

Reading 5, The Waste Makers

Have you ever wondered how, why, and when Americans became rampant consumers? As consumerism has a profound environmental and climate footprint, it is worth pausing on this question and its history.

In one sense, unchecked consumerism has been going on for a very long time. In my course on literature and the environment, we read a blistering attack on consumerism by the English writer Sir John Denham from nearly 400 years ago. And he is hardly the first. However, in the US, consumerism really ramped up in the seventy years separating us from the Second World War.

It is not coincidental that the same period of time is called the “Great Acceleration,” as humanity’s impact on the planet, including and notably in the form of climate change, greatly accelerated during this period.

Radical cultural change is an interesting phenomenon. Once it has taken place, we often quickly adjust to the new normal. To people born into a changed era (as are, in one way or another, all eras), it generally doesn’t seem unusual at all, as it is all that they have ever known. The new normal is simply normal.

However, people caught in the middle of profound cultural change have an interesting vantage point, as they can see the changes particularly clearly – and hence often react to them strongly.

In the 1950s, as consumerism really took off in the US, journalist Vance Packard was a particularly keen observer of the change in American culture. Immediately after that decade closed, Packard published a best-selling, scorching indictment of consumerism entitled *The Waste Makers*.

While Packard was not an environmentalist per se, and Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (which in many ways inaugurated the modern environmental movement) would not be published until two years after *The Waste Makers*, from the title onward the book focused on consumerism as a culture defined by the production of waste – which is obviously environmentally disastrous. Although Packard didn’t take up industrial waste, he focused in on the fact that American consumerism was quickly evolving into a waste machine.

Although we don’t often think much about it, as the words suggests, “consumerism” is the process of consuming stuff and eventually discarding what we have consumed as waste. Packard drew attention to the fact that Americans were increasingly being encouraged to both consume more stuff and to discard it more quickly.

Born in 1914, Packard matured during America’s Great Depression. Hence, “normal” to him meant consuming something as completely as possible before discarding it. A jacket, for example, might be worn for many years, even though it would become frayed and need assorted repairs along the way.

However, the “new normal” of 1950s consumerism meant that we would keep a jacket a fraction of that time, discarding it as soon as it went out of fashion – which the industry that produced it made sure that it quickly did. If you look carefully, you can see the early roots of fast fashion here.

While the garment industry arguably pioneered this model of discarding what is entirely usable but no longer fashionable – which is why we call it the “fashion” industry – Packard drew attention to the fact that all sorts of additional industries were jumping on the fashion bandwagon.

The automobile was a prime example. The ubiquitous car that Packard grew up with, Henry Ford’s Model T, famously came in just one color (actually, that’s a lie marketed by Ford, but that’s neither here nor there) and didn’t significantly changed much over its 20-year production history. In contrast, taking its cue from the fashion industry, in the 1950s automobile mobile manufacturers were significantly changing cars every two or three years in a successful effort to sell more and more cars – and in the process create more and more waste.

But is this as bad as it sounds? Aren’t the needs of individuals and corporations arguably both served when they provide us with stuff? In other words, isn’t this this is a win-win, for people and corporations? The problem is that time and time again corporations have chosen their needs over those of consumers, often with horrific results. Let’s look at an example.

Since the 1920s, scientists have known that there was a link between smoking cigarettes and cancer. By the early 1950s, the American public was alerted to the problem through series of articles entitled “Cancer by the Carton” in the *Reader’s Digest*, which was an incredibly popular magazine at the time. By the end of the 1960s, all cigarettes sold in the United States were required to have a prominent label informing consumers that “Cigarette smoking can cause lung cancer and heart diseases.”

Knowing that they were selling a poisonous substance that was, moreover, addictive, what did the tobacco industry do? Did they, horrified at what they had done, apologize to the public and immediately stop? To the contrary, they doubled down, denied the science, and did everything they could to continue profiting from extraordinary human suffering for as many decades as possible.

Even today, when a successful campaign has significantly reduced cigarette smoking in the United States over the past few decades, even today half a million people in the US. die every year from smoking. Smokers, on average, die ten years sooner than nonsmokers.

But, wait, it gets worse. In 1987 - 35 years after the articles on “Cancer by the Carton” made Americas aware that cigarettes killed - the R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company launched its Joe Camel advertising campaign for its for Camel cigarette brand, which featured a hip and friendly cartoon camel named “Joe.”

