

Death by Consumption

Dennis Soron

Volume 55, 2005

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt55re02>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Soron, D. (2005). Death by Consumption. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 55, 201–216.

Death by Consumption

Dennis Soron

The Worldwatch Institute, *State of the World 2004. Special Focus: The Consumer Society*, edited by Linda Starke (New York: W.W. Norton & Company 2004)

Tim Kasser, *The High Price of Materialism* (Cambridge: MIT Press 2002)

Michael Dawson, *The Consumer Trap: Big Business Marketing in American Life* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press 2003)

IN RECENT YEARS, critical discussions of consumption and consumerist lifestyles, long consigned to the academy and the counter-cultural fringe, have increasingly moved to the forefront of some of the most urgent social, political, and economic debates of our time. Contemporary environmentalists, for instance, have consistently attempted to sound the alarm that our accelerating levels of consumption and resource-use are bringing us to the verge of ecological exhaustion. As Betsy Taylor and David Tilford argue, all available evidence suggests that “skyrocketing consumption is rapidly depleting the Earth’s ecosystems, robbing future generations of vital life-sustaining resources ... [and] using far more of the Earth than the Earth has to offer.”¹ Indeed, Alan Durning writes, “measured in constant dollars, the world’s people have consumed as many goods and services since 1950 as all previous generations put together.”² As a consequence of such dramatically inflated rates of consumption, the World Wildlife Fund reports, global ecosystems over the past 25 to 30 years alone have lost over 30 per cent of the basic resources needed to sustain life on this planet.³

Such aggregate global measures, of course, don’t really do justice to the stark discrepancies in consumption between the global North and South that are an inte-

¹Betsy Taylor and Dave Tilford, “Why Consumption Matters,” in Juliet B. Schor and Douglas B. Holt, eds., *The Consumer Society Reader* (New York 2000), 484.

²Alan Durning, *How Much is Enough? The Consumer Society and the Future of the Earth* (New York 1992), 38.

³Taylor and Tilford, “Why Consumption Matters,” 464.

gral part of this emergent ecological crisis. From an ecological footprint perspective, as Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees have calculated, four extra planets would be required to supply the necessary resources for a global society in which everyone consumed at the level of the average North American.⁴ Such figures highlight both the disproportionate responsibility borne by the advanced industrial world for global environmental degradation and the potentially catastrophic consequences of its consumerist paradigm being embraced as a developmental model and target of cultural emulation by the rest of the planet. Roughly half of the current “consumer class,” as some environmentalists have labelled it, resides in the developing world, with the bulk of its future growth expected to come from heavily populated and rapidly expanding countries such as India and China.

Beyond alerting us to mounting environmental dangers, prevailing global consumption patterns also serve to draw our attention to the sheer injustice of a world in which all manner of luxurious consumer indulgence exists casually alongside the most debilitating forms of scarcity and human deprivation. As the United Nations *Human Development Report 1998* and other sources have dramatically documented, current Northern expenditures on discretionary goods such as ocean cruises, ice cream, perfumes, and pet food vastly exceed the total amount of money that would be needed to eliminate world hunger and malnutrition, immunize every child, supply clean drinking water for all, and achieve universal literacy.⁵ However striking, such statistics should not simply be taken as a sign of the heedless self-absorption of individual consumers, but as a measure of contemporary capitalism’s failure to ensure a rational and fair distribution of material resources and social opportunities. Indeed, they are an index of the persistent structural inequalities of a global economic system that leaves billions with unmet basic needs, while ensuring the most affluent continued access to the cheap labour and resources on which their consumption-intensive way of life largely depends.

Even within the relatively privileged milieu of the advanced capitalist world, debates over consumption have provided useful opportunities for re-examining some of the basic imperatives that structure our individual and collective lives. Are the fleeting gratifications of private consumption, for instance, an adequate recompense for the sheer time and energy we expend on the job, engaged in work that we often find draining, stressful, unsatisfying, and personally limiting? Can they offset the pernicious side-effects that consumption-oriented lifestyles themselves are having on human well-being and security — measured in terms of personal debt and bankruptcy, social and psychological dislocation, and the escalation of consumption-related health disorders such as diabetes, cancer, heart disease, obesity, and addiction? Finally, we are increasingly prompted to question whether the glittering bounty of the marketplace can compensate for the ongoing depletion of pop-

⁴Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees, *Our Ecological Footprint* (Gabriola Island 1996).

⁵See, for instance: UNDP, *Human Development Report 1998* (New York 1998); Worldwatch Institute, *Vital Signs 2002* (New York 2002).

ular-democratic life — the insulation of economic activity from collective control, the commodification of public goods, the stifling of political dissent, the progressive transformation of citizens from active makers and re-makers of the world they inhabit into passive “consumers” of it. Indeed, how are we to even understand democracy today, when trivial consumer options proliferate wildly even as our political horizons drastically shrink, and when opportunities for genuine political choice and participation continually dwindle?

