

Tackling turbo consumption

An interview with Juliet Schor

Juliet Schor, co-founder of South End Press and The Center for a New American Dream, talks to Jo Littler about trends in contemporary consumerism.

What do you see as the key trends or significant developments in American consumer society over the past decade?

The first is the ‘work and spend’ culture. This is the idea that growth in work productivity gets channelled not into shorter hours of work, but into *incomes*; and those incomes then get spent. Recently there has been a significant change in that culture. When I was writing *The Overworked American* between 1985 and 1990, the idea was that productivity growth got shared out at least *reasonably* widely to a large sector of workers as well as to shareholders, business owners and management. But in a trend that began in the 1980s, and accelerated in the 1990s, less and less of the productivity growth is actually becoming disseminated to anyone who’s not at the top of the distribution tree. People’s incomes are not rising in the same way, except for a very small minority. At the same time, long hours are increasingly associated with rising incomes, which people then get habituated to; and then they’re locked into lifestyles that are always creeping up in terms of financial requirements. People in that cycle often get burned out, and stressed out, particularly as the requirements of jobs have increased. That’s one of the ways that firms have responded to globalisation and earlier crises of profitability, and the much heightened competition that they’re facing: by pushing their workers much harder. This is true whether we’re talking about

hourly paid workers or salaried workers - even very privileged and well-paid workers are subjected to this kind of pressure. And this has led to an ongoing backlash against conditions of life in these jobs. The jobs are scarcer and scarcer, and simultaneously the norms for succeeding in them are harder and harder to sustain for individuals.

Then, alongside the worsening distribution of income, there's the declining vitality of social life, and the increasing prominence of market culture in people's lives. The dynamics of consumer emulation have changed, and have come to focus much more on very high levels of consumption. In other words, the consumer norm has shifted - from what one would call a 'proximate', or 'horizontal' norm, in which people are aspiring to lifestyles similar to other people in their economic bracket, to one in which a high-end, affluent, media-driven norm of consumption prevails (although exactly how high you aspire will vary according to where you are). And that's what I call 'vertical emulation'. So my catchphrase is 'we went from keeping up with the Joneses, to keeping up with the Gateses'. That's an exaggeration, of course, but it does signal what is a substantial change. It's a shift that is responsible for an ongoing sense of dissatisfaction, because such consumer aspiration is unattainable for the majority of people.

A third trend is the way in which younger generations are growing up in a more consumer-saturated world, a world in which market mediation is so much more important in defining their own identities, subjectivities and social dynamics. This is really the expansion of market culture, of consumer culture, to more and more of social life. And that's a process that's been going on for a long, long time, but it has accelerated with younger generations.

And where do you think these trends are moving right now?

Religion. Religion is one of the places that is being rapidly colonised by consumerism. You see it in evangelical movements that have combined religiosity with a kind of very 'boosterist' love of the market and consumer culture. There's also still an incomplete colonisation by the market of non-market institutions. I'm thinking about the university, for example, which is rapidly marketising; and the healthcare system, the education system, all of those areas. These marketing processes have gone on for a while but they're accelerating rapidly now. And then there's the commercialisation of people's personal lives. There's a lot of

data out there already about the extent, in dollar terms, of growing imports, and I think people are aware that Americans are consuming many more imported products. I'm concerned with the ecological impact and patterns, and what I am finding is that the cheapening of prices is leading to big increases in *units* of things. I'm interested in how this is being made possible by a global economy of sweated labour, and by the failure to deal with the environmental impacts of production and consumption. I've been trying to construct the empirical story of what's going on. I started with apparel, which is a well-known industry in terms of sweatshops and so forth. And what I found is that in 2003 the average American consumer purchased 57 pieces of apparel. That's more than one new piece of apparel per week. In 1991 the figure was 34, which is an increase of 23 pieces a year over a mere 12 years.

So you're looking at the debates around overconsumption in a global, rather than a purely American, context. Do you think that any significant movement against consumerism and overconsumption can actually come from the US? Or will it mainly have to come from outside it?

Well, there are definitely places in Europe that are ahead of the US in some dimensions of consumerism - for example ethical consumerism, fair trade and the ecological impacts of consumption. On the other hand, there are parts of what we might loosely call an emerging 'anti-consumerist movement' that originated in the US, and have had a dynamic life here. I'm thinking in particular of 'downshifting' and 'simple living'. You see analogies to that in Europe, although the more prevalent pattern is people who never 'upshifted' enough to be able to downshift. But simplicity has an interesting popular resonance in the US. It's not a mainstream trend by any means, but I do think there are possibilities here. We're taking a different path against consumerism here, and it's a much more individualistic path: but I definitely see significant things happening.

