

CONFRONTING CONSUMERISM

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Kathleen G. Donohue, *Freedom from Want: American Liberalism and the Idea of the Consumer* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003)

Jonathan M. Hansen, *The Lost Promise of Patriotism: Debating American Identity, 1890–1920* (University of Chicago Press, 2003)

Daniel Horowitz, *The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939–1979* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2004)

To recapture the ideal vision that many late nineteenth-century American thinkers held for their society one can do no better than Edward Bellamy's utopian novel, *Looking Backward, 1887–2000* (1888). In it Bellamy transports his young protagonist, Julian West, from the Boston of his day to a far more appealing version of the same city imagined as it was about to enter the twenty-first century. Julian finds a consumers' paradise, where each citizen receives a credit card to use in selecting from a virtually limitless variety of goods available for sale at local distribution centers. With everyone receiving a per capita share of the burgeoning national output, the entire society has now become securely middle class. Indeed, there is so much wealth that citizens are actively encouraged to spend rather than save. "The nation is rich," we are told, "and does not wish the people to deprive themselves of any good thing."¹ Labor unions, strikes, and class conflict have all become a distant memory. Along with the working class, the unsightly factories that once dominated so much of the urban landscape have essentially vanished. A cornucopia of goods miraculously appears, with the apparatus required for manufacturing them entirely out of sight. Given this happy state of affairs, all citizens exhibit a strong degree of patriotism. Dissent and disloyalty have become unknown, since there is no longer any need for them.

While some aspects of Bellamy's elaborate fantasy did not come to pass, what seems astonishing in retrospect is how accurate much of his forecast turned out to be. The world of mass consumption he envisioned is surely the world we inhabit today. The lives of most Americans have come to center on the acquisition of

1 Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (New York, 1960), 73.

material goods, paid for by credit cards and made available at local distribution centers known as shopping malls. Just as Bellamy foresaw, the rate of savings for much of the population has fallen to zero (although he did not anticipate the high level of consumer debt currently piling up). Industrial areas are usually located far from residential neighborhoods—often on the other side of the planet. And the middle class, which in Bellamy's time constituted a small fraction of the population, today represents a clear majority. While dissent has not disappeared, it has certainly been pushed to the margins of society in recent decades. In this regard, one could say that the fondest dreams of Bellamy and his contemporaries have largely come true.

Or have they? While the worst social and economic ills of the late nineteenth century have clearly been eliminated, one wonders how writers from Bellamy's day would have responded to the material abundance of the twentieth century had they witnessed it first-hand. To be sure, prosperity has allowed the overwhelming majority of Americans to live more comfortably than ever before. At the outset of *The Anxieties of Affluence* Daniel Horowitz recounts how bad things were as recently as the mid-1940s, when, to pick a few examples, a third of all households had no running water and sixty percent lacked central heating. Clearly any decent-minded observer would have to applaud the progress that has been made. But it somehow seems doubtful that the sight of countless families descending on the nearest Wal-Mart each weekend to fill their shopping baskets with bargain goods of dubious quality should count as utopia. And although those Wal-Mart shoppers may technically qualify as members of the middle class, it is apparent that most of them do not enjoy the social status or financial security one would expect for people in that socioeconomic category. To put that another way, it may be possible to argue that the "American dream" has come true for many of the country's lower-middle-class citizens, especially in comparison to earlier times, but it seems essential to add that that dream has turned out to be flawed in important respects.

Indeed, a host of troubling moral and cultural issues have arisen regarding the mass consumption society—ranging from the moral acceptability of free-market capitalism and the ubiquitous advertising on which it depends, to consumerism's impact on the nation's commitment to democracy, to whether excessive materialism corrupts the human spirit. Questions regarding culture and lifestyle have seemed especially pressing. For example, should the fact that so many Americans can afford the suburban housing and neighborhoods they apparently desire be celebrated as a great national achievement, or condemned for relegating such a large population to a wasteful and conformist existence? More fundamentally, has consumerism eroded or even destroyed the values of industriousness, frugality, and classic simplicity with which the United States began, in effect transforming the national character and the manner in which

citizens relate to the larger society? The books under review attempt in various ways to describe and comprehend how American intellectuals have wrestled with these highly charged topics. Taken together, the three works show that academic and popular writers did over time evolve a characteristic role for themselves—one in which they would issue jeremiad-like warnings that the new mass consumption economy was putting the nation in danger of losing its original republican identity. Even so, there have been no easy solutions. The paradox has remained that the economic strategies most often advocated for improving the economic lot of the entire population have also led directly to the orgy of acquisitive individualism that so many social critics have decried.

Kathleen G. Donohue's *Freedom from Want: American Liberalism and the Idea of the Consumer* deals with consumerism at the level of formal economic thought and public policy, tracing the slow and often halting evolution from what she calls "the producerist paradigm" of the nineteenth century to the consumer-oriented "New Deal liberalism" she sees emerging in the 1930s and maturing in the wake of World War II. Although her prose can be wooden and repetitious at times, in the end her meticulous analysis does a splendid job of explaining how a wide assortment of writers, from Henry George and Simon Patten to John Dewey and Rexford Tugwell, moved from an economic vision strongly biased toward those who actually made things to one centered on those who bought and enjoyed them. Her commitment to scholarly objectivity helps her get the story straight despite the contentious nature of the material she is covering, although it would have been useful had she looked up from her intense focus on occasion to consider the broader cultural context.

