

Hedonistic Consumerism: Patterns of Consumption in Contemporary Capitalism

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Abstract

The post-Fordist accumulation regime has drifted toward hedonistic consumerism: a mix of highly unequal and burgeoning consumption. Since World War II, cultural and structural elements have led to a situation in which consumption, fostered by induced wants, far exceeds levels of basic need and tends to be monopolized by the wealthiest, both among and within nations. I suggest that a possible solution to these tensions may be found by applying Sen's notion of equality of opportunity to modern patterns of consumption.

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I. Markets, Consumption, and Consumerism

In this article, I argue that both Fordism and post-Fordism, understood as accumulation regimes¹ in the tradition of the regulation approach, have relied on consumerism to bolster consumption. In post-Fordism, this strategy has focused on the expansion of consumption for the wealthy, while marginalizing the poor. In the rest of this section, I introduce the key elements of my analysis; in section 2, I discuss the nature of consumerism, and focus on the U.S. example in section 3. I finish by looking at the contradictions of hedonistic consumerism, the latest variant of consumerism, and suggest that a possible solution is to be found in a pattern of consumption that is inspired by the concept of equality of capability to re-equilibrate the model that is currently in place (Sen 1980).

1. The regulation school recognizes that accumulation regimes are variably realized (according to institutional, cultural, and ideological specificities) in the modes of regulation of the various economies. The institutions of Italian Fordism, for example, were both different and lagged chronologically behind those of the U.S. model. While some underlying elements of the accumulation regime (mass production, increased consumption, high living wage in the manufacturing sector) remained much the same, others (like the role of the trade unions, of the banking system, and of the state) had indigenous character.

The modern consumer acts primarily within the market, which mainstream liberal economists describe as an arena bringing together actors wanting to purchase goods and services, and those wishing to sell them. Mediated through the relative abundance of and need for these commodities, a price is fixed and an exchange takes place. According to this model, the great strength of markets is that, in most cases, nobody *must* purchase a good they deem too expensive. Because the demand generates the offer, market exchanges are positive sum games. While this is an appealingly straightforward description, it is also an incomplete one. Markets are more than clearinghouses for goods and services; they frame exchange within specific socioinstitutional constructs—which necessarily embody power relations (Elliott 2000; Fligstein 2001; Weber 1922) that are continuously reconstituted and recast during the process of exchange itself, underscoring market processes—and marginalize alternative modes of exchange (Li 2001). Throughout this article, I define markets as socioeconomic loci, involving both ideational and material elements, where commodities are traded. Because market exchange is fundamentally a type of social exchange (Sen 1972; White 1981), it involves an element of socialization which is reflected in the mode of regulation that dominates a certain economy through the mediation of the political sphere (Boyer 2003: 4). As is the case with all social institutions, the market and the individuals engaged in economic exchange have a dynamic interrelation. Just as political, social, and economic market rules influence the decisions of individual actors, the actors can change the practice of market activity through their interaction, as the demand for organic foods and fair-trade commodities shows.

Hedonistic consumerism, the highly wasteful and discriminatory pattern of consumption that predominates in current capitalist models, is the latest evolution in the forms of modern capitalism. Both Georg Simmel (1900) and Max Weber (1981) had noted the innovative and dynamic nature of modern capitalism: it structured socioeconomic relations by radically breaking with traditional institutions and behaviors, and materially distinguished itself from its antecedents by providing mass rather than luxury goods (Weber 1981). Society became more individualistic, organic relations *à la* Durkheim faltered, and the money economy became central, permeating all social relations. The process of exchange became impersonal (Simmel 1900, 1903) and individuals were disembedded from traditional groups and networks (Polanyi 1944). At the same time as they were alienated, though human beings had an unprecedented opportunity to express their individuality, as capitalist opportunities for consumption created an almost inexhaustible matrix of choices (Sassatelli 2000).

This dovetailed with the technological advances of industrialization, offering capitalist economies the synergy of industrial production and large-scale, sustained consumption. Capitalism became “addicted” to both large-scale production and large-scale consumption, but adapted its modes of production and consumption to the specific social, technological, and economic limitations it faced. During the Fordist period, consumerism was linked to mass production and a relatively generous system of income redistribution that allowed expenditures from the masses to sustain this economic model. As the post-Fordist era replaces the Fordist one, we witness the transition from standardized mass production to batch production and the creation of differentiated products for niche markets. Stable labor relations are replaced by flexible ones (Boltanski and

Chiapello 1999) and are intensified, leading to harsher and more precarious working conditions (Shipman 2001).²

In the realm of consumption, hedonistic consumerism has replaced traditional consumerism and these processes are being pushed to increasingly unequal and extreme lengths as the rather egalitarian Fordist arrangements are abandoned. Sustained consumption, ever more central to capital reproduction, is supported and encouraged in the higher income quintiles to a point that Simmel's (1903) matrix of choice becomes the core of social relations and self-image (Baudrillard 1994, 1998; Bauman 2001). This occurs even as ever larger numbers of people are excluded from the market or pushed to its margins in terms of their ability to consume by an increasingly skewed distribution of income. This, I argue, amounts to restricting the "capabilities" of all but high-income individuals (Sen 1985, 1999).

The French regulation school postulates that there are two fundamental levels of economic activity. At the global level is the *accumulation regime*, the dynamic structure of the productive system, evolving in a particular direction and linked to specific technological factors. These include

The evolution of the organisation of production and of the workers' relationship to means of production, . . . the time horizon for the valorisation of capital, . . . [a] distribution of value that allows the reproduction and development of the different social classes or groups, . . . [a] composition of social demand that corresponds to the tendencies in the development of productive capacity, and . . . [a] manner of articulation with [relevant] non-capitalist economic forms. (Boyer and Saillard 2002: 335)

At the second level are the *modes of regulation*; different for each economy, they mediate between the needs of the capitalist system to achieve a sustainable level of capital accumulation and the needs of society to maintain a viable and coherent structure. Their content depends on the historical and material characteristics of nations or groups of nations and follows the logical and hierarchical elements of the specific capitalist model (Boyer 2000, 2001). Beginning in the 1970s, the Fordist accumulation regime began to be replaced by the post-Fordist one. This transition is a critical factor in the shaping of the socioeconomic structure of our societies.

Fordism had begun to congeal around its production phase; the assembly line, reliance on economies of scale, and automation were necessary elements for the emergence of the new accumulation regime, which produced large amounts of standardized goods at comparatively low cost. Still, the new accumulation regime needed a mode of consumption to match this emergent mode of production and make long-term capitalist accumulation viable. O'Hara (2003: 21) notes that "[t]he Fordist regime of accumulation in the 1950s

2. I am not suggesting that there is a clearly identifiable "curtain call" for the Fordist model; in fact, there is evidence that this is not so (Pietrykowski 1999). Economic transitions are much messier and uneven affairs than theoretical approaches often allow for. Technologies, accounting methods, industrial processes, and credit systems depend on too many factors to have anything similar to a timed, homogeneous diffusion. It is much more likely that the models will coexist for quite a while. What I wish to stress is that after the Fordist model ceased to be dominant, some new processes emerged that are relevant to our study, and that this is especially true of the United States.

and 1960s thus constituted both a sustainable production system or style and a mode of regulation of consumption, not simply in the United States but through all the major capitalist economies.” This model hinged, I argue, on consumerism and diffused consumption.

The post-Fordist system is still developing and has not yet achieved a final structure. Profit margins in traditional industrial sectors declined, while increasing for the speculative and financial ones, especially in the United States. New modes of production have been emerging, variably related to new technologies and information flows. The real contribution of these new elements is at the center of a complex debate (Barnett 2000; Cantwell and Santangelo 2000; O’Hara 2003; Papadakis 2000; Phillips 2000; Tabb 2001; Yates 2001), but the economic data show a trend toward increasing aggregate private consumption, often financed through private debt (O’Hara 2003: 31), and the elimination of many of the redistributive mechanisms that underpinned consumption in the 1950s and 1960s (O’Hara 2003: 34). In general, nations are less egalitarian in their income distribution and in their patterns of consumption than they were during the Fordist period, while aggregate private consumption absorbs a higher amount of goods and services.

