



CHAPTER 10

I buy,
therefore I am
Consumerism

Geoff Broughton

Inner liberty depends upon being exempt from domination of things as well as from domination of people. There are many who have acquired a high degree of political and social liberty, but only very few are not enslaved to things.

Abraham Joshua Heschel!

INTRODUCTION

I was recently confronted by a disturbing image in *Adbusters* magazine. The image was of a distended brown belly beside a picture of a bloated white belly. The caption below was even more disturbing: 'One billion people are dying of starvation. Another billion are dying of excess.' Merely being able to read this book automatically places you in the second category. We live in that part of the world where people generally have 'too much' rather than 'not enough'. We are living in a period some are calling 'The Age of the Consumer', where we find our identity and meaning in life through acquisition and accumulation: 'I buy (shop), therefore I am.'

Australian Institute founder Clive Hamilton provocatively called this 'affluenza' in his 2004 book of the same name². Yet most Australians (and probably the vast majority of those living in the developed world) don't consider themselves sick with greed. In Australia, we pride ourselves on being a land where everyone gets a 'fair go'. But if we define greed as taking more than our fair share, then the evidence is against us. In greater than half of the world's industrialised countries, 50% or more of the population are considered to be overweight. This is in comparison to the estimated 925 million people (roughly one in seven people in the world in 2011) who are starving. Five billion dollars-worth of food is thrown out in Australia each year. When it comes to money, Australian households fork out \$642 billion each year on everyday expenses—that's more money than some developing countries ever see.³

Consumption of such magnitude has become a way of life and does not have a neatly organised system of ideas or beliefs. There are no great thinkers who are the key 'proponents' of consumerism. Nearly everyone is a consumer. There are those who have more because they consume more, just as there are those who have less because they consume less. Very few people choose to opt out of consumer culture

*We find ourselves
in a culture
that defines our
relationships and
actions primarily
through a matrix
of consumption.
As the philosopher
Baudrillard
explains,
'Consumption is a
system of meaning'.
We assign value to
ourselves and others
based on the goods
we purchase. One's
identity is now
constructed by the
clothes you wear,
the vehicle you
drive, and the music
on your iPod.
Skye Jethani⁴*

by 'not consuming'. Economics is one way of exploring how consumption has become such an unavoidable part of living in the twenty-first century.

HISTORY

Only a few generations ago, people produced (mainly food and other essentials) for their own use. This is what economists call subsistence production. The market had its origins as a place where farmers (and others) could sell their excess produce. Today, people produce an endless array of goods and services that will be consumed almost exclusively by others. The 'market' has evolved and grown from being local and mainly agricultural to being global and all-pervasive. It is the extension of the market into every

sphere of life that forces us to become consumers. Our daily food is bought at the 'super' market. The ever-expanding growth of the market has brought massive changes to our lives that are largely invisible to us. For example, we once worked in order to survive, and provide for our loved ones, as perhaps our great-grandparents did. Today we work to make money and buy a lifestyle. Increasingly this lifestyle is defined by possessing certain 'luxury' items—the latest mobile phone or iPod, and their many accessories.

*Commodification*⁵ refers to the process by which goods and services once provided through self-provision become commodities to be bought and sold in the marketplace. For example, once you might have made your child's birthday cake, thrown a child's birthday party at home, done your own cleaning and ironing, washed your own car or made your own custard. But now, you could opt to buy a birthday cake, pay a local centre to run your child's birthday party, employ a cleaner or someone to do the ironing, pay to have someone wash the car and buy custard from the supermarket.

When goods or services are exchanged in the marketplace economists call them commodities. Older generations can remember when many daily items like clothing, furniture

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.
Victor Lebow
(Retailing Analyst 1955)⁶

and tools were made at home rather than bought at a shop. Recently I discovered that my grandfather made the bricks to build a garage when he purchased his first car. Each evening after work, he would mix up a batch of sand and cement, fashion some new bricks, so that on the weekend he would have a couple of dozen new bricks to lay! I'm about as likely to make my own bricks as I am to make my own car! When I choose to make something (as opposed to purchasing it at a shop) it is either a cup of coffee or a sandwich. And in any given week, I buy more coffees at the cafe than I brew at home.