Four years later, an article in the Journal of the AMA (American Medical Association) revealed that this cartoon camel had become nearly as recognizable to six-year-old children as Mickey

Mouse. One third of all cigarettes illegally sold to minors by this time were – you guessed it – Camels.

Astonishingly, the tobacco industry got into the business of making consumers out of children. As unbelievable as it may sound, the goal was to addict them to a poisonous substance that would take 10 years off their lives - all in order to keep profits up.

Are all corporations as...well... evil as the tobacco industry? No, of course not. Nonetheless, this is an instructive example, as it reveals that, unchecked, corporations have been willing to do extraordinary things in the name of profit and preserve their industry. Even knowingly kill people, by the millions.

As the publisher of *The Waste Makers* notes, it was “An exposé of ‘the systematic attempt of business to make us [into] [wasteful, debt-ridden, permanently discontented individuals’ ...[and]...how the rapid growth of disposable consumer goods was degrading the environmental, financial, and spiritual character of American society.”

I am curious what you make of *The Waste Makers*. In particular, what do you think of the various types of planned obsolescence that he outlines? He also weighs in on an issue that I take up in discussing the film *The True Cost*: just who is responsible for our obsession with consumer stuff that is wreaking havoc on our planet? Is it us consumers? Or is it the companies that manufacture all this stuff?

Incidentally, Packard continued writing books for some time. Like *The Waste Makers*, his last book, published in 1989, is arguably as timely today as it was then: *The Ultra Rich: How Much Is Too Much?*

Class discussion of *The Waste Makers*

(Note that the following observations, which are in italics, have not been paraphrased or altered, though I do correct the occasional typo and, because of space concerns, often just part of the comment is reproduced here along with my reply. In working through these, I will first quote an observation by a student, followed by my thoughts.)

Before jumping to student comments on *The Waste Makers*, let me first quote from a Spring 1955 article entitled “Price Competition in 1955” by Victor Lebow in the *Journal of Retailing*. Note that Lebow is an economist and retail analyst, not a scholar. Hence, he is not critiquing consumerism here, but is rather offering advice to corporations on how products need to be marketed.

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 satisfactions, our

ego satisfactions, in consumption. The measure of social status, of social acceptance, of prestige, is now to be found in our consumptive patterns. The very meaning and significance of our lives today expressed in consumptive terms. The greater the pressures upon the individual to conform to safe and accepted social standards, the more does he tend to express his aspirations and his individuality in terms of what he wears, drives, eats, his home, his car, his pattern of food serving, his hobbies.

These commodities and services must be offered to the consumer with a special urgency... We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever-increasing pace. We need to have people eat, drink, dress, ride, live, with ever more complicated and, therefore, constantly more expensive consumption...

As we examine the concept of consumer loyalty, we see that the whole problem of molding the American mind is involved here.

In 1955, Lebow thus provided what is in many ways a mission statement for modern consumerism.

Note that there is nothing here about providing superior services or making better products. Instead, the focus is on “molding the American mind” with the goal that “[t]he very meaning and significance of our lives today [be] expressed in consumptive terms.”

What is the role of marketers here? It is not to extol the merit of the products on offer (as we might fully expect marketers to do), but rather to exert “pressures upon the individual to conform to safe and accepted social standards” through the act of consumption.

As you might imagine, many students were mortified to see marketing unmasked in this way:

“Thus the challenge was to develop a public that would always have an appetite as voracious as its machines.” What a sickening line. The American public is being convinced by the manufacturing and advertising industries to purchase items, in order to ensure the wheels of production are never still. This is completely backwards to how production and consumption should work, ESPECIALLY if you look at it from an environmental standpoint. Before mass production, most goods were made on an as-needed basis. If you needed a dress, you got fabric and made it, or went to a clothing maker and put in an order. Now, we aren’t even sure if we need another dress, but we probably do, right? Because look at all the cute ones there are in the online ads! Ready to purchase! In what feels very related to last week’s minimalist and Walden content, the manufacturing and advertising industries have completely warped our sense of desire for material goods...

The endgame for marketers is now, to quote from this apt comment, to completely warp “our sense of desire for material goods.”

