

Towards a theory of consumption

The autopsy of homo economicus

There is a fable: "There once was a man who lived in Scarcity. After many adventures and a long voyage in the Science of Economics, he encountered the Society of Affluence. They were married and had many needs." "The beauty of *homo economicus*," said A. N. Whitehead, "was that we knew exactly what he was searching for." This human fossil of the Golden Age, born in the modern era out of the fortuitous conjunction of Human Nature and Human Rights, is gifted with a heightened principle of formal rationality which leads him to:

- 1 Pursue his own happiness without the slightest hesitation;
- 2 Prefer objects which provide him with the maximum satisfaction.

The whole discourse on consumption, whether learned or lay, is articulated on the mythological sequence of the fable: a man, "endowed" with needs which "direct" him towards objects that "give" him satisfaction. Since man is really never satisfied (for which, by the way, he is reproached), the same history is repeated indefinitely,

behavior as a social phenomenon. The economist's notion of "rational" choice has been changed into the model of choice as conformity, which is significantly different. Needs are not so much directed at objects, but at values. And the satisfaction of needs primarily expresses an *adherence to these values*. The fundamental, unconscious, and automatic choice of the consumer is to accept the life-style of a particular society (no longer therefore a real choice: the theory of the autonomy and sovereignty of the consumer is thus refuted).

This kind of sociology culminates in the notion of the "standard package,"¹⁵ defined by Riesman as the collection of products and services which constitutes the basic heritage of the middle-class American. Constantly on the rise and indexed on the national standard of living, the standard package is a minimum ideal of a statistical kind, and a middle-class model of conformity. Surpassed by some, only dreamed of by others, it is an *idea* which encapsulates the American way of life.¹⁶ Here again, the "standard package" does not so much refer to the materiality of goods (TV, bathroom, car, etc.) as to *the ideal of conformity*.

All of this sociology gets us nowhere. Besides the fact that the notion of conformity is nothing more than an immense tautology (in this case the middle-class American defined by the "standard package," itself defined by the statistical mean of consumed goods – or sociologically: a particular individual belongs to a particular group which consumes a particular product, and the individual consumes such a product because he or she belongs to such a group), the postulate of formal rationality, which in economics determined the individual's relation to objects, is simply transferred to the relation of the individual to the group. Conformity and satisfaction are interrelated: the resulting similarity in the subject's relation to objects, or to a group *posited as a distinct entity*, is established according to the logical principle of equivalence. The concepts of "need" and "norm" respectively are the expressions of this miraculous equivalence.

The difference between the economic notion of "utility" and the sociological notion of conformity is identical to the distinction Galbraith establishes between the pursuit of profit and economic motivation, which is characteristic of the "traditional" capitalist system, on the one hand, and the behavior of identification and adaptation, which is specific to the era of organization and of the technostucture, on the other. The conditioning of needs becomes the central issue for both the psycho-sociologists of conformity, and for Galbraith. This is never an issue for economists (and for

since the time of the ancient fables.

Some appear to be perplexed: "Among all the unknowns of economic science, needs are the most persistently obscure" (Knight).⁸ But this uncertainty does not prevent the advocates of the human sciences, from Marx to Galbraith, and from Robinson Crusoe to Chombart de Lauwe,⁹ from faithfully reciting the litany of needs. For the economists, there is the notion of "utility." Utility is the desire to consume a specific commodity, that is to say, to nullify its utility. Need is therefore already embedded in commodities on the market. And preferences are manipulated by the arrangement of products already offered on the market: this is in fact an elastic demand.