The three books to be discussed in this essay each, in their own way, have something valuable to contribute to the effort to understand and confront the complex web of social, psychological, political, and economic problems to which contemporary consumer capitalism has given rise. Taken together, these provocative books, while not without flaws of their own, provide us with a means of rendering our lingering unease with consumerism more theoretically articulate and politically focused. To this extent, they also offer a spur to the further development of a “critical politics of consumption” which, as Juliet Schor has argued, can and should play an important role in the struggle for a more just, democratic, ecologically sustainable, and humanly satisfying world.⁶

For over twenty years, *State of the World* has been the Worldwatch Institute’s annual flagship publication, providing readers with a rich supply of timely information on global environmental trends. The Institute’s *State of the World 2004* productively takes up and refines the familiar critique of “consumer society” that has crystallized in environmentalist circles over the past few decades. One obvious strength of the established ecological critique of consumer society has been its forthright challenge to the conventional assumption — deeply embedded within liberal economics, mainstream political discourse, and the dominant institutions and policies determining the course of global economic development — that unlimited growth and maximal material consumption are an unmitigated good. In challenging this assumption, environmentalists have also posed a powerful challenge to the so-called “productivist” biases of the traditional Left, whose faith in promethean industrial growth and constantly rising material living standards has often paid little heed to the ecological limits and preconditions of economic activity. In so doing, they have highlighted the inadequacy of certain forms of redistributive politics whose egalitarian goals have largely been oriented around a vision of generalized material opulence, and have placed a narrow emphasis upon continually raising the income and consumption power of the general population.

While this environmental critique has rightly emphasized our need to collectively reassess our current consumption practices and reduce our overall volume of resource use and waste, it has often done so in ways that misconstrue the causes of ecological destruction and unduly restrict our sense of how to practically address it. In particular, by foisting the blame for ecological degradation directly onto the

⁶Juliet Schor, “Towards a New Politics of Consumption,” in *The Consumer Society Reader*, 447.

backs of “consumers” as aggregated individuals, it has deflected critical attention away from the production process and government policy, and has downplayed the extent to which everyday consumption choices are shaped by social-structural forces over which ordinary people have little direct control. As Michael Maniates has recently argued, the contemporary environmental movement’s increasingly narrow focus on the domain of private consumption has given rise to a toothless political strategy that individualizes blame for environmental problems, lets the economically and politically powerful off the hook, and expresses itself primarily through “timid calls for personal responsibility and green consumerism.”⁷

While not entirely innocent of such shortcomings, *State of the World 2004* marks a welcome step forward in progressive environmental thinking about the problem of consumption, combining a concern for micro-level consumer behaviour with a renewed emphasis upon the macro-level changes that will be required in “moving towards a less consumptive economy.” (96) That said, it would perhaps be inappropriate to hold this edited collection, which spans a wide range of arguments and subjects, accountable to the same standards of internal consistency as one would apply to a single-authored text. Indeed, with eight different chapters by thirteen authors, as well as a series of short information boxes and illustrative tables provided by a larger team of writers and researchers, *State of the World 2004* comprises not so much a single, continuous argument as a revealing cross-section of environmental debates over the state of consumption today.

This format enables the book to cover a great deal of ground in a relatively short space, balancing in-depth analyses of specific topics such as energy use, water productivity, food security, and government procurement policy with more general discussions of the politics of consumption and post-consumerist visions of the “good life.” Interspersed between the chapters is an interconnected set of “Behind the Scenes” articles which provide concise accounts of the hidden environmental dangers and costs of everyday consumer items such as plastic bags, bottled water, antibacterial soap, computers, chocolate, soda, paper, and cell phones. The volume is itself part of the Worldwatch Institute’s broader outreach campaign on consumption for 2004, which has also involved the establishment of a special consumption research portal on its website, online discussion forums, streaming audio and video interviews with staff researchers and writers, and a range of free pamphlets and popular education material on consumption-related issues.