As this person notes, the way that consumption worked historically was largely based on need: “If you needed a dress, you got fabric and made it, or went to a clothing maker and put in an order.” However, need is now greatly overshadowed by desire. In other words, do we really need

that new dress or whatever it is that is on offer? The answer is now generally no, but that doesn't mean that we still don't desire it. Where does this desire come from? From marketers, of course.

In this sense, the goal of marketers is to generate desire where there is little or no need.

However, Victor Lebow suggested, just in case desire is not sufficiently motivating in itself, marketers need to exert "pressures on the individual to conform" so that Lebow's imagined male consumer will consequently "express his aspirations and his individuality in terms of what he wears, drives, eats, his home, his car, his pattern of food serving, his hobbies."

It's simple enough. If we just purchased what we needed, marketers would only sell a fraction of what has become possible through industrial mass production and the largely unchecked exploitation of workers. Consequently, in addition to manufacturing products, all sorts of companies are now in the business of manufacturing desire.

At first hearing, it may sound a little odd, but most corporations, from fashion brands to pet food and automobile manufacturers, are first and foremost are all in the business of manufacturing the same thing: desire.

Without desire, these industries would be decimated if they had to rely on need as a sole motivator. After all, if you just purchased a new shirt when you really needed it, when your old one was frayed beyond repair, the fashion industry (especially the fast fashion industry) would crumble.

And if desire is not a sufficient motivator, desire has a less-pleasant counterpart, as we human beings are hardwired to conform to the norms of the groups to which we belong. In this case, manufacturers are not just manufacturing desired, but engineering social pressure on the individual in order to make them consume. For example, by quickly shifting fashion trends, an individual embarrassed by wearing a shirt from last year, will discard it and purchase a new one.

As we all know firsthand, social pressure is a powerful thing. Everybody wants to fit in; nobody wants to be an outcast. Marketers are turning this truism of human nature against us.

If you consume enough and correctly, the promise is that you will fit in. If you don't, the threat is that you risk outcast.

Regarding whether you actually need the product on offer, this is of somewhat minor concern.

But the American economy has been built on the notion that a healthy economy is one that grows due to increased consumption. In order to prolong this unsustainable economic path, the entire advertising industry was created— this all feels so artificial!...What makes "The Waste Makers" such an uncomfortable read is the fact that it so simply explains that many of our desires are not our own. They are a product of an economy and culture that excels in shaping desires and inventing scenarios and fads that draw the attention of our wallets. If being mindful of your consumption for the sake of the environment isn't for you, maybe being mindful for the sake of acting on what you actually want is.

This comment nicely dovetails with the previous one, especially the observation that “[w]hat makes *The Waste Makers* such an uncomfortable read is the fact that it so simply explains that many of our desires are not our own.” This is rightly a disconcerting thought, as we tend to feel that basic emotions, like desire, originate with us. Hence, it is more than a little disturbing to realize that they are being manufactured elsewhere.

If this were being done for the good of the consumer, it might be less worrisome. In other words, if marketers were creating a desire for healthy and inexpensive food, this might feel a little more acceptable. However, as Thoreau realized over 150 years ago, corporations largely act in their own interests, not those of the consumer.

Hence, soda companies, for example, sell us branded sugar water that is neither healthy nor inexpensive. Indeed, the WHO (World Health Organization) is urging “global action to curtail consumption and health impacts of sugary drinks,” as these can be a “major factor in the global increase of people suffering from obesity and diabetes.”

The problem is that a number of the corporation selling sugar water are so large and profitable that they have been very successful at maintaining their prosperity and health, even though they are contributing to global health problems among people consuming their products. You may not be surprised to learn that the five most valuable brands on the planet are (in order) Apple, Amazon, Microsoft, Google, and Samsung. What may be a surprise is that #6 is Coca-Cola.

This comment also draws attention to the fact that our economy is built on the notion of unending growth, which is fueled by consumerism. The difficulty is that we do not have sufficient resources on this planet to sustainably support infinite growth. Indeed, we have already exceeded what is sustainable for this planet.

The solution is simple enough: We need to enter a period of economic degrowth. “Degrowth emphasizes the need to reduce global consumption and production ... and advocates a socially just and ecologically sustainable society with social and environmental well-being replacing GDP as the indicator of prosperity.”

Make no mistake, degrowth presents its own formidable set of challenges. However, we have no choice but to find a way to make this work if our species is to live sustainably on this planet.