Beginning with Fordism, we have a transition from consumption to consumerism. The need for a viable rate of accumulation demands that the phases of production and consumption be integrated. The modes of this integration, the historical and material realities of class relations, are the object of class struggle, which remains inherent in capitalist relations whether or not class discourses are evident (Meiksins-Wood 1998; Thompson 1978). The mode of integration of the production and consumption phases of the capitalist economy is a key moment of the system of class relations because it reflects and influences the material conditions of classes. Arguably the greatest success of modern capitalism has been its capacity to adjust its mode of integration so that the material relations among classes were progressively obscured by an increased fragmentation of the working class and diluted by consumerist and individualist practices.

Fordism and post-Fordism are qualitatively different from previous capitalist accumulation regimes because within them is articulated the obfuscation of class struggle in favor of a focus on self-referencing consumerism. During the Fordist period, the act of consuming becomes the paramount mode of economic interaction and its nature becomes self-referencing; the satisfaction of desires, many of them induced, becomes the sufficient cause for consumption. This does not mean that consumers, in and of themselves, slavishly respond to the inducements of marketers, or that they are unable to articulate their experiences of consumption in a sophisticated way. In fact, shoppers were offered (and required) increasingly differentiated products and buying experiences to foster consumerist attitudes (Binkley 2004; Bowlby 1985; Breazele 1994; Cohen 1998; Fine and Leopold 1990; Mackay 1997). It means that the goals of consumption change: sophisticated, acute consumers can engage in self-referencing consumerist practices just as often as unsophisticated ones. It is not the ability of consumers to negotiate a positive consumption experience that is in question, nor is their capacity to choose what to purchase. The meaning and nature of consumption changed with the emergence of an increasingly hegemonic discourse that equated individual expression with material possession (Ritzer 2004; Schor 1996; Scitovsky 1976).

Fordism provided affordable goods through economies of scale; solved the related problem of workers’ disposable income by increasing wages to support diffused consumption, trading off high profit margins for consistent ones (Boyer and Orléan 1991); and saw the emergence of a culture of consumerism. When, in the early 1970s, because of the saturation

Table 1
Modes of Consumption of Modern Capitalism

Accumulation Regime	Mode of Regulation	Mode of Consumption
Fordism	<i>Fordist/Keynesian</i> Mass production; Taylorism; high wages; national markets; automatization; stable employment relation	<i>Diffused/Egalitarian</i> Consumerism; relatively egalitarian consumption from the masses; advertisement; commodification; high levels of public debt
Post-Fordism	<i>Post-Fordist/Neoliberal</i> Flexibilization of work and wage relations; international markets; low wages; just-in-time and batch production	<i>Segmented/Unequal</i> Hedonistic consumerism; unequal consumption; high reliance on advertisement; increased levels of commodification; high levels of private debt

of national markets and of the relative ageing of its technology base, the effectiveness of Fordist production models entered a phase of decline, new arrangements began to emerge both in the production and consumption spheres. While consumerism has been at the root of both Fordism and post-Fordism, and as such was incorporated in the modes of regulation of both, it has undergone an important transformation since the early 1970s as consumption became increasingly self-referencing, more segmented, and unequal. Consumerism was, in short, transformed into hedonistic consumerism.

Today hedonistic consumerism is one of the key factors underpinning the post-Fordist mode of consumption. Consumerism is nothing new, and was well developed even during the Fordist period. Their Durning (1992) cites Victor Lebow's famous remark about American consumption patterns:

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. (Victor Lebow 1955, cited in Their Durning 1992: 21-22)

Wells (1972: 54) noted that the hedonistic approach was "perhaps becoming the dominant pattern in the West. The fruits of labor are to be consumed as soon as possible or even in advance, and production is geared to consumerist products." He also made the argument that the media were a crucial part of the consumption machine and that both the capitalist system and socioeconomic attitudes should be analyzed through the lens of consumerism. He proposed a fourfold ideal-typical categorization of societies along their production/consumption patterns, defining consumerism as "the increase in consumption in material culture" of nations (Wells 1972: 43). This "material culture" embraces manufacture, marketing, imports, and increasingly services. Producerism is the "increased mobilization of a society's population to work, and to work more productively in the non-consumerist sector of the economy" (Wells 1972: 45). This process increases the level of production and generates profit for reinvestment. In Wells's terms, hedonistic consumption reflects high producerism and high consumerism.

While arguably developed to explain Fordism, Wells's notion of hedonistic society also fits the post-Fordist accumulation regime's consumerist patterns, but it is only one factor. Consumerist patterns in post-Fordism reflect excessive consumption (hooks 2000), often superimpose alien consumption patterns onto specific societies (Norberg-Hodge 1999) extending the notion of commodification to incorporate more social elements,³ and determine ever larger differences between those who can afford to consume and those who cannot. At the same time, the redistribution of income has changed, marginalizing the poor as their relative share of income has declined. Both factors must be taken into account to explain the post-Fordist mode of consumption.

In this article, I use aggregate consumption figures; this type of data tends to hide the specificity of "market segments" and "target markets." While I recognize this as a limitation on the depth of the analysis, here I am interested in assessing the historical trends of consumption and income and I believe aggregate data to be more useful in this respect.

Differentials in incomes and consumption occur both within and among nations. Not only do developed countries tend to consume an inordinate amount of world GDP, but within countries themselves consumption is also highly unequal. One question that confronts all Marxian analysis is the role of class in connection to socioeconomic phenomena. It has been increasingly difficult to operationalize the concept of class itself (Clark and Lipset 2004; Meiksins-Wood 1998) in a political context that confuses policy homogeneity with the end of ideology. The classic twentieth-century indicators of class (voting for left-wing parties, trade union membership, and size of the industrial working class) seem to have lost at least part of their analytical edge. Nonetheless, the material consequences of the power relations that structure socioeconomic systems remain evident. The distribution of relative incomes, wealth, and consumption remains the most powerful signifier of material hierarchy. Given that the primary goal of Marxian analysis is to point out the internal contradictions of specific socioeconomic arrangements, no more glaring indicator than this can be found to direct our analysis.

There is no doubt that both GDP per capita (Maddison 2003) and personal consumption have increased in the past decades (Osberg and Sharpe 2002).

Furthermore, levels of consumption of both primary and consumer goods and services increased quite dramatically (OECD 2002, 2004), showing little sign of slowing down, but this same consumption has a strongly unequal nature, with the rich consuming enormously more than the poor do. Income is highly concentrated in the so-called developed world. The richest 5 percent of the world's population has 114 times the income of the poorest 5 percent, with the richest 1 percent receiving the same income as the poorest 57 percent. In the United States, the top 25 million earners have an income comparable to what 2 billion of the world's poorest people receive (Milanovic 2002: 51–92). Below, I use the GINI index⁴ to show the relative distribution of incomes. While some domestic GINI values are quite skewed, as with Brazil (0.59), the overall index for world income distribution (0.66) is the most unequal (UNDP 2003).

The richest 20 percent of world population has an absolute grip on consumption and ownership. Consider the following two tables highlighting the distribution of specific goods and services, and of some macro-economic indicators.

3. Commodification is one of the elements underpinning consumerism; the extension of commodity status to an ever-expanding number of objects is the prerequisite for a consumerist attitude.

4. The GINI coefficient measures income inequality on a scale from 0 (indicating perfect equality) to 1 (indicating complete inequality).