As in past years, one strength of this year’s edition of *State of the World* is its ability to combine exceptional readability with an enormous amount of illuminating empirical detail. This combination of accessibility and empirical richness enables the volume to move beyond both the heady abstractions of much current academic work on consumer culture and the easy platitudes of popular anti-

⁷Michael Maniates, “Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?” in Thomas Pincen, Michael Maniates, and Ken Conca, eds., *Confronting Consumption* (Cambridge, MA 2002), 54.

consumerist discourse, bringing the ecological consequences of our current consumption practices into sharp relief. The array of statistics assembled in its pages leaves little doubt that today's "consumption juggernaut" is fundamentally endangering the future of life on this planet. Globally, as Gary Gardner, Erik Assadourian, and Radhika Sarin write in the opening chapter, private consumption expenditures have more than quadrupled in the last 40 years, driven by both overall population growth and rapidly escalating rates of per capita consumption. (5) Consequently, the same time period has witnessed an exponential rise in the use of basic goods such as paper, water, fossil fuels, metals, wood, minerals, synthetics, and resource-intensive foodstuffs, alongside a continual proliferation of ever-more elaborate consumer "needs" and the ephemeral commodities designed to satisfy them. Such trends, as we've acknowledged, are overwhelmingly concentrated in North America and Western Europe, where 12 per cent of the global population now account for over 60 per cent of consumer spending — in marked contrast to areas such as sub-Saharan Africa, where 11 per cent of the world's population consume at roughly one fiftieth of that rate. (6) All told, our overheated consumption regime is putting unprecedented demands upon the environment — exhausting non-renewable resources, shrinking wetlands, decimating forests, draining aquifers, driving thousands of plant and animal species to extinction, degrading soil, and generating levels of pollution and waste far beyond the natural world's capacity to assimilate.

Having clearly spelled out the nature and scale of the environmental problems we face, the authors in *State of the World 2004* set forth in various ways to analyze the specific forces that are driving runaway consumption in today's world. In some instances, they fall back upon a well-worn "dominant ideology thesis" about consumerism which has been effectively criticized by Conrad Lodziak and others in recent years.⁸ From this perspective, overconsumption is a problem whose origins are primarily cultural — one arising from the pervasive spread of consumerist ideology, which leads us to succumb to the spell of advertising, develop artificially inflated needs, and uncritically embrace materialistic values and aspirations. Thus, as Worldwatch President Christopher Flavin argues in his *Preface*, the decisive "ideological victory" of consumerism in recent decades has resulted in a situation in which "the drive to acquire and consume now dominates many people's psyches, filling the place once occupied by religion, family, and community." (xvii) According to this scenario, consumption levels are rising primarily because growing numbers of people are caught up in this compulsive and ultimately insatiable "drive" to satisfy their varied social, spiritual, and psychological needs through consuming material commodities. To this extent, the future of life on earth depends on our ability to resist being hoodwinked by the hollow enticements of consumer culture, to develop a more conscientious relationship to the "stuff" we consume on a daily ba-

⁸See, for instance, Conrad Lodziak, *The Myth of Consumerism* (London 2002); or his earlier work, *Manipulating Needs: Capitalism and Culture* (London 1995).

sis, and to reorient our lives and identities around non-material sources of fulfillment.

While this culturalist argument rears its head at various points throughout the volume, it does so in dynamic tension with a competing perspective that critically targets the structural features of contemporary capitalist society that foster unsustainable patterns of consumption. From this angle, we are forced to contend with not simply the hedonistic desires of consumers, but with what Michael Renner, Gary Gardner, and Erik Assadourian refer to in their respective chapters as the “infrastructure of consumption” — a whole matrix of social, material, political, and economic constraints and pressures that effectively compel ordinary people into making consumption-intensive choices in their daily lives. (112, 172) The issue of transportation provides a particularly compelling illustration of this point. While environmentalists may decry our current over-reliance on energy-inefficient modes of transportation such as the private automobile, for instance, they often fail to recognize that the roots of this problem go deeper than the commuter’s personal values and preferences. Indeed, they grow out of a whole range of contextual social influences — urban zoning laws, commercial land-use patterns, incentives for low-density suburban housing development, state subsidies for the petroleum and auto industries, under-funded public transit systems, inflexible work routines, inadequate child-care arrangements, and so on — that make energy-intensive car-use the only practical option for many people as they navigate their way through their everyday responsibilities.

At one level, this focus on the “infrastructural” underpinnings of unsustainable consumption patterns points us towards the myriad ways in which the state is responsible for “priming the consumption pump,” as the authors of Chapter 1 put it, and establishing the basic social framework within which consumer decisions are made. (15) Indeed, as any casual perusal of the daily papers will quickly make clear, stimulating economic growth through ever-increasing rates of private consumption has become the supreme goal of state economic policy. At another level, as Michael Renner suggests, it also directs us to the ways in which ecologically reckless consumption is not so much an isolated pathology as the predictable consequence of “a capitalist economy geared toward perpetual economic expansion” and the continual stimulation of new forms of consumer demand. (115) While Renner himself pulls up short of an explicitly anti-capitalist position, his argument provides a useful means of reconnecting the problem of overconsumption with the underlying dynamics of capitalist production.

