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## Consumerism

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## **Introduction:**

*Consumerism* can be defined as the institutionalization of social action associated with the human consumption of goods. Consumption is key to all life. For example, plants consume sunlight, water, and nutrients from the earth, animals consume plants and other animals, and most humans, consume (at minimum) all of the above. Without consumption, life would cease to exist. Despite its centrality to all existence, however, the particulars of human consumption are often left unanalyzed, are overlooked, or discussed only in superficial ways. To some, reflecting and analyzing our patterns of buying and selling (and the consequences of these transactions) might appear a bit silly – one might as well sit and think about the air we breathe or the water we bathe in. Consumerism is so ubiquitous that we hardly notice just how peculiar it has become. In this essay I subject our ways of individual and collective consumption to investigation and analysis.

Although people have been buying and selling commodities (i.e. products sold for money) in ways we would recognize since at least since the time of the Renaissance, what social scientists consider to be contemporary consumer society has only been in existence for about a century (Strasser, McGovern and Judt 1998; Robbins 2002). It must be one of the great ironies of history that the grey, dour, and miserly Protestant work ethic (Weber 1958) would eventually give way to the unbridled, hedonistic, consumer based capitalism that envelopes much of the globe today. Many changes in consumer society were initiated during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially after World War II. During that time, “new products and technologies made old ones obsolete.... Wholly new classes of

human activity joined the realm of commodities. Businesses commodified forms of folk culture such as dancing and popular song. Technological innovations spawned new kinds of amusements and new ideas of leisure...Changes in transportation and communication revised ideas of distance, space and time” (Strasser, McGovern and Judt, 1998, 3). Many of the consumer objects and experiences that consumers now take for granted (e.g. the television, garbage disposal devices) were first developed in the post-war economic boom in the United States.

Benjamin Barber’s book *Jihad v. McWorld* (1996) offers an important viewpoint on consumerism and the globalization of American capitalism. One of the main claims of that work – which is also a working assumption of this essay – is that while much of the world is coming together much of it is also blowing apart at equal or greater velocity. While the forces of globalization or “McDonaldization” (Ritzer 1995) are bringing the global community into ever greater contract, the forces of what Barber calls neo-tribalism are also threatening to quite literally disintegrate the global order.

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In this article I hope to spell out some of these, and related, concerns in greater detail. The focus is on how consumerism relates to international security. Although consumerism gets more attention in the first half of the chapter and security in the second, it should be remembered that in reality they are always intertwined. In the following section I describe the nature of global consumer society, which is followed by a discussion of some important theories of consumerism.

### **The Nature of Global Consumer Society**

Consumption is initiated by a *consumer* (or a number of consumers) – whose “purpose is to purchase and consume ever increasing quantities of goods and services” (Robbins 2002, 7). Today, being a consumer is one of the primary roles people play in life, especially in Euro-American societies. The act of consumption is a dialectical process that can be viewed in terms of a subject-object relationship. A subject or actor (or population of actors) consumes or uses up something – a particular “object” of some sort. Through the act of consumption, the subject and object become engaged in a sort of interactive exchange. Through this consumptive dialectic (ritualized and routinized across the social landscape), subjects and objects are transformed in both significant and mundane ways.

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Consumers have limited menus of objects available for possible consumption. Not all the available products that consumers might want to buy are available at the local supermarket, only a subset of a larger universe of certain commodities. Corporations become adept at monitoring customer selections so as to better understand their needs and keep consumer capitalism functioning (Parenti 2004; Friedman 2006). Particular consumption patterns and choices are not freely chosen but rather are channeled and influenced by organizational and institutional forces. Consumer goods are the historical outcome of a chain of socio-economic relationships fashioned and reformed by different constellations of actors over time. Consumers as subjects are likewise historically constituted and are influenced by various social, political, economic and historical forces that provoke and delimit consumer choices.

[INSERT PHOTOGRAPH 1 ABOUT HERE]

Photo One: All societies have different ways of consuming goods and resources. This photograph, taken in Hanoi, Vietnam in 2004 (Penny Robinson; used with permission) depicts a typical market scene there. One notes the various consumer objects that are for sale and how they differ from consumer objects found in Euro-American societies. Increasingly countries like Vietnam are playing a role in economic globalization and goods which are made in Vietnam are being sold all around the globe.