Our mindset towards wanting more is becoming a serious problem. This reminded me of a trip I made to Nicaragua, where I went to volunteer to build a school for a small community. It was there that I learned how consumerism is making my life and others in developed countries worse. These people I was lucky to meet were happy and content with what little they had. The locals were always smiling and laughing with each other, which took me by surprise because in America, where we literally have everything these people don't, we find ourselves unhappy that we can't get the new iPhone or new clothes. These people in Nicaragua don't have money to buy one pair of shoes yet they seem happier than us who have everything at our finger tips. This was just an eye-opening experience and hopefully we can change our mindsets that are wired to always want more.

After manufacturing desire, product advertisements often hold out a promise that purchasing the product will satisfy the desire.

First, as we have seen, this is worrisome as the desire didn't necessarily even exist before the corporation manufactured it. Second, the promise of fulfilled desire is also problematic

If products really did fulfill our desires, then people who purchase the most should be the most satisfied (i.e. the happiest). Consequently, it is often implied that people who are outlandishly gorging themselves with consumption, like some influencers, are the luckiest, happiest human beings.

However, even without resorting to statistics here, I think that most of us know from first-hand experience that consumerism does not, deep down, make us happy. Consequently, consumerism, even outrageously supersized consumerism, is not the answer.

In dramatic contrast, this comment considers people who are largely untouched by consumerism. As we are accustomed to equate consuming things with happiness, it is striking that people who have so little are so happy.

For the person who made this observation, this was "an eye-opening experience," as largely stepping outside of consumer culture made it clear that it is not only failing to deliver on its promise to fulfill our desires and make us happy, but is, in fact, making us even less happy than people who have very little.

This is not to say that all sorts of people across the planet should remain living in poverty and not have a range of needs met more successfully. However, there is a danger here, as corporations are waiting in the wings to convert these people into consumers.

Corporations often speak of low- and middle-income countries as "emerging markets."

Let's stay with our example of Coca-Cola and the sale of sugar water. In low- and middle-income countries, "only a quarter of what...[people drink]...is a commercial beverage."

In wealthy countries, companies like Coca-Cola have already done an extraordinary job when it comes to manufacturing desire of their product, as "75% of beverages consumed are commercial products." However, experts agree that, for Coca-Cola, the "greatest growth opportunities looking ahead are in emerging markets," like India. In order realize this potential, Coca-Cola needs to manufacture desire in these countries.

India is considered an emerging market for Coca-Cola. The average yearly income for a laborer in rural India is about 300 rupees per day. That's for a man. For women, it drops to 200. The cost of a small (12 ounce) Coke is 34 rupees. Hence, if you work a 10-hour day, a man will need to work for more than an hour to buy a small Coke. Or nearly an hour and 45 minutes if you are a woman.

In a country where “76 million are without access to safe drinking water,” it is wildly misguided to manufacture desire for a water substitute that many people simply cannot afford and that no one really needs, especially as it can contribute to a host of health problems.

Alternately, corporations to step in and supply what people really need: safe drinking water.

This week's reading is very interesting in many aspects. It was written in the early 1960s, just as modern consumerism in the United States was taking root. Now I am from China, and modern consumerism is also taking its root here at an extremely rapid pace in the recent years. Therefore, this book has an even closer relationship to me. In the twenty-first century, the book can be a reflection of the past decades for the developed countries, but it can also still as a warning sign against the potential dangers of consumerism, not to the American people as it was in the 1960s, but to the developing countries.

What a great comment.

As I noted in my introduction to *The Waste Makers*, “people caught in the middle of profound cultural change have an interesting vantage point, as they can see the changes particularly clearly.” Vance Packard was well positioned to see the emergence of truly modern American consumerism in the period following the World War II.

In different parts of the world, however, this is not something that happened a generation or two ago, but something that is happening right now. In some places, consumerism is, in fact, something that has yet to arrive, or is only now coming on the scene. Indeed, for most people on the planet, large-scale consumerism is (perhaps) looming in the future.

While we often see this type of consumerism is part of the so-called American Dream, in addition to cars, computers, music, and a host of other products, the most notable thing that America is selling the world may well be the American Dream itself (i.e. our consumer culture).

