

# Day 14: Society and Culture: Manufacturing a Consumer Culture | Vision

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This article is moronic. First of all, it uses the Bible as evidence, so -100 points (admittedly, it does so only to use moral platitudes that have something of a point, but still). Then, it's blatantly technophobic and we-should-all-go-back-to-the-woods-esque. It also doesn't account for the fact that the world is *amazing* right now. Finally, it doesn't acknowledge the fact that the future can be better if we just believe (see Self-Fulfilling prophecy). Also: Best for Whom?

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Over the past 100 years, scientific breakthroughs and technological innovations have radically changed the human experience. Today the world is awash in material goods and a higher standard of living for increasing numbers. We live longer, have access to increasingly sophisticated entertainment and modes of communication, and travel greater distances. In short, **we are the greatest consumers in the history of life on earth.** Yet we seem to be less happy and more anxious. **Has our consumer culture become a curse rather than a cure?**

We are surrounded by a manufactured world. Almost everything we touch or use in our homes, our garages, our offices is the **by-product of an intense and complex industrial system**: from potato to potato chip, cowhide to seat cover, petroleum to plastic pen.

Ours is a world of mass production. Clothes, furniture, toys, cars, food are produced in factories—large factories—somewhere. **Because only a very few of us participate in the actual making of these everyday items, we tend to take their existence for granted**; it is as if they magically appear on the shelves of our ubiquitous superstores. So, just as we tend not to think of the farmer or farm worker in the field who grows, picks and sorts our fresh foods (nor the immense integrated processing systems that synthesize our common packaged foods), so we are oblivious to the story line behind almost everything we use in

our daily lives.

Do we need this story line? For several reasons, we do.

### The Cost of Ignorance

The so-called good life of low-cost consumer textile and technological goods—the West's status quo—comes at a cost paid by workers in other parts of the world. The tragically poor and exploited lives of Chinese chip makers and Indian and Bangladeshi seamstresses are gaining worldwide visibility. Recent news concerning the unsafe living and working conditions of great masses of people is likely merely the tip of the exploitation iceberg. Just as the Mexican drug lords have built their empires and fractured their nation on consumptive American demands for marijuana and narcotics, so the Chinese have destroyed much of their land, peasant peoples and urban health in making "Made in China" the current worldwide label for "cheap and easily replaced."

This is a "vinyl sounds better" type argument.

Having a more intimate connection with the things we use has meaningful psychological benefits. There is a certain satisfaction in making something yourself; a life seems fuller in the rather than just the *using*. To build something is participatory in a way that simply consuming a product is not. No one *needs* to change his or her car's oil anymore, yet some still do; and urban dwellers appreciate having a garden, even if its crop is only one tomato plant. It's no wonder that in a desire to reconnect with what many see as a simpler, more organic time, the hand-made and do-it-yourself movement has experienced growing popularity. It is as if we desire to take on responsibility for something more than simply going and buying.

"Getting and spending has become the most passionate, and often the most imaginative, endeavor of modern life."

James Twitchell, "Two Cheers for Materialism," in *The Consumer Society Reader*

Be that as it may, history professor William Leach argues that the development of the modern consumer culture has played on another human desire entirely: to covet, or have an inordinate desire for things. Leach describes "the concept of the human being as an insatiable, desiring machine or as an animal governed by an infinity of desires"—a view that suggests there will always be demand if supply can be created. "This concept of humanity argues that what is most 'human' about people is their quest after the new, their willingness to violate boundaries, their hatred of the old and the habitual . . . and their need to incorporate 'more and more'—goods, money, experience, everything" (*Land of Desire*).

Covetousness is a temptation to which we are all certainly prone. What we think about, we tend to do; and when we think about "not having" we tend to respond by creating a way to get (James 4:1–2). It is no small thing to recognize that the Ten Commandments warn against being overtaken by covetousness, because its consequences quickly spiral out of control (Exodus 20:17). But the profit motive and [greed](#) for an ever-increasing bottom line turn corporate gears, ensuring that this human weakness will be exploited.

See also: belief that the future will always be better than the present.

"American consumer capitalism produced a culture almost violently hostile to the past and to tradition, a future-oriented culture of desire that confused the good life with goods," Leach continues. "It was a culture that first appeared as an alternative culture—or as one moving largely against the grain of earlier traditions of republicanism and Christian virtue—and then unfolded to become the reigning culture of the United States."

But this wasn't always the case.

### Cultural Shift

As recently as 150 years ago, people in the mostly rural communities of the world lived lives governed by the seasons, produced most of what they needed, and stayed in their communities for a lifetime. They valued stability, thriftiness and family. Handmade goods were passed down through the generations; items that were purchased, such as cloth or tools, were cared for, repaired, repurposed.