Although bartering economies still exist (and in some places are thriving), most consumer transactions in contemporary societies are commodified – i.e. secured only through the exchange of money. Consumers need access to money or consumption capital (Perrucci and Wysong 1999) to take part in the consumer game. Without money people become what Zygmunt Bauman (2005, 38) describes as “defective consumers.” As Robbins (2002, 7) puts it, consumerism “has left little in our lives untouched – it has affected our material, spiritual, and intellectual life; it has reshaped our values; ... [and] it has largely dictated the direction that every institution in our society would take.”

Consumption is the mortar holding societies together. As Nealon and Giroux (2003, 118) comment, what unites the many divisions (along the lines, for example, of race, class and gender) in society is the “spectacle of consumption.” There is a remarkable universe of commodities to be desired, surveyed, purchased and bought. For the particular consumer who has enough capital and the right social networks, everything and anything can be purchased, while bystanders and onlookers look on in either horror or envy. People may disagree about issues of faith, politics, or the merits of private schools, for example, but

they will still dine at the same restaurants, buy similar cars, and finance their home loans with the same mortgage lenders. After the 9/11 attacks United States President George W. Bush did not call for sacrifice or humility in America's consumerism, but rather he suggested Americans get their lives back on track by going shopping, and lowered taxes with the rationale that more money in people's pockets would translate into greater consumer spending.

The spectacle of consumption engulfs Euro-America, and to an alarming extent, the rest of the world as well. From the "all-you-can-eat" food buffets, to gigantic gas guzzling four-wheeled drive vehicles (most of which never touch dirt roads), the cacophony of "virtual" slot machines (played with now with debit cards instead of coins) in capitalism's casinos, the omnipresent televised professional sporting events that consume so much of people's attention and time, or the consumption of so many images and sounds from the Internet – all these examples show that the culture of consumption is everywhere and exerts huge social pressure on our lives. While consumption has always been a condition of human activity, it has recently taken a qualitative leap. Suddenly greater numbers of people are consuming more at faster clip. Apparently trivial and quaint terms such as "shop-a-holic" and "buyer's remorse" actually represent how lives are lived. Whole classes of humanity "fetishize objects and seek to prove themselves and to find salvation in the consumption of objects" (Ritzer, 1998, 8).

The economies of modern societies have achieved "a level of global integration unmatched in human history" (Robbins 2002, 8). This has allowed consumerism to rapidly expand to include not just the wealthier inhabitants of developed countries, but also many people in developing countries who historically have been excluded from the

promise of consumer society. As Thomas Friedman (2006, 205) argues, Western consumers are now “in touch with people [they have] never been in touch with before, [are] being challenged by people who had never challenged them before, [are] competing with people with whom they had never competed before, [and are] collaborating with people with whom they had never collaborated before.” The growing interconnectedness and expansion of global capitalism will have enormous impacts on human security across the globe as the fate of more people in the world is linked together in a way never before imaginable. When the Chinese or American stock market tumbles, for example, ripple effects are felt in many other societies. Companies and businesses known to customers in one society opens for business in many others. As consumerism spreads, however, the effects of its expansion become more unpredictable and may or may not merge with the politics of established consumer societies. American writer Jedediah Purdy (2003, 4) describes sitting in a *TGI Friday* restaurant in Cairo, Egypt, with three elite young professional women from established families – a medical student, “a young corporate lawyer and a first-year law student.” Over chicken fingers, Oreo Sandwiches and Mocha Madness, and in the pauses allowed for text messaging, Purdy was startled to hear these young women voice support for Osama Bin Laden and the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. In trying to make sense of the seeming contradiction between an advocacy of anti-Americanism and the embrace of Western styles of consumerism, Purdy (2003, 9) writes: “There is no guarantee of an American future. It is naïve to believe that the migratory icons of American modernity – constitutions, regular elections, free markets, shopping malls, MTV – will turn every place to a version of what we already are.”

[INSERT PHOTOGRAPH 2 ABOUT HERE]

Photo Two: This photograph of Thanajvur, Tamil Nadu (Cynthia J. Miller; used with permission) illustrates the contradictions of global capitalism and global economic development. We see a cart pulled by a bull, and in the upper left hand corner an advertisement displaying a new television set. The photograph seems to indicate that Indian society (or some subset of it) is on the cusp of transitioning to a more technologically savvy, commodity focused society, but the presence of the bull-drawn cart also seems to indicate that older, more traditional, modes of experiencing life are still the reality for many.