This is a sobering thought. Not only did the United States directly contribute more to the climate crisis than any other country, we have indirectly encouraged the rest of the world to do the same. In short, we are potentially multiplying the harm that we did to the planet many times over by encouraging the rest of the world to do the same.

Of course, other countries also played a role in the development and spread of modern consumerism. However, arguably, no country did it to the extent of the United States, making supersized consumption our signature way of life.

Because the world now looks to the United States as a cultural model, can we reimagine the American Dream to be environmentally sustainable? If so, we need to sell the world this new Dream.

Can we succeed at this? Honestly, I don't know. It may, in fact, be up to other countries to take the lead in imagining a new, better, more sustainable way of life.

“There are the soft, insistent commercials the youngsters hear during their weekly twenty-odd hours of television watching. And there are the breakable plastic toys, which teach them at an early age that everything in this world is replaceable.” It wasn’t until I read this sentence then I realized that I grew up watching commercials that can shape my attitude about consumerism. I can still remember the commercials in which an actor encourages us to purchase their products as soon as possible. Many kids have been impacted by those commercials, and their idea about consumption is gradually shaped by them. It is scary to think that people, at such a young age, have been negatively impacted by the capitalist who wants to maximize their profits, and the formation of our values is shaped while we don’t even realize it is formed.

At first glance, it may seem that corporations are principally in the business of manufacturing products, like toys for children. However, as we have seen, they are also in the business of manufacturing desire for the product, as well as manufacturing social pressure to buy the product. In other words, even if you are happy with your aging smartphone and don’t desire a new one, you may succumb to this artificially created social pressure and buy one anyway just to fit in.

What is in some ways even more disturbing is that corporations are also, in addition to manufacturing desire and social pressure, now manufacturing consumers as well.

As this person notes regarding advertisement aimed at children, “[m]any kids have been impacted by those commercials, and their idea about consumption is gradually shaped by them...[hence]... the formation of our values is shaped while we don’t even realize it is formed.”

In other words, people are born, consumers are made.

Because marketers have a direct channel to children through a range of daily programming aimed at kids, they cannot only sell a child on the idea of buying a particular product, they can - and do - also sell children on the idea of buying itself (i.e. consumerism). Hence, to again quote this comment, during the “the formation of our values” as children, marketers are working to make sure that one of our core values is consumerism.

What exactly is a human being?

On a personal note, from my perspective as a parent, I try to do all that I can to ensure that my daughter grows up to be my ideal for a successful human being, which is a happy and good person. From the perspective of our society, the ideal is that children will grow up to become good citizens. From the point of view of marketers, they are doing all that they can to raise generations of consumers.

These ideals need not necessarily be in conflict. For example, one can be a good and happy person, as well as a good citizen. Arguably, the goal is to be all three. However, it is unclear why we need to be, in addition to being good people and good citizens, good consumers.

To again approach this on a personal note, I have to admit to finding it frustrating (perhaps I should say “mortifying”), as I daily work, as a parent, to raise my child in a certain way, which is

deeply in conflict with the marketers who daily work to raise her in another way. The profound difference here is that my goal is to give her an upbringing that benefits her. Marketers on the other hand, are intent on benefiting themselves – at her cost. In fact, to once again quote this comment, they don't care at all about her, they just want to “maximize their profits.”

The following comment also takes up this issue:

What Ken mentioned about the influence of this society on children in particular was quite shocking. On one hand, the idea of selling to kids was revolutionary, it spawned multibillion dollar industries. On the other hand, it can be considered downright evil, spawning generations that only know how to purchase and are subconsciously brainwashed into believing that is the gateway to true happiness and contentment...This week made me feel as if I had been living as a puppet on strings.

It is one thing to think about how, in a general way, consumerism impacts children, people, and society as a whole. But it's something else again to think about how this has impacted each of us personally, myself included, as I was born shortly before *The Waste Makers* was published, when the project of creating a generation of consumers was well underway.

Being hit with the revelation that we have been, from early childhood on, to again quote this comment, “subconsciously brainwashed into believing that is the gateway to true happiness and contentment” is to be found through consumerism, it really does make it feel like we have “been living like a puppet on strings.”

I, for one, like to feel that I am in control of my own actions. Consequently, it is more than a little disconcerting to think that someone else is pulling the strings - and has been since my childhood. Do I really want to buy that new mobile device, or is that invisible and familiar tug pulling at me to do so?