



William Leiss

The Limits to Satisfaction:  
An essay on the problem of  
needs and commodities

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## Preface

In the year 1972 the 210 million people of the United States, in pursuit of the satisfaction of their needs, used approximately 4.4 billion short tons of new material resources (minerals and non-food organic materials). This averages 42,500 pounds per person - for a single year; included were 17,800 pounds of natural gas, coal, and petroleum; 17,500 pounds of stone, sand, and gravel, 2,750 pounds of forest products, 1,200 pounds of iron, 50 pounds of aluminum, 25 pounds of copper, and 15 pounds of zinc.

At the same time, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that one-half of American families did not have sufficient income to enjoy a 'moderate' standard of living. Yet these families lived in the nation that enjoyed a disproportionately large share of the earth's bounty which was commanded by the 'developed' countries, that fortunate one-third of the human population which consumed ninety per cent of the total resource production.

And what of the future? A U.S. government commission projected the average yearly per capita demands of 300 million U.S. citizens in the year 2000 as follows: 5,000 pounds of forest products, 1,600 pounds of iron, 200 pounds of aluminum, 67 pounds of copper, and 23 pounds of zinc. The annual energy requirements of each U.S. citizen at that time would be the equivalent of twenty metric tons of coal.

In the light of the enormity of these demands upon the earth's natural resources, is it surprising that there should be widespread public concern in the 1970s over shortages and the possible scarcity of energy and minerals? That groups of experts should consider the feasibility of extracting resources from other planets? That haggling over the right to plunder the earth on favourable terms - such as the pointed reminder in

1974 by the International Economic Policy Association that the United States requires 'continued and reliable access to Canadian natural resources' - should cast a pall over the future relationships of all nations?

✓ Short-run solutions to the problem of resource supply probably will be found, at least for the developed countries, whose economic and political power guarantees their disproportionate share of the world's production in the immediate future. Yet so long as public discussion is concerned almost exclusively with the adequacy of resource supplies, another equally significant aspect of our situation will continue to be neglected. For while much attention has been focused on problems of supply, far too little has been bestowed upon problems of demands, wants, and needs.

✓ At its roots the problem of material demands in modern industrialized societies is nothing less than the problem of the possibilities of human satisfaction. The problem we must face now is to assess both the nature of human wants and the nature of the means by which we attempt to satisfy them. The problem of supply - that is, the provisioning of material resources for the satisfaction of needs - has no solution of itself, apart from its intrinsic relationship to the processes of social interaction wherein needs and wants arise.

In this essay I have examined the problem of human needs in the high-intensity market setting of contemporary industrialized societies. This setting promotes a lifestyle that is dependent upon an endlessly rising level of consumption of material goods. ✓ I have tried to show that, within the social process which enshrines this lifestyle as the highest goal of human endeavour, individuals are led to misinterpret the nature of their needs and to misunderstand the relationship between their needs and the ways in which they may be satisfied. And I have argued that, so long as that process persists, individuals will experience the frustration of their expectations and the terrors of anticipated scarcity in proportion to the massive, ever-growing accumulation of material wealth.

There is no prospect for a solution to this fundamental paradox apart from a better understanding of our needs and a reorientation of our social and economic behaviour away from dependence on a high-consumption lifestyle. The alternative prospect is increasingly bitter competition over available resources both within and among the industrialized nations.

W.L.  
Toronto  
November 1975

## Preface to 1979 edition

After this manuscript was complete, a number of important related works were published. These include Robert Heilbroner, *Business Civilization in Decline*; Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*; Tibor Scitovsky, *The Joyless Economy: An Inquiry into Human Satisfaction and Consumer Dissatisfaction*; Fred Hirsch, *Social Limits to Growth*; and Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason*. Some of what they have to say has a direct bearing on the issues examined in this book. I will not try to give an adequate account of these books here; but a brief discussion of certain themes in them will help to set the stage for presenting the specific approach I have chosen to use in the following chapters.