### **Theorizing Consumerism**

Although contemporary critiques of consumption could, at a stretch, be traced back to the Ancient Greek philosophers, more recent theories usually have some sort of foundation in the work of 19<sup>th</sup> century economic theorist Karl Marx. Though focusing mainly on questions of production and labor, Marx's ideas can also provide insights into the nature of consumption. Marx provides a vivid description of what we could describe as a *logic of consumerism*. Marx (1978, 87) writes: "In place of *all* these physical and mental senses ... seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, being aware, sensing, wanting, acting, loving ... there has therefore come the sheer estrangement of *all* these senses – the sense of *having*...Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it – when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directed possessed, eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc. – in short, when it is *used* by us." Marx's account of how people relate to consumer goods, written over 150 years ago, still captures a good deal of what happens in consumer society. We are all aware of children who demand another toy just to have it not because it generates any additional pleasure, and the same could be said of art collectors, or of people who demand huge wardrobes.

Advertisers and other corporations want consumers to feel powerless to provide for their own basic needs – utterly dependent on consumer goods for survival.

Marx's critique was later to be taken over by figures such as Thorstein Veblen and later, by members of the so-called "Frankfurt School" of critical theory (Wiggershaus 1994) scholars such as T.W. Adorno, Hebert Marcuse, and Walter Benjamin. Veblen's work, written in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, underwent a bit of a revival in the 1960s. Adorno (1988, 75) was quick to point out his debt to Veblen, who had argued that "the consumption of goods, from the early 'predatory' stage of history to the present, has served not so much to satisfy men's true needs ... as to maintain social prestige – status." The Frankfurt theorists offered a trenchant critique of consumer capitalism and suggested that modern society has witnessed the "conquest of the unhappy consciousness," (Marcuse 1965) a certain philosophical attitude described by the philosopher G. F. H. Hegel. Marcuse pointed out that in the commodified consumer society of the 1960s there was little place for critique. Rather, the "happy consciousness" reigned supreme, as forms of rebellion and dissent were co-opted if not crushed completely by the culture industries (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002), and the impulse to criticize subdued by unrelenting consumption of, for example, alcohol, pharmaceuticals and television. Today such a critique is no longer voiced just by social theorists but has become accepted by many in mainstream society. As acclaimed film director Martin Scorsese recently put it, "We've been eaten away by the comforts of the consumer products...television today is constantly grabbing at your attention, pounding at you. You become just pummeled with information, and you become deadened" (Travers 2007, 98).

One can see resemblance of these critiques in recent work by Zygmunt Bauman, a contemporary social theorist and leading critic of consumerism. Bauman (2005, 24) writes: “The passage from producer to consumer society has entailed many profound changes; arguably the most decisive among them is, however, the fashion in which people are groomed and trained to meet the demands of their social identities.” Bauman argues that Max Weber’s Protestant work ethic (Weber 1958) has largely given way to what he calls the “aesthetic of consumption.” Bauman associates producer society with the Protestant work ethic, and notes how work continues to undergo enormous transformation in modern societies. Most people no longer associate their working lives with their identity – with who and what they are. Rather, people today often experience and are controlled by what Bauman calls the aesthetic of consumption. One expert in the advertising field, Kevin Roberts, CEO of Saatchi and Saatchi Worldwide, argues that today’s advertising companies strive to manufacture what he calls “loyalty beyond reason” (*Frontline* 2004). Douglas Atkin, of Merkle and Partner’s Advertising, states that it is now the task of the consumer “brand manager” to “create and maintain a whole meaning system for people through which they get identity and understanding of the world” (*Ibid.*) It might be an interesting task to reflect upon one’s own favorite “brands” and to inquire into how that loyalty has been manufactured.

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An especially important part of contemporary consumerism comes in the form of the consumption of visual and aural messages. As Ritzer (1998, 7) puts it, “what we consume is signs (messages, images) rather than commodities.” We spend much of our days watching, then re-watching, then pausing to watch, then watching again, then later

talking about watching, images which are forced upon us from all sides. The same could be said for aural messages in consumer society. Rather than making its citizens smarter or more knowledgeable, media consumers are more often bombarded with emotionally laden, trivial, information, making them feel isolated and detracting from community building (Putnam 2000; Gitlin 2003).

In the place of the work ethic, consumption becomes the main way (and for many, the only way) of orienting one's life – to differentiate oneself from who others – for example, by watching different media, listening to different music, wearing alternative clothing, and so on (Milner 2005). Yet because consumption is inherently such a fleeting act, the cogs of consumer capitalism must always be churning so as to cajole and persuade consumers to go back for more. As Bauman (2005, 26) puts it, “Consumers must never be given rest. They need to be constantly exposed to new temptations in order to be kept in a state of a constantly seething, never wilting excitement and, indeed, in a state of suspicion and disaffection.”

