

# Ecopsychology

RESTORING THE EARTH

HEALING THE MIND

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# Are We Happy Yet?

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EVERY PSYCHOLOGY HAS a theory of what makes people happy. Ecopsychology raises the following question: is human happiness inevitably in conflict with the needs of the planet? Or are there sources of satisfaction that flourish in harmony with the natural world? In recent decades in the developed world, people have sought happiness in an increasing array of consumer products. This has had a devastating impact on the Earth. In fact, it is widely agreed that consumerism is one of the central roots of the environmental crisis, rivaled only by population growth. In this essay, Alan Durning examines the place of consumerism in modern life. He suggests not only that consumerism is failing in its promise to deliver contentment, but that by diminishing our free time and distracting us from relationships, the consumer culture is actually making us *less* happy.

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High rates of economic growth are regarded as signs of economic success, but overconsumption is depleting the planet's resources, creating massive waste, and often making people miserable.

Consumption is almost universally seen as good—indeed, increasing it is the primary goal of U.S. economic policy. The consumption levels

exemplified in the 1970s and 1980s are the highest achieved by any civilization in human history. They manifest the full flowering of a new form of human society: the consumer society.

This new manner of living was born in the United States, and the words of an American best capture its spirit. In the age of U.S. affluence that began after World War II, retailing analyst Victor Lebow declared: "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, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing rate." Most citizens of Western nations have responded to Lebow's call, and the rest of the world appears intent on following.

But the consumer society's exploitation of resources threatens to exhaust, poison, or unalterably disfigure forests, soils, water, and air. The consumers of the world are responsible for a disproportionate share of all the global environmental challenges facing humanity.

Ironically, high consumption is a mixed blessing in human terms, too. People living in the 1990s are on average four and a half times richer than their great-grandparents were at the turn of the century, but they aren't four and a half times happier.

Psychological evidence shows that the relationship between consumption and personal happiness is weak. Worse, two primary sources of human fulfillment—social relations and leisure—appear to have withered or stagnated in the rush to riches. Thus many in the consumer society have a sense that their world of plenty is somehow hollow—that, hoodwinked by a consumerist culture, they have been fruitlessly attempting to satisfy with material things what are essentially social, psychological, and spiritual needs.

How much is enough? When does having more cease to add appreciably to human satisfaction?

Unless we see that more is not always better, our efforts to forestall ecological decline will be overwhelmed by our appetites. We will likely fail to see the forces around us that stimulate those appetites, such as relentless advertising, proliferating shopping centers, and social pressures to "keep up with the Joneses." And we may not act on opportu-

nities to improve our lives while consuming less, such as working fewer hours to spend more time with family and friends. Ultimately, sustaining the environment that sustains our humanity will require that we change our values.

Not since the Roaring Twenties had conspicuous consumption been so lauded as it was in the 1980s in the United States. Personal debt matched national debt in soaring to new heights, as consumers filled their houses and garages with third cars, motorboats, home entertainment centers, and whirlpool baths. Between 1978 and 1987, sales of Jaguar automobiles increased eightfold, and the average age of first-time buyers of fur coats fell from fifty to twenty-six.

Rather than making their owners happy, these things apparently engendered severe nervousness: to protect their possessions, Americans spent more on private security guards and burglar alarms than they paid through taxes for public police forces.

By the consumerist definition, satisfaction is a state that can never be attained. For decades, *Harper's* editor Lewis Lapham, born into an oil fortune, has been asking people how much money they would need to be happy. "No matter what their income," he reports,

a depressing number of Americans believe that if only they had twice as much, they would inherit the estate of happiness promised them in the Declaration of Independence. The man who receives \$15,000 a year is sure that he could relieve his sorrow if he had only \$30,000 a year; the man with \$1 million a year knows that all would be well if he had \$2 million a year. . . . Nobody ever has enough.

If human desires are in fact infinitely expandable, consumption is ultimately incapable of providing fulfillment—a logical consequence ignored by economic theory. Indeed, social scientists have found striking evidence that high-consumption societies, just as high-living individuals, consume ever more without achieving satisfaction. The allure of the consumer society is powerful, even irresistible, but it is shallow nonetheless.

Measured in constant dollars, the amount of goods and services that the world's people have consumed since 1950 is equal to that consumed by

all previous generations put together. Yet this historical epoch of titanic consumption appears to have failed to make the consumer class any happier. Regular surveys by the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago reveal, for example, that no more Americans report they are "very happy" now than in 1957. The "very happy" share of the population has fluctuated around one-third since the mid-1950s, despite near doublings in both gross national product and personal-consumption expenditures per capita.