In his *Business Civilization in Decline*, Robert Heilbroner gives us the most sensible prognosis offered to date on our society's future. He argues that the economic system of corporate 'private enterprise' will be subjected increasingly to government regulation. This does not mean that private property or structural inequalities in wealth will be abolished in the foreseeable future; but the mixed economy of public and private interests will be directed more and more by civil servants whose actions will reflect the outcome of political processes. Of equal interest is Heilbroner's reflections on the changing attitudes of individuals. There is a growing general realization, he maintains, that 'economic success does not guarantee social harmony.' In the long run — over the next century — more and more persons will experience the 'hollowness' at the center of a business civilization.' This hollowness results from the universal substitution of pecuniary, impersonal exchanges for interpersonal,

non-pecuniary relationships, and from the degradation of labour into nothing but a means of securing income, without intrinsic satisfaction. When hopes for continual economic growth can no longer be sustained, it will become clear that these twin developments have robbed everyday life of much of its pleasure, and individuals will turn away from them towards other, as yet uncertain, forms of social organization.\*

Stuart Ewen's book recounts part of the history of a decisive turn in the course of capitalist development: the realization that 'ordinary' men and women could do a double duty for the economy, first by toiling (that much was known and appreciated) and second by consuming. Consumers are not among nature's evolutionary stunts; they must be created. The industrial work-force had been assembled by the brutal disruption of long-established ways of life and had been kept at their appointed tasks mainly by police terror. To the extent that any training in popular ideology had been found to be desirable for them, an ascetic production ethic was supplied, for example by Henry Ford. There is much irony in the fact that the mass-production techniques implemented by Ford and others signalled the obsolescence of this ethic and the necessity for its replacement.

The ideology of consumerism took shape in the 1920's. Led by business spokesmen such as Boston's Edward Filene, from whose remarkably frank speeches Ewen draws numerous quotations, its champions detailed the ways in which the 'masses' (their term) would be permitted to enjoy a share of what they had produced. Some time would pass before this reorientation of business thinking would take hold widely, and in any case the Depression and Second World War delayed its implementation until after 1945.

But the fabrication of a consumer ideology was underway. As described by Ewen, the following themes were explicitly presented in trade journals, speeches, and books of that period: (1) increasing access to consumer goods should weaken demands for workers' control in industry (i.e., 'bolshivism'); (2) as a corollary to the first, 'participation' was redefined as the exercise of consumer choice, which was to be the new and appropriate form of 'democracy'; (3) non-English ethnic minorities would be 'Americanized' and a

\*Robert Heilbroner, *Business Civilization in Decline* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1976), pp. 44, 113-7.



uniform national 'taste' created through advertising messages; (4) the spheres of production and consumption would be kept separate — for example, workplace scenes would not be used in advertising (a practice that is still quite noticeable in advertisements today); (5) the family would be opened up increasingly to social pressures, for example by new consumption models learned in public school 'home economics' courses and brought home by the kiddies; (6) male and female roles would be manipulated, with chief attention being given to presenting women as sexual objects; (7) the realm of personal consumption skills would be transformed: individuals (especially women) would be pressured into buying manufactured items (e.g., food and clothing) rather than making them at home.

In *The Joyless Economy* Tibor Scitovsky set out to undermine the economic theory of rational behaviour and consumer sovereignty. This is made up of the following propositions: (1) what the consumer chooses to do is an accurate reflection of his preferences, or in other words his preferences are revealed by his behaviour; (2) the consumer develops his own tastes and preferences independently of those of other consumers; (3) without sufficient means to satisfy all of his desires, the consumer must 'keep unsatisfied margins on all his needs and desires,' in order to insure that 'any extra dollar he spends on one thing yields him as much satisfaction as that extra dollar would if he spent it on any other thing.'

Scitovsky challenges his fellow economists by turning against them their most cherished value: he claims that the theory is *unscientific* in its portrayal of human psychology. He points out that the accepted theory simply cannot account at all for the obvious fact that the individual's preferences change over time — or, more precisely, that it cannot show why or how preferences change, as they obviously do. These changes are understandable only in relation to a social process of interpersonal relationships. Moreover, there is a reciprocal relation between changing preferences and changes in the sense of satisfaction derived from any particular activity; in Scitovsky's words, the dominant paradigm 'overlooks the possibility that the same influences that modify our tastes might also modify our ability to derive satisfaction from the things that cater to our tastes.'

