creating a wholly downshifted society (and thus, one that has a smaller environmental footprint and, as important, is happier) include benefits for part-time work, limits on extremely high compensation of corporate leaders (with the money saved going to increases in low-end wages), a shorter work week, and reinvestment in the social commons: parks, libraries, public transportation, and other public facilities that can provide people access to things they need without having to buy each and every one.

Regardless of the critique, downshifters help prove that there's a functional, enjoyable alternative to a fifty-hour-plus workweek, second and third jobs, etc. Overworking didn't emerge inevitably from the genetic makeup or innate desire of Americans. Instead, the overwork-overspend model was the result of conscious decisions made by our government, business, and even some labor leaders. The good news, as downshifters illustrate on an individual level, is that these decisions can be unmade as well.

Forging a Consumer Class

So once the system to make more Stuff was set in place, the dilemma then became how to sell enough of that Stuff to keep the machine running. When this humongous increase in the capacity to produce consumer goods first occurred, most people had neither the expendable income nor the desire to orient their lives around accumulating ever more Stuff.

Henry Ford, best known for his perfection and standardization of the assembly line, came up with an answer. He knew that his company's success depended not only on continuing to produce reliable products as quickly and cheaply as possible, but also in helping to create a consumer class, made up of the broader public, that could actually buy the cars. Ford's theories of mass production have been so influential that they are widely

referred to as Fordism, but what many people don't realize is that the assembly line piece of it is only half of the story. As much as it involved increasing mass production, Fordism was equally concerned with facilitating mass consumption because, as Ford realized, producers can't keep churning out all this Stuff unless someone is going to buy it.

In 1914, Ford took the unprecedented step of voluntarily doubling his workers' salaries to five dollars a day (equivalent to just over one hundred dollars a day in 2008 dollars). He also decreased the workday from nine to eight hours. His reward: lower worker turnover, the ability to run three shifts a day instead of two, and greater car sales as the workers themselves joined his customer base. Other companies watching this process soon followed Ford's lead, and the foundation for mass consumerism was set.⁵³

With Fordism set into motion, people had the means to buy Stuff, but not yet the inclination. Shortly after the end of World War II, retailing analyst Victor Lebow described what was needed to keep the people consuming and factories producing: "Our enormously productive economy . . . demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption . . . we need things consumed, burned up, replaced and discarded at an ever-accelerating rate."⁵⁴

In order to achieve this vision, industry executives and their minions developed an array of strategies:

- transitioning from local stores to ubiquitous shopping malls to the big-boxes and Internet retailers of today, which I described in chapter 3 on distribution;
- making it possible for customers to buy now and pay later (plus interest) with the invention and heavy promotion of credit and credit cards;
- systematizing and normalizing the concepts of planned and perceived obsolescence (which I describe below);
- removing self-reliant and/or community-based ways to fulfill basic needs, as for example with the deliberate destruction of light rail systems by the major car manufacturers;
- the intentional merging of identity and status with consumption (i.e., that you are what you buy);
- and the crown jewel, *advertising*.

There are whole books written about each of these tools, so I'm going to review just the two most insidious of them here.

Two Tricks of the Trade

1. Planned Obsolescence

As the production of Stuff ratcheted up, one of the first messages broadcast to consumers was that it was better to have more than one of most things. A second (and then third, fourth, and fifth) bathing suit, when the previous norm for most women had been to make do just fine with one. A second car. And finally a second home, with a whole other set of contents to fill it up, so ultimately you had at least two of everything.

But even so, producers of Stuff realized that there was an eventual limit to how much people could consume. At some point, everyone would have enough shoes and toasters and cars. At some point, there would be total saturation. And if the factories were going to keep churning out Stuff once consumers were Stuff saturated, then there'd be a glut. And a glut would be very bad for business indeed.

So the architects of the system came up with a strategy to keep consumers buying: planned obsolescence. Another name for planned obsolescence is "designed for the dump." Brooks Stevens, an American industrial designer who is widely credited with popularizing the term in the 1950s, defined it as "instilling in the buyer the desire to own something a little newer, a little better, a little sooner than is necessary."⁵⁵

In planned obsolescence, products are intended to be thrown away as quickly as possible and then replaced. (That's called "shortening the replacement cycle.") Now, this is different from true technological obsolescence, in which some actual advance in technology renders the previous version obsolete—like telephones replacing the telegraph. The instances when new technology honestly surpasses the old are rarer than we're led to believe. Today's cell phones, for example, which have an average life span of only about a year, are pretty much never technologically obsolete when we throw them away and replace them with new ones. That's planned obsolescence at work.

The idea of planned obsolescence gained currency in the 1920s and 30s as government and businesspeople realized that our industries were making more Stuff than people cared to, or could afford to, buy. In 1932, a real estate broker named Bernard London who wanted to play his part in stimulating the economy distributed his now infamous pamphlet called *Ending the Depression through Planned Obsolescence*. In it London argued for creating a government agency tasked with assigning death dates to specific consumer products, at which time consumers would be required to turn

the Stuff in for replacements, even if they still worked fine. This system, London explained, would keep our factories humming along.⁵⁶

Some obsolescence was planned to be not just *soon* but *instant*—with the advent of disposable goods. The first breakthroughs in this arena were diapers and sanitary pads, and it's pretty obvious why these particular items caught on. But soon we were sold on disposable cooking pans that don't need to be washed and disposable barbeques that don't need to be lugged home from the park. Now we have disposable cameras, mops, rain ponchos, razors, dishes, cutlery, and toilet brushes (flushable, even!).