Consequently, commodification affects almost every area of life. This has fundamentally changed the way contemporary societies are organised, how we relate as neighbours, friends and even family, as well as the way we relate to our governments, schools, universities and voluntary groups like clubs, churches and sporting teams.

As our lives become dominated by the marketplace and what economists call 'exchange relations' our identity increasingly becomes that of a consumer. We become part of the system informed and formed by the values of the marketplace. The central idea of markets is individualism. The market assumes that individuals know best what they want and that by engaging in the marketplace they are free to express their desires and needs—economists call this 'utility maximisation'.

The industry rule of thumb says we see 3000 commercial messages a day.⁷

MATERIAL SATISFACTION? | 'Many studies show that materialism—the pursuit of money and possessions—seems to breed not happiness but dissatisfaction, depression, anxiety, anger, isolation, and alienation. People for whom "extrinsic goals" such as fame, fortune and glamour are a priority in life tend to experience more anxiety and depression and lower overall wellbeing—and to be less trusting and caring in their relationships—than people oriented towards "intrinsic goals" of close relationships, personal growth and self-understanding, and contributing to the community. In short, the more materialistic people are, the poorer their quality of life.' *Eckersley, Wierenga And Wyn*⁸

CENTRAL BELIEFS

The pursuit of economic growth is the engine room of individual, corporate, national and global consuming. While most people saw the irony of the 1980s mantra 'greed is good', the idea that 'growth is good' remains a fundamental economic principle. Many of us will remember the pictures in our high school economic textbooks of an African or Asian farmer who was able to produce enough only for his or her family. This was described as 'subsistence' living—not being able to produce enough to sell on the market.

Economists would argue (and who could disagree?) that growth would be a good thing for this farmer, his family, village and nation. In the same way, the growing business of backyard or home office entrepreneurs into their first factory or shopfront should be celebrated.

If a fundamental principle of economics is 'growth is good' then another follows—that 'the market is good'. The twentieth century triumph of capitalism over communism—the free market over centralised control—emphasises the point. Some economists will defend the excessive salaries of CEOs, or the ridiculous advertising contracts of sports stars, simply because they are determined by 'market forces'.

But this also raises the tricky issue of distribution. The benefits of ever-expanding economic growth are not shared equally. While there is no shortage of advertising endorsements for the successful sports star, the subsistence farmer may have trouble getting a fair price for his rice or coffee at the markets. Awareness-raising campaigns such as 'free trade versus fair trade' highlight the problem of market forces being the sole determinant in distribution.

Another key principle undergirding modern economics is that *supply is scarce*. The idea of scarcity cries out 'there is not enough'. Contemporary consumer culture operates on the central tenet that there is not enough to go around. 'You'll miss out' is an idea that feeds our anxieties and insecurities that branding and corporate advertising relies on. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says:

"The myth of scarcity makes us each an agent of acquisitiveness in the face of all the others who also pursue acquisitiveness."

The almighty power of the market can also surprise those who have gained most from it. We are becoming more aware that unbridled economic growth has social and ecological costs. In the twenty-first century, many large corporations are attempting to reflect these concerns by addressing a 'triple bottom line'—monetary profits, together with environmental sustainability and social responsibility. The market brings about these shifts as consumers buy from what they regard as fair and responsible companies.

Some remain suspicious of these developments, and whether 'triple bottom line' reporting is all it is cracked up to be. Actual sales figures of these environmentally friendly and socially responsible products show there is still a long way to go.¹¹

Although economics and theology are vastly different disciplines,¹² a few initial observations are worth making from a Christian perspective (which I will develop later). Obviously economic theory does not actually teach that 'the market' is any kind of divine entity. Those who believe that any rival to God is a form of idolatry must challenge the market's god-like function. Jesus said that we cannot serve two masters. Both God and the market cannot be sovereign. The philosophy of 'growth-at-all-costs' is directly opposed by the 'jubilee economics' practised by God's people throughout the Old Testament. Widows and strangers were allowed to pick up the leftovers from the corner of fields being harvested and interest *wasn't* charged on loans. But perhaps most radical of all, property returned to the original owners every 50 years (the jubilee year), ensuring a kind of generational justice, where current generations were not permitted to steal from future generations. This kind of jubilee economics was grounded in the character of a generous God, for whom the key principle is abundance, not scarcity.

