

The Culture of Consumption

In the whole of human history there has never been a societal system that has produced such a *high level of material well-being and wealth of material comforts* than that which has originated out of our modern Euro-American (Western Europe and North America) society.¹ From sophisticated health care systems, to automated industrial manufacturing, to high-yield farming practices, to expansive transportation and communication networks, to an accessible educational system, the accomplishments go on. Humanity has now walked the craters of the moon and extended the life of a child with the implantation of a baboon's heart. In fact, the human biological heart can now be replaced with a mechanical heart.

The world is rapidly becoming a singular community. What is news in Beijing, Buenos Aires, Jakarta, Moscow or Tokyo is news in one's own living room. And what is dreamed in Beijing, Buenos Aires, Jakarta, Moscow or Tokyo is dreamed in one's own home. The aspirations associated with Euro-American society are rapidly becoming the aspirations of much of the entire world community. And those expectations are directed at ever increasing levels of consumer goods and material well-being, e.g., automobiles, clothing apparel, entertainment systems, recreational equipment, housing, nutrition and health care. One of America's most lucrative exports is its multi-billion-dollar-a-year "Hollywood Image,"--the motion picture, television, magazine, amusement park, popular music, and most assuredly, "fast food" and clothing industries. At this very moment it is likely that someone in Beijing, Buenos Aires, Jakarta, Moscow or Tokyo is standing in a line, wearing a pair of Levis, listening to "rock 'n' roll" and about to order a Big Mac and a Coke, and that someone is not an American. An entire life style, "American Popular Culture," is being successfully marketed worldwide. The images are clearly disseminated and received, images ingrained with expectations.

With the emergence of modern Euro-American society has emerged what John Bodley has labeled the "culture of consumption."² It is a life style predicated not only on what one

¹Our Euro-American society is the culmination of the influences of both Traditional and Modern world views. We are reminded that we should not arbitrarily assume an exclusive association of one or the other world view with any particular society.

²See Bodley 1985. Bodley is among many who have used the term "culture of consumption." For an insightful discussion of the range and implications of the consumer life style, see Alan Durning 1992.

consumes, but on an ever increasing level of consuming. One's social and economic status, familial relationships and modes of entertainment, the very core of one's self-identity are defined in terms of an almost insatiable hunger for consumable goods. Two favorite American pastimes, viewing television and visiting shopping malls, are oriented around their sales pitches for and lure of a seemingly endless array of brightly packaged consumer goods and throwaway products. The "culture of consumption" can best be epitomized in the soft drink and fast food slogans, "Gotta have it" and "What you want is what you get."

With these levels of material well-being and expectation also come a price tag. Never in the whole of human history has a societal system necessitated such high levels of resource and energy consumption than that required by our modern Euro-American society. To facilitate this cultural infrastructure and level of expectation, expanded and new sources of energy and resources are constantly being sought. The contemporary energy use in the United States alone translates into the equivalent of each American consuming 25 barrels of oil, 3.5 tons of coal, and 75,000 cubic feet of natural gas annually.

But within the global community, shared by so many world views, the benefits of Euro-American society are not uniformly bestowed on all those who aspire its dream. While estimations vary, in the United States alone, Americans consume some 40% of the world's annual production of goods and 35% of the world's energy. Americans represent only 5% of the world's population. In global terms, the top 20% of the world's population controls 80% of the wealth while the bottom 20% controls less than 1.5% of the world's wealth. It is estimated that over a billion people in the southern hemisphere of this world survive on the equivalent of one dollar a day. Many dream the dream, yet for most the dream is far from realized. All indications suggest that this socio-economic schism is widening and becoming more pervasive throughout the world, expressed in virtually all communities. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer.

With the increased levels of energy consumption characteristic of our Euro-American society, the questions remain whether the earth can continue to supply the energy resources necessary to maintain the expectations of its people, and whether the by-products of this level of energy consumption (i.e., pollution) can safely be absorbed within the world ecological system.

Are new resources to be found? Are new technologies to be discovered? Is a change in expectations or even world-view values necessary?

At stake are the reserves of fossil fuels and raw materials such as iron ore and copper. At stake is the very fertility of the earth. Up until recently, within the United States, for every ton of wheat harvested from the great plains, two tons of topsoil are lost because of erosion caused by modern farming practices. Each year some three billion tons of topsoil are lost to water and wind erosion tied to agricultural practices. In turn, agriculture and silviculture account for 46% of all river pollution in the United States. It takes approximately 500 years to produce an inch of topsoil.

At stake is the quality of the air and water. At stake are the global fluctuations in temperature and solar radiation. Each year, America emits over five billion tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, a major "green house" gas, and hundreds of millions of tons of sulfur dioxide, causing acid rain.

At stake is the continued existence of the vast forests of the Amazon, Southeast Asia, and the American Northwest. At stake is the diversity of animal and plant species, and the indigenous peoples who inhabit those forests. In the year 1900, there were over 1,400 distinct species of crop foods utilized worldwide. Today, there are only four key species – soya, corn, rice and wheat, along with a few subspecies. When disease hit parts of the America's southeast crop a few years ago, the entire harvest was lost, only rescued by the introduction of an exotic species reliant to the disease. Seventy percent of all pharmaceutical drugs have been discovered based upon their natural derivative. Each year between 20,000 and 40,000 species of animals and plants is eliminated from this planet by the actions of humans; and the rate of species extinction is increasing. It is estimated that one in eight known plant and animal species will be extinct within the next ten years. Of the five million Indians who once lived in the Amazon region, only 220,000 survive today. Until very recent and reluctant intervention by the Brazilian and Venezuelan governments, an average of one Yanomami Indian was killed each day by gold mining and lumber interests. Yet, of the remaining 300 million indigenous people scattered throughout the world today, representing some 5% of the world's population, tens of thousands continue to die each year because of murder and warfare or disease and starvation, all brought

about as a direct result of the resource demands of Euro-American society. With the death of indigenous peoples comes the loss of cultural diversity. As the biologist reminds us and as echoed in the voice of the anthropologist, a viable ecological system is a reflection of species and cultural diversification. Ultimately all successful adaptations to the dynamic of our bioenergetic-cybernetic niche are predicated on the vitality of and accessibility to system-wide diversity. An unstable and potentially dying ecological system is a reflection of an absence of species and cultural diversification, and the emergence of what is called a "mono-culture."

At stake is not only the quality of our life, but the very existence of the Dream Animal itself. At stake is not only the preservation of pristine wilderness areas, but the very existence of all life in this planetary ecosystem. Never in the history of this planet has a single species so influenced the very survival of all the species!