Expressed in its simplest terms, Scitovsky's analysis attempts to explain why the expected correlation between greater happiness and rises in real income does not occur. He refers to empirical studies



done in the U.S. between 1946 and 1970: 'Over this period, almost twenty-five years, per capita real income rose by 62 per cent, yet the proportion of people who consider themselves very happy, fairly happy, and not too happy has hardly changed at all. Our economic welfare is forever rising, but we are no happier as a result.' He claims that the conventional economic paradigms cannot account for this, and he attempts to construct a theory that will do so.

There are four dimensions. First, there is empirical evidence that people derive satisfaction from status itself, that is, from relative social ranking or interpersonal comparisons that occur at any income level. Second, satisfaction is derived from work, but again largely as a function of the relative income and 'prestige' attributes of a particular job in the social hierarchy. Third, satisfaction correlates positively with novelty in one's experiences, but our own culture tends to standardize experience and progressively reduce novelty. Fourth, material progress is translated primarily into increasing comfort. Comfort, however, is like addiction: we become accustomed to it and soon take it for granted; new comforts cease to give pleasure in themselves, and only being deprived of them makes us feel the pleasure of having them (central heating, indoor toilets, adequate quantities of food, for example). 'Taken together,' Scitovsky concludes, 'they well explain why happiness should depend so much on one's ranking in society and so little on the absolute level of one's income.'\*

The background context that makes sense of this 'rank-happiness' is, of course, the market or commodity-oriented society. Most individual activity is directed at increasing income that serves as the access to purchasing goods and services. This context steadily depreciates the value of activities that do not serve this objective, including the intrinsic satisfactions that might otherwise be derived from work creativity or informal interpersonal relationships. No stable or permanent sense of satisfaction is achieved simply by virtue of the fact that most individuals have a higher 'standard of living' than preceding generations had.

Fred Hirsch's *Social Limits to Growth* complements Scitovsky's analysis. The basic similarity in the two books has to do with the social impact of changes in individual preferences. Hirsch argues that,

\*Tibor Scitovsky, *The Joyless Economy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. vii, 7, 64-5, 134-9.

once 'basic material necessities' are met for the majority of the population in a market-exchange economy, there is intensified competition for what he calls 'positional' goods. Since these goods are scarce by their very nature, the intensified competition for them yields no net benefits for individuals (the proportion of individuals in the population who get them remains roughly constant), and at the same time there is a high social cost incurred.

What are positional goods? These are goods which define social status differences among individuals; their value lies chiefly in the fact that some persons possess them and others do not. For example, to be able to move to a suburban community to escape a decaying urban environment can be such a good; those who can do so first enjoy easy access to both city and countryside. But when and if many people become suburbanites the advantages are largely negated: the urban culture has declined so much that it is no longer worth visiting, and the nearby countryside has been swallowed up by the newer suburban developments. All that remains for most is the well-known emptiness of suburbia itself. Another example is access to scenic beauty or foreign cultures. When only a few persons have the means of access, the advantages to them are enormous, as is the social 'distance' between them and those who cannot afford the costs. An increasing general level of affluence opens the gates, but at the price of sharply devaluing the experience, due to overcrowding and the resultant deterioration in the quality of the sites.

The deterioration of overcrowded sites is an example of the social costs resulting from positional competition. A better example can be drawn from the relationship between jobs and educational requirements. It is a well-known fact that the level of educational qualifications for jobs has been steadily increasing, and that in most cases this bears little or no relation to the requisite job skills. The flaw lies in individual assumptions about the expected correlation between formal education and high-paying jobs. The proportion of 'top' positions in society remains approximately the same, but larger numbers of individuals now compete for them. Stiffer educational qualifications are one of the screening mechanisms used to sort out the competitors. The same proportion succeeds now as in the past; but society pays the enormous cost of larger facilities for formal education for all the competitors.

In different ways both Scitovsky and Hirsch are concerned with one of the key aspects of a competitive, market-oriented society.

which has reached a certain general level of material affluence: the importance of the symbolic attributes of goods, and the ways in which rank and status are attached to them. This is by its very nature an intractable problem within the self-imposed limits of that society. When *relative position* is at stake, then the society will and must create new scarcities — that is, new *symbols of success* to be striven for — at every turn. It matters little what is chosen to signify status differences. The important point is that there is no limit to the process.