Do you think there are any US politicians or political figures dealing with the question of overconsumption now, or is the issue just absent? How do you think US left politics should position the issues of overconsumption within its agenda?

It's been very difficult because if you think about the traditional left - or rather,

what is left of it in the US, which isn't much - it has been geared pretty closely towards more conventional social democratic (or rather, what is as close as this country gets to social democratic) calls for better distribution and higher levels of income. So the US left has conventionally been growth-oriented. Certainly the unions, which are at the core of a progressive articulation here, have taken that point of view. One of the points I've made is that that such a perspective is insufficient and problematic, and that there has to be a critique within the left of how we consume, and consumerism as a way of life and an ideology. And there was a lot more of that kind of thinking in the 1960s. In the 1960s, there was an ecological critique, a feminist critique - and they were both fairly anti-consumerist. It was mainly a kind of Marcusean formulation, and I think many leftists who were formed in the sixties have a pretty critical view of consumption. But this view is often a somewhat simplistic one, I would say, as in 'oh, consumer culture is bad', a formulation which assumes there's another anti-consumerist culture that is 'good', and that people are duped by consumerism. I think that's insufficient. Because the US is such a consumer society, and because US identities and lives are so structured by consuming, it seems to me that a political positioning on consumption is necessary. It has to be integral to any successful social or political movement in the US at this time. This is particularly true with young people: it's too hard to think of organising them in a way that doesn't deal with or address consuming, because it structures people's lives so much.

Would you say there somehow needs to be more of an attack on the very idea of economic growth? I noticed that in your book you don't use the word 'capitalism' very much.

I do talk about capitalism sometimes. But it's a hard word to use in the US right now because it carries a lot of baggage. And it moves the discourse onto very unfavourable terrain, which is: well, if you don't like capitalism, what *do* you like? And since we don't really have a *name* for what it is that we're for right now it plays to our weaknesses and not our strengths. By 'our' I mean people who have similar views. Now, why is that? Our strengths are the failings of the system. My work is always oriented toward the failings of the system, and the critique is implicit and in many ways explicit. What is it that we're *for*? Well, as I said to the student last night, the things that I'm for, and the solutions that

I'm articulating, could in no way be called capitalism. Of course there are many variants of capitalism, and many ways to move, and so this is one problem with the word. Twenty years ago I didn't have this view. I thought capitalism was one thing, which is a view I no longer hold. Now I recognise that it's a much more complicated system, with different articulations at different times and places. In terms of my own thinking about what kind of alternative we're trying to construct, I have been trying to do a little bit of work on this, on a new economic vision. And I've come to this through ecology as a discipline, and ecological movements that I'm active in politically - the Center for A New American Dream, which I co-founded, is part of the sustainability and ecological movement.

What I think is really crucial and what the Keynesian vision doesn't address is that the Number One cultural transformation that needs to happen is a very profound shift in the distribution of productive assets. That's a very basic Marxian kind of idea, but I think we need to move in the direction of those assets being small-scale and owned locally, as opposed to owned in large collective public units. I don't see a sustainable ecological alternative that isn't small-scale in the long run. In my view, that's the direction we need to move towards. I think debates about states and markets are really a sideshow to the debates about how is property distributed. So in that sense I'm a pretty old-fashioned Marxist. And then of course you have the strategic question: how is it that we could move from a world in which productive assets are becoming more and more concentrated over time, more and more unequally distributed, to one where we have a roughly egalitarian distribution of assets? That's the key question.

So movements against overconsumption have to connect, somehow, to new forms of economy.

'Have to' is a strong phrase. Now, the dominant, ecological point of view is that we can green the existing capitalist economy. And 'overconsumption' is a word I rarely use, as it puts the onus in the wrong place. It gives the impression that the problem is with these out-of-control individuals who eat too much or drive too much. There's a part of that which is valid, but the most fundamental problem with consumption right now is its ecological impact. So unsustainable consumption, unjust consumption: those are the words I would prefer to use.