Table 2

Personal Consumption Per Capita, Select Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Countries

Nation	1960	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2001
Australia	\$6,358	\$8,389	\$9,343	\$10,129	\$11,000	\$11,738	\$12,827	\$15,078
Canada	\$5,943	\$7,634	\$9,521	\$11,124	\$11,753	\$12,884	\$12,989	\$14,969
Germany	\$4,800	\$7,245	\$8,374	\$9,286	\$9,707	\$11,293	\$12,184	\$13,342
Norway	\$4,744	\$6,310	\$7,389	\$9,165	\$10,491	\$10,489	\$11,605	\$13,847
Sweden	\$5,842	\$7,853	\$8,701	\$9,108	\$9,354	\$10,447	\$10,074	\$11,705
United Kingdom	\$5,644	\$6,698	\$7,522	\$8,264	\$9,228	\$11,472	\$12,206	\$15,398
United States	\$8,836	\$11,680	\$12,775	\$13,724	\$15,679	\$17,519	\$18,888	\$21,833

Note: All figures in 1995 United States \$.

Source: Centre for the Study of Living Standards (CSLS) Index of Economic Well-Being [www.csls.ca].

Table 3

Measures of Inequality within Nations

HDI Rank	Survey Year	Share of	Share of	Inequality	Inequality	Inequality Measures GINI Index \times 100	
		Income or Consumption (%)—Poorest 10%	Income or Consumption (%)—Richest 10%	Ratio of Richest 10% to Poorest 10%	Ratio of Richest 20% to Poorest 20%		
1	Norway	2000	3.9	23.4	6.1	3.9	25.8
2	Sweden	2000	3.6	22.2	6.2	4.0	25.0
4	Canada	1998	2.5	25	10.1	5.8	33.1
8	United States	2000	1.9	29.9	15.9	8.4	40.8
9	Japan	1993	4.8	21.7	4.5	3.4	24.9
12	United Kingdom	1999	2.1	28.5	13.8	7.2	36.0
19	Germany	2000	3.2	22.1	6.9	4.3	28.3
53	Mexico	2000	1.0	43.1	45.0	19.3	54.6
72	Brazil	1998	0.5	46.7	85.0	31.5	59.1
94	China	2001	1.8	33.1	18.4	10.7	44.7
127	India	1999/2000	3.9	27.4	7.0	4.7	32.5

Note: Values of China and India are based on a survey of consumption, for all others on a survey of income.

Source: United Nations Development Program Human Development Index (HDI) Statistics.

The true measure of how skewed this distribution is rests with the fact that 80 percent of world population shared only 14 percent of the world total private consumption.

The recent trend across Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations is toward an increased polarization of income distribution as measured by the GINI index.

Income enables individuals in a market economy to consume. Issues of consumption are often framed within a discussion regarding the divide between needs and wants. This is a philosophically and practically complex debate (Doyal and Gough 1991; Maslow 1987)

Table 4
Measures of Global Inequality—1

	Consumed/Owned by the Wealthiest 20% of World Population (%)	Consumed/Owned by the Poorest 20% of World Population (%)
Meat and fish	45	5.0
Energy	58	4.0
Telephone lines	74	1.5
Paper	84	1.1
Vehicles	87	1.0
Private consumption	86	1.3

Source: United Nations Development Program (UNDP; 1998).

Table 5
Measures of Global Inequality—2

	Shares of world GDP (%)	Shares of exports of goods and services (%)	Shares of foreign direct investment (%)	Shares of Internet users (%)
Richest 20%	86	82	68	93.3
Middle 60%	13	17	31	6.5
Poorest 20%	1	1	1	0.1

Source: United Nations Development Program (UNDP; 1998).

Table 6
Historical Trends in GINI Index Values

Nation	1960	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2001
Australia	.304	.304	.304	.304	.311	.329	.338	.338
Canada	.359	.359	.320	.310	.307	.304	.303	.324
Germany	.303	.303	.282	.258	.284	.351	.307	.307
Norway	.248	.248	.248	.250	.257	.256	.266	.266
Sweden	.240	.240	.240	.214	.232	.250	.253	.253
United Kingdom	.290	.290	.290	.290	.308	.332	.343	.343

Source: Centre for the Study of Living Standards (CSLS) Index of Economic Well-Being [www.cscls.ca].

that I am not going to tackle here. However, I wish to use a concept that will allow for both socioeconomic differences and a dynamic concept of human development. Amartya Sen's capabilities approach (Sen 1985, 1990, 1993, 2002) captures these requirements. In "Equality of What?" Sen (1980: 219) defines capabilities as an extension of the Rawlsian concept of equality in a non-fetishist direction, while retaining a cultural-dependent context. In short, capabilities refer to the ability that individuals have to achieve certain goals, to be the person they wish to be, and to lead the life they desire to lead. This approach distances itself from those that focus on the provision of means, stressing instead human activity and choice. The notion of capabilities has been criticized (Pogge 2003) and modified

(Nussbaum 2000), but remains one of the more flexible and culturally respectful models of equality.

I do not suggest that we apply a single measure of consumption irrespectively of differences; rather, measures of consumption should be tempered by an outlook inspired by Sen's principle. Consumption is ethically acceptable if it is conducted in a manner that ensures that the largest possible number of human beings is offered equality of capability. This is obviously not the case today: rich countries consume more than poor ones, and within individual countries the affluent minority consumes more than the poor do; this consumption is continuously fostered and little is done to minimize its ecological footprint. A level of consumption aimed at the healthy development of the physical, intellectual, and emotional spheres of human beings should be an inherent right for everyone. The same does not hold for *consumerism*: accepting that it is through the possession and/or consumption of increasing quantities of commodities that human beings can achieve self-development and self-fulfillment. This is a non-referential process, as Bauman notes: "Consumer society and consumerisms *are not about satisfying needs* not even the more sublime needs of identification or self-assurance as to the degree of 'adequacy.' The *spiritus movens* of consumer activity is not a set of articulated, let alone fixed, needs, but desire" (2001: 13). Even when rejecting the notion that capitalist society dictates consumption patterns through consumerist cultural models, while propagandizing "free consumer choice" (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972; Marcuse 1964), and even when recognizing that advertising does not determine consumer behavior, but only helps to shape consumer attitudes (Bauman 2001; Ohmann 1996), the question remains of why so much of societal interaction is expressed through consumption and why consumption has become substantially more unequal in the recent past.

In the section that follows, I argue that this depends on the transition between Fordist and post-Fordist accumulation regimes; the development of modes of production and modes of consumption in the latter that do not require broad, egalitarian consumption to sustain the necessary rate of capital accumulation; and the establishment of an hegemonic neoliberal discourse.

2. Consumerism, the Spirit of Modern Capitalism

Like any other system of social relations, capitalism is based on, and functions according to, a set of values, cultural elements, social characteristics, and material realities. Markets predate the modern capitalist organization and, while modern economists strive to convince their public that the market system as it exists today is the apex of a technical evolution in the matter of economic interaction, there is evidence that this is rather a historically specific organizational standard of such an interaction (Jessop 2002a).

Consider, for example, the gift economy (Godelier 1999; Lévi-Strauss 1987; Mauss 1969), which relied on magical and religious elements to create bonds among economic actors and couched many of these exchanges in terms of reciprocal obligations. This established a cycle of exchanges where gifts could assume the value of wages, contracts, or donations, reflecting the material realities of the Melanesian economy where goods were produced or harvested at different times in different regions, and, therefore, could not have easily been bartered simultaneously. This system reflected the sociocultural background of

these societies and solved some of the problems related to economic exchange. In fact, it would not be inappropriate to see gift giving, at least in part, as a way to reduce negative externalities. By linking economic exchange to the realm of religion and magic, ancient Melanesian societies effectively placed material interactions in a metaphysical setting, reducing the risk otherwise inherent in purely economic transactions.