The commercial reaches out to sell more than a service or product; it sells a way of understanding the world.
Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen¹⁰

IMPACT

I denied myself nothing my eyes desired;
I refused my heart no pleasure.
My heart took delight in all my labour, and this was
the reward for all my toil.

Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done
and what I had toiled to achieve,
everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;
nothing was gained under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 2:10–11

It would be impossible to overstate the impact consumerism has had on the Western world. It is so much part of life that few of us pause to question the underlying assumptions that drive the urge to consume.

One of the implications of individualism as expressed in the market is that individuals become the primary unit of analysis and the focus of all activity. This means that advertisers direct all their attention to the individual, to you and me—not our community, our environment or our city. As part of this message we are told that acquisition will bring some sort of satisfaction—the marketplace becomes our treasure trove—a font of endless possibilities where our many desires and dreams might one day be made a reality. It is an attractive and seductive message.

Advertising itself has undergone something of a revolution in response to the increasingly central role of the consumer. At the turn of the millennium, Naomi Klein identified the trend away from advertising products to developing brand identities.¹³ For example, the BMW has been cleverly marketed as the 'best car in the world', even though the vast majority of people would know very little about the quality of a BMW compared with an Audi or a Lexus. This is because branding focuses our attention away from the 'product' to the 'personality', which can be understood as a lifestyle, an image, an identity or even a set of values. The CEO of Gucci says it succinctly:

[Luxury] brands are more than goods. The goods are secondary because first of all you buy into a brand, then you buy the products. They give people the opportunity to live a dream.¹⁴

Attempts to resist the effect of corporate advertising and branding are made difficult by another dimension of consumer culture: its ability to quickly *commodify* alternatives, which are incorporated into the mainstream. The world of fashion and music illustrate how this happens.

If you were born after the mid-1960s, you cannot remember the time when jeans were considered a radical (working class) alternative to traditional pants.

By the late 1960s everybody and anybody wore jeans. In our lifetime we have seen a number of changes to the pair of jeans that began life as some kind of sub-cultural protest, but were quickly *commodified* and incorporated into the mainstream. First, during the 1980s the ripped appearance of an old, worn out pair of jeans was deemed fashionable. Very quickly a range of pre-washed, stonewashed, faded and factory-ripped jeans could be purchased right off the shelf. By 2006 this fashion trend had spread to most clothes: faded, distressed polo shirts, faded, distressed jeans, faded, distressed cargo pants and shorts, faded and distressed leather sandals and striped shirts. The 'pre-owned' look was mainstream. Similarly, during the 1990s, the alternative trend of wearing baggy jeans lower on the hips, rather than skin-tight jeans around the waist, became the latest innovation quickly incorporated into their design.

SUBSTANCE OR STYLE? | 'Style ... is a way of saying who we are or, perhaps more correctly, who we want to be perceived as being. Our consumer paradise offers us a rich palette from which to paint this image of ourselves consisting of stylised goods, name brands, logos, fashions, new looks, retro looks, reshaped noses and breasts, whitened teeth and exotic accessories which are all delivering information ... style is how we stand out, how we say who we are, how we assert our unique individuality. So from these purchases we assemble the parts of who we want to be, the parts which can combine in different ways as the whole comes together each day ... Of course! God has done a disappearing act and what are we left with? Only what is shifting and changing, what is superficial and impermanent, only with ourselves and what we can make of ourselves.' *David F. Wells*¹⁵

In today's consumer culture, 'new' music cannot remain alternative for very long. The rebellious roots of rock, punk, and grunge, plus a host of others, have been *commodified* and made mainstream. At the turn of the millennium, artists began posting their latest recordings directly on the internet, as a protest against the corporate power of the recording studios. MP3s have made online music mainstream (and big business!).