Addressing the power of capital to organize the production process for its own private ends enables us to consider sources of ecologically damaging consumption that have little to do with the predispositions of ordinary consumers. For instance, the built-in obsolescence of many modern products is not a reflection of the will of the “sovereign consumer,” but rather of the producer’s self-interested drive to maintain and increase commercial profit. The issues here, as Renner recognizes, go

beyond simple product design, directing us to the ecological effects of the entire production process. As he suggests, it is a common mistake to think that “consumption” merely takes place at the point of final use; indeed, the majority (up to 70 per cent by some estimates) of the materials that are destroyed or displaced by today’s capitalist economy are incorporated into the production process and discarded as waste long before the “consumer” decides to buy a finished product. (101-2) How many swooning newlyweds, for instance, are aware of the fact that (as the authors of Chapter 1 point out) “roughly 3 tons of toxic mining waste are produced in mining the amount of gold needed in a single wedding ring?” (16) It should be remembered that such “hidden flows,” which largely account for the inflated levels of per capita resource consumption and waste that environmentalists report, emerge from a privately-controlled production process that operates beyond the knowledge, influence, or explicit approval of ordinary consumers.

Beyond the issue of the social forces driving skyrocketing consumption levels, there remains the knotty problem of how to practically confront the process of ecological decline and engender more sustainable and socially just forms of production and consumption. As Michael Maniates has asserted, this task will require us to broaden our “environmental imagination,” to think of ourselves not simply as consumers with a responsibility to be more abstemious and mindful in our daily habits, but as “citizens in a participatory democracy ... working together to change broader policy and larger social institutions.”⁹ While falling short of providing a comprehensive blueprint for change, *State of the World 2004* does contribute to the deepening of our “environmental imagination,” putting forth an array of suggestions for transforming consumer society — from ecological tax reform, to extended producer responsibility schemes and clean production methods, reductions in the working week, and the expansion of publicly provisioned amenities and services — that stretch far beyond simple technological fixes or voluntary changes in individual consumption. At the global level, Renner argues, social justice and ecological integrity both require a fundamental challenge to the “system of consumer apartheid that upholds western binge habits but denies the poor a decent standard of living.” (97) At the national level, moving towards a less consumptive way of life will require a radical reconceptualization of the nature and purpose of social and economic development, one which disavows today’s unquestioned faith in the beneficence of “endless economic growth driven by unbridled consumption.” (96) Breaking with the timid accommodationism of current forms of “market environmentalism,” Renner, Gardner, Assadourian, and other writers are refreshingly clear about the central role that state institutions must play in “using their extensive legislative and regulatory powers to shape the way people consume and the values ... society internalizes regarding consumption.” (173) Such forms of collective action are necessary, as Gardner and Assadourian argue in the volume’s final chapter, both to reverse our current trajectory of ecological decline and to create the “infra-

⁹Maniates, “Industrialization,” 47.

structures of well-being” which can enable people to simultaneously reduce their levels of material consumption and enhance their overall quality of life. (172)

Gardner and Assadourian’s closing chapter on “Rethinking the Good Life” represents a welcome effort to reconnect green politics with a positive quality-of-life vision, one that associates ecological sustainability not with the ascetic renunciation of consumer pleasures, but with the deeper human satisfactions of a post-consumerist future. In this regard, it also carries us directly onto the terrain of psychologist Tim Kasser’s *The High Price of Materialism*, which sets out to examine how consumer culture, far from delivering on its promises of bliss, may actually be seriously undermining our everyday well-being and emotional health.

Kasser begins his study by highlighting what he takes to be our culture’s strangely conflicted relationship to consumerist values. Many of our most revered religious and philosophical traditions are explicit in their rejection of materialism, decrying the vacuity and immorality of a life oriented around the acquisition of wealth and possessions. Such lofty ideals, unfortunately, seem increasingly remote from the venal reality of a hyper-commercialized society in which people’s daily lives are largely organized around materialistic pursuits. Such contradictions would perhaps make more sense if these pursuits were yielding contentment for a large number of people. Over the past few decades, however, a growing body of survey research has shown that self-reported rates of happiness in the industrial world have flattened or declined even as material consumption has ballooned. As Kasser asserts, economists and psychologists alike have consistently shown that “what we have bears relatively little relationship to our well-being, beyond the point of ensuring sufficient food, shelter, and clothing to survive.” (4) If this is the case, then why do so many of us continue to pursue happiness through means that are fundamentally incapable of providing nourishment or personal satisfaction? To answer this question, as Richard M. Ryan writes in his *Foreward*, Kasser presents us with an original psychological account of how the “empty promises of consumerism can become deeply anchored in our psyches.” (xi)

In Kasser’s view, psychology has thus far failed to adequately grapple with the complex origins and consequences of the materialistic cravings that fuel consumer society. Some versions of evolutionary and behavioural psychology, for instance, explicitly approve of the relentless pursuit of materialistic goals, arguing that the quest for wealth, status, and external validation is a deep-rooted survival strategy and a source of human advancement and flourishing. Elsewhere, psychology’s promotion of materialistic values has been even more overt — as in the case of psychologists plying their trade in the field of advertising or working within a popular self-help industry in which self-actualization and the attainment of riches have become virtually synonymous. An alternative psychological tradition, represented by thinkers such as Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and Erich Fromm, has offered critical interpretations of materialistic orientations, but these have mostly taken the form of abstract theoretical discussions of alienation and inauthenticity in mass so-

ciety. The little empirical work that has been done on the topic of materialism, Kasser argues, has been largely restricted to charting the tenuous relationship between income and self-reported psychological contentment.