In some ways, Bauman's work occupies a similar space of investigation as that of social theorist Jean Baudrillard (1998), and who might agree with Bauman's emphasis on aesthetic forms of consumption. With the continued deskilling of work and the continued reign of abstract labor (Postone 1993) consumer products have provided a way to forge a distinct identity in society, a pivot around which to organize life, and a signal to others about one's consumption preferences. As Ritzer (1998, 14-15) argues, “consumption is *not* merely a frenzy of buying a profusion of commodities...consumption is an order of significations in a ‘panoply’ of objects; a system, or code of signs.” If you think about it, most people do not really drink a carbonated beverage such as Diet Coke just for

refreshment, but more so because of what it signifies (i.e. youth, vigor, excitement, and so on). People may have difficulty changing their gender, their class position or racial or ethnic status, but it is relatively easy to reinvent oneself through one's consumption patterns – such is the magic of money. Consumption patterns allow members of certain social classes to differentiate themselves from people in other classes, particularly those perceived to be below them in the social hierarchy.

In most societies, the nation state or government plays a central role in structuring environments of consumption. In richer, more democratic countries, agitations for so-called consumer rights have become essential to the “social contract” between citizen and government. Many citizen grievances about the state have to do with what the government is (or is not) doing about consumer related concerns, e.g. keeping consumer prices down, combating inflation, ensuring access to clean drinking water, and so on. But before people even conceptualize these particular functions of the state, at minimum, they expect their governments to keep them safe and secure.

Societies have a range of ways through which to embrace consumerism – from complete *laissez-faire* capitalism to highly regulated economies that prohibit many goods and use surveillance to monitor what citizens are consuming. Under the Taliban in Afghanistan, for example, before the 2002 invasion, it was forbidden for people to listen to amplified music. People in Saudi Arabia can be thrown out of the country for consuming alcohol or might be arrested simply for dancing in public. Yet even the most regulated environments, such as totalitarian regimes or prisons, always have underground economies – black markets – that offer consumer products that are not legally available. This shows that although political regimes may set the parameters for what subjects may

consume, people also have a certain autonomy in their consumption. In some cases, consumption can be used as a vehicle to critique the state. Marlboro cigarettes, Coca-Cola, Levis, and rock-n-roll, have all at one point or another been used as transformative social forces and symbols for freedom against homogenous, anti-entrepreneurial, statist regimes. There is an anti-authoritarian aspect to consumerism that in many ways is opposed to the rigidities of bureaucratic rationalization. As Bauman (2005, 29) observes: “The ‘consumer spirit’, much like the merchandizing companies which thrive on it, rebels against regulation. A society of consumers is resentful of all legal restrictions imposed on freedom of choice.”

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While on the one hand consumerism can be viewed as a fairly functional thing – a positive movement that centers around the distribution of goods, resources, and services, consumerism can also be viewed as rather dysfunctional, in so far as it causes a host of social problems that negatively impact people, cultures and societies. For example, consider the obscene amount of waste that is generated by consumer societies as byproduct of development – not just large portions of left over food or sewage – but more importantly more hazardous and toxic forms of waste, e.g. used cars, refrigerators, computers and their peripherals, animal waste, spent nuclear fuel, and so on. Although there have been some positive developments in recent years in tackling environmental degradation, many consumers do still live in a throw-a-way sort of a world. As Sennett (2000) has pointed out, the motto of our age can indeed be categorized as “no long term” The emphasis is always on the here and now, and future generations are considered

beside the point. Such a hegemonic outlook does little to generate environmental awareness.

Another dysfunction of consumerism are the wasted lives of people around the globe who have been treated, and continue to be treated, negatively by consumer capitalism simply as a matter of course, in the very mode of consumerism's operation itself. Not only are there, as Lee (2000, x) notes, "consequences of the erosion of indigenous, traditional cultures [in both] the Third and First Worlds, by the all-pervasive cultures of consumption and promotion," but on a more fundamental level, millions of people must labor every day in often exploitative, oppressive conditions in order to provide consumers with the goods (e.g. beef, coffee beans, diamonds) that they need to live. For all the winners in wealthier, more developed societies who benefit from cheap consumer goods and the latest electronic gadgets, there are many losers in developing countries who make these goods and are exploited in doing so. Some indigenous cultures are making a comeback (Wilkinson 2005) but it seems that often native peoples must first undergo a real or symbolic death before being readmitted to and accepted by consumer society.