Then there are other things that aren't advertised as disposable but are treated as such in practice. For instance, appliances and electronics break so routinely these days, and it's become such a hassle to get these items repaired, and new ones are so cheap because of externalized costs, that we just replace them. "We'll just get another one," we sigh. I grew up with the same telephone, refrigerator, and kitchen clock, none of which were replaced by my mother for years and years until the fridge finally broke and she gave up the old rotary phone in order to get an answering machine when her kids all went off to college. (She still has the clock.)

Consumers are not just resigned to the practically disposable nature of this Stuff; we've come to accept it. In fact, we barely notice it anymore. That widespread social acceptance of ever quicker obsolescence is key to the success of the system. There were a number of things that had to happen in order for us to become so amenable to it. First, the cost of getting something repaired needs to be close to, or even greater than, the replacement cost, urging us to toss the broken one. Replacement parts and servicing need to be hard to access, which anyone who has called a customer service line recently can verify. Current products must be incompatible with new upgrades or accessories. And the way Stuff looks has to keep changing, providing an incentive to toss an older model, even if it is still working just fine.

This last quality is what's known as "perceived obsolescence." In this case the item isn't broken, nor is it really obsolete at all; we just perceive it as such. Some people call this "obsolescence of desirability" or "psychological obsolescence." This is where taste and fashion come in to play. The ever-shifting hem lengths of women's skirts and dresses; the chunky heels that are in fashion one season only to be replaced by skinny stilettos the next; the width of men's ties; this year's hot color for cell phones, iPods, toasters, blenders, couches, even kitchen cabinets: this is all perceived obsolescence at work. It's not, as I say in *The Story of Stuff* video, that there's a raging debate among podiatrists as to whether fat heels or skinny heels provide

better orthopedic support. Those twenty-six distinct fashion seasons rushing in and out of stores, which I described in the previous chapter—that's all part of the strategy of perceived obsolescence. Retailers and producers want you to believe that you can't wear the same color or cut from one week to the next and that you'll be less cool, less savvy, and less desirable if you do.

Now, not every lousy thing that industry has done was intentional and manipulative, but this one was. Corporate decision makers, industrial designers, economic planners, and advertising men actively, strategically promoted planned obsolescence as a way to keep the engine of the economy running. In his 1960 book *The Waste Makers* (one of my all time favorite reads), social critic Vance Packard documents the early debates about planned obsolescence in consumer products in the 1950s and 60s. While some individuals opposed the idea, worrying that it was unethical and jeopardized their professional credibility, others recognized it as a way to ensure never-ending markets for all the Stuff they designed, produced, and advertised—and they embraced it wholeheartedly. Packard cites Brooks Stevens, who shamelessly explained, "We make good products, we induce people to buy them, and then the next year we deliberately introduce something else that will make those products old-fashioned, out of date, obsolete . . . It isn't organized waste. It's a sound contribution to the American economy."⁵⁷

The strategy has worked beyond the wildest dreams of the people who instituted it. Planned obsolescence continues to dominate and define consumer culture today, and we dispose of (often perfectly good) products at an ever-increasing rate. In the service of perceived obsolescence in particular, there's a whole industry hard at work spending billions of dollars each year to manipulate us into buying something new, better, different, and more "us." That industry is known as . . . advertising.

2. Advertising

Advertising is like a constant background hum in our lives. The average American spends a total of one year of his/her life watching advertisements,⁵⁸ while the regular American child sees 110 TV commercials a day.⁵⁹ By the time she is twenty, the average American has been exposed to nearly a million advertising messages. According to the Center for a New American Dream, brand loyalties are established in children as early as age two, and by the time they get to school, they can identify literally hundreds of logos.⁶⁰

Two-thirds of our newspaper space and 40 percent of our mail is unsolicited advertising.⁶¹ In 2002, global spending on advertising reached

daily by 10 million teens (ages eleven to eighteen) in 320,000 classrooms⁷⁰ provides programs with “educational content,” news, and commercials. To its captive audience of kids in classrooms (and on school buses via similar BusRadio programs), Channel One ads promoted violent and/or sexually provocative movies and TV shows, online social networking sites, the U.S. Army/Navy/Marine Corps, and, before opponents prevailed in 2007, junk food.⁷¹

I had read about the relentless advertising to children, but I didn't really get how well coordinated it was until I had my own daughter. Advertisers defend their actions by claiming it's the *parents'* responsibility to protect their kids from excessive marketing. But, in my experience, despite my best efforts, it's been impossible to keep ads from influencing her. I find that the hardest advertising to resist is the kind that appears in different settings, across a variety of platforms. Dora the Explorer, whom my daughter actually resembled when she was younger, was my biggest nemesis. Dora popped up everywhere—on TV, toothbrushes, shampoo, backpacks, electronic games, pencil sets, underwear, bikes, sweatshirts, birthday party goodie bags, pillowcases, beach pails, ice cream, and even breakfast cereal. I noticed that my daughter, who was about three years old at the time, would respond to Dora as if she were seeing a friend. “There's Dora!” she would squeal in the toothpaste aisle of the supermarket (which is not usually a place that generates excitement among preschoolers). Buying that toothpaste became like bringing a friend home. And who doesn't want another friend?

