**Consumerism – an Historical Perspective**

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**Production, consumption and status**

Vance Packard, in his book *The Status Seekers* argued that the use of consumer goods as status symbols was a deliberate strategy of advertisers, or ‘merchants of discontent’, who took advantage of the “upgrading urge” that people felt. The message that workers could improve their status through consumption was particularly aimed at people who had little chance of raising their status through their work because opportunities for promotion were slim.[[43]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_edn43" \o ") Employers sought to divert the dissatisfaction of workers with the nature of their work into a more personal dissatisfaction that could be fed with consumer goods: “offering mass produced visions of individualism by which people could extricate themselves from the mass.”[[44]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_edn44" \o ")

The advertiser offered workers the possibility of gaining social status through buying goods that were better than their neighbours. With the help of instalment plans and credit, they could purchase the signifiers of success even if they weren’t achieving that success in their workplace. This was not something that came naturally to working people who were, for the main part, resigned to their position in life. According to Packard “they need prodding and ‘educating’ to desire many of the traditionally higher-class products the mass merchandisers desire to move in such vast numbers, such as the electric rotating spits or gourmet foods.”[[45]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_edn45" \o ")

Car manufacturers, particularly, exploited people’s desire for status, spending “small fortunes exploring the status meaning of their product”. They found, for example that people in housing developments where all the houses looked similar, were most likely to leave their large new cars parked on the street in front of the house rather than in the garage where no-one would see them. Plymouth  advertisements pictured a family in front of their car saying “We’re not wealthy... we just look it!” Dodge advertisements featured a man saying to a Dodge car owner “Boy, you must be rich to own a car as big as this!” And Ford advertisements showed the back of one of their cars and stated “let the people behind you know you are ahead of them!”[[46]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_edn46" \o ")

Such advertising was so successful that people began diverting funds from other purchases into the purchase of a car that would enhance their status, and by the end of the 1950s Americans “were spending more of their total income on the family chariot than they were in financing their homestead, which housed the family and its car or cars.”[[47]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_edn47" \o ") Not to be outdone home builders and sellers ensured that the home became a status symbol that rivalled the motor car.

Chinoy observed that consumption provided automobile workers in the 1950s a way of rationalising their failure to advance in their work: “Advancement has come to mean the progressive accumulation of things as well as the increasing capacity to consume... If one manages to buy a new car, if each year sees a major addition to the household—a washing machine, a refrigerator, a new living-room suite, now probably a television set—then one is also getting ahead.”[[48]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_edn48" \o ") Rather than question the American Dream workers would either blame themselves for their failure to live up to it, or find other ways to interpret it.

Such trends were not confined to the US. The consumerism that proliferated in the US in the 1920s and 1930s, spread to other industrialised nations after the second world war, particularly in the 1950s.[[49]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_edn49" \o ") In  his book on the rise of a consumer society in Australia, Greg Whitwell said:

The ownership of certain sorts of consumer goods, each ranked according to brand names, came to be seen as guides to an individual’s income which in turn, so it is believed, said something about his or her inner worth. Consumer goods became external signs, used to give a sense of hierarchy by members of a society characterized by an emphasis on change and on social and geographical mobility.[[50]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_edn50" \o ")

In a British study of the working class in the 1950s Ferdynand Zweig found “a steep rise in acquisitive tendencies and pre-occupation with money in work attitudes.” There was far less difference between middle class and working class purchase of consumer durables (cars, white goods, electrical appliances) than previously and class self-identification had come to depend more on factors such as house ownership than type of work. In fact Zweig found workers impatient with questions about class. They were more interested in status as a way of organising the social spectrum.[[51]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_edn51" \o ")

Increased consumerism led to an increased emphasis on the importance of pay.  Many people work so as to earn the money to buy consumer goods and some measure of status that accompanies them. A European study by the Henley Centre in 1991 found that “better pay” was the priority for new jobs for 70 percent of those surveyed, compared with enjoyable work, which was a priority for 58 percent.[[52]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_edn52" \o ")