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It is beyond the scope of this chapter to elaborate them in any detail, but it should be remembered that consumer capitalism generates massive inequalities. While billions subsist on a dollar a day, the pay packages for CEOs of Euro-American businesses continue to rise. Some social actors (individuals and countries) simply have more "consumption capital" (Perrucci and Wysong 1999) available than others. As people starve in Africa, obesity and heart disease sky rocket in the west. Increasingly, the

problems that plague the social landscape in Western nations have more to do with “over” consumption than “under” consumption.

Notable consumer differences can also be found within developed societies, for example in urban areas compared to suburbia. Critic bell hooks (2000, 46) argues that often the “poor are more addicted to excess because they are the most vulnerable to the all powerful messages in media and in our lives in general which suggest that the only way out of class shame is conspicuous consumption.” Bauman writes that the underclass in every consumer society is considered deviant. As he states, “the poor of a consumer society are socially defined, and self-defined, first and foremost as blemished, defective, faulty and deficient – in other words, inadequate – consumers” (Bauman 2005, 38).

### **Consumption and Security**

A certain amount of security must be present in a consumer society for people to have their consumption needs met (at minimum, food, water, shelter, clothing, etc.). If a given environment contains too many risks and dangers, consumer markets will decay and transactions will move elsewhere. Social insecurity can also burst the bubble of what Marx called commodity fetishism. Many consumers do view commodities in magical ways, as charms to ward away evil spirits, as much as bringers of or rewards for good fortune. When consumer society ceases to be an entertaining circus, the spell is largely broken – like no longer believing in Father Christmas or the tooth-fairy, the magical aura of consumption quickly vanishes.

Security is arguably the top concern of corporate management in the current era and will likely be so well into the foreseeable future. It is possible to conceive of the

globe in terms of different and ever shifting “zones” of security, more specifically, what Cooper (2000) refers to as *zones of safety* (e.g. Europe, the US), *zones of danger* (e.g. Iran), and *zones of chaos* (e.g. parts of the Ivory Coast, Iraq, South America). It has been one of the main effects of the war on terrorism to shake up the existing constellation and distribution of such zones. For example, New York and London were both transformed from zones of safety to zones of chaos after the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks, respectively, and still today may be viewed by many as zones of danger.

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Security is one of the main issues on the minds of Euro-American consumers as many believe that the world is becoming an ever more dangerous place. There are two main currents of thought when it comes to thinking about the sociology of risk. The *probabilistic perspective* takes a statistical approach to understanding our fears (Clarke 2006) and asks us to consider if we are truly afraid of the right things. For example, 400,000 Americans die each year from tobacco related deaths, dwarfing deaths from illegal drugs by about a factor of twenty five, yet many continue to use tobacco believing it to be a safe product. The probabilistic approach reminds us that, most likely, we will *not die*, for example, in a terrorist attack or be murdered by a serial killer, but it is far more likely that we will die from mundane causes such as heart disease, strokes, cancers, and so on. Rather than succumbing to the hysteria one finds on the local and national TV markets, the probabilistic approach tells that we should calm down, use our heads and realize that the probability of any one horrible event happening to us is incredibly small. Yet it is difficult not to be influenced by the culture of fear. As Marc Siegel writes “Fear invades our homes like never before, affecting more and more people. Newspaper

headlines are apocalyptic warnings. Media obsessions fuel our cycles of worry, which burn out only to be replaced by more alarming cycles” (Siegel 2005, 3). Siegel claims that the current US fear epidemic impacts consumers by making them anxious, paranoid, ill, and dependent on medical and psychiatric care. Siegel argues that people are actually safer than they think they are. His focus is on the larger probability of negative events *not* happening and advocates more stoicism and resolve to get on with our lives.

The *possibilistic approach* to understanding risk, on the other hand, makes a strong argument for the case that there is, indeed, cause for worry. This approach suggests that although the likelihood of catastrophes happening may be small, we should still be prepared for them. Catastrophe researcher Lee Clarke suggests there are now threats to consumer capitalist society that are altogether new and that no one (politicians, doctors, and emergency management personnel included) has ever seen before. Because of this, Clarke suggests we need to be constantly alert (just driving to the grocery store, or sending one’s child to school may be trouble) and to use our imagination to better come to terms with any “worst case scenario” that might befall us.