Hirsch understands what he calls positional competition as intrinsically related to a commodity-oriented economy: one of his chapters is entitled 'The New Commodity Fetishism.' The positional economy is in fact largely an expression of a 'bias to material commodities' and a 'commercialization effect'; this means that individuals increasingly interpret their well-being as the degree of success they have in 'turning over' their possessions, i.e., in having what the latest fashion dictates.

Hirsch uses the phrase 'commodity fetishism' in a book which, while it is highly critical of our present society, is not 'Marxist' in the usual sense. Yet of course this concept is one of the great hallmarks in the Marxist critique of capitalism. Most authors who write in the Marxist tradition continue to use it as a concept which to them accurately depicts certain key aspects of capitalist society down to the present day. On further examination, however, there appear to be serious difficulties in this approach. Marx used this term in a very restrictive sense, and used in this sense it does not have very wide relevance for a critical assessment of contemporary society. Moreover, there is a basic flaw in Marx's conception that has gone largely unnoticed since his time.

Marx developed the notion of commodity fetishism from his discussion of use-value and exchange-value. The former constitutes the 'matter' of the commodity, the latter its 'form.' The crucial aspect of this analysis is that the fetishism of which he speaks *arises only with respect to the form of the product*. Marx refers to the 'mystical character of the commodity' which arises out of its dual nature: commodities are 'sensuous things which are at the same time supra-sensible or social.' He also states: 'The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as

objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things ...'

These passages are so familiar, so much taken for granted after repeated citation<sup>214</sup>, that we rarely ask the obvious questions: What exactly is the 'mystery' that is alluded to here? The division of labour has stamped the products of human activity with a social character as far back as our anthropological researches permit us to go. Was not the dual<sup>215</sup> character of objects — as sensuous things and as objects whose significance is established by cultural forms — always quite obvious? On the basis of what evidence does Marx assume that people actually are mystified by this duality? Or that people do not recognize the characteristics of their labour in the properties of produced objects?

Marx offers an analogy between the commodity and the gods of religious belief that makes clear what is the essential point about the commodity: it is a physical object that appears to have a 'life of its own.' This is consistent with the understanding of fetishes in 'primitive' religion: a fetish is an object which itself is thought to possess certain powers, thus differing from an idol, which only symbolizes the power of, say, a deity.<sup>216</sup>

Three points are worthy of note. First, Marx states that the commodity form has '*absolutely* no connection with the physical nature of the commodity' (my emphasis). Thus it is not something arising out of the interplay of form and matter in the commodity — that is, the inherent duality of the commodity itself — that produces the mystery; its mysterious character is solely a function of the form alone. Second, *all* systems of goods-exchange which are sufficiently extensive to require a separate commodity as a medium of exchange have this result: the fetishism of commodities bears no intrinsic relation to the capitalist mode of production. Third, Marx gives no indication *how* the fetishism occurs under capitalist relations. In other words, if the commodity *form* is the generalized fetish, what specific kinds of fetishistic activities occur?

In order to develop his point, Marx contrasts the medieval and modern periods. Economic relations in the former are largely 'services in kind and payments in kind,' and 'the social relations between individuals in the performance of their labour appear at all events as their own personal relations, and are not disguised as social relations between things, between the products of labour.' One might

ask first whether this is an accurate picture of medieval social relations, i.e., whether labour did 'appear' as a form of *personal* relation, or whether the fundamental distinction between noble and non-noble (which may have been a kind of fetishism also) was not in fact the different disguise<sup>of</sup> of that period.

There may be little disagreement with the implicit suggestion made here, namely that there are different forms of reification in social relations. The questions remain: What exactly is the reification in commodity production? What exactly is 'the whole mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour on the basis of commodity production'? At the end of his section on commodity fetishism, Marx refers to what he regards as a series of conceptual errors by earlier economic theorists: these are apparently the result of the fetishism. It seems somewhat of an exaggeration to speak of them as 'magic' and 'necromancy,' but this may be merely quibbling. The important point is that the kinds of notions Marx refers to were gradually rejected in the further development of 'bourgeois' economic theory — in other words, they reflect the immature phase of a discipline which was attempting the difficult task of representing the new and complex mechanisms of a generalized market exchange economy.\*

I would like to pose a series of questions: (1) Did Marx's concept of commodity fetishism refer only (or chiefly) to 'ideological' elements in economic theories up to his day? (2) If this concept is still useful today, what specific notions in contemporary non-Marxist economic theories are expressions of commodity fetishism? (3) Did Marx mean that 'ordinary individuals' in the capitalist society of his day, as opposed to economists, were mystified — i.e., made mistakes in their choices or opinions — because of the way the system of commodity production operated? If so, what specific kinds of mistakes did they make? (4) Is it the case that individuals today make the same (or different) mistakes for the same reasons?