Capitalism is also a “growth only” model, at least in its current incarnation. It is so important to show continued profit and growth that a negative connotation is attached to simply maintaining the economic *status quo*: we call it stagnation. The whole system is premised on increasing levels of consumption; this can be achieved by increasing the number of consumers, by increasing the levels of consumption, or by combining the two. In advanced capitalist societies, self-referencing consumption has become the norm, at least for those better off financially. Within the context of increasingly utilitarian and individualist frameworks, the notion of consumption has grown increasingly more insular and self-centered. Consumerism may well have extended the number of goods for which the demand is elastic by attaching social status attributes to these goods: certain clothing and accessories, certain foods and drinks are now charged with particular relevance and their frequent (and often time-limited) consumption is linked to status and social awareness, as with fashion. The satisfaction of consumerist trends has led to grossly unbalanced resource consumption, and the individualism that permeates the economic model underpinning these trends has denied the relevance of relative income and consumption inequality both within and among nations. The concept of equality of capabilities appears to be incompatible with highly individualistic socioeconomic models.

As human beings increasingly behaved as consumers, their activity became the subject of social analyses (Gabriel and Lang 1995; Pietrykowski 1994; Ritzer 2004; Slater 1997). The theoretical approaches that have emerged since have mostly been occupied with explaining the strong aggregate increase of consumption that both rich and developing societies have experienced. They did so by tackling the nature of market relations among individuals, capitalist actors, and the State. Simmel framed consumers in a modern aesthetic and left them, by and large, free to choose what they consumed (Simmel 1903, 1971 [1904]). While an overly optimistic Marshal McLuhan (1951) saw little to decry in mass consumption, the Frankfurt school identified consumers with mindless purchasers in the hands of the marketer (Adorno and Horkheimer 1972; Marcuse 1964). Others saw them as held in thrall by dependence effects (Galbraith 1958), a model that is deterministic and limited (Baudrillard 1998; Reisman 1961), or locked in a dialectic of continuous enchantment and boredom (Debord 1994 [1967]; Vaneigem 1984 [1967]).

The self-referencing wants of hedonistic consumerism are relentlessly stimulated and consistently excited. Contemporary society is constructed on inherently unstable and uncertain grounds, but

The consumer market has achieved an uncanny feat of reconciling and blending two mutually contradictory values which are both avidly sought by members of an individualized society: it offers, in one package deal, the badly missed assurance and the keenly desired yet elsewhere unavailable guarantee of goods-replacement, even a money-back guarantee, in case the presently sought assurance wears off and a new assurance needs to be put in its place. The consumer market promises, and delivers, the reassuring certainty of the present without the frightening prospect of mortgaging the future. (Bauman 2001: 24)

The nuanced model of consumption activity (re)appeared with postmodern analysis (Pietrykowski 1994, 1995) and granted consumers an interactive, diverse, generally sophisticated, and autonomous approach to consumption (Brown 1998; Featherstone 1991; Goulding 2003; Hirschman and Holbrook 1992; Jameson 1996). This work is perhaps an extension of the Simmelian notion of modern consumption as expression of individuality within the bounds of modern capitalist structures, an all-encompassing expression of modernity through aesthetics (Guillet de Monthoux and Strati 2002), certainly echoing some of the elements of the ephemeral and diverse nature of consumption described by Debord (1994 [1967]). This has been a common theoretical approach to the study of consumerism over the past thirty years. Colin Campbell (1987, 1991, 1994) notes that consumption is turning into hedonistic consumerism (his term too) because it is based on the psychological process of daydreaming. After biological desires are fulfilled, consumers must consistently reinvent new desires to keep consuming. A self-replicating cycle of dream, desire, acquisition, and disillusionment is then established within which the search for novel products is really a proxy for the quest for psychological satisfaction of the desire. Because of the nature of the process, disillusionment sets in after consumption, and new products must be found and consumed. Tibor Scitovsky (1976: 325) had already noted as much: "We must acquire the consumption skills that will give us access to society's accumulated stock of past novelty as a source of stimulation." Of course this was not necessarily the key to happiness; on the contrary, Scitovsky dubbed us *the joyless economy*, a point still arguable of late (Sen 1996).

The self-referencing and competitive nature of consumerism is highlighted by Robert Frank's notion of positional competition (Frank 1985), according to which consumption is not important relatively to the absolute level at which we consume but rather as a reference to the consumption of others. Such positional competition is premised on the overproduction (and consumption) of private consumer goods at the expense of savings, the environment, and leisure time (Schor 1996, 1998).

Current economic practice focuses on fostering self-referencing consumption and on supporting this consumption with an increasingly sophisticated and ubiquitous marketing and advertisement effort. At the same time, income distribution has followed a long-term trend toward increasing inequality. This is especially clear in the American case, but is not unique to it. The cultural element of consumerism is central to the process. The creation of constructed needs is reflected not only in the elements of planned obsolescence, but also in the generation of specific sociopsychological traits. These range from the illusion of diversity that thinly veils the mass uniformity of modern commercialization efforts (McLuhan 1951), to the postmodern model premised on the colonization of reality by "simulacra"; the ultimate *reductio ad consumptium* of everything around us, flanked by the progressive disappearance of meaning (Baudrillard 1994). This system, Baudrillard argues, is hegemonic in that "Our society thinks itself and speaks itself as a consumer society. As much as it consumes anything, it consumes itself as consumer society, as idea. Advertising is the triumphal paean to that idea" (Baudrillard 1998: 193).

Consumption fulfills more than the simple "needs" of the consumer. Certain goods have highly symbolic value; possession and/or use of certain objects add to their use value a powerful status-defining element. These extra-utilitarian values are socially defined and, therefore, subject to constant evolution. It should be our goal to assess if there are material relations underlying consumption patterns. Whether the reason for consumption be

emulation, indulgence, self-expression, or a mix of the three (Fischer 2003), our society looks increasingly to consumer goods as the accepted form of expressing “individual” choice, determining status, showcasing wealth, and satisfying psychological compulsions.

3. Trends in Consumption and the U.S. Case

Global capitalism is being sustained by the concomitant activity of multinational corporations, nation-states, international organizations, and individual consumers (Burgess 2001; Witt 2001). It hinges on the geographical fragmentation of production, the emerging post-Fordist arrangements,⁵ the spatio-temporal fixes of globalization (Jessop 1999, 2000, 2002b), and consumerism. These elements are closely connected, but consumerism is particularly important because it offers a ready outlet for increased consumption and, therefore, a way of achieving continued profits. The push toward a consumerist attitude has both temporal and geographical dynamics. It established itself in the United States in the period after World War II and in the early 1950s, mainly as an effect of the Fordist industrial model, which had become paramount in the period between the two world wars.

It then spread to Western Europe and Japan, as their industrial and economic bases began to be rebuilt under the U.S. reconstruction plans that followed the defeat of the axis. With U.S. aid and grants came the standard set-up of industrial mass production and, even if the economic models that actually emerged from this intervention were not mere reproductions of the U.S. one, but nationally specific evolutions (Boyer 2003; Lipietz 1991; Quémia 2001), mass production was established to support them. The notion of stimulating demand (in fact increasing consumption) to deal with economic downturns was at the core of Keynesian policy. It is not at all surprising, then, that as supply-side intervention became the norm for these economies, the call for mass consumption coming from the private sector mirrored the spending sprees of governments.⁶

Patterns of consumerism progressively deepened and expanded; increasingly, commodities are being turned into induced wants and their rate of replacement becomes ever faster. The need to consume to belong, which is well established in affluent communities, is now beginning to take hold in the rest of the world (Burke 1996; Lu 2001; Staab 1997; Zhao 1996). Probably for the first time in history, the economic sphere is on its way to become predominant in defining the tenets of human society. Its narrative is hegemonic in the Gramscian sense: some of its premises are so commonly accepted that the discourse they underpin not only is seldom challenged, but it often offers the only organizational and legitimizing basis for social structures. Notions like the primacy of the market, the need for nation-states to be “competitive,” the relevance of participation in the market as an indicator of social participation, and the role of consumption in the assessment of self-worth, have become so widely diffused and are so ingrained in the subconscious and conscious elements of the social and political organization of the market that very few of those who

5. With post-Fordism comes not only the abandonment of much of the tools aimed at securing social peace in the capitalist system, but also the fragmentation of the working class in its classical Marxist definition, a decreasing amount of free time for those who actually work and more occasions and incentives to consume. On the other hand, high levels of consumption remain a fundamental element of the economic system.