Free to Be You and Me

The success of fashion (that most visible form of perceived obsolescence) and brand marketing (how companies and their advertisers sell us on the lifestyle image of a product as opposed to its inherent qualities) are related to some pretty fundamental ideas we hold about ourselves as citizens of the U.S. of A. We pride ourselves on being individuals: rugged individuals, pioneers, the first man on the moon; quirky individuals, someone with a strong individual style or mark. We also cherish the idea of our boundless freedom. Our country was built on ideas of liberty from persecution and the freedom to be individuals. And last but certainly not least, there's the sacred American Dream, the self-made man, the rags-to-riches success story. We love the idea that our wide-open, bountiful country allows the least among us to achieve tremendous status, if we just work enough for it.

Or shop enough for it. The engineers of consumerism have played into these values that we hold dear in a big way. They took these sources of

national pride and twisted them into reasons to buy Stuff. And then at some point it was like the transitive property kicked in: all we have to do now in order to achieve or display our individuality, or to express our freedom, or to go from the pauper to the prince, is shop. How on earth did they accomplish that, and what does that mean for us as people, exactly?

Today the pressure to buy more, newer, fancier Stuff has everything to do with the pressure to express our identity and status. In *The Bridge at the End of the World*, Gus Speth writes, “Psychologists see people as hardwired to find security by both ‘sticking out’ and ‘fitting in.’ Consumption serves both goals; the culture of capitalism and commercialism emphasizes both ‘sticking out’ and ‘fitting in’ through possessions and their display.”⁷²

That's why we tend to spend more extravagantly on Stuff that is visible compared to Stuff we consume in private. Economist Juliet Schor has identified the house, car, and wardrobe as the “visible triangle.” We spend less on Stuff others don't see. For example, the popularity of health clubs, Schor says, contributed to the creation of designer underwear. And women spend far more on lipstick—which is applied and worn in public—than on facial cleanser, which seldom leaves the bathroom.⁷³

This phenomenon is based in large part on social comparisons. Schor, along with other economists, has documented how our sense of wealth and material well-being is relative; that is, it has to do with how much Stuff we have compared to other people. So, if we're hanging around a bunch of ostentatious spenders, we feel poor. If we're hanging around with people who are lower than us on the economic ladder, we feel rich. The saying “keeping up with the Joneses,” inspired by a comic strip from the early twentieth century, refers to our tendency to compare our material well-being with our neighbors'. Back then, we were most likely to compare our living room furniture with that of our neighbors and families, because there weren't other people around to be our yardsticks. But that all changed with television.

In 1950, only 5 percent of U.S. households had televisions. A decade later, 95 percent of U.S. households had them.⁷⁴ On average, American homes now have more television sets than people. In 2008, the average American watched an all-time high of about five hours of TV a day, or 151 hours a month, up 3.6 percent from the 145 or so hours Americans reportedly watched the previous year.⁷⁵ In *The Overspent American*, Juliet Schor explains the link between TV viewing and consumer spending and debt; each additional five hours of television watched per week led to an additional thousand dollars of spending per year.⁷⁶

Each of us in the United States is bombarded with up to three thousand

commercial messages a day, including TV ads, billboards, product placements, packaging, and more—but it's not just the actual commercials, it's the images promoted in shows and movies too, big time. On TV shows, people are disproportionately rich, thin, and fashionable. So all of a sudden, rather than comparing ourselves to the Joneses in the house next door, we are comparing ourselves to millionaires and celebrities. That's why the more television people watch, the more they overestimate how wealthy everyone else is, making them feel poorer by comparison.⁷⁷ What peer pressure! Not only do my clothes and house and car have to be on par with my colleagues and the other parents at my kid's school, but now also with the lavish lifestyles of Jennifer Aniston and Beyoncé. Juliet Schor calls this phenomenon the “vertical expansion of our reference group.”⁷⁸

As soon as I read about that concept in Schor's *The Overspent American*, I remembered countless times when I had fallen into that trap myself. For many years, my work required a lot of international travel. I noticed that wearing the exact same outfit could make me feel stylish and good in Dhaka but shabby and outdated in Paris. I live in Berkeley where, fortunately, there's not a lot of fashion pressure. I wear my flip-flops or clogs most days and am just fine, reassured by the fact that a good number of the people I pass are wearing the same. But for years, every time I'd go to Manhattan, I'd see women with gorgeous designer shoes everywhere. I'd just *have* to buy a new pair of shoes even though—believe me—I really do not need any more shoes. It was irresistible. They have such good shoes there and they are for sale on almost every corner. Then I read Schor's book. In my experience, a powerful way to free oneself from an unhealthy dynamic is simply to name it. Now when I am in Manhattan and I get that rush of need, I can call it out: “There's that vertical expansion of my reference group thing again; just gotta hang on until I get home,” and I can walk right past those shoe stores.

To my mind, my ability to see the peer pressure exerted by an unrealistic reference group like that and refuse to yield to it is real freedom. I consider myself freer for being able not to bow to the pressure. But the economic system, on the other hand, wants me to associate my personal freedom with consumption.

Our obsession with individual rights got off track in this country. Putting aside the hugely significant issues of the native Americans and African slaves whose rights were obliterated, the United States was built upon the promise of the unassailability of individual rights. But I am pretty sure those early patriots meant *political rights*, not consuming rights. I am not

saying consumers should have no choice in what we buy, but freedom in the marketplace is simply not the most important freedom.