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Clarke (2006, x) asks us to consider troubling questions such as: “What happens if the nation’s power grid goes down for six months? What if smallpox sweeps the world? What if nuclear power has a particularly bad day? What if a monster tsunami slams southern California?” All of these potential disasters would have huge impacts on consumer society, in the US, Europe and around the globe. If a huge tidal wave hit Los Angeles, for example, consumers would be faced with a situation that would make the chaos in New Orleans’s Convention Center after Hurricane Katrina seem minor. As

Clarke (2006, 31) writes: “The Port of Los Angeles is the largest international gateway for moving goods. The U.S. economy could be crippled, at least for awhile, and the world economy depends on the U.S. economy being in good shape.” Clarke is especially concerned about the threat posed by an accidental collision between trains hauling toxic chemicals such as chlorine gas through populated areas, but he is also worried about an asteroid impact that could result in the equivalent of a long, dark nuclear winter. As he puts it, “in spite of all our modern technology, we are utterly dependent on crops. If the crops die, we become the dinosaurs” (Clarke 2006, 18). Another worry, a nuclear weapon being smuggled inside a cargo container and then later detonated in an urban environment, is perhaps more widely known to consumers. As William Langewiesche (2004, 42) notes, “The fear on everyone’s mind is that a nuclear device or some other weapon of mass destruction will pass through a port with little chance of being discovered, and will subsequently be carried by truck or train with dead-on precision to any target desired...Aboard the transporting ships, the containers are stacked tightly and high, and most are impossible to get at.” Port security is an enormous area of concern and for obvious reasons. Less than one percent of all cargo containers are inspected when passing through US ports. Within them “there are possibilities for accident and attack, disease and disaster that would make September 11 seem like a mosquito bite” (Clarke 2006, ix).

### **The Future of Consumerism:**

An interesting area for reflection and research concerns the future direction of consumerism. There is serious debate within social science concerning how long various

consumer societies can continue at their current pace of development and what sorts of ecological brakes may prevent perpetual growth.

According to Jared Diamond, consumer capitalist societies are inherently unsustainable and we are already beginning to see cracks in their foundation. His recent book, *Collapse*, charts the development and collapse of a number of societies. In discussing the lifespan of US consumer society, in particular, he suggests the country may be lucky to have another 400 years left.

[INSERT PHOTOGRAPH 3 ABOUT HERE.]

Caption: Photo Three: This painting, “City Life,” by Zbigniew Fitz (used with permission), might be said to express the dark, animalistic and duplicitous nature of contemporary consumer society. We see the lizards and other strange creatures mingle around the feet of grotesque representatives of consumer society, their bloated bodies disfigured by consumption.

Arguing that “world society is presently on a non-sustainable course” Diamond (2005, 48) argues that there are five important variables that influence whether or not societies survive or become extinct: environmental factors, climate change, actions by hostile neighbors, decreased support by friendly neighbors, and various political, economic, cultural initiatives undertaken by societies to cope with the above. Diamond forces us to seriously consider the prospect that the days of consumer society may be very limited. He claims that unless we drastically alter what and how we consume, there simply may *not be an environment* left to support humanity.

According to Diamond (2005, 513), “Our totally unsustainable consumption means that the First World could not continue for long on its present course, even if the

Third World didn't exist and weren't trying to catch up to us." Yet, in the coming years more people, not less, will demand access to the commodities and styles of life now taken for granted in rich Western societies. Millions of people around the world dream, and will continue to dream, of attaining a middle-class lifestyle involving:

“acquiring a house, appliances, utensils, clothes and consumer products manufactured commercially by energy-consuming processes, not made at home or locally by hand; having access to manufactured modern medicines... eating abundant food grown at high production rates with synthetic fertilizers... traveling by motor vehicle (preferably one's own car), not by walking or bicycle; and having access to other products manufactured elsewhere and arriving by motor vehicle transport” (Diamond 2005, 372).

The problem, according to Diamond, is that as already highly developed consumer societies continue to develop, other less developed societies also want what the First World offers. This dynamic is accelerated by the increasingly interconnected (e.g. through television, films and the Internet) nature of global society. Sectors of Indian and Chinese societies are cases in point. A particularly daunting problem will arise when “it finally dawns on all those people in the Third World that current First World standards are unreachable for them, and that the First World refuses to abandon those standards for itself” (Diamond 2005, 496). It is unclear how members of First and Third world will respond to this conundrum. It would seem hypocritical to deny people in developing societies a shot at the same goods and comforts that people in the First World have taken for granted for decades. Friedman (2006, 500) understands the potential trouble that could ensue and suggests, without trying to be alarmist, that to tell “China, India and

Russia to consume less could have the same geopolitical impact that the world's inability to accommodate a rising Japan and Germany had after World War I.”