A US study found that those who believed “having lots of money” was “extremely important” had gone up to almost two thirds in 1986 from  less than half in 1977. It ranked higher than any other of goal in life.[[53]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_edn53" \o ") Americans born since 1963, those referred to as generation X, are more likely to agree that “The only really meaningful  measure of success is money” than any previous generation. They spend more money on stereos, mobile phones, beepers and cars than older people and are more likely to take a less interesting  job if it pays well.[[54]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_edn54" \o ")

Jimmy Carter, as President of the US noted that “Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns.”[[55]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_edn55" \o ") Consumption has become a more important source of self-identity and status than work for many people. Compton Advertising undertook a survey of public attitudes to the economic system in 1974 and found that two thirds of those surveyed identified their role in the economic system as that of “consumers and spenders of money” rather than workers or producers. This included one half of those in the labour force.[[56]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_edn56" \o ") Also more recent opinion surveys show that in countries like the US and Japan, “people increasingly measure success by the amount they consume.”[[57]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_edn57" \o ")

In a society where people don’t know each other very well, appearances are important and social status, though more securely attained through occupation, can be attained with strangers through consumption. When people are uprooted and move to the cities they are strangers to each other. Previously everyone knew one another's business and the status that should be accorded to each person. In an anonymous city a person can adopt a certain lifestyle, clothes, car that is higher up the status ladder than their occupation would indicate, particularly if they are willing to go into debt to do it. Consumption then becomes an indicator of achievement.[[58]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_edn58" \o ")

The desire to consume is often portrayed as a natural human characteristic that cannot be changed. However it is clear that populations have been manipulated into being avaricious consumers. What people really want, more than the multitude of goods on offer, is status and history has shown that the determinants of status can change. If we want to live in an ecologically sustainable society, then we need to award status to those who are happy with a basic level of comfort rather than those who accumulate possessions. If, as a community, we admired wisdom above wealth and compassion and cooperation above competition, we would be well on the way to undermining the motivation to consume.

Excerpted from Sharon Beder, [Selling the Work Ethic: From Puritan Pulpit to Corporate PR](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/work.html), Scribe, Melbourne, 2000.

[[43]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_ednref43" \o ") Vance Packard, *The Status Seekers: An Exploration of Class Behaviour in America* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1961), pp. 269-70.

[[44]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_ednref44" \o ") Andrew Hornery, ‘Family Pack aims for the children’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 September 1998, p. 45.

[[45]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_ednref45" \o ") Packard, note 84, p. 271.

[[46]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_ednref46" \o ") Ibid., pp. 273-4.

[[47]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_ednref47" \o ") Ibid., p. 274.

[[48]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_ednref48" \o ") Ely Chinoy, *Automobile Workers and the American Dream*, 2nd ed (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinios Press, 1992), p. 126.

[[49]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_ednref49" \o ") Stewart Lansley, *After the Gold Rush: The Trouble with Affluence: ‘Consumer Capitalism’ and the Way Forward* (London: Century Business Books, 1994), p. 85.

[[50]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_ednref50" \o ") Greg Whitwell, *Making the Market: The Rise of Consumer Society* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble Publishers, 1989), p. 7.

[[51]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_ednref51" \o ") Ferdynand Zweig, *The New Acquisitive Society* (Chichester: Barry Rose, 1976), pp. 15, 21-2, 26-7.

[[52]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_ednref52" \o ") Cited in Lansley, note 90, p. 136.

[[53]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_ednref53" \o ") Alan Thein Durning, *How Much is Enough: The Consumer Society and the Future of the Earth*, ed. Linda Starke, *Worldwatch Environmental Alert Series* (London: Earthscan, 1992), p. 34.

[[54]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_ednref54" \o ") Dan Zevin and Carolyn Edy, ‘Boom Time for Gen X’, *US News and World Report* (20 October 1997)

[[55]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_ednref55" \o ") Quoted in Thomas H. Naylor, William H. Willimon and Rolf Osterberg, *The Search for Meaning in the Workplace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 69.

[[56]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_ednref56" \o ") Compton Advertising, ‘National Survey on the American Economic System’, (New York: The Advertising Council, 1974), p. 17.

[[57]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_ednref57" \o ") Durning, note 94, p. 22.

[[58]](http://www.uow.edu.au/%7Esharonb/consumerism.html" \l "_ednref58" \o ") Bell, note 71, p. 68.