Consumer Choice

Currently we have this great illusion of choice in this country—but it is almost entirely limited to the consumer realm. Walk into any supermarket these days, and what do we see: choice, or actually, the *appearance* of choice. Thousands of products. Producers gladly offer different hair conditioners for dry, limp, color-treated, or healthy hair, but can I find one that is free of toxic chemicals? I can pick between a variety of pajamas for my daughter or furniture for my living room, but I can't pick any that aren't treated with toxic flame retardants, because such treatment is still required by law. If I want a cup of coffee, I may choose between grande, venti, single, double, tall, short, skim, soy, decaf, etc. But the meaningful decisions about coffee have to do with where and how the coffee was grown, transported, processed, and sold—everything from farm and labor conditions to international trade agreements—not the decisions offered at the counter.

In 2002, a few thousand people in Berkeley, California, signed a petition to put a measure on the ballot that would have required all coffee sold in Berkeley to be Fair Trade certified, organic, and shade grown—all things that have enormous positive environmental and social benefits for the coffee growers and the environment. While the ballot didn't pass, it was exciting: *that* is the kind of discussion we should have about coffee specifically as well as our consumer choices in general. The bill garnered intense opposition from many who insisted that they had the right to drink whatever they want (including a cheaper and more destructive product). Some in the business community also opposed the proposal. John DeClercq, the chair of the Berkeley Chamber of Commerce, said, “It's an improper restriction on business . . . anti-free choice. If coffee can be restricted, do we have politically correct chocolate, beef, vegetables? There's just no end to it.”⁷⁹

The voice of the consumer, stoked by the crafty engineers of our consumerist economy, demands unlimited choice in coffees, anytime, anywhere, and claims that anything else operates against freedom. But isn't that a fairly childish notion of freedom? In his book *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole*, Benjamin Barber very convincingly argues that consumerism effectively keeps adults in a childlike mental state where it's always OK to demand “Gimme that!” Consumerism privileges impulse over deliberation; instant gratification over long-term satisfaction; narcissism over sociability; entitlement over responsibility; and the now over the past and future.⁸⁰

If we are going to be adults about the issue of coffee (or any consumer product), we need to recognize that we have responsibilities as well as rights. We know that the world is complex and interconnected and that each act (and purchase) has consequences. Coming at it from this angle, it makes sense to prefer coffee that doesn't deplete the soil or move more pesticides into our water, air, or bodies. We recognize that Joe Coffee-Grower is a person just like me or you and has just as great a right to a

WHO'S REALLY DRIVING?

Is consumer demand really the key force that causes Stuff to be made and sold? A lot of people believe that, and I guess it makes them feel good about themselves, thinking they're holding all that power. But I've got to beg to differ. As just one example . . .

I mentioned above how right after giving birth to my baby daughter, a nurse gave me a packet of "educational" materials, which turned out to be credit card applications, coupons, and advertisements. That wasn't all they gave me. The other "welcome new mommy" goodies included a one-pound can of Enfamil-brand baby formula, disposable diapers, and a diaper bag. Guess what the diaper bag was made of? Easy-to-clean, entirely-toxic PVC. I flipped out. The hospital was allowing corporations to distribute hazardous schlock to new mothers and their precious infants?

I wrote a letter to the editor of the local paper about what a moral outrage this was, how corporations overstepped all ethical boundaries. The story promptly got picked up and became front-page news. As a result, I received a bunch of letters from mothers, some of whom were grateful and others of whom objected to what I'd said.

I still have one of the letters I received, along with my response, which I'm excerpting here:

Dear Ms. Leonard,

Congratulations on the birth of your baby! Now stop spoiling it for the rest of us. I am referring, of course, to the article . . . concerning your displeasure at receiving a free diaper bag with samples, etc., from your maternity hospital . . . You voiced the notion that "rampant commercialism . . . has affected the hospital-patient relationship." Good Lord, woman, of course it has! We do, after all, live in a consumer-driven society, or weren't you aware . . . We, the consumer, control the manufacturers. It is never them controlling us, and it never has been. Don't like the free coupons? Toss 'em! Ha ha, that's money that they've spent to no avail! . . . Get it now?

Most of us in this world are not the stupid, biddable sheep you seem to think we are . . . Everyone has a mind of their own. I certainly hope you weren't being so patronizing to the "poorer mothers" on purpose—I can assure you that most of them aren't likely to run out and buy formula just because they now have a coupon for it! The vast majority of women giving birth in today's maternity hospitals are simply not as gullible as you think.

And that includes me. Little Toby is now four months old, and I use his free Enfamil diaper bag every day. To date, I have received innumerable coupons and freebies from manufacturers and formula companies, and it's been a blast getting free stuff.

Yours sincerely,

(it was signed but I'm withholding the name in this book)

Dear Ms. _____,

Thank you for your recent letter with congratulations on the birth of my baby. I, too, congratulate you on the recent birth of your son Toby and I wish him a healthy future . . .

I do, however, disagree . . . with the claim that "We, the consumer, control the manufacturers. It is never them controlling us, and it never has been." Corporations around the world make decisions based on a number of factors. Profit, not consumer demand, is the primary driving force. Every day corporations take actions that are not only *not* demanded by consumers, but which are against consumers' best interests . . . For example, let's consider the diaper bag produced by the Enfamil infant formula company and given to you by the hospital. Your letter states that you use this bag every day. If it is the same Enfamil bag that I received (a green one decorated with Peter Rabbit), it is made of polyvinyl chloride plastic or PVC.