As the environmental threats posed by consumerism are huge, environmental protection measures should be central to communities and societies the world over. Diamond (2005, 487-494) is particularly worried about the destruction of local habitats, depletion of natural seafood stocks, loss of species, soil erosion, energy shortages, freshwater depletion, depletion of photosynthetic capacity, toxic chemicals in the environment, invasive species, global warming, and the effects of population growth. If one considers each in turn, one notices that most, if not all, of these problems have some relation to our current modes of consumption. A robust research program could be created that could address any one of these important concerns, delineating just how consumption regimes are responsible for environmental degradation.

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Another perspective that also indicates problems in the future of consumerism is provided by historian Kevin Phillips (2006). He argues that US society is being run into the ground by dependence on foreign oil, radical religion and soaring indebtedness at both the individual and government levels. Like Spain, Holland and Great Britain in earlier historical epochs, Phillips claims US dominance will also one day come to an end and that US power will be superseded by other nations. Phillips (2006, 378) writes, “there is little doubt left about the next dominant continent, Asia, and the next leading world economic power – China, possibly in the 2030s.”

Phillips' argument hinges on a commodity that is at the center of all consumer societies – oil. He suggests that the success of the United States in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was

largely due to cheap oil. The supplies of cheap oil are no longer available. Not only does US dependence on foreign oil have largely negative economic, environmental and political consequences the world over, but few people are seriously considering alternatives to oil consumption and how contemporary consumer societies will function when oil is no longer available. Quite simply, oil will one day run out. Most oil fields have already in fact peaked. We are already beginning to see (in early 2008) in the United States, some of the economic and social consequences caused by gasoline prices approximating the \$3/gallon mark, oil prices hovering close to \$100 a barrel, and falling stockprices. It would take a social scientist with the imagination of someone like Lee Clarke (2006) to try to foretell what the world will look like when oil reserves become even more scarce.

**Conclusion:**

Consumption preceded humanity and it will outlast it (Gray 2003). All societies, however secure or insecure, whether war torn or peaceful, will always have people who need consumer resources, products and services in order to live. Yet societies also have many options for coping with the dilemmas and contradictions of consumer society, and thus their fates are still to a large degree within their own sphere of influence.

If there is any lesson to be gleaned from this essay on consumerism and security it is that people in contemporary societies should be more cognizant about what and how they consume while also thinking deeply about the variety of threats to their security. Different ways of consuming have differential impacts on people, animals and the planet. Although ecological concerns are usually the furthest thing from people's minds when

they put petrol in the car or eat a beef-burger, it is arguable that the very fate of the planet depends on how we face up to our consumer choices, and whether we change what we put in our bodies, in our cars, or on our backs. Due in part to recent security concerns, there is a growing movement of people interested in becoming more self-sufficient and less wasteful, and a certain amount of social status is becoming attached to doing so.

[INSERT BOX 9 ABOUT HERE OR ON THE MARGIN]

One of the paradoxes of the contemporary age is that while we are doing more to damage to the planet and the cultures that live on it, we also have more knowledge than ever before about the nature of such destruction. For example, if you want to find out how the beef industry impacts global warming, you can easily find out. Just logging onto the Internet allows people to compare the prices of various products and to see if they are being given a fair price. If a local car dealership is charging too much, one can buy the same vehicle from different dealer found online. Consumers today have many options to better manage their consumption. We have the choice, as Michael Pollan (2006) puts it in his book on the food industry, to either look the reality of our consumer choices directly in the face, or we can look away in ignorance. The same could be said of all our consumer choices.

Ultimately, of course, we should remember that “there is no one model of consumer society” (Strasser, McGovern and Judt 1998, 5). Although it is true that we are so steeped in the logic of consumer society, “its mode of address and manners that we can scarcely begin to conceive of a form of social life which is not organized around the consumption of mass-produced commodities” (Lee 2000, ix), there are social movements and social actors who are trying to change consumption patterns for the better. It seems

that many children and young people, for example, are becoming less enamored with “one-way” interactions with media, for example, and want to take more of an active role themselves, by playing more interactive and multiplayer videogames. Compared to a generation ago, such individuals are playing a much more active role in their consumerism. Similarly, there are now myriad ways to read the news, or consume media, and blogging has become a powerful tool in circulating opinions and facts that a few years ago might have been ignored. A mass email can generate more support for a cause than any amount of street protest or canvassing could ever bring. In spite of its seeming homogeneity then, consumer society also offers productive ways for people to resist oppressive forms of social organization (Lyng 2005). People are increasingly realizing that consumer society is not so much devoid of meaning as able to contain new meaning, and are becoming more autonomous and conscious consumers.