For the psychologist there is the theory of "motivation" which is a bit more complex, less "object oriented"¹⁰ and more "instinct oriented,"¹¹ derived from a sort of ill-defined, preexisting necessity. For the sociologist and psychosociologist, who arrived last on the scene, there is the "sociocultural." The anthropological postulate, of the *individual* endowed with needs and moved by nature to satisfy them, or of a consumer who is free, conscious and aware of his needs, is not put into question by sociologists (although sociologists are suspicious of "deep motivations"). But rather, on the basis of this idealistic postulate, sociologists allow for a "social-dynamics" of needs. They activate models of conformity and competition ("Keeping up with the Joneses")¹² derived from the pressure of peer group, or they elaborate grand "cultural models" which are related to society in general or to history.

Three general positions can be identified: for Marshall, needs are interdependent and rational; for Galbraith, choices are imposed by motivation (we will come back to this); for Gervasi (and others), needs are interdependent, and are the result of learning rather than of rational calculation.

Gervasi: "Choices are not made randomly. They are socially controlled, and reflect the cultural model from which they are produced. We neither produce nor consume just any product: the product must have some meaning in relation to a system of values."¹³ This leads to a perspective on consumption in terms of integration: "The goal of the economy is not the maximization of production for the purposes of the individual, but the maximization of production in relation to society's value system" (Parsons).¹⁴ Similarly, Duesen-possessions according to one's position in the social hierarchy. In effect, the differences in choice from one society to another, and the similarity of choices within a society, compels us to view consumer

Weekly Passage Reflection Activity Instructions, v3

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May all of you experience wonder at some point in your lives.

A	Objectives	Expand your vocabulary by experiencing “big words” in meaningful passages across different forms of media including, historical, modern, news, splack, internet, and social science theory.
B	Background	<p>Anyone can grow their vocabulary!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It takes practice, determination, word use, and experiencing words. Humans grok in different ways but spend their life expressing themselves. Polysyllabic words enrich experiences and self expression. Polysyllabic words also assist in building respect amongst your peers.
C	Why?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ A brain is strange; one never knows when an item will “pop” into it. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Higher consciousness theory indicates the normality of items coming from “the air.” Use of free association writing stimulates this outcome. ➤ Pack the gray matter to fuel fierce thought, fire communication, and wit. ➤ I’ve been thanked years later for this approach; perhaps you may too.
D	How perform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set aside 20-30 minutes when your mind is clear - like a Sunday morning. Ensure to turn off your phone so that your mind can flow.
E	Part I Complete a reflection	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Read and reflect on a passage. Google unknown words: <code>google query = { <word> defintion }</code> Write 2-3 sentences about the passage. Reflect options: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> on a word, use of a term a phrase, something striking, quirky, haunting, beautiful how the characters or situation made you feel the goal is allow your thoughts to flow and write freely
F	Part II	<p>Copy and paste special \ values <or as plain text> to it.226.spring.2023.submit</p> <p>This activity is 10-15% of your grade, i.e., a potential letter grade difference.</p>
G	Concerns?	Your learning is the primary focus so please reach out directly to me.
H	FYI passage materials	<p>My graduate training includes data science and sociological theory, including robotics, human as machine, info.TECH, data.TRASH, nonsense, and transhumanism. Passages from sociological theory may describe haunting, terror, computation insanity, cyber flesh or skin, and the use of feminist descriptive words such as penetration or tech absorption.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nothing is intened to shock, alarm, make uncomfortable, discriminate, and so on. It’s advanced “computer science” and.or computer science theory material. <p>The intent is to expose you to unfamiliar words and contexts regarding the infusion of computer science into our personhood with fleshy wearable tech (iWatch), strange impants, sensors, and limb replacements. Nothing is unbecoming nor intended to disturb you.</p> <p><u>Please qualify</u> the sharing of any of this work with ANYONE outside of class as</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ academic learning/theory media ➤ If something is too unordinary or concerning, ask me for clarification. <p>Note: passages are also from the Torah, classics (Moby-Dick), philosophers, and critics.</p> <p>~v/r brian.hogan 1/21/23 v3 ~v/r brian.hogan 1/7/23 v2</p>

This weekly activity is 10-15% of your grade, i.e., a potential letter grade difference.