

In Defense of Consumerism



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I'm beginning to think that the epithet "consumerism" is just another word for freedom in the marketplace.

It's true that the market is delivering goods, services, and technological advances by leaps, day after day. People claim that they are so inundated with techno advances that they don't want anymore. Say no to the latest gizmo!

But we really don't mean it. No one wants to be denied web access, and we want it faster and better with more variety. We want to download songs, movies, and treatises on every subject. No amount of information is too much when it is something specific we seek.

And that's not all.

We want better heating and cooling in our homes and businesses. We want more varieties of food, wine, cleaning products, toothpaste, and razors. We want access to a full range of styles in our home furnishing. If something is broken, we want the materials made available to repair it. We want fresh flowers, fresh fish, fresh bread, and new cars with more features. We want overnight delivery, good tech support, and the newest fashions from all over the world.

The libraries are going online, as is the world's art. Commerce has made the shift. New worlds are opening to us by the day. We find that phone calls are free. We can link with

anyone in the world through instant messaging, and email has become the medium that makes all communication possible. We are abandoning our tube-televisions and landline telephones – staples of 20th-century life – for far superior modes of information technology.

We want speed. We want wireless. We want access. And improvements. Clean and filtered water must flow from our refrigerators. We want energy drinks, sports drinks, bubbly drinks, juicy drinks and underground spring water from Fiji. We want homes. We want safety and security. We want service. We want choice.

We are getting all these things. And how? Through that incredible production and distribution machine called the market economy, which is really nothing but billions of people cooperating and innovating to make better lives for themselves. There's no dog-eat-dog. Competition is really nothing but entrepreneurs and capitalists falling over themselves in a quest to win the hearts and minds of the consuming public.

Sure, it's easy to look at all this and shout: ghastly consumerism! But if by "consume" we meant to purchase products and services with our own money in order to improve the human condition, who can't help but plead guilty?

The whole history of ideas about society has been spent trying to come up with some system that serves the common man rather than just the elites, the rulers, and the powerful. When the market economy, and its capitalistic structure, came into being, that institution was finally discovered. With the advent of economic science, we came to understand how this could be. We began to see how it is that billions of unplanned economic choices could conspire to create a beautiful global system of production and distribution that served everyone. And how do the intellectuals respond to this? By denouncing it as providing too much to too many.

But are people buying superfluous things that they can do without? Certainly. But who is to say for sure what is a need as versus a mere want? A dictator who knows all? How can we know that his desires will accord with my needs and yours? In any case, in a market economy, wants and needs are linked, so that one person's necessities are met precisely because other people's wants are met.

Here is an example.

If my grandchild is desperately sick, I want to get her to a doctor. The urgent care clinic is open late, as is the drug store next door, and thank goodness. I'm in and out, and I have the

medicine and materials necessary to restore her to health. No one would say that this is a superficial demand.

But it can only stay open late because its offices are nestled in a strip mall where the rents are low and the access is high. The real estate is shared by candy stores, sports shops selling scuba gear, a billiard hall, and a store that specializes in party favors – all stores selling "superficial" things. All pay rent. The developer who made the mall wouldn't have built the place were it not for these less urgent needs.

The same is true for the furniture and equipment and labor used in the urgent-care clinic. They are less expensive and more accessible than they otherwise would be due to the persistence of non-essential consumer demands. The computers they use are up-to-date and fast precisely because technicians and entrepreneurs have innovated to meet the demands of gamers, gamblers, and people who use the web to do things they shouldn't.

The same point can be made about "luxury goods" and bleeding-edge technologies. The rich acquire them and use them until the bugs are gone, the imitators are aroused, capitalists seek out cheaper suppliers, and eventually prices tumble and the same technology hits the mass market. Moreover, it is the rich who donate to charity, the arts, and to religion. They provide the capital necessary for investment. If you think through any service or good that is widely considered to be a need, you will find that it employs products, technologies, and services that were first created to meet superficial demands.

Maybe you think quality of life is no big deal. Does it really matter whether people have access to vast grocery stores, drug stores, subdivisions, and technology? Part of the answer has to do with natural rights: people should be free to choose and buy as they see fit. But another argument is buried in data we don't often think about.

Consider life expectancy in the age of consumerism. Women in 1900 typically died at 48 years old, and men at 46. Today? Women live to 80, and men to 77. This is due to better diet, less dangerous jobs, improved sanitation and hygiene, improved access to health care, and the entire range of factors that contribute to what we call our standard of living. Just since 1950, the infant mortality rate has fallen by 77 percent. Population is rising exponentially as a result.

It's easy to look at these figures that suggest that we could have achieved the same thing with a central plan for health, while avoiding all this disgusting consumerism that goes along with it. But such a central plan was tried in socialist countries, and their results showed precisely the opposite in mortality statistics. While the Soviets decried our persistent poverty amidst rampant consumerism, our poverty was being beaten back and our longevity was increasing, in large part because of the consumerism for which we were being reviled.

Nowadays we are being told that consumption is aesthetically displeasing, and that we should strive to get back to nature, stop driving here and there, make a compost pile, raise our own vegetables, unplug our computers, and eat nuts off trees. This longing for the primitive is nothing but an attempt to cast a pleasing gloss on the inevitable effects of socialist policies. They are telling us to love poverty and hate plenty.

But the beauty of the market economy is that it gives everyone a choice. For those people who prefer outhouses to indoor plumbing, pulling their teeth to dentistry, and eating nuts from trees rather than buying a can of Planters at Wal-Mart, they too have the right to choose that way of life. But don't let them say that they are against "consumerism." To live at all requires that we buy and sell. To be against commerce is to attack life itself.