But in the mid-1800s, a cultural shift was beginning. In the United States, the measured pace of rural life was being replaced by the hurried tempo of urban commerce. Historian David Nye notes, "The development of the United States into a highly accelerated society began at the latest during the late eighteenth century" (*America's Assembly Line*). Several events occurred to cause this transformation.

One key development in the middle of that century was the US government's division of land into salable grid sections. Land became a commodity, a standardized resource to be bought, sold, and exploited to generate economic growth. Nye characterizes the change this had on people's impression of land as "an imagined order of interchangeable and standardized parts."

Along with this change came an increasing ability to commercialize one's land, as the original internet—railroad lines—facilitated the movement of produce from country to city. Roads and railways soon crisscrossed the country; people began to travel and to move away from their homes and extended families. Trips that had taken weeks at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century took only days by 1860. Time itself, once tied to the actual relationship of the sun to the earth, became standardized to make travel more reliable and convenient, and to ensure that schedules were adhered to as closely as possible.

Communication for a spreading populace was made possible by the inventions of the telegraph and the telephone. Business could be conducted, orders taken and filled in hours or days instead of weeks or months. Speed, standardization and ease of transportation changed the face of the country and its economy.

"Commercialism is more a mirror than a lamp. In demonizing it, in seeing ourselves as helpless and innocent victims of its overpowering force, . . . we reveal far more about our own eagerness to be passive in the face of complexity than about the thing itself."

James Twitchell, "Two Cheers for Materialism," in *The Consumer*

Commerce became the focus of the national consciousness, and it spawned the consumer culture, according to Leach: "In the decades following the Civil War, American capitalism began to produce a distinct culture, unconnected to traditional family or community values, to religion in any conventional sense, or to political democracy. It was a secular business and market-oriented culture, with the exchange and circulation of money and goods at the foundation of its aesthetic life and of its moral sensibility. . . .

"The cardinal features of this culture were acquisition and [consumption](#) as the means of achieving happiness; the cult of the new; the democratization of desire; and money value as the predominant measure of all value in society."

### [Moving the Work to the Worker](#)

The automated assembly line was a natural outgrowth of these attitudes. As Nye says, "a cultural context either fosters or resists a new technology. Before [Henry Ford](#) was born, speed, acceleration, innovation, interchangeable parts, uniformity, and economies of scale already were valued in the United States, where the values that the assembly line would embody were woven into everyday life."

Ford didn't invent the assembly line, but it was his engineers who, from 1908 through 1913, capitalized on and further developed such innovations as the subdivision of labor, interchangeable parts, single-function machines that operated in sequence, and mechanized belts to move the work to the worker. Nye notes that an important additional feature, electrification of the factory, "was a necessary precondition before these elements could be improved individually and combined into a new form of production." By 1911 it had all come together, and in 1914 "the assembly line was in full operation."

The jump in productivity with the new technology was remarkable. In 1909 14,000 cars were turned out at Ford's old Piquette Avenue factory in Detroit. By 1914, using the assembly line in a newer factory in Highland Park, Ford was producing 248,000.

These were astonishing numbers, and this new form of mass production attracted widespread attention. At the 1915 San Francisco World's Fair, a working model of the assembly line turned out Model Ts. Back in Highland Park, tour guides were hired to lead thousands of curious visitors and businessmen through the intricacies of the production process.

### [Ford's Greatest Invention](#)

Revolutionary though it was, the assembly line might have been just another step in the history of manufacturing if not for Henry Ford's most important and pioneering idea. Understanding that products needed buyers, Ford decided to pay his workers double the going wage of the time. While primarily done as a way to reduce worker turnover, Ford also recognized that by paying his workers more, they would become greater consumers.

In addition, with the increased productivity that the assembly line made possible, the prices of goods could be lowered. The combination of the two factors—higher wages and the lower cost of mass-produced goods—would enable consumers of every economic class to access a higher standard of living.

Workers at the new Ford plant were happy to have steady jobs and better wages. Because the price of the Model T actually came down year by year, they could now afford the automobiles they made. Nye notes that the popular car had sold for \$950 in 1910 and would have cost the average worker 380 days' wages, yet a new one could be had for only \$397 by 1921, 80 days' wages at Ford's generous \$5 per day.

The advantage of mass production—using an assembly line that moved the work to the worker—was not lost on other industries and products. "In the 1920s, factories churned out millions of electric irons, vacuum cleaners, corn poppers, coffee percolators, and other household appliances," Nye notes. "By 1930, mass-produced electric fans, radios, and washing machines had become as widespread as the automobile."