The High Price of Materialism attempts to answer the need for a critical yet empirically-grounded psychological analysis of materialistic desires — one that examines what happens to our emotional and physical well-being, our sense of self, and our relationships with others, “when our desires and goals to attain wealth and accumulate possessions become prominent.”(4) Kasser’s initial research findings on materialistic wants grew rather fortuitously out of a broader project that he and Richard M. Ryan had been conducting on the relationship between people’s expressed values and goals and their levels of satisfaction in other key areas of their lives. As this project progressed and became ever more complex in terms of the variables and social groups analysed, an interesting statistical pattern began to emerge. Across the various sampled groups, those subjects who placed relatively high importance upon financial success, material acquisition, and other consumerist goals reported not only lower levels of happiness, but significantly higher levels of depression, anxiety, anti-social behaviours, fractured relationships, substance abuse, and a variety of physical ailments. As Kasser argues, the consistent conclusion to be drawn from the considerable amount of detailed empirical research that he and his colleagues have conducted over the past decade is that “the more materialistic desires are at the center of our lives, the more our quality of life is diminished.” (14)

To get at the roots of this striking disconnect between consumer society’s preferred vision of happiness and the actual quality of life of its most faithful members, Kasser posits that materialistic value orientations are fundamentally at odds with the satisfaction of many of our most basic psychological needs. Indeed, materialistic desires can themselves be seen as indirect symptoms of a whole range of prior psychological needs that remain unfulfilled. Thus, as he suggests, such desires appear to be particularly prominent among individuals and groups “driven by unmet needs for security and safety” (29) — for example, those from dysfunctional or fractured family backgrounds, those who have experienced high levels of economic insecurity and financial dependence, and those whose broader social environment has been marked by intensive change or instability. The problem here is not simply that materialistic values signify underlying forms of unresolved distress, but that they in turn “lead people to organize their lives in ways that do a poor job of satisfying their needs, and thus contribute even more to people’s misery.” (28)

Consumer culture’s inability to satisfy the individual need for what Kasser calls “competence, efficacy, and self-esteem” provides a particularly illuminating example of the ultimate psychological dead-end of materialistic striving. Under the spell of a mass media system that floods us with seductive commercial messages and glorifies the extravagant lifestyles of the super-wealthy, many of us come to be-

lieve that the acquisition of material possessions might bolster our fragile sense of self-worth and offer us a durable sense of personal achievement. In this scenario, Kasser suggests, even the successful accomplishment of our material goals can provide only a temporary reprieve from underlying feelings of unworthiness, offering us at best a “contingent self-esteem” that is continually beset by new “base-lines” of material expectation, new types of upward social comparison, and new cravings for external validation. Caught in this narcissistic spiral, and lacking solid grounding for their identity in the intrinsic satisfactions of their own activities, restless consumers grow increasingly miserable in their nagging sense of the “discrepancies between their current states and where they would most like to be.” (48)

As this implies, Kasser believes that materialistic values are an integral part of a broader motivational system in consumer culture — one that is focused narrowly around external rewards and praise, as opposed to being “concerned with expression of interest, enjoyment, and challenge, and ... doing things for their own sake.” (76) To this extent, they detract from genuine happiness by orienting people towards the quest for fleeting sources of “extrinsic” gratification and steering them away from self-initiating activities that might speak to their authentic needs and interests. As Kasser provocatively suggests, the frenetic drive to acquire wealth and possessions, far from being an expression of consumer freedom, is actually something that frustrates the individual’s need for personal autonomy. Caught up in the daily pressures of working long hours, climbing the social ladder, managing assets and debts, and conforming to prescribed standards of outward success, Kasser argues, materialistic individuals deprive themselves of the intrinsic pleasure of unself-conscious immersion in creative and self-directed activities. Feeling “chained” and controlled by external expectations and circumstances, such individuals can often lapse into a deadening conformity, disengaging from politics and other arenas of social participation, and limiting their free time to passive, “low-flow” activities such as shopping and watching television.