None of this, of course, should blind us to the very real security risks facing global society today or should make us “pretend that there really isn’t a serious enemy out there” (Walzer 2003, 3). As Marc Sageman (2004, 175) writes, “The Global Salafi jihad is a threat to the world. Its theater of operations spans the globe, and its apocalyptic vision melts any barriers to its planned atrocities. It will not hesitate to use weapons of mass destruction...Elimination of this movement is imperative.” The relationship between consumerism and radical Islam is, as such a relationship is for all religions, quite complicated and can only be touched upon here. Research indicates, however, that it should not be assumed that jihadi terrorists constitute “a relatively ignorant, naïve group”. Rather, they are “truly global citizens, familiar with many countries ... and able to speak several languages with equal facility (Sageman 2004, 76).” The 9/11 hijackers spent a

good deal of time in Florida and their consumption patterns mirrored (even down to the alcohol consumption and the topless bars) the behavior of many tourists. Yet even in spite of the luxuries and comforts of consumer culture, adherents to *salafiyyah* Islam would rather restore the “the glory and grandeur of the Golden Age” (Sageman 2004, 4) than co-exist with an open consumer society. Such Muslims believe that those who do not share their worldview are living in *jahiliyya*, a “state of barbarism and ignorance” (Sageman 2004, 8).

The logic of consumerism spread through the social and technological networks of global capitalism will continue to intersect, for the foreseeable future, with the logics of terrorism and violence. Continued expansion of consumer societies is today accompanied by a gnawing nervousness and anxiety concerning the very fate of these societies. It will be the task of governments and corporate management to try to shield consumers from threats of terrorism and other risks to their survival. Whether or not politicians and corporate managers are up to this task remains to be decided. What is clear, though, is that consumerism and security will remain in a state of tension for a long time to come.

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### **Suggestions for Further Reading**

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**Boxed Points: See instructions in the text for insertion**

Box 1: Globalization refers to the social, economic, cultural and political processes through which the world is both coming together, and coming apart, at the same time. Although such dynamics have been in play for hundreds of years, they have been rapidly accelerating since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Box 2: Being a consumer is one of the dominant roles people play in society. The act of consumption is an interactive process between an individual and a consumer object or product. Through the act of consumption, the subject and object become fused, and are transformed in both significant and mundane ways.

Box 3: According to Zygmunt Bauman, the Protestant work ethic has given way to an aesthetic of consumption. In contemporary societies people do not judge themselves and others so much by what they do for a living, but rather by what they consume.

Box 4: Although there is much truth to sociologists' criticisms of mindless consumerism in society, it should also be remembered that in some cases, consumption can be used as a vehicle to critique the state. Marlboro cigarettes, Coca-Cola, Levis, and rock-n-roll, have all at one point or another been used as transformative social forces and symbols for freedom against homogenous, anti-entrepreneurial, statist regimes.

Box 5: For all the winners in wealthier, more developed societies who benefit from cheap consumer goods and the latest electronic gadgets, there are many losers in developing countries who make these goods and are exploited in doing so.

Box 6: According to analyst Robert Cooper (2000), it is possible to conceive of the globe in terms of different and ever shifting "zones" of security, e.g. to as *zones of safety* (e.g.

Europe, the US), *zones of danger* (e.g. Iran), and *zones of chaos* (e.g. parts of the Ivory Coast, Iraq, South America).

Box 7: There are two main approaches to understanding risk in society – the probabilistic, which examines the odds of an event occurring and the possibilistic, which theorizes worst case scenarios and thinks about what might happen.

Box 8: According to biologist Jared Diamond (2000) consumer society is having a negative effect on the global environment. He suggests that societies need to pay attention to the following specific environmental problems: destruction of local habitats, depletion of natural seafood stocks, loss of species, soil erosion, energy shortages, freshwater depletion, depletion of photosynthetic capacity, toxic chemicals in the environment, invasive species, global warming, and the effects of population growth.

Box 9: People should learn to be more cognizant about what and how they consume while also thinking deeply about the variety of threats to their security.