PVC's entire lifecycle, from production through use and disposal, has severe environmental and public health impacts. Most notably, the production and disposal of PVC is closely linked to the creation of dioxin, the most toxic man-made substance known to science . . . Since dioxin concentrates in fat, and breast milk contains high amounts of fat, women's breast milk around the world is now contaminated with this highly toxic chemical which is known to cause cancer and disrupt hormonal systems. Every time I breastfeed my baby, I think of the corporations that knowingly create and release dioxin into our environment . . . Enfamil is fully aware of the controversy around PVC . . . The representative with whom I spoke was aware of the concerns and was knowledgeable about the details . . . The irony is that an infant formula company is a culprit in making our breast milk less safe.

Will you continue to use your Enfamil diaper bag knowing that it may

leach chemicals that threaten Toby's reproductive and hormonal systems, neurological development, and may cause cancer? . . . Do you really believe that the production and distribution of a diaper bag made from a dangerous and unnecessary plastic—which will obviously be around small children—is consumer driven? Do you believe it is appropriate for a hospital nursery to distribute a PVC diaper bag without even warning of the dangers? . . .

Again, best wishes for a healthy future for your son.
Sincerely,
Ann Leonard

My point then, as now, is that what is best for the corporation is not always best for the consumer. The choices that are offered to us may be touted as "consumer driven" but often are actually corporation driven, which is to say profit driven.

decent, family-supporting wage and a healthy work environment. We might even grasp the notion that supporting the prosperity and self-sufficiency of coffee-growing communities around the world contributes to our national security. From a childish point of view, I want the best, cheapest, fastest coffee. From an adult point of view, I want coffee that makes the world safe, healthy, and just.

Being a powerful, free individual actually means being able to demand an economic system that respects, rather than exploits, workers and the environment, not being able to choose between an infinite number of coffee flavors and styles. Barber writes in *Consumed*, "We are seduced into thinking that the right to choose from a menu is the essence of liberty, but with respect to relevant outcomes the real power, and hence the real freedom, is in the determination of what is on the menu. The powerful are those who set the agenda, not those who choose from the alternatives it offers."⁸¹ And the places where we enact our real freedoms to define what's on the menu and set the agenda—those places are our town halls and community meetings, the offices of elected officials, the op-ed pages of newspapers, and sometimes simply the streets—not the aisles of shopping markets or the counters of coffee shops.

Consumer Self, Citizen Self

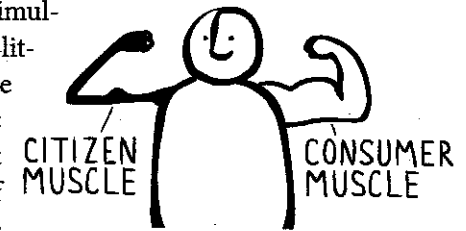
I can't tell you how many times I've been speaking to a community group or at a college and been asked by audience members, "OK, so what SHOULD I buy?"

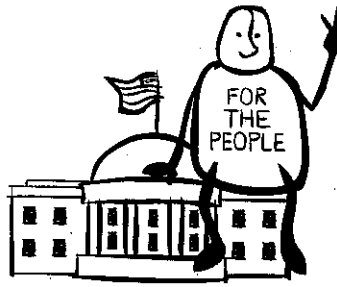
I've come to believe that each of us has two parts of our identity: a consumer self and a citizen or community self. In American society today, the consumer part of our self is spoken to, validated, nurtured from Day One. From the moment we are born, we are bombarded with messages that reinforce our role as consumers. We're experts in consuming; we know where and how and when to get the best deals. We know how long we have to wait until the shirt we want goes on the sale rack. We know how to navigate the Internet to get what we want the very next day.

Our consumer self is so overdeveloped that it has drowned out all our other identities. What should be our core identities—as parents, students, neighbors, professionals, voters, etc.—are smothered underneath it. Most of us lack a basic understanding of how to utilize the citizen muscle.

The hyperdevelopment of our consumer self and the atrophying of our citizen self isn't natural; social scientists, historians, child development experts, academics, and many others see it as a result of nearly a century of consumerist conditioning. Survey after survey has shown an increasing commercialization of our culture and a simultaneous decrease in investment in civic literacy and engagement. The Intercollegiate Studies Institute annually tests the civic knowledge of Americans. Its 2008 report found that not only can fewer than half of us in the United States name all three branches of government, which is a pretty fundamental foundation on which to understand our governance system, but that the more TV—even news!—we watch, the lower our civic literacy.⁸²

"It is not that Americans do not accept the Constitution, indeed they love it," write law professor Eric Lane and journalist Michael Oreskes in their 2007 book *The Genius of America—How the Constitution Saved Our Country and Why It Can Again*, "but . . . they no longer have any idea of its contents or its context. For them, Government has become a place to seek a product and they grow angry at government when it does not deliver."⁸³ Some see the government solely as a service provider; others see it as an obstacle to individual success. Either way, the fundamental sense is of gov-





ernment being external to or separate from us. What happened to the idea that government, and governance more generally, is something we can, indeed must participate in? Remember “government of the people, by the people, for the people”? That’s us—the people! But we’re letting all that drift away because we’re busy watching TV or shopping at the mall.