"The word *consumption* increasingly lost its earlier connotations of destroying, wasting, or using up, and came instead to refer in a positive way to the satisfying of human needs and desires."

Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*

Increased advertising piqued consumer desire, and demand for these new and inexpensive products grew rapidly. Mass marketing became an industry of its own as manufacturers realized they would have to keep the consumer coming back for more to keep the money coming in. Thus brand loyalty and consumer confidence also became commodities.

In time it was a relatively simple task to make minor modifications to existing products and then advertise them as new and improved so that consumers would feel they needed the latest version. This planned obsolescence didn't mean that products stopped working at a certain age, however. A perfectly working five-year-old auto was merely considered outdated in terms of features. Harley Earl, former design chief at General Motors, is frequently quoted as saying that the "big job is to hasten obsolescence. In 1934 the average car ownership span was five years; now [in 1955] it is two years. When it is one year, we will have a perfect score." The idea of giving consumers choice was often a ploy to keep them spending money on things that did not actually need to be replaced.

### Patriotic Consumption

From the beginning, mass production was also important on a national, political level. During World War I, mass production was recognized as "an urgent necessity . . .," Nye writes, "and governments gave lucrative contracts to arms makers capable of mass production." The Depression soon followed and took its toll on all areas of the economy. Production and consumption waned. But with the

entry of the United States into World War II, mass production ramped up and once again turned toward the war effort: "The assembly line [became] the arsenal of democracy," guaranteeing that "the United States would never run short of trucks, ships, planes, weapons, or supplies" for the war effort.

When the war was over, the focus of manufacturing turned back to the consumer and became, in Nye's words, "the guarantor of prosperity and democracy." He cites a post-World War II issue of the *Saturday Evening Post* as proclaiming America "the last bulwark of civilization" and singing the praises of its "mass employment, mass production, mass advertising, mass distribution and mass ownership of the products of industry."

The mutualism of mass production and mass consumption has today formed an economic bond that is both critical and tenuous. When the United States was attacked in September 2001, then-president George W. Bush asked the nation for its "continued participation and confidence in the American economy." While not exactly telling the public to go shopping, his words encouraged the populace to go about its usual business, which certainly included a trip to the local mall.

### Going Offline

Global economics and manufacturing have seemingly wedded themselves to the ethic of consumption. Thus we find ourselves in a quandary: to slow our consumption seems tantamount to cutting our own economic neck. Yet, to continue at an ever-increasing pace—a pace that meets the growth model of increasing profits, wages and employment—requires more feedstock materials, energy and capital. Worst of all, this model plays to the lowest common denominator of human nature.

Historian Leach concludes his overview of the development of American consumerism with a call for the consumer to reject "business values, the cult of the new, the constant pursuit of mere comfort" that are the foundation of what he calls the "culture of desire." Like earlier critics, he suggests that we would all be better off if we could step off the assembly line of consumption and seek "a larger vision of what it [means] to be human, a fuller sense of being," and join in the "refusal to accept having and taking as the key to being or the equivalent of being."

"We have not been led into this world of material closeness against our better judgment. For many of us, especially when young, consumerism is our better judgment. We have not just asked to go this way, we have demanded."

James Twitchell, "Two Cheers for Materialism," in *The Consumer Society Reader*

In this, Leach is returning to an even earlier historical record. Jesus noted that life was not the sum total of one's possessions (Matthew 4:4) and that the duty of humankind was to seek something higher than material things alone (Matthew 6:33).

This is a stupid argument. It actually was important for the economy to keep functioning after a major terrorist attack, when there was ample reason for consumer non-confidence.

It is easy to become entangled in simply consuming for the sake of consuming. In fact, as we have seen, we are encouraged on many fronts to do just that; it can even seem to be one's patriotic duty. But we need to have our priorities in order. Wanting, getting and having are not the point of life (Luke 12:15–21). The desire that all people have a decent standard of living is certainly commendable; things in themselves are not necessarily bad, and having a mass production system that meets the needs of the masses is not intrinsically wrong. But as Nye notes, "the assembly line is not the ideal instrument with which to promote frugality or minimize consumption."

We must conclude that there comes a point at which *having* more doesn't *give* us more. Instead, the desire for acquisition begins to erode one's sense of innate human value and transfers it to things. This degrades human relationships both near and far. Like an addiction, we can become trapped in a downward spiral of both financial and mental consumer debt. It is a death spiral.

Are we ready to step away from the line?