Studies on happiness indicate that the main determinants of happiness in life are not related to consumption at all; prominent among them are satisfaction with family life, especially marriage, followed by satisfaction with work, the leisure to develop talents, and friendships. Oxford University psychologist Michael Argyle's comprehensive *Psychology of Happiness* concludes: "The conditions of life which really make a difference to happiness are those covered by three sources—social relations, work and leisure. And the establishment of a satisfying state of affairs in these spheres does not depend much on wealth, either absolute or relative."

Indeed, some evidence suggests that social relations, especially in households and communities, are neglected in the consumer society; leisure likewise fares worse among the consumer class than many assume. In other words, the very sources of satisfaction tend to get squeezed out as individuals pursue their high-consumption lifestyles.

The fraying social fabric of the consumer society, though it cannot be measured, reveals itself poignantly in discussions with the elderly. In 1978, researcher Jeremy Seabrook interviewed scores of older people in the English working class about their experience of rising prosperity. Despite dramatic gains in consumption and material comforts their parents and grandparents could never have hoped for, they were more disillusioned than content. One man told Seabrook, "People aren't satisfied, only they don't seem to know why they're not. The only chance of satisfaction we can imagine is getting more of what we've got now. But it's what we've got now that makes everybody dissatisfied. So what will more of it do—make us more satisfied, or more dissatisfied?"

The elders Seabrook interviewed felt isolated from their neighbors and unconnected to their communities. Affluence, as they saw it, had

broken the bonds of mutual assistance that adversity once forged. In the end, they were waiting out their days in their sitting rooms, each with his or her own television.

Mutual dependence for day-to-day sustenance—a basic characteristic of life for those who have not achieved the consumer class—bonds people as proximity never can. Yet those bonds have been severed with the sweeping advance of the commercial mass market into realms once dominated by family members and local enterprise. Members of the consumer class enjoy a degree of personal independence unprecedented in human history, yet hand in hand comes a decline in our attachments to each other. Informal visits between neighbors and friends, family conversation, and time spent at family meals have all diminished in the United States since midcentury.

The consumer society fails to deliver on its promise of fulfillment through material comforts because human wants are insatiable, human needs are socially defined, and the real sources of personal happiness are elsewhere. Indeed, the strength of social relations and the quality of leisure—both crucial psychological determinants of happiness in life—appear as much diminished as enhanced in the consumer class. The consumer society, it seems, has impoverished people by raising their incomes.

Yet, while consumption fails to make us happy and even contributes to our unhappiness, many of the forces “compelling” us to consume, such as advertising, cultivate and prey on our unhappiness. Even if television commercials or magazine ads fail to sell a particular product, they sell consumerism itself by ceaselessly reiterating the idea that there is a product to solve each of life’s problems, indeed that existence would be satisfying and complete if only we bought the right things. Advertisers thus cultivate needs by hitching their wares to the infinite existential yearnings of the human soul.

Entire industries have manufactured a need for themselves. Writes one advertising executive, ads can serve “to make [people] self-conscious about matter-of-course things such as enlarged nose pores [and] bad breath.” Advertisers especially like to play on the personal insecurities and self-doubt of women. As B. Earl Puckett, then head of the Allied Stores Corporation, put it forty years ago, “It is our job to make women

unhappy with what they have.” Thus for those born with short, skinny eyelashes, the message mongers offer hope. For those whose hair is too straight, or too curly, or grows in the wrong places, for those whose skin is too dark or too light, for those whose body weight is distributed in anything but this year’s fashion, advertising assures us that synthetic salvation is close at hand.

Another human cost of the consumer society appears to be an acceleration of the pace of life and subsequent loss of true leisure time. In *Good Work*, renegade economist E. F. Schumacher proposed an economic law: “The amount of genuine leisure available in a society is generally in inverse proportion to the amount of labor-saving machinery it employs.” The more people value time—and therefore take pains to save it—the less able they are to relax and enjoy it.

Leisure time becomes too valuable to “waste” in idleness, and even physical exercise becomes a form of consumption. In 1989, Americans devoted the wages of one billion working hours to buying such sports clothing as Day-Glo Lycra body suits, wind-tunnel-tested bicycling shorts, rain jackets woven from space-age polymers, and designer hiking shorts. Leisure wear has replaced leisure as the reward for labor.

Most consumers work more than they wish to. More and more people find themselves agreeing with American industrial designer William Stumpf, who says, “We’ve got enough stuff. We need more time.” Harvard University economist Juliet Schor writes in *The Overworked American*:

Since 1948, the level of productivity of the U.S. worker has more than doubled. In other words, we could now produce our 1948 standard of living in less than half the time. Every time productivity increases, we are presented with the possibility of either more free time or more money. We could have chosen the four-hour day. Or a working year of six months. Or every worker in the United States could now be taking every other year off from work—with pay.