Even traditional religions like Christianity have been affected (some would argue seduced) by consumerism. In a book called *Selling Spirituality*, the

authors argue that the replacement of tradition-specific religion with a more freeform search for personal meaning has resulted in a consumerist spirituality that promises the world but demands absolutely nothing:

In a sense, the most troubling aspect of many modern spiritualities is precisely that they are not troubling enough.¹⁶

These flourishing expressions of consumer spirituality (what the authors call *capitalist spirituality*) ultimately serve the profit margins rather than faithful devotion. Increasingly those attending church (or mosque, synagogue or temple) are treated as consumers of a spiritual brand or product.

As noted earlier, some see the process of commodification as a simple (and neutral) outworking of market forces. Others are more enthusiastic, seeing the market's ability to both correct its own excesses and to constantly reinvent itself.

In accepting there is some truth in both observations, I refuse to believe that commodification is a wholly positive, or even neutral development.

Along with contemporary figures such as Pope Francis¹⁸, Bono of U2¹⁹, and Russell Brand (English comedian and activist)²⁰, I believe those of us with too much need to focus more attention on those with not enough. And there is enough evidence to suggest that we are not alone.

Recently, Australians have shown greater willingness to 'dig deep' when a national or international crisis grabs our attention, as with the Boxing Day tsunami of 2004. Private donations to Australian aid agencies have increased by an average of 9.5 percent per year since 2000. In the case of some Christian aid and development agencies, the increase is even greater. Conversely, people like Vandana Shiva are critical of the way westerners think that by throwing money at these problems they will somehow get better instead of worse.

Lasting solutions may indeed be elusive. Who has the answers? Who should we believe? Theorists of globalisation and global culture have often noted that the world now

The consumer is schooled in insatiability. He or she is never to be satisfied—at least, not for long. The consumer is tutored that people basically consist of unmet needs that can be appeased by commodified goods and experiences. Accordingly, the consumer should think first and foremost of himself or herself and meeting his or her felt needs. The consumer is taught to value above all else freedom, freedom defined as a vast array of choices.
Rodney Clapp¹⁷

resembles a large shopping arcade or supermarket.²¹ So it seems with the choices regarding our world's future.

Positively, the current generation of young people have been raised with a greater awareness of global issues through CNN and the web, and seem more inclined to be concerned about issues of economic justice such as debt relief for African nations, and the difference between fair trade and free trade. More young Australians are choosing to live and work overseas, some for multinational corporations, others with groups focused on global issues like the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund. Time will tell whether campaigns like 'Make Poverty History' and the Millennium Development Goals succeed in bringing any lasting change. But globalisation has raised awareness of the effects of our 'conspicuous consumption' on everyone else.

Simultaneously, more individuals and families are living in Australia with unsustainable levels of expectation and debt.

Research suggests the current generation of young people leaving school will find it harder to afford an education, get a job, or buy a home and they will have a huge group of aging baby-boomers to support in their retirement.

We now know that we are facing an energy crisis (when the world's consumption of fossil fuel will exceed the future reserves) and an ecological crisis (climate change). As suggested earlier, both are closely connected to our current levels of consumption.

In rich countries today, consumption consists of people spending money they don't have to buy goods they don't need to impress people they don't like.²²

CONTINENTAL DRIFT | Writing in 1932, Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset spoke of the nature of modern technological society as a 'mass' society in which cultural and political aspirations are surrendered to the lowest common denominator of comfort, convenience and safety. He said we live in a time:

'when man believes himself fabulously capable of creation, but he does not know what to create. Lord of all things, he is not lord of himself. He feels lost amid his own abundance. With more means at its disposal, more knowledge,

more technique than ever, it turns out that the world today goes the same way as the worst of worlds that have been; it simply drifts.²³

CONTACT AND DEPARTURE FROM CHRISTIANITY

Christianity (along with most other spiritual traditions) contends that people are relational beings, and ultimate fulfilment or satisfaction is not achieved individually. Although Christians believe in a *personal* God, this God is revealed to be relational. The very character of God is found in relationships between Father, Son and Spirit. In creating, sustaining and reconciling the world and humanity, God is deeply relational.