6. It is noteworthy that while neoliberal economics has singled out state debt as a major hindrance to economic stability and development in the current system, it has little to say about consumer debt.

accept the validity of the market as an allocative mechanism dispute them on other levels (Beabout and Echeverria 2002; Morgan 2003).

The high levels of consumption fostered by hedonistic consumerism lead to both an ecological and an economic crisis. From the ecological point of view, it imposes an ever-increasing strain on resource stocks and ecosystems around the world (Daly 1997). The issue of how much pressure can be sustained by the environment is unlikely to yield a simple answer (Crocker and Linden 1998; Ger 1997; Mazur 1994; McKibben 1999) and escapes a simple categorization (Appadurai 1986; Fine 1995; Wilk 1996). The general trends, though, should be enough to create, if not apprehension, at least curiosity regarding the long-term effects of consumerism.

The United States is one of the most affluent societies and one of the most active and dynamic economies in the world. The question is then, how has the United States experienced a pattern of hedonistic consumerism? While the analysis presented here is not complete, it provides an interesting picture. American capitalism shows increased disparities in relative income shares between the rich and the poor, with the usual gender and race differences still as important proxies for poverty and lower income (Census 1998; Pryor 2002). Widening income inequality is evident from GINI index measurements: while inequality tended to diminish between the late 1940s and the late 1960s, it has since followed an obviously upward trend.

Table 7 shows the changes in the historical distribution of household income by quintiles between 1967 and 2002. Relative income distribution became increasingly skewed during this period and the only group that is better off today (in terms of income share) than it was in 1967 is the richest 20 percent of Americans, whose share of total income went from 43.8 percent in 1967 to 49.7 percent in 2002.

Even in the top quintile, gains have been higher for the richest. In 2002, the best-off 20 percent of the American population had seen its share of aggregate income rise by 13.4 percent from its 1967 level; for the top 5 percent it had increased by 24 percent. The lower three quintiles of the U.S. population all showed significant losses: the share of the poorest 20 percent dropped by 12.5 percent (from 4 percent to 3.5 percent of all U.S. income). For this group even a minor redistributive increase would be significant. Bringing its share of U.S. income to 5 percent of total income would mean an increase in income for this quintile of almost 40 percent. Families on income assistance see most of their income consumed by housing, food, and transportation expenses (Passero 1996; Tan 2000), while being able to save little if anything (Ferguson 2004). This leaves them with two unequally constricting choices: spend using expensive credit, or further reduce spending.

In addition to a clear historical trend toward progressively more unequal distribution of income, consumption has become increasingly more self-referencing as marketing strategies divide the consumer base in ever more sophisticated target markets organized by mixes of gender, income, status, age, and ethnic characteristics. Every group then receives specific marketing messages that vie for that segment's disposable income. Advertisement expenses are highly concentrated in the most developed countries, with eight nations (United States, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the U.K., and Japan) accounting for 75 percent of its total in 2003.

Advertising expenditures amounted to U.S. \$344B in 2003 and are estimated to go beyond U.S. \$400B by 2006. It grew in quite a sustained manner (averaging 2.5 percent

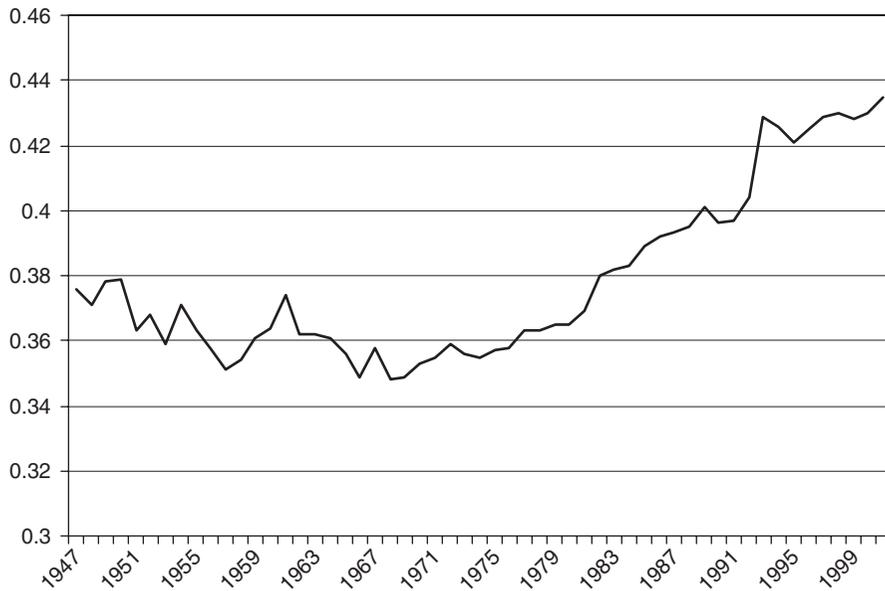


Figure 1.
GINI Index for U.S. Families 1947-2003
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, various publications.

Table 7
United States Shares of Income by Quintiles 1967-2002

Shares of Household Income by Quintiles

	1967	1970	1975	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2002
Lowest quintile	4.0	4.1	4.4	4.3	4.0	3.9	3.7	3.6	3.5
Second quintile	10.8	10.8	10.4	10.3	9.7	9.6	9.1	8.9	8.8
Third quintile	17.3	17.4	17.1	16.9	16.3	15.9	15.2	14.8	14.8
Fourth quintile	24.2	24.5	24.8	24.9	24.6	24.0	23.3	23.0	23.3
Highest quintile	43.8	43.3	43.3	43.7	45.3	46.6	48.7	49.8	49.7

Source: DeNavas-Walt et al. (2003).

since the 1990s), peaking in North America in the late 1990s with a rate of growth beyond 5 percent. Advertising is not simply more expensive, it is more ubiquitous: in 1990 in the United States there were over 171 million pages of advertising distributed over 164 magazines; by 1999 these had increased to 255 million pages, over 238 magazines (ZenithOptimedia Group Limited 2004).

The data suggest that people living in poverty or close to it are being marginalized in terms of their ability to consume. It is difficult to establish a link in this area but some indications can be found. Passero (1996) and Tan (2000) analyzed the consumption patterns of families receiving public assistance in the recent past, and from their data the percentage of the average annual expenditures devoted to some key indicators, like housing and health care, is shown to absorb larger portions of the family expenditure. The question is, though,

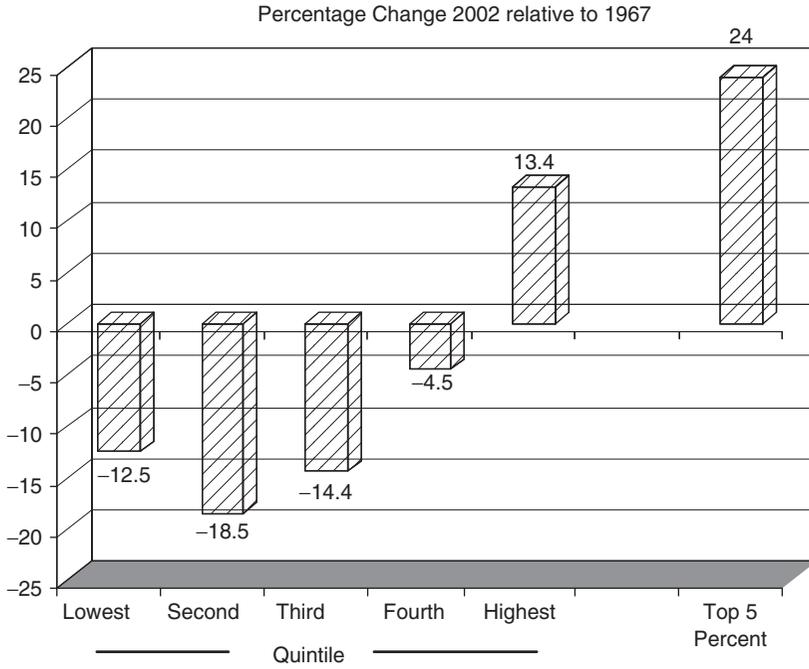


Figure 2.
 Changes in Share of Aggregate Income for U.S. Households: 1967-2002
 Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, various issues.