Beyond undercutting individual self-esteem and autonomy, Kasser argues, materialistic values also interfere with the development of strong and supportive social relationships — something that has been consistently ranked by psychologists as one of the most important determinants of personal well-being. As his research suggests, those people most deeply invested in materialistic aspirations suffer disproportionately from feelings of isolation and disconnection, experiencing shorter and more conflict-ridden relationships and facing real difficulties in creating and sustaining intimacy. Harboring unresolved feelings of envy, greed, contempt, and aggression, materialistic people generally demonstrate an inability to form empathetic, caring, and non-judgmental connections with others. Indeed, Kasser boldly asserts, their narrow fixation upon acquiring and consuming material goods gradually gives rise to an instrumental outlook in which “people become reduced to objects, little different from products that may be purchased, used, and discarded as necessary.” (67) This tendency to objectify and dehumanize others, he

cogently observes, is particularly prevalent today among the economic and political élite, who have grown habituated to instrumentally manipulating others from above without regard for the damage inflicted upon individuals and the broader community. For Kasser, materialistic values are thus both an index and a contributing cause of a wider social malaise in consumer society, one that is weakening the integrative bonds of family and community and eroding our sense of responsibility towards both our fellow human beings and the natural environment on which our survival depends.

The High Price of Materialism offers a stimulating exploration of the damaging psychic and interpersonal consequences of consumerism, probing into the dynamics of materialistic desire with a level of nuance that many sociological analyses of consumer society lack. That said, it also suffers from a number of shortcomings that detract from the quality and appeal of its message. As relevant and provocative as its subject matter may be, Kasser's book is weighed down by a leaden writing style and methodical mode of exposition that often lends it the feel of a book-length lab report. While the empirical research he has conducted over the years provides a rich vein of material for him to mine, his single-minded focus on carefully parsing this private stock of data gives his argument a strangely windless and self-enclosed quality. By engaging in a more substantial way with the work of other thinkers who have cut a path through similar terrain, such as Tibor Scitovsky, Paul Wachtel, Michael Argyle, Robert Frank, and others, Kasser could have sharpened many aspects of his own analysis, and enabled its psychological dissection of materialism to resonate more fully with some larger social, political, and economic themes. Lacking this broader frame of reference, Kasser's book vacillates uneasily between a clinical account of the "pathologies" of materialistic individuals, who are often portrayed as deviants and outsiders, and a theoretical critique of consumer capitalism's "normal" values, institutions, and socialization processes.

While offering a cursory acknowledgement of the influence of "societal context" (25) upon individual behaviour, Kasser's analysis of materialistic values downplays the extent to which extra-individual pressures and constraints also "motivate" us to consume in particular ways and to address our needs through means that are ultimately unsatisfying. Indeed, as discussed briefly above, our behaviour as consumers is always embedded in a broader social and material "infrastructure" that induces particular "choices." For instance, as Conrad Lodziak, André Gorz, and others have highlighted, workers in a capitalist context are unavoidably "consumers," insofar as they are divorced from the means of survival and dependent upon the market for their needs. Within the confines of a life structured by the routines of wage labour and the demands of domestic life, people typically lack the time, the resources, and even the developed skills to meet their varied material, social, and psychological needs in a non-commodified manner. In such circumstances, for example, do people watch television at the end of the workday because they enthusiastically identify with its consumerist messages, or because it offers a

cheap and readily available opportunity for emotional escape and physical recuperation? Similarly, do they crave the sugar-rush of frivolous consumer pleasures because of their woefully shallow “aspirations,” or because such pleasures offer them some immediate comfort within life circumstances that ultimately align quite little with their deepest personal hopes? As such cases suggest, it is not primarily our self-defined “values” that draw us into the vortex of consumerism, but alienated social conditions that provide us with little power but the power to consume, and with few significant opportunities for personal autonomy, social solidarity, and “all-round development.”

Another weakness in Kasser’s analysis is his failure to adequately take up the issue of social inequality. As his own research suggests, materialistic values seem to prevail especially among groups that have experienced economic hardship and social marginalization. This fact in itself seems to further undermine Kasser’s attempt to establish a direct link between our expressed values and our everyday practices — insofar as those who seem most prone to consumerist values are also those with the least power and opportunity to actually consume. It also suggests — along the lines of recent work done by Juliet Schor and others — that material inequality itself is crucial to the cultural and psychological dynamics of consumer society. In conditions of increasing economic inequality, does it come as any surprise that those who feel deprived and humiliated by their lowly condition might develop “materialistic” aspirations to improve their social status and be included in the familiar rites of consumer society? Similarly, is it not likely that those higher on the socio-economic ladder might also strategically employ their consumption practices to symbolically enhance their own class position? Increasingly, as Pierre Bourdieu, Douglas B. Holt, and others have noted, this process of elite class distinction does not rely upon garish forms of “conspicuous consumption,” but upon an offhanded disavowal of the vulgar materialism of “the masses,” and an outward orientation towards the non-material realm of spirituality, aesthetics, and psychological self-actualization. Kasser’s failure to engage more directly with the complexities of social inequality leads him to overestimate the progressive potential of such “anti-materialist” values and voluntary lifestyles. It also leads him to underestimate the extent to which treating the ills of consumer society will require political measures that involve a collective redistribution of power and resources — ones that go beyond simply regulating the advertising industry, providing charity assistance to the poor, and gently entreating profit-hungry corporations to become “organizations designed to encourage the health of their employees, to contribute to the welfare of their community, and to help heal the earth.” (111)