One can give a clear affirmative answer only to the first of these questions. If this is the case, then the concept of commodity fetishism has a narrow range of application. Moreover, as Marshall Sahlins has argued, there is a crucial flaw in Marx's approach that weakens its critical thrust. Marx assumed that both needs and

\*Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, tr. Ben Fowkes (Middlesex, Eng: Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 163-77 *passim*.

utilities were 'objective' data that could be specified without ambiguity. This is erroneous. Sahlins notes that for Marx the commodity as a use-value 'is perfectly intelligible: it satisfies human needs.' He refers to the passages in which Marx states that there is nothing mysterious in the properties of objects in so far as they are use-values or utilities, and he comments: 'all utilities are symbolic. Insofar as "utility" is the concept of "need" appropriate to a certain cultural order, it must include a representation, by way of concrete properties of the object, of the differential relations between persons — as contrasts of color, line, or fabric between women's clothes and men's signify the cultural valuation of the sexes. The "system of needs" must always be relative, not accountable as such by physical necessity, hence symbolic by definition.\*' The idea of the *symbolic constitution of utility* is indispensable for a critique of consumer behaviour in an industrially-advanced society.

If the commodity *qua* commodity has an enigmatic character, i.e., if it has such a character solely by virtue of its form, then one of two conclusions must follow. Either there is no problem here, as the apologists for market society claim; or, if there is a problem (as its critics say), there is no solution to it. For, no industrial society, however dedicated to the ideals of communism, could abolish the commodity form entirely, at least not without erecting an arbitrary dictatorship of tastes in its place. If there is only direct production for use in small community groups, then each group can suit its peculiar tastes; but this restricts the assortment of goods to what handicrafts can produce. Industrial production depends on extensive exchanges; the expression of individual preferences and a pricing mechanism — which may be limited in its scope by express policies on the basis of welfare considerations — has a place in facilitating those exchanges.

But we cannot begin to understand how to design such policies — that is, how to limit the destructive effects of commodity-oriented consumption patterns — if we do not recognize the symbolic constitution of utility. It is the key to Scitovsky's dilemmas of rank-happiness, to Hirsch's dilemmas of the positional economy — and to the fetish of the commodity (not the commodity-form) as the *embodiment of psychologically grounded attributes* (for ex-

\*Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 150.

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ample, the association of automobiles with animals and the qualities conventionally ascribed to them).

I think we must agree with Sahlins that all utilities in all cultures are symbolic. In a society like ours, where large numbers of people participate daily in extensive market exchanges, there is a *double* symbolic process at work. One facet of it is the symbolism consciously employed in the manufacture and sale of the product, including the imagery utilized in the advertising designs. The second facet is the symbolic associations selectively employed by consumers in 'constructing' lifestyle models; the whole marketplace is divided into semi-autonomous sectors which respond to different cues or to the same cues in different ways.

The analytical model developed in Part Two of this book is an attempt to sketch the main features of this double symbolic process. The dialectic of needs and commodities outlined there is intended to provide one comprehensive explanation of the social processes that Ewen, Scitovsky, Hirsch, Sahlins — and Marx, at a much earlier stage — have also sought to understand from a variety of different perspectives.

The outstanding dissimilarity between my approach and the others' is the great importance I attach to one special component of these issues: the relation between humanity and non-human nature. In the daily concern with economic indicators in industrially advanced societies there is now no place for this component. Yet we cannot continue indefinitely to ignore the effects of our impact on the regenerative capacity of the biosphere. Our indifference to it up to this point, I have tried to show, mirrors our growing indifference to the qualities of our own wants and needs. Without a better idea of how these two processes are related we will be unable to understand why the contentment that industrial progress was supposed to bring continues to elude us.

W.L.



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