Surprising for some, is the growing consensus of economists that our excessive consumption is not achieving what we think it might: greater happiness. Anyone who has spent even a moment in self-reflection knows this already. But we continue to consume more, not less. Last year I purchased a second-hand sea-kayak, a sport I had not been involved in since my late teens. Twelve months later, I have purchased another kayak from a paddling mate who happened to be selling his, which was better than mine. I am also equipped with four new life-jackets (for my wife and two kids), a new paddle, a headlamp for paddling at night, a hand pump, a dry bag for car keys and mobile phone, and I look longingly at a whole range of gadgets and clothing in a magazine I now buy called *Sea-kayak*. I still love my new toy, and I try to get out on the water once or twice a week—but since the initial purchase I have consumed more, not less.

As a Christian, I am troubled by my high consumption, and of those around me. Together we have been seduced into thinking we will never have enough. Ultimately, I find myself *consumed* by this way of life. The neverending pursuit of acquisitions, the luxurious lifestyle that remains tantalisingly just out of reach, the burden of growing debt, the pace of life that wants to grab each and every opportunity ... together become all-consuming.

In sharp contrast to this idea of scarcity, the God of the Bible is about abundance. From the first chapters of the Genesis story, we see an abundant God at work:

- God initiates abundance—calling forth plants and fish and birds and animals.
- God promises continued abundance—commanding all these to ‘increase and multiply’.
- God is satisfied with creation’s abundance, declaring it all ‘very good’.
- God rests: having set in motion a world of abundance the world will have enough.

Although some forms of Christianity are aggressively against materialism, the biblical account affirms the essential *goodness* of what God created. For those with the eyes to see, creation is not just ‘there’—it’s given by God.

As the apostle Paul wrote at the end of one of his letters:

“Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?”
For from him and through him and to him are all things.’

Romans 11:35–36

God the creator is a generous gift-giver, and God intended that people receive and enjoy his gifts.

MEDIA

WALL STREET: MONEY NEVER SLEEPS (2010) | The sequel to the 1987 hit *Wall Street* sees the return of Gordon Gecko—the poster child for 80s greed and excess. In the original movie, Gecko (played by Michael Douglas) uses every means at his disposal—legal or otherwise—to make money. He lives by the creed ‘greed is good’. In *Money Never Sleeps*, Gecko has spent a number of years in prison as a result of his wrongdoings. As he walks out the prison gate, he finds a very different world to the one he left.

The financial excesses of the 80s have led to a disastrous financial situation in the early 21st century. The movie is set in the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, where unethical money-making decisions plunged whole countries into an economic emergency situation. The movie questions whether this crisis was inevitable or a function of our consumerism and greedy desire for more.

Yet the rest of the Bible tells the story of human distrust of divine abundance. From the beginning people were dissatisfied. God's creatures wanted more. And so the Genesis story continues as the bountiful earth becomes stingy—daily food now requires sweat and tears. Scarcity sets in and paradise is lost. The history of the Hebrew people is a history of learning to trust God's abundance. So central was this issue to the Hebrew people they had a special name for it: *Dayenu*—the attitude that says:

'there is enough', more than enough, because 'there is enough in God's goodness'.²⁴

If the God of the Bible really is a God of abundance, how might this shape attitudes and behaviour when it comes to consuming? The role of wealth and acquiring possessions in Christian thought is quite diverse. Sharp differences in attitude and lifestyles can be traced to the tensions that arise in Christian thought and teaching. A brief survey of the main themes that arise through the narrative of the Bible illustrates these tensions.²⁵

In Hebrew or early Jewish thought, what Christians call the Old Testament, we begin with the goodness of wealth because it is the blessing of God. God blesses certain people such as Abraham who, in turn, should become a blessing to others. Certain restrictions are also found in those Old Testament books known as 'The Law', governing the accumulation of wealth, particularly property. Everything belongs to God, and God wants all to enjoy it.

By the time the Hebrew people had developed into a nation-state, with their own king, gaps had emerged between those with too much and those with too little. Wealth and property increasingly belonged to a few. The 'prophets' spoke powerfully against this lack of economic justice. The 'sins' of the people of God were closely linked with selfish attitudes towards wealth, evidenced by a lack of care of those in need. The more poetic writings, called 'Wisdom literature', describe the tension around possessions and accumulating wealth. On the one hand possessions can be a reward for faithfulness and hard work. On the other, there are repeated warnings against the rich, often called 'the wicked', who accumulated their wealth dishonestly, or at the expense of others.