Instead, Americans work the same hours and earn twice the money.

But that attitude appears to be shifting the other way. Schor found that workers in all the core regions of the consumer society express a strong desire for additional leisure time and a willingness to trade pay increases for it.

Although cynics predict that shorter workdays would simply translate into more time watching television, there is abundant reason to believe otherwise. For many people, television is something to do when their creative energy is low, when they are too tired to do something more rewarding. Europeans both work less and watch less television than Americans; Japanese both work more and watch more television.

No one can say yet how strong this preference is for free time over extra consumption. Indeed, the present generation of young Americans believes that being good parents means providing lots of goodies rather than spending time with their children. (According to the survey research of Eileen Crimmins and her colleagues at the University of California, Los Angeles, American high school seniors express a strong desire to "give their children better opportunities than they have had," but not to "spend more time with their children." In high schoolers' minds, "better opportunities" apparently means "more goods.")

Still, in theory, if everyone consistently chose free time over additional money, normal gains in labor productivity would cut consumer-class working hours in half by 2020, giving us abundant time for personal development and for family and community activities.

In transforming the consumer society into a *non*consumer society, or an economy of permanence, we should start by asking ourselves what we really want: for example, do we really want telephone books, newspapers, or magazines for their own sake? Or do we merely want access to the information they contain? In an economy of permanence, that information might be available to us for the same price on durable electronic readers. That would enable us to consult the same texts, but eliminate most paper manufacturing and the associated pollution.

Likewise, people do not necessarily want cars as such; they buy them to gain ready access to a variety of facilities and locations. Good town planning and public transportation could provide that access equally well. In every sector of the economy, from housing to food, there are vast opportunities to disconnect high resource consumption from a high quality of life.

The basic value of a sustainable society, the ecological equivalent of the Golden Rule, is simple: each generation should meet its needs without jeopardizing the prospects for future generations to meet their own

needs. We can curtail our use of those things that are ecologically destructive, such as fossil fuels, minerals, and paper. And we can cultivate the deeper, nonmaterial sources of fulfillment that are the main psychological determinants of happiness: family and social relationships, meaningful work, and leisure. Or we can abrogate our responsibilities and let our life-style ruin the Earth.

Lowering consumption need not deprive people of goods and services that really matter. To the contrary, life's most meaningful and pleasant activities are often paragons of environmental virtue. The preponderance of things that people name as their most rewarding pastimes are infinitely sustainable. Religious practice, conversation, family and community gatherings, theater, music, dance, literature, sports, poetry, artistic and creative pursuits, education, and appreciation of nature all fit readily into a culture of permanence—a way of life that can endure through countless generations.

The first step of reform is uncomplicated. It is to inform consumers of the damage they are causing and how they can avoid it. New values never arrive in the abstract. They come entangled in concrete situations, new realities, and new understandings of the world. Indeed, ethics exist only in practice, in the fine grain of everyday decisions. For instance, an environmental ethic will have arrived when most people see a large automobile and think first of the air pollution it causes rather than the social status it conveys, or the frustration it will cause them when they get stuck in traffic or spend precious time hunting for a parking place, rather than the convenience of personal transportation.

For those who choose to live simply, the goal is not ascetic self-denial, but a sort of unadorned grace. Some come to feel, for example, that clotheslines, window shades, and bicycles have a functional elegance that clothes dryers, air conditioners, and automobiles lack. These modest devices are silent, manually operated, fireproof, ozone- and climate-friendly, easily repaired, and inexpensive.

At present, living simply may be an unattainable ideal for most people in the consumer class. People's choices are constrained by the social pressures, physical infrastructure, and institutional channels that envelop them. Most would be immobilized if they abandoned their cars while still living amidst mass-transit-less, antipedestrian sprawl. Few workers have the option of trading extra salary for reduced working

hours because few employers offer it, and they could not accept it quickly anyway, with mortgage and car payments, insurance premiums, college tuition, utility bills, and so forth, making demands on their incomes. Thus, a strategy for reducing consumption must focus as much on changing the framework in which people make choices as it does on the choices they make.

The future of life on Earth depends on whether the richest fifth of the world's people, having fully met their material needs, can turn to non-material sources of fulfillment; whether those who have defined the tangible goals of world development can now craft a new way of life at once simpler and more satisfying.

In the final analysis, accepting and living by sufficiency rather than excess offers a return to what is, culturally speaking, the human home: to the ancient order of family, community, good work, and good life; to a reverence for skill, creativity, and creation; to a daily cadence slow enough to let us watch the sunset and stroll by the water's edge; to communities worth spending a lifetime in; and to local places pregnant with the memories of generations.