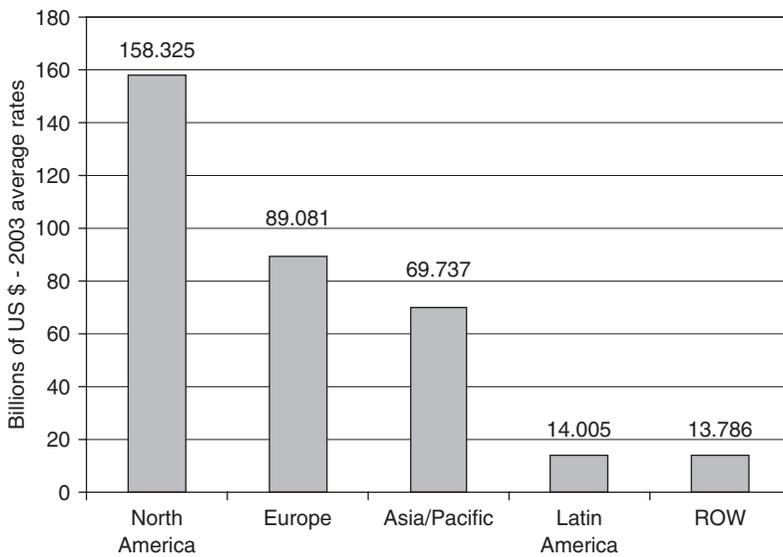


Figure 3.
 World Advertisement Expenses—2003
 Source: ZenithOptimedia Ground Limited 2004.

Table 8
Consumer Price Indexes (CPI-U) by Select Major Groups

Year	All Items	Medical Care	Food	Shelter
1980	82.4	74.9	86.8	81.0
1990	130.7	162.8	132.4	140.0
1995	152.4	220.5	148.4	165.7
2000	172.2	260.8	167.8	193.4
2003	184.0	297.1	180.0	213.1

Source: Table 706. United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. 1982-1984 = 100.

Table 9
Percentage of Average Annual Consumption, Select Major Groups

Year	Food	Health Care	Shelter
1984	16.12	5.89	18.94
1990	18.60	7.84	18.18
1995	17.05	7.52	21.52
2000	14.90	8.19	20.82
2003	17.19	7.78	22.01

Source: United States Bureau of Labor Statistics.

what does that mean for these people: how are they being affected by the changing economic situation? A full answer to these questions would require much more space than it is allowed here, but a quick reference can be made by looking at the variations in the average annual expenditures of the bottom quintile of income earners on a larger scale than Passero (1996) and Tan (2000) did, and at the changes that the Consumer Price Index (CPI) has undergone in the past twenty-five years.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that between 1984 and 2003 the average annual expenditures for the bottom quintile of income earners in the United States went from \$10,894 to \$18,492. If we make 1984 the base year (1984=100) this represents an increase to 169.7 for 2003, still well below any of the CPI increases noted above. Over time the lowest quintile of income earners in the United States has also seen some of the average amount of their annual expenditures increase for those major groups we may call “needs.”

Most other major groups have remained relatively stable, or shown a slight downward trend, with the exception of transportation, which fell from 18.10 percent of annual average expenditures in 1984, to 15.46 percent in 2003.

A relative large increase in basic needs' expenditures (food, shelter, and health care) would probably signify either less or lower quality consumption in the other areas. Is this the effect of post-Fordist economic structures? Once again, it is difficult to say with certainty, but some reflections can be put forward at this point. First of all, the flexibilization and precariousness of labor relations and the generalized downward pressure on unskilled labor wages has been felt the most at the lower end of the workforce, even as income distribution has become increasingly skewed across the whole social spectrum. The changes toward a financial rather than industrial-based mode of regulation (Boyer 2000; O'Hara 2002, 2003), the increased social and economic relevance of what Reich (1991) called “symbolic analysts,” and the increasing purchase of simplistic analyses like Friedman's

(2005) *The World is Flat*, all contribute to the blossoming of a specific sociopolitical and economic climate that is marginalizing those who do not fit within its strict parameters.

The politically conservative social values that have been the handmaiden of so much neoliberal economic policy in the past three decades have pushed toward a more individualistic and less solidarity-based approach to fighting poverty. The poor have been caught in this material and ideological vise. While still being pressured to consume (Cotton 1990), they have been increasingly spending on needs (housing, food, and health care), just as the CPI indexes of these consumption groups have been increasing faster than the income of low-income consumers.

The progress of post-Fordism, the flexibilization of wage and work relations, the reduction of industrial wages and employment opportunities (at least for the less skilled industrial workers), the increased relevance of the financial sector in the creation of wealth and in determining who the high income earners are, constitute the material premises of the emergence of hedonistic consumerism. From them follow the segmentation of the earning capacities of the population, with the emergence of a progressively more unequal distribution of income that has favored the richest. These patterns are closely connected with the continuous unbalancing of the savings/consumption ratio, and with the increased reliance on private debt to sustain private consumption. These features exist along with the continued pressure to consume, the increasing percentages of expenditures that low-income earners have devoted to necessities (food, shelter, and health care), and the sharp decline in public assistance figures since the mid-1990s.⁷ The latter are the sociopolitical facets of post-Fordism, which increasingly relies on politically conservative and individualistic values, openly marginalizing those who do not fully participate in the market. This marginalization is made possible by the changed realities of the credit system that for capital reproduction now relies heavily on finance and real estate and only in small part on surplus profits from industrial production. In the Fordist era, diffused consumption formed the necessary basis of capital accumulation. Industrial surplus profit depended on diffused and rather egalitarian consumption from the masses, which in turn was enabled by high living wages and Keynesian welfare tools. Today this link is broken and the post-Fordist economy is increasingly relying on what one could call "subsistence laborers." These take up the low-skill, highly unregulated (if not illegal) and flexible jobs that form the underbelly of the glitzy new economy. They are the seasonal fruit pickers in Canada or Italy, the illegal migrants in California agribusiness, the Chinese and Indonesian women who assemble clothing in North American sweatshops, the Asian caregivers and maids, the flood of sex-trade workers from Asian and Eastern European countries; but they also are the single mothers and the inner-city youths or the deskilled industrial workers of the rust-belt. There is no need for them to practice any more consumption than what ensures a sufficient rate of labor reproduction,⁸ establishing the lower boundaries of the labor market in the affluent

7. In 1994, the lowest 20 percent income quintile received \$1,157 in public assistance; in 2004, this figure was \$807; still above the \$565 of 1984, but a sharp decline nonetheless (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics CXUPA000103). Unemployment and workers' compensation and veterans' benefits figures also tended to be very low throughout the late 1990s and the first year of the twenty-first century, rising to the levels of 1984 only in 2004 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics CXUUE000103).

8. An event that is debatable considering that the socioeconomic conditions of the home countries of many migrants are likely to provide a sustained supply of such workers for the foreseeable future. For the countries where they emigrate to, they provide a cheap, disposable workforce and an outlet for a progressively more impoverished domestic working class to vent frustration against.

West. From this preliminary analysis, hedonistic consumerism appears as a feature of the American economic system, and it segments U.S. society. In the next section, I propose a possible approach to reduce its impact.