While touching upon a number of similar themes, Michael Dawson’s *The Consumer Trap: Big Business Marketing in American Life* (2003) presents a very sharp contrast to Kasser’s book in terms of both style and substance. Where Kasser’s style of exposition is cautious, pinched, and scientifically respectable, Dawson’s abounds with bristling sarcasm, blunt political judgments, and bold polemical

sucker-punches. Similarly, where Kasser's critique of consumer society focuses primarily on the internal desires and values of individual consumers, Dawson's is aimed squarely at the profit-maximizing strategies of the capitalist class. This is not to say that Dawson simply steers clear of criticizing the consumerist lifestyles of ordinary people. Indeed, as he forthrightly argues, our consumption-oriented lives "make us dumber, lazier, fatter, more selfish, less skilful, more adolescent, less politically potent, more wasteful, and less happy than we could and should be," leading us into everyday habits "that clutter our homes, poison our bodies, undermine our independence, pollute our ecosphere, and waste our precious time and energy." (2) However, he insists, these degraded circumstances need to be understood not simply as a reflection of our own misplaced "values" and "aspirations," but as a direct consequence of the operation of class power in capitalist society. For Dawson, the real motor of consumer society is not the insatiable desire of consumers, but the relentless drive of capital to "ratchet up the commodity intensity of our personal lives" by continually coaxing and pressuring us into profit-yielding behaviours. (2)

The foundation of Dawson's book is thus a powerful insistence that the issue of class power be placed at the centre of contemporary debates over consumerism and the marketing strategies that fuel and sustain it. Unfortunately, he argues, commentators from across the political spectrum have consistently skirted around any critical engagement with this issue for decades. This evasion of the question of class power has perhaps been most prominent within free-market ideology, in which private business figures as the humble, diligent servant of the public good, and the market is portrayed as a purely democratic, non-coercive mechanism responding to the expressed needs of the sovereign consumer. More vexingly, Dawson suggests, it has also become increasingly common among progressive and radical critics who associate the rise of post-war consumer society with the declining salience of class as an analytical category, source of personal identity, and site of political mobilization. In both cases, the tendency to regard the capitalist market system as demand-driven and bereft of significant class conflict has deflected critical attention away from the behaviour of producers and marketers, effectively saddling consumers with "all the transferred blame for capitalists' costly, socially irrational actions." (144)

This surreptitious transfer of political responsibility is, as Dawson argues, embedded in the very notion of "the consumer." While critics of all stripes have gradually come to label all of our "off-the-job product-related activities" as acts of "consumption," he writes, they fail to recognize that most people have little interest in "consuming" the products they purchase in the literal sense of eviscerating them or rendering them unfit for further use. (4) In this regard, "consumers" are better conceived of as "product-users" whose normal goal is not to increase consumption, but to maximize and prolong the pleasure, usefulness, and value derived from their purchases. "Consumption," however, is very much the cardinal goal of producers aiming to maximize profit by overriding our reluctance to "consume" and opening

up new areas of life to commodification. In this regard, as Dawson pointedly warns fellow progressives, to even refer to people as “consumers” is to revert to an instrumental business mindset in which “off-the-job human beings count only as mere money-spending garbage disposals, mere programmable units for buying and using up the firm’s wares.” (4-5)

By reorienting our attention from the plane of “consumer” motivation and behaviour to the profit-maximizing strategies of capital, Dawson suggests, we can avoid vilifying ordinary people and begin to see big business marketing for what it patently is: “a systematic effort by agents of the rich to use corporate resources and management to coerce the non-rich into off-the-job habits that make the rich richer.” (6) At the heart of Dawson’s book is a sophisticated and detailed historical analysis of the modern “marketing revolution” that emerged out of the crucible of post-war monopoly capitalism. Market consolidation and declining rates of profit in past decades, he argues, have increasingly led corporate enterprises to transform themselves from simple purveyors of goods to would-be customers, to “organizations whose central means to institutional success is conscious, Taylorian engineering of the objects and environments that condition ordinary people’s product-related activities.” (34) As this suggests, Dawson views corporate marketing as a natural extension of Taylorist principles of scientific management that had been first employed in the rationalization of the industrial workplace. As Taylor and his disciples were quick to realize, and as marketers were to later confirm in practice, scientific management’s focus on the “study, analysis, and reconfiguration of profit-yielding human behaviours” promised to be equally effective in the management of labourers’ off-the-job behaviours. (16)