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Yes, there's too much of it; but it's also the wrong kind of consumption. And it's conceivable that, if we're thinking really long term, and there's a really profound shift in the technologies of production and consumption, and in the patterns, it's possible that we could have *more* consumption, in value terms, than we do today, but with a more sustainable ecological impact. And that to me could be a really good thing. Although 'capitalism' is a word that doesn't have a lot of resonance in this context, growth is another matter. I think it's easier to have a discourse about whether growth is good, or what *kind* of growth. You asked me if any political figures are discussing growth and I think the answer to that is no. It remains an incredibly taboo topic in the United States. At the level of national political discourse we're barely talking about whether we should use so much oil, much less whether we should consume so much altogether. That debate is starting, but the debate about whether our consumption is too high...? No.

'Economic growth' is still the great untouchable. You can talk about environmentalism, but it's completely separate. That link is not made on any significant popular level.

Right. If you're playing in the mainstream sandbox of political discourse, then the last person who tried to do that was Jimmy Carter and he sure got slapped down for it.

When reading Born to Buy I was struck by your discussion of how the processes of consumer culture are mediated through social contact and community. Do you see any possibilities there for more progressive forms of anti-consumerism or sustainable consumption?

Yes, there are groups of people who are getting together with a common purpose, coming together and rejecting conventional branding, and the multinationals, and advertising, and marketing. They are developing a different relationship to consumption. You saw that of course in the anti-globalisation movement, which had an anti-brand dimension to it; and we see it in the emergence of the 'simple living' groups, and of young people whose parents were trapped in the work and spend cycle, and so they are wary and critical of that lifestyle. There are people who are drawn to a values-driven lifestyle and that's the kind of person that the Center for the New American Dream is appealing to.

That relates to how consumer and social networks could function differently. Robert Greenwald's recent documentary, Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price, is an interesting example here, in that they have used viral marketing techniques, and social networks of distribution, to disseminate the video amongst Wal-Mart workers and shoppers alongside the theatrical release of the film. The idea is that you buy ten of these DVDs at a time and send them to your friends and colleagues; you are encouraged to have parties to see the film, etc.

Right. We're doing similar things, we're having house parties to discuss books that are critical of consumption, and having alternative gift fairs. A stance that just says 'consuming is bad, don't consume' is a non-starter. People *have* to consume. Consuming is a very legitimate, and very important, activity. The literature has been very polarised into positions that are very pro- or anti-consumer society and culture, the critics and the defenders. But really the question is: *what kind of consumers do we want to be?* And that's a better articulation, I think, because people have identified so much with being consumers. The possibility of not being a consumer no longer exists. So I think the questions that we want to ask are: where is my clothing coming from? What is its symbolic meaning? We don't want to say, you're a bad girl for buying clothes.

There's also a useful distinction that we could make here between anti-consumption and anti-consumerism: in that consumption is about consuming anything, and consumerism is about a particular stage of late capitalism.

I define consumption particularly as market activity. There are differences in the literature on this. Some people say that going to a free concert is consuming music, but I take a more traditional economic position here, and say that it's the market purchase of these goods we call consumption. But I make another distinction between consumption and consumerism. I define consumerism as an ideology and a set of values. I think that it is particularly pernicious, an ideology which is not conducive to promoting human well-being, which is destroying the planet, which is enabling a rapacious capitalist system.

'Consumerism' can also refer to the political movements on behalf of consumers' rights movements ...

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... yes, some of which are anti-consumerist, which is so interesting, particularly in terms of how they have evolved since the 1960s in the US, where we had a consumer safety movement, and the consumers' union. And I know you have the equivalent in the UK with the National Consumer Council. It's an interesting movement, this, because it's all about value, and about seeing through the hucksterism of Madison Avenue - of advertising and marketing - and not paying needlessly for branding activities and so forth. This consumerism embodies a very rational, male, value-oriented, 'pay the least price for the best quantity' movement.

In which the idea of equipping the sovereign consumer with full knowledge is dominant.

Yes. And that has a very anti-symbolic dimension to it. And my own view is that that's a limited perspective, because a lot of what people want from consumption *is* symbolism. It's why they care so much about their Nikes, or Coca-Cola, or whatever. There's an intense emotional connection to brands, which teaches me how important the symbolic dimensions of consumption *are*. People are buying and discarding things at a very rapid rate. Clearly this is an ecological problem, but it's also a fascinating social dynamic. Why is the symbolic value of these things disappearing so rapidly, when their practical or useful value is still very high? I think the answer is the importance of the symbolic nature of goods and services. Where many critics have gone wrong is arguing against symbolic value and saying, if it's not practical or if it's not useful, then it's not worth anything. But a lot of what people want from their goods is symbolic value, and I think the questions we have to ask of these goods are, what are these products symbolising? And where are these symbolic meanings coming from? How do we create an authentic consuming culture in which symbolic meanings are coming from good places - through good, egalitarian processes - which actually give people deep and indirect meaning, so they don't throw products away when they're still practically useful.