4. The Contradictions of Hedonistic Consumerism

Hedonistic consumerism carries two internal contradictions: on the one hand it fuels an ecological crisis (Sklair 2002) that is becoming ever more complex as globalization increases the speed at which ecological problems are being transmitted around the globe (Held and McGrew 2002: 8; Spangenberg and Lorek 2002). On the other hand, it misallocates scarce resources toward the satisfaction of self-referencing consumption rather than meeting real needs.

Post-Fordist economic trends have increasingly relied on consumerism while driving an increasingly larger relative income gap between the elite and the rest of U.S. and world consumers. This was the result of both structural pressures and political choices. The increasing viability of removing the production of many goods and services from the core OECD economies, coupled with the hegemonic reach of neoliberal policy, define contemporary capitalism. The internationalization of production networks through foreign direct investment and outsourcing unhinged the national dimension of Fordist economies, undermining the coherence and viability of the pro-labor, progressive policy arrangements that sustained it.

Post-Fordism did not usher in a reduced workload for employees; rather it introduced flexibilization (Boltanski and Chiapello 1999; Salais 1991) and intensification (Shipman 2001), which meant higher unemployment, longer hours, and reduced job security. Education, health care, and social security have increasingly been removed from the sphere of what society should provide and placed within the realm of what can be sold in the market. The new accumulation regime required that, alongside the consumer, society deploy the producer to satisfy a growth-only model of the market, and premised social inclusion on one's productive participation in the economy (Godelier 1999). Those who are not included in the twin processes of production and consumption are marginalized from society and looked on with suspicion if not contempt. Changes in the bases of advanced economies favored what Robert Reich (1991) calls "symbolic analysts," who premise their success on processing information and symbols. At the same time, this structural shift made it ever more difficult for others to access education and well-paying jobs.

As capital accumulation continued its historical shift from the manufacturing sector to the tertiary and financial ones (Boyer 2000), policy choices veered toward neoliberalism. By the early 1990s, neoliberal policy had become the hegemonic framework of socioeconomic relations across the globe (Beck 1999). In the United States, this process meant the progressive relative pauperization of middle- and low-income earners, who saw their employment and consumption options shrink and their savings erode.

From a political point of view, the post-Fordist "global economy" paradigm shifted not only the nature of labor relations, but especially the policy frameworks that underpinned them. The focus of governments moved from the negotiation of stable, broad-based labor agreements to the liberalization and internationalization of their economies. Once that was achieved, the level at which class struggle and capitalist contradictions could be negotiated and partially reconciled shifted from the national to the international arena, leaving most

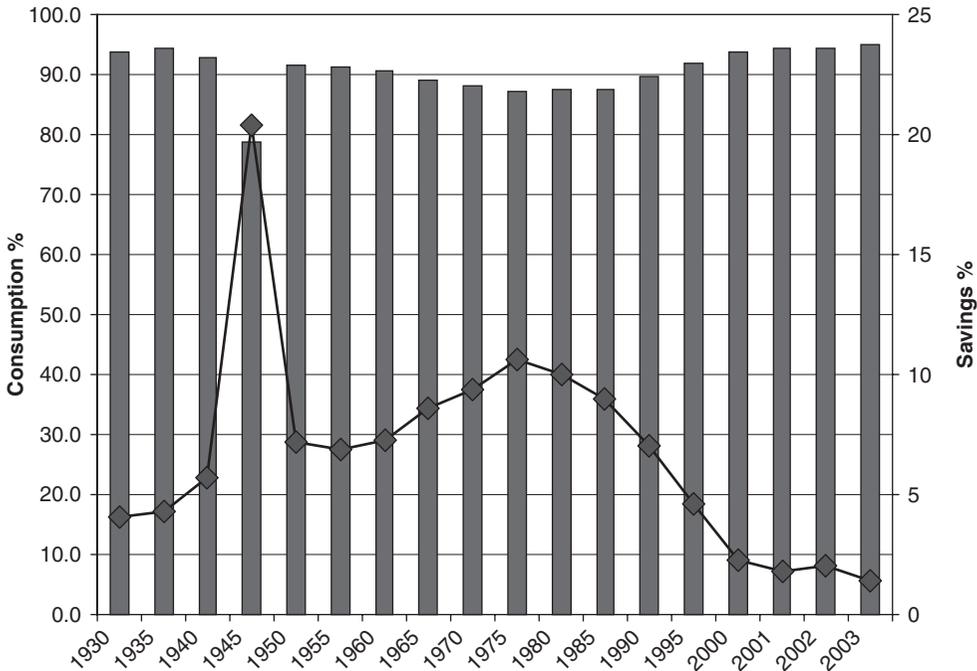


Figure 4.

U.S. Savings and Consumption as a Percentage of Disposable Income

Source: Bureau of Economic Analysis online database (<http://www.bea.doc.gov/bea/dn1.htm>).

labor and civil society organizations behind. The process of globalization also changed, sometimes radically, the localities in which goods are produced and consumed.

Rising consumption levels are sometimes said to reflect wealthier societies and an increased relevance of consumerist philosophies, not solely in industrialized countries, but across the globe (Jameson 1990). From the data presented above, they instead appear to be correlated with progressively increasing relative income inequality, especially in the United States, and certainly seem consistent with the continued existence of poverty within the global economy (UNDP 1998). Consumption rates increase and the life span of products or trends tend to be ever shorter. High levels of consumption remain central to our production-consumption regime, devouring ever-increasing quantities of inputs at the aggregate level; but those less well off have progressively been marginalized. This process is extremely clear in the American example. Figure 4 highlights the correlation between personal consumption expenditures and personal saving as a percentage of disposable personal income. The trends are obvious: between 1930 and 1975, savings tended to grow, reaching an upper limit of 10.5 percent of personal disposable income in 1975. They have since declined to a historical low of 1.4 percent in 2003. Conversely, the percentage of personal consumption expenditures climbed from a low of 87.1 percent of personal disposable income in 1975 to 95.1 percent in 2003, a figure beyond the levels of the Great Depression, and whatever savings were achieved were largely dependent on the top quintile of income earners (Ferguson 2004).

The same trend is also evident across other OECD economies, and in the case of Australia, savings become negative in 2002.

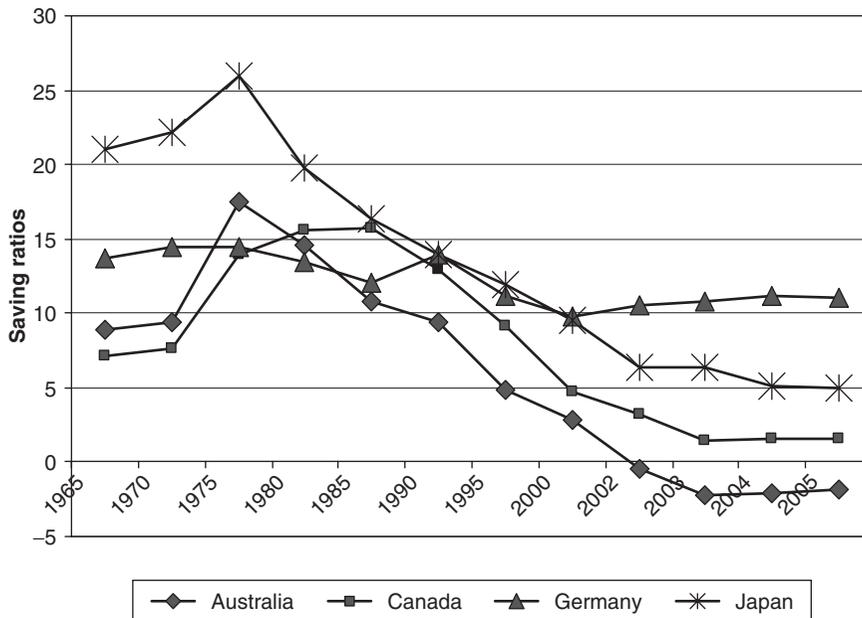


Figure 5.
Savings Ratios of Select OECD Nations
Source: OECD 2004

The transition to a post-Fordist accumulation regime redesigned the power relations that underscored the production, financial, and labor spheres of capitalism. This had far-reaching effects both within and between classes: the compression of labor-oriented policy represents the declining weight of the working class in the global economy just as surely as free trade and current account convertibility signal the predominance of transnational over national capital. As capital accumulation becomes increasingly independent of diffused consumption and more reliant on monetarist policy and free trade, unequal income distribution comes to define the system.