The result: two-year-olds can articulate brand preferences and teenagers spend more time in shopping malls than reading or exercising, while about half of adults don’t bother to vote regularly in public elections⁸⁴ and fewer than 15 percent have ever been to a public meeting.⁸⁵

Of all the worrisome trends and data on the state of the planet—and there are many—the one that I am most worried and sad about is the withering away of this community/citizen self because that is what we most need right now. Given how constantly we’re bombarded with messages that reinforce us as consumers, it’s understandable that we get stuck there. It’s familiar, and that’s comforting. We know what is expected of us, we know the rules, and we know the system.

A Buddhist teacher I know named Dr. Rita Lustgarten cautioned me about the lure of familiarity. She explained that repeated experiences bring with them a reassuring sensation, which we can easily mistake as being a good thing, when it is just the familiarity that feels attractive. Familiarity can feel like an old friend. That is why we repeat all kinds of patterns in our lives that aren’t always good for us. In other words, as my friend Peter Fox says, “Sometimes we’re in a rut so deep, we think it’s a groove.” A familiar dead end is often more appealing than an unknown open road.

Conscious Consuming

Trying to consume our way out of the mess we’re in is a familiar dead end. Many people believe or hope that if we just buy greener, if we buy this

instead of that, everything will be OK. Sorry to be a buzzkill here, but we need way more than that. This is why I am uninspired by all the hype about the latest “green” product line or the “green shopping guides” that seem to be springing up all over the place.

Skeptics call this concept “greensumption,” while advocates call it “conscious consuming.” It’s about bringing a new level of awareness to your consumption. In practice, it means giving preference to products that are the least toxic, least exploitative, and least polluting—and steering clear of products linked to environmental, health, or social injustices.

Don’t get me wrong: of course when we do shop, we should buy the least toxic, least exploitative, least harmful product available—and thanks to the GoodGuide we can better and more quickly assess which products those are. But conscious consumption is not the same thing as citizen engagement. Being an informed and engaged consumer is not a substitute for being an informed and engaged citizen. The “what should I buy differently” response to the critically serious environmental and social mess we’re facing now worries me because it shows how much our citizen or community self has become dormant. What we really need is a revitalization of that citizen self.

Three Reasons to Reactivate Your Inner Citizen

1. Participating in strong, vibrant communities makes us happier and healthier.

There’s lots of evidence that the single biggest contribution to our happiness is the quality of our social relationships.⁸⁶ People with strong social ties tend to live longer and be healthier. Strong communities also have less crime and survive disasters better because neighbors watch out for one another and are more likely to raise a voice when they see a potential problem.

As just one example: the environmentalist filmmaker Judith Helfand is making a film about a massive heat wave in Chicago in 1995 that killed about six hundred people.⁸⁷ She explains that the greatest common denominator among the victims was that they were socially isolated. They didn’t have friends or family or trusted neighbors to notice they hadn’t been out of their house lately, or to check that their air conditioners were working well.⁸⁸ In fact, three-quarters of all Americans don’t know their neighbors.⁸⁹ Judith argues that the best way to prevent deaths from future heat waves is not the policy of handing out discount air conditioner coupons, but pro-

viding community-building activities that strengthen social ties throughout the year.

2. A vibrant community lifestyle, as opposed to a strong individualist lifestyle, lessens our toll on the planet.

Having stronger local communities means we buy less Stuff, use less energy, consume fewer resources because we can share things and help one another. The more resources we can get locally—from vegetables to borrowed hand tools—the less energy is spent transporting this Stuff all over the planet. Some great examples of this idea being put into practice are the success of farmers markets across the country, or the Tool Lending Library in the Berkeley Public Library system: anyone with a library card can borrow hammers, drills, ladders—for free!

3. Reinvigorating that citizen muscle will rebuild public participation in politics and generate real collective solutions to the considerable problems we're facing on this planet.

This point is really important. When we allow the consumer part of ourselves to dominate, our thinking about anything—from which product to buy to attitudes about recycling or global warming—skews toward favoring ourselves as individuals (or families), rather than as part of the larger community. Then the option that seems best is always the fastest, cheapest, easiest, and safest for me and my family. But when we act from our community or citizen selves, we can think more broadly. We consider the impacts of our actions (i.e., how will this purchase or this action influence the broader environment, workers, the climate, communities?) and, importantly, we can broaden our thinking about strategies to make change. We can go beyond that limiting arena of consumer action, which is what we really need to do, since the solutions we need simply aren't for sale in the store! So, instead of "What can I, as an individual consumer, do?" we can ask, "What can we, as a community, as citizens, do to fix this problem once and for all?"