So any kind of sustainable consumption has to take into account the complexities of desire and identification.

Absolutely. Situating the aesthetic at the core of an alternative consumer vision is really key, as that is what a lot of people are *craving*. People want beautiful things; they want to be creative in their consumption. The kind of approach to consumption that I'm talking about is the kind of consumption that really values the aesthetic and the creative and its connection to the symbolic.

Can that move beyond a middle-class niche which has lots of cultural capital?

We need to connect it to the production side, emphasising the need for the local and small-scale. What that means is that we need to revalue artisanal and craft skills. This is pretty old-fashioned in a certain way: people like William Morris, Adorno and Horkheimer and the Romantic movement thought about it, it's an old tradition that revives itself constantly. Let's take apparel, which is the industry I've thought most about. Right now, a very small number of highly-paid designers have their designs mass-produced in factories, under sweatshop conditions, which then send them back to the consuming countries. There, some are sold but large numbers get dumped on the market, especially if the designs are 'wrong'. So what would an alternative be, that validates both sides of this consumption and production? You could have much more local, small-scale production, with much closer links between the consumers and producers.

How would you connect such ideas to broader forms of political policy?

First of all, to make it happen, you need a shift in tax incentives and subsidies, to change the type of production; to turn abandoned factories into little workshops; there's a whole set of policies and economics that go along with this. But I think it's fairly obvious in some ways. For example right now in the US we're spending hundreds of billions of dollars to enforce an international economic regime which needs a giant military and political apparatus to keep it going, so that we can have a whole system of sweatshop labour in far-flung places and exploitative, extractive industries, and so we can avoid paying farmers reasonable prices for goods and so forth. There's actually a lot of money that we use right now to put down the rest of the world that would no longer be needed if we had a more equitable production system. So it sounds expensive, but if we actually did it, it's affordable.

So you would want to link the idea of smaller, artisanal, sustainable consumption to policies whereby transnational corporations are not permitted to scour the globe to employ sweatshop labour.

Absolutely. I think that if we're talking long-term, the multinational corporation as it exists is not a sustainable entity. It will not prove to be ecologically sustainable, and it's not a politically feasible institution from the point of view of democracy or egalitarian social relations.

This brings us to the question of how you view your work in relation to, and as a form of activism. Your work occupies quite an interesting space in that your books deal with complex issues, but seek to present them in an accessible way; they mix the qualitative and the quantitative, and present recommendations for change at the end. So I wondered how you think of your work as a kind of activism, and how you think it has changed over the years.

Even before I wrote *The Overworked American*, which was my first trade book, I felt strongly about the value of working for a broad audience, even though I had done very little of it. I and some others started a summer school called *The Center for Popular Economics* [in 1978]. One thing I have always felt very strongly about in my work is the value of expressing ideas in 'plain' language which large numbers of people can read, and the power of writing books for a general audience about these issues. I see that as a political commitment; and it allows to me to go around and do a lot of public speaking, and media work about the books.

Now, I do feel that where I've fallen short in every one of the books I've written is the last chapter, which asks, well, what do you *do* about this problem? It's always the chapter that I'm least happy with. Since 1995 I've been working with people to start this very active organisation, the Center for a New American Dream, and this has helped me become a little bit more rooted in the practical aspects of activism around social movements. I feel I'm getting better at at least *thinking* about the solution side of things. I did a volume with the main founder of the Center, Betsy Taylor, called *Sustainable Planet Solutions for the 21st Century*, because one of the things that I feel very strongly is that there are a lot of people out there who *understand the critique of the system*.

The alternative globalisation movement has done that. But people are having difficulty figuring out what to do, particularly on more than on a very, very small scale. So Betsy Taylor and I are trying to work more on that area, with a view to perhaps convening a project around sustainable economic alternatives. This is where progressive movements get stymied. Let's go back to where I said we have a problem when we talk about capitalism: we have a disadvantage, because we don't have a name for our alternative. And so we're criticising something about which people will say: 'Well, there's no alternative to it'. So I think working on that alternative is really important.