It ensures that levels of consumption are maximized by creating the conditions for affluent consumption among the richest part of society and by compressing income shares for the rest of society, so that consumption demands most of their income. This mechanism is even more efficient in fostering relative levels of consumption than Keynesian redistributive policies judging by the relative balance of savings and consumption as a percentage of disposable income noted above.

In contemporary post-Fordist society, the impulse to consume is diffused and aired through the ever more pervasive media to all segments of society, becoming an important social signifier. All indicators show increased consumption straining resources beyond their natural limits: wild fish stocks must be supplemented by farmed ones, not to restore the former to their original size but simply to keep up with demand; rice and grain must be genetically modified to increase size and yield; and so forth. Technology allows us to beat some environmental limits but the real question is for how long? How efficient is it to continue allocating such an enormous amount of resources to the satisfaction of induced wants rather than channelling them toward a more even human and economic development?

It is important, as noted by Deleuze and Guattari (1988), to focus on the process of production rather than on consumption and to define what we consume in our own personal terms rather than in terms of the socioeconomic pressures we are exposed to. A partial answer might be found in the creation of specific consumption taxes, the yield of which could be redirected toward sustainability programs. Naturally, the preferable solution would be to contest consumerism on its own grounds: to delink human value from consumption. Barring that, the first order of action must be curbing consumerist patterns and fostering sustainable practices wherever possible. A possible solution to this situation rests with embedding consumption within the notion of equality of capabilities (Sen 1980, 1985). Sen moves away from the classic definition of equality, mainly premised on redistribution of wealth. He suggests that the appropriate theoretical space in which to understand the idea of social welfare is that of “functionings.” Functionings are “the various things a person may value doing or being” (Sen 1999: 75). Simply looking at the “achieved functionings” of an individual (what we have managed to realize) is not sufficient. The true key to social welfare is the degree of freedom individuals have in achieving what is of interest and value to them. Capability is the freedom groups and individuals have to transform desired functionings into achieved ones (Sen 1992, 1999), “the *real opportunity* that we have to accomplish what we value” (Sen 1992: 31). This approach is deliberately incomplete (Sen 1992) and broad, involving a plural definition of functionings. It should be mentioned that the capability approach is not unchallenged from the Left. There is no doubt that its roots are set in the liberal tradition and in methodological individualism (Devereux 2001), and as such it is often criticized for not being able to provide a radical enough image of power relations (Hill 2003; Koggel 2003; Robeyns 2003). Besides these critiques, other scholars have challenged Sen about the alleged “lightness” of the capability approach when it comes to accounting for social structures (Jackson 2005) and social relations (Rosenbaum 1999). At least some of these critiques are well founded, especially when it comes to power networks. Some authors (Alkire 2002; Nussbaum 2000, 2004) have incorporated these issues into their writings but there still is room for more improvement. Nonetheless, the capability approach has the advantage of being flexible enough to incorporate these critiques, and to allow for a process of empowerment for grassroots groups. This is a process that has been embraced throughout the development community (Appadurai 2001; Sirolli 1999).

A grave shortcoming of hedonistic consumerism appears to be its self-referencing nature, which makes it insular and self-justifying. The application of Sen’s concept to this pattern of consumption carries two consequences: individual consumers are confronted with both the disparities among classes and nations that hedonistic consumerism generates and its ecological impact. With regard to the first element, very unequal income and/or consumption distribution becomes inherently unethical. While an equal distribution of income is not necessarily a goal, creating a system that allows the most disadvantaged sectors of society to attain equality of opportunity is necessary. The example here is once again that of the poorest 20 percent of U.S. citizens: they now share 3.5 percent of all American income and by redirecting an extra 1.5 percent of national income toward this group we could improve its material lot by almost 40 percent. This certainly does not appear unreasonable when billions are spent on pet food and makeup every year. The comment of Bonvin and Farvaque (2004: 20) frames the ultimate implications of choosing Sen’s strategy for analyzing consumption: “[t]he capability approach focuses on designing

an appropriate institutional-individual framework in order to create the conditions for responsible behaviour.”

Low-income consumers are structurally disadvantaged in the consumption process, rather than irrational or unreasonable.

It is realistic for poor people to believe they are powerless . . . poor people do tend to attribute control of their behavior to external forces and believe that they have little control over their own fate. This is not an unrealistic point of view. (Alwitt and Donley 1996: 67)

The goal, therefore, is at least to mitigate these structural disadvantages by fostering responsible behavior. We can do so by relying on the paradigm of equality of capability. The obvious corollary is that to achieve equality of capability we must empower those who are disadvantaged so that they can voice the elements of, and strive toward, the fulfillment of their goals. This demands that material interventions be implemented to facilitate this activity, requiring, at the same time, that we reassess the role of the State within the democratic framework. It is necessary to assign to the State the critical role of empowering the voices of those who are marginalized and disadvantaged. Its role, unlike what neoliberal theorists argue, should be to protect those who cannot protect themselves. If pluralism is truly an important value to democratic societies, there can be no more important role for the State than to provide the means for effective participation of all members of the polity. From a Kantian perspective (Kant 1993), this is the equivalent to putting the needs and hopes of the individual first.⁹ Therefore, there can be no doubt that empowerment must pass through true economic development both within nations where the GINI index should be reduced, and among nations through debt forgiveness and effective development aid. In a time when the most important key to material success is one's skill and educational level, it is also necessary to recast the role of education to make it a tool for economic, social, and intellectual development available to all independent of income, gender, or race. At the same time, we must be aware of the fact that addressing poverty does not simply mean addressing economic inequality. Poverty is also exclusion from power networks and social networks (Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Jordan 1996). The response to this problem is therefore to seek to expand human choice in the social, economic, and political realms. The operational “boundaries” of this goal are dictated by the notion of justice and fairness and are underscored by a deontological orientation. Within this framework economic utility is only one possible indicator. In practice this may take a host of different forms of empowerment and of enablement. For example, cities may choose to fund antipoverty groups or offer spaces for discussion and research of these issues. Academia may encourage research partnerships between scholars and students on one side, and the poor and their advocacy groups on the other. For example, what is the opinion of the homeless regarding the optimal services and structures to be included in shelters? Grassroots groups have had remarkable success in influencing policy when they had the option of being heard (Appadurai 2001). This is an important lesson, and particular attention should be paid to expanding the membership of various organizations (from city councils to UN agencies) or to, at least, allow *amicus curiae* submissions from NGOs.

9. Immanuel Kant encapsulated this principle in the formula of Humanity as an End in Itself: “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end” (Kant 1993: 36).

In sum, redistributive efforts must cover both the economic and the participatory sides of the problem. There can be no equality of opportunity without at least some economic equality, but the latter is moot if the opportunity to express opinion and exercise choice is not given to the actors. Consumption patterns are an important indicator of the state of our matrix of choice.

As far as the environmental crisis is concerned, Sen's concept translates into a strong call for sustainable consumption understood as the process of bringing the ecological footprint of the production and consumption phases of economic activity as close to zero as technology will allow and by applying the notions of intra- and inter-generational equity (Hansen and Schrader 1997). This extends the potential of equality of opportunity to future generations. This approach does not carry a common solution to commodification, consumerism, inequality, or empowerment; instead it relies on the action of individuals, the empowerment of grassroots movements, and a variety of responses to different versions of capitalism around the world. It requires, at the same time, that we tap into the creative side of consumption, redefining consumption itself to challenge its self-referencing nature.

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