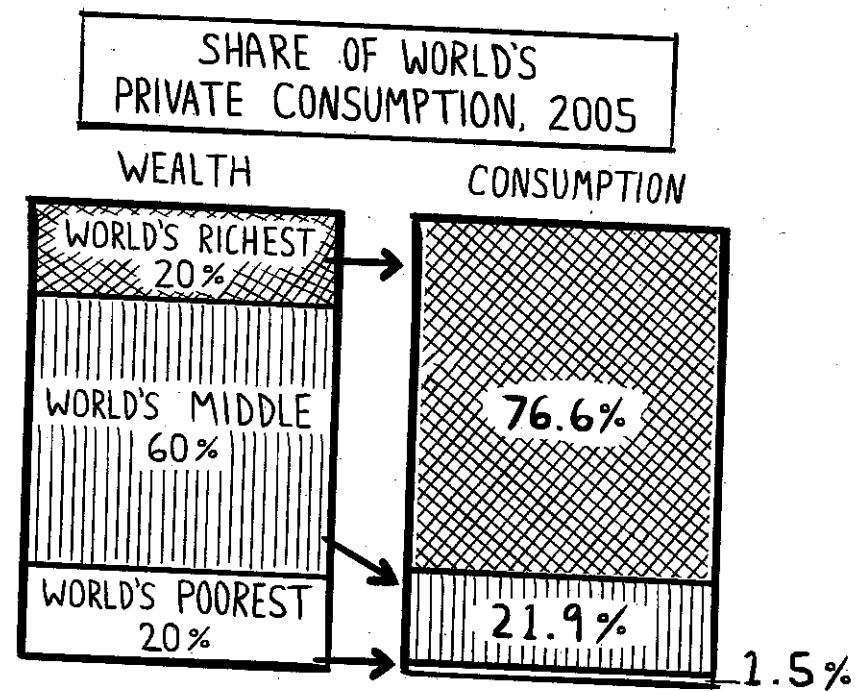
And you know what is good about that? Joining up with others around a shared goal is fun! It makes us happy. Richard Layard, economist and pioneer in the field of happiness studies, says that "the greatest happiness comes from absorbing yourself in some goal outside yourself."⁹⁰ How fortunate that the very thing that will solve challenges like universal health care, poverty, climate chaos, and water scarcity turns out to be the thing that makes us most happy! Imagine the positive feedback loop: if we spend less time watching TV and shopping, and more time building community and engaging in civil society, then our community and our world become

better, more fulfilling, more fun, so we want to engage with them more. Who wants to watch five hours of TV a day when we could instead be gathered around a big dinner table with neighbors and friends?

Equalizing Consumption

So. A big part of the solution is for people like you and me to step off the work-watch-spend treadmill and consume less Stuff. But an important thing to keep in mind is that many people, all over the world, need to consume quite a bit more. That's because there are massive differences in the levels of consumption around the world. While it's true that most Americans are experiencing material wealth unimaginable just a couple of generations ago, that's not true of all people even in this country, let alone in other parts of world, where many, many people are unable to meet their basic human needs.

According to the *State of the World 2004* report, calculations of overall global growth in consumption mask massive disparities. The 12 percent of the world living in North America and Western Europe accounts for 60 percent of global personal consumption expenditures,⁹¹ while the one-third of the world's population that lives in South Asia and sub-Saharan



Source: World Bank Development Indicators, 2008.

Africa accounts for only 3.2 percent.⁹² Globally, the 20 percent of the world that lives in the highest-income countries accounts for 86 percent of total private consumption expenditures—the poorest 20 percent a minuscule 1.3 percent.⁹³ More specifically:

- The richest fifth of the global population consumes 45 percent of all meat and fish; the poorest fifth 5 percent
- The richest fifth consumes 58 percent of energy generated globally; the poorest fifth less than 4 percent
- The richest fifth has 74 percent of all telephone lines; the poorest fifth 1.5 percent
- The richest fifth consumes 84 percent of all paper; the poorest fifth 1.1 percent
- The richest fifth owns 87 percent of the world's vehicle fleet; the poorest fifth less than 1 percent⁹⁴

For the first time in history more than 1 billion people on our planet—one-sixth of the total population—are living in serious hunger, eating fewer than 1,800 calories a day. This milestone was reached in June 2009 and means that 100 million more people are going hungry in 2009 than in the previous year.⁹⁵ While we in the United States are reaching never-before-attained levels of wealth-related diseases like obesity and a return of gout (caused by high-fat foods and traditionally associated with aristocracy),⁹⁶ half the world's population lives on less than three dollars a day.⁹⁷ Clearly, many people across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and even right here in the United States need to consume more just to meet their needs.

Sometimes I think that for those of us who count among the world's haves (as opposed to the have-nots), our comfort dulls our imagination. It is hard to imagine what it means to really be without. At an all-day meeting last year, I turned to the woman next to me, who had spent many years in Haiti, and unthinkingly said to her, "I hope this ends soon. I am starving." She turned to me and gently reminded me, "My dear, you are *not* starving." When we're not starving, when we're not anywhere near the edge of survival, it is hard to imagine what it is like for those who are. During my international travels, I've had moments where the absolutely miserable truth of poverty shook me, but then I went back home where, in the chaos of parenting and modern life, most memories fade. Most, but not all.

One that I will never forget happened in Cité Soleil, a shantytown with more than a quarter million residents living in extreme poverty on the edge of Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti. Their single-room homes are made

of scraps of metal or plastic and often contain not even one piece of furniture on the dirt floor. There are open ditches of rotting trash and sewage forming a network throughout the slum. There are no stores, no place to get clean water, almost no electricity. Few residents live past the age of fifty.