With the development of specifically Christian thought in the New Testament, there is one *significant* difference: wealth and possessions are never promised as a reward for faithfulness or obedience. The nuances of

the wisdom literature give way to the more radical teaching and lifestyle of Jesus Christ. God and money are rival masters, and Jesus repeatedly asked his listeners to choose God. Jesus and his band of disciples voluntarily lived with limited incomes. They accumulated few possessions for the sake of God's kingdom, relying on the generosity and hospitality of others. Likewise the early Christians pooled their resources and possessions, and lived generously with each other and outsiders. By the end of the New Testament writings, there are strong warnings against the emerging divisions between wealthy and poor people (see the letter of James) and against forgetting generosity (see Paul's two letters to the Corinthians).

Very importantly the New Testament challenges us to ask where we place our trust. Jesus' parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13–21) urges people to be 'rich towards God' rather than relying on physical wealth in the present. While we can enjoy the good things of life now, relationship with God and each other is a priority according to biblical teaching.

If Hebrew thought celebrated *dayenu* (there is enough in God's goodness), then Christian thought celebrates grace (the goodness of God in the person of Jesus Christ). Both are expressions of the generosity of God. Consequently contemporary Christian thought generally remains suspicious about accumulating wealth, greed and acquisitiveness and ever-increasing consumption.²⁶

God's generosity, and God's abundance offers the possibility of living more simply (acquiring less) and more generously. Simple, generous lifestyles shaped by generous communities are a powerful challenge to the pervasive culture of consumerism.

RESPONSE

Question

- 1 | What would be a good slogan to sum up the underlying beliefs of consumerism?
- 2 | Do you agree that consumerism is in fact a problem?
- 3 | What are the costs to society of rampant consumerism?

4 | What might be some potential benefits of reducing consumption in your own life? Try to think of some specific ways your life could change if you were to resist consumerism.

Discussion

A | *'My view of the world is that everybody is medicated on something; plastic surgery, drugs, sex, religion, shopping ... We're a culture that anaesthetises ourselves with things. And we're also a culture that really tries hard to find meaning where sometimes there isn't any meaning.'* Ryan Murphy (Creator Of TV Drama Nip/Tuck)

How much do you think consumerism is a part of this 'anaesthetising' element of our culture?

B | One criticism of some modern economic policy and practice is that people as well as things are regarded as commodities, and that the market determines a person's worth.

Do you agree that this is the case? In what way is such practice in conflict with a Christian view of the world?

ESCAPING THE TRAP

In the US a group of about 50 teachers, engineers, executives and other professionals have formed what they call the Compact, pledging not to buy anything new other than food, medicine and other essentials. They aim to buy only used goods and rely on second-hand stores, flea markets and eBay to do so. Happiness through simplicity is the aim.²⁷

Mike Hanley, in the Australian Financial Review says, 'The failure of a consumer society to deliver high levels of personal happiness has become a perplexing question of great interest, not just to economists, but to society as a whole. It's known as the happiness paradox'.²⁸

The Compact is an attempt to answer this paradox. John Perry, a member of Compact says, 'We're trying to get off the first-market consumerism grid, because consumer culture is destroying the world'.²⁹ Their concerns centre on environmental

and social damage created by consumerist culture. The only way to stop it is to get off the merry-go-round they say.

High school teacher Kate Boyd says the initiative gives her more time, money, and a healthier perspective on life. 'It's just a relief to get away from the pressure to always have new clothes, gadgets and other things we don't need', she said.

Some commentators suggest the Compact is part of a larger trend away from the all-pervasive consumerism. Time will tell, if they are right.

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Discussion

- C | How do you account for the phenomenon described in the article?
- D | What do you think brings lasting satisfaction in life?

Perception

- 1 | What are the most appealing aspects of consumerism as a way of viewing the world?
- 2 | What are its most identifiable weaknesses?