Coming to terms with the corporate “management” of personal life, Dawson argues, requires us to grasp the subtle forms that class coercion can take in capitalist society. To do this, he believes, we need to re-engage with Thorstein Veblen’s prescient but under-appreciated analysis of the ways in which capitalism has displaced overt, political forms of class domination by continually refining the covert types of élite coercion built into ostensibly “free” and “equal” market relationships. In the case of today’s consumer marketplace, for instance, we should not assume that coercion is absent simply because our “shopping, buying, and product-related activities take place outside the individual corporation’s sphere of formal, contractual control.” (53) Indeed, it is precisely because corporate planners cannot outright command consumers to act in certain ways that they have had to develop a system of control that is “effective enough to profitably alter product users’ behaviour yet also subtle enough to avoid recognition and resistance.” (54) To this extent, the success of corporate marketing arises not from capital’s power to override our freedom with top-down decrees, but from its ability to channel our expression of that freedom in profitable directions by reshaping the environment in which we live and strategically controlling the range and type of choices available to us.

In pursuing this stimulating line of inquiry, Dawson presents us with an original analysis of marketing that stretches far beyond reiterating familiar ideas about advertising's ability to influence consumer values and behaviour. Indeed, in his opinion, critical studies of consumer society have generally made far too much of the dubious claim that ordinary people choose to buy and use specific commodities because of the entrancing spell of advertising ideology. For Dawson, advertising is at best one small part of corporate marketing's extensive "set of methods for turning elements of popular off-the-job behaviour settings into effective behaviour-modifying carrots and sticks." (101) In the broadest sense, he suggests, corporate marketing can be regarded as a form of "class struggle from above," one whose power to profitably reshape the everyday, product-related behaviour of ordinary people is underwritten by the overwhelmingly superior economic and political resources of corporate capital.

It is these resources, for instance, that have enabled corporations to compile the dizzying amounts of detailed demographic and psychographic information they now use to deploy intricate new marketing strategies that address all of the complex psycho-social and environmental influences upon consumer behaviour. In a situation where people lack any correspondingly sophisticated understanding of capitalists' motives and behaviours, this marked "informational inequality" is only reinforced by the one-way communication fostered by the commercial media, which enables corporations to restrict the terms of public debate, limiting our "knowledge of a product's real qualities, context, and alternatives." (62) Similarly, capital's effective monopoly over the production process has furnished "consumers" not with high-quality, durable products that satisfy their needs in an efficient, pleasurable, and affordable way, but with a growing stock of transient, ephemeral, ecologically destructive goods designed for marketing purposes for rapid physical, technical, and stylistic obsolescence. At the political level, corporate capital avails itself of its disproportionate power and influence to pursue "macro-marketing" strategies, shaping public policy in ways that provide the infrastructure and incentives for profit-yielding private consumption, extend the scope of commercial activity into new spheres, and make people more market dependent by depriving them of non-market resources and public goods.

All told, Dawson argues, consumption is inextricably woven into the "existential reality" of a society in which our media, public spaces, material environments, work lives, and leisure opportunities are all saturated with capitalist imperatives, such that people are perpetually "surrounded in their personal milieux by scores of effective reinforcers and boosters of commodified, corporation-prescribed ways of living." (141) In decrying the happy complacency of the consumerist masses, he suggests, many on the left have seriously underestimated the lingering feelings of alienation, helplessness, frustration, and disgust that an increasing number of people now feel in the midst of this hyper-commodified way of life. To this extent, they have also generally failed to recognize the promising democratic potential of "this

already large pool of public resentment of the costs of a commodified society.” (171) Indeed, Dawson argues, it is this powerful but still largely inarticulate popular frustration with the corporate colonization of personal life that must be tapped into and channelled in a progressive direction if we are to effectively resist the form of “market totalitarianism” that is descending upon us, destroying the natural environment on which we depend, and degrading the quality and integrity of our individual and collective lives. While the rhetoric of consumer choice that surrounds us encourages us to believe that we have freely chosen our life circumstances, this conveniently overlooks the extent to which ordinary people in capitalist society are systematically shut out of many of the major decisions that determine their fate. Much more than the first two books discussed in this essay, Dawson’s book anchors its critique of consumer society in an inspiring, large-scale vision of an alternative social order in which “democracy would be the pre-dominant regulating force ... in the state, in the economy, and in personal life.” (162) In so doing, it entreats us to refuse to simply settle into consumer capitalism’s “proffered world of micro-choices,” (144) and to struggle for the cultural, political, and economic changes that will enable us to build a genuinely free and democratic future.