On the material side, it's as bad as it gets. For someone like me, who can mistake a mild stomach grumbling for being starving, visiting Cité Soleil is a profound event, one that is not easily forgotten. I remember one woman in particular whose situation brought home for me just what desperate poverty means. She held a young child, probably about seven or eight months old, in her arms. His forehead had been badly burned—from falling into a cooking fire, she explained. As I walked through the area—gathering the expected level of attention—she held him out to me, pleading for help. There was something bluish black smeared all over his forehead, which had combined with the infection to create a clearly serious problem. I asked what the blue color was, hoping it was some kind of iodine that would help fight the infection. No such luck. The mother had been desperate to put something sterile on the wound but had no access to antibiotics, gauze, or even clean water. So she broke open a ballpoint pen she found and, thinking that the ink inside was the only thing she could access that had not been contaminated by the filth around her, she smeared it over her baby's forehead. I emptied my wallet for her, probably doubling her annual income on the spot, and left feeling entirely inadequate in my response.

You don't have to travel that far, however, to meet people who need more Stuff. Even here in the United States there is inequity—just look at any major city. Until the embarrassing economic crisis in 2008–09, our economic planners loved to tell their success story, evidenced by the increased total wealth generated in this country each year. But that number wasn't telling the whole story at all: while the rich have been getting richer, the poor have been getting poorer. In his 1999 book *Luxury Fever*, Robert Frank calculated that the top 1 percent of earners had captured 70 percent of the earnings growth from the mid-1970s through the mid-1990s.⁹⁸ The cycle just perpetuates itself as the superrich, constantly depicted in the news, the movies, and TV shows, keep setting a new bar of consumption for the rest of us to aspire to.

It's just not going to work. There isn't enough for everyone to consume at this high bar. And if we were to make the selfish and immoral choice of going any farther down that path, then we would have to build bigger walls and fences and hunker down, because it would get ugly. As an official of the U.N. World Food Programme said, "A hungry world is a dangerous world.

Without food, people have only three options: They riot, they emigrate or they die. None of these are acceptable options.”⁹⁹

Consumption, Climate, and Equity

We’re hearing a lot these days about how much we urgently need to reduce CO₂ emissions to stabilize the climate. CO₂ is produced at every stage of the Story of Stuff, from drilling for oil to running factories to shipping our Stuff all over the planet. Stuff is the common denominator here. The more Stuff we consume, the more CO₂ we’ll keep pumping out. Here’s the dilemma: levels of CO₂ are already over the threshold beyond which catastrophic climate change will occur, as determined by top scientists, yet a lot of people need to increase their consumption in order to meet even basic human needs.

This dilemma is proving to be a huge obstacle in international negotiations around climate solutions. The rich, overconsuming countries say they won’t commit to significant CO₂ reductions unless everyone else does—especially India and China, which are fast approaching the top of the CO₂ emitters list, but with far larger populations than ours (and thus much lower per-capita emissions).

Developing countries resent the notion of limits being placed on their industrial activities and economic growth when historically they have contributed far less to the ecological crisis than the rich countries. A Brazilian diplomat at the 1997 Kyoto climate conference explained the climate negotiations from a developing country’s perspective: “They invite you in, only for coffee after the dinner. Then they ask you to share the check, even though you didn’t get to eat.”¹⁰⁰

A first-ever analysis and comparison of the carbon footprints of different countries was created by researchers at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology and the Center for International Climate and Environment Research-Oslo. Not surprisingly, it shows that the higher a country’s per-capita consumption expenditures are, the bigger its carbon footprint. The national average per-capita footprints varied from 1 ton of carbon dioxide equivalents per year in African countries such as Malawi and Mozambique to roughly 30 tons per year in industrialized countries such as the United States and Luxembourg. The study also found that in poorer countries, food and services are a bigger contributor to the carbon footprint, while mobility—transportation—and the consumption of manufactured goods result in the greatest greenhouse gas emissions in rich countries.¹⁰¹



One of the key innovations of the study is that it assigns the global carbon footprint from imports to the country that imports the goods—not the country that manufactures the goods. This approach is really important because globalized production chains allow companies to outsource the manufacturing of carbon-intensive products, thus hiding the real carbon costs of imported goods. What we need to avoid is a scenario in which countries with tight carbon emission limits can simply outsource the production of Stuff they consume to countries where the emission limits are not so restrictive.

Redistribution and Reverence

Around the world, current consumption patterns are destroying remaining environmental resources and the services that the earth provides and exacerbating inequalities. The crises of poverty, inequality, and the environment are all related—and they are all related to consumption. It is simply not an option for those of us in the wealthy countries to refuse to reevaluate our consumption patterns: the planet is in crisis, we’re not sharing fairly, and it’s not even making us happy.

Here’s an alternative scenario: we realize that things have got to change, because the previous scenario isn’t the world we want. We need to make room at the table for those who don’t yet have a seat. According to Duane Elgin, author of *Voluntary Simplicity*, “If the human family sets a goal for itself of achieving a moderate standard of living for everyone, computer projections suggest that the world could reach a sustainable level of economic activity that is roughly ‘equivalent in material comforts to the average level in Europe.’”¹⁰² Now, that doesn’t sound half bad to me; in fact, it sounds like the way to go.

I like Alan Durning’s poetic vision of what the above level of consumption could look like: “Accepting and living by sufficiency rather than excess offers a return to what is, culturally speaking, the human home: to the ancient order of family, community, good work, and good life; to a reverence for skill, creativity, and creation; to a daily cadence slow enough to let us watch the sunset and stroll by the water’s edge; to communities worth spending a lifetime in; and to local places pregnant with the memories of generations.”¹⁰³

All we have to do is rethink and redesign how we’re living in order to produce and consume less Stuff, to better share the resources and Stuff we do have among us, and—the topic of the next chapter—to throw a whole lot less of those precious resources away.