She begins in the Gilded Age, when, she claims, everyone was an unambiguous advocate of the "producer" (envisioned as either a factory owner, laborer, or craftsman), while the consumer was regarded with deep suspicion, if not contempt. Leading theorists like William Graham Sumner declared that all material goods consumed resulted in that much less capital available for investment, so the secret was for everyone to purchase the bare minimum needed for "comfort." Anything beyond that ill-defined level was a morally dubious "luxury." A number of contemporary thinkers provided mild challenges to this orthodoxy but, as Donohue shows, none of them managed to break with the era's central allegiance to the values associated with production. In his early work, for example, Thorstein Veblen assailed the capitalist class that Sumner held in reverence, but he did so on the basis of their profligate consumption and alleged incompetence at managing their enterprises. The problem with the robber barons, from Veblen's standpoint, was that they were not good producers.

This paradigm, which harks back ultimately to Adam Smith, was based on the economy of small farmers and artisans that had existed earlier in the century when, in Donohue's words, "it had been relatively easy to distinguish between

those who ‘eat and produce not’ and those who ‘labor and produce’” (p. 111). One wonders if that distinction was as obvious as Donohue claims it was in, say, the Jacksonian era, but by the 1880s there seems no doubt that a far more complex regime had taken hold, with most goods manufactured by large corporations for a national market, making it increasingly difficult to decide who qualified as productive in the traditional sense of the term. Bankers, lawyers, and salesmen worked hard and were essential to the new economy, but were they “producers”? Even so, producerist thinking was so powerfully embedded that it was able to survive long after it had become outmoded—a fact that Donohue notes but does not really explain.

Here she would have been well advised to look more closely at her own evidence, which consistently shows her subjects viewing economic issues in terms of the strident moralism associated with Victorian culture. From that vantage point, producers were seen as exhibiting the highly prized traits of hard work and thrift, while consumers gave themselves over to self-indulgence. That was why it was so crucial that the former be rewarded with prosperity while the latter were relegated to poverty; the entire moral framework of society depended on it. To Donohue’s puzzlement, even the economist Simon Patten, who fully comprehended the changes industrialization was bringing, could not break with the Victorian morality that was so fundamental to his world view. “The same individual who argued that ‘the new morality does not consist in saving, but in expanding consumption,’” she writes, also posited that citizens in the new economy “would need to possess ‘the ultimate moral virtues of abstinence, fortitude, chastity, and thrift’” in order to resist its temptations (p. 85). Likewise Patten, closely echoing Sumner, blamed much of the poverty of the Gilded Age on the working class’s excessive consumption of whiskey and beer. For all his formidable insight, Patten was clearly wearing blinders put in place by the tenacious culture in which he had been raised, and it would prove impossible for him and his contemporaries to fully embrace a modern consumer society until those blinders were put aside. Donohue unfortunately never firmly makes that connection.

What helped immensely in legitimizing consumerism, she tells us, was the school of “marginalist” economic thought that started to gain acceptance in the United States in the 1890s. Marginalists argued that “the most meaningful way to measure value was not in terms of labor or production costs, but, rather, in terms of the amount of satisfaction which a product gave to the consumer” (p. 65). This had nothing less than a “revolutionary” impact, at one stroke calling into question both the orthodox *laissez-faire* theories of Sumner and the socialism of Karl Marx. Most important, at least within the discipline of economics, the old moralistic rhetoric began to give way to “the more neutral and objective language of science” (p. 66). In just four years Richard Ely’s widely adopted textbook went

from portraying all consumption as vaguely immoral to providing a positive definition of luxury as “a satisfaction which society may well hope to make general, but . . . cannot yet afford” (p. 69).

Donohue portrays the progressive era as a time of transition between producerist and consumerist thought, and also as a moment when the political implications of consumerism began to emerge. Those on the left who started to champion a consumer-oriented economy were drawn, almost against their will, to an abandonment of the working class and a defense of the free market and middle class. As Donohue notes, it was hard for these writers, who valued their credentials as radicals, to become “consumerist left liberals,” as she terms them, and to embrace “an identity associated with shopping,” but they ultimately concluded that maximizing abundance through the awesome productive potential of capitalism would benefit a far greater number of Americans than would dividing up the economic pie more equitably (p. 153). Again and again, the logic of consumerism would have this effect of drawing figures from the political extremes to the center.

In the 1920s, though, support for both capitalism and consumerism temporarily waned among intellectuals as a result of what they saw as the wild spending spree in which Americans were indulging during the decade. Donohue touches on this briefly, but does not give much attention to the obvious revulsion against mass consumption and culture that so many of her personae exhibited, preferring to keep her focus on the conflict between the economic virtues of the producer versus those of the consumer. She does, however, describe in some detail the way so many thinkers in the age of Coolidge and Hoover, such as Stuart Chase, George Soule, and Robert Lynd, came to distrust the people, both in respect to taste and politics, which led them to endorse Veblen-style planning through which “experts” would run both the government and large corporations.

Donohue’s narrative comes to a head during the New Deal, when the Roosevelt administration, after a prolonged internal debate, decided in favor of a market-driven, consumer-oriented approach to the economy rather than attempting to regulate or plan it from Washington. Those who wanted planning invested their hopes in the National Recovery Administration, led by General Hugh Johnson, a diehard “producerist” whose goal was to keep prices and profits high despite the adverse impact on the consumer. But the failure of the NRA to stimulate recovery permanently discredited planning in the eyes of New Deal liberals, according to Donohue. They instead turned to the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, which was staffed by a number of pro-consumer types including the Columbia economist Rexford Tugwell. Having begun its efforts to aid farmers by conspicuously plowing up crops and slaughtering pigs, the AAA was under pressure to show that it also had the interests of the general public at heart. As a result it came, in time, to adopt a policy of “balanced abundance” that regarded

the concerns of the producer and consumer as intertwined. Within the AAA, Donohue tells us, “liberals were forced to confront the possibility that too much production was as bad for the consumer as too little,” and “to devote far more attention to the issue of a fair price” (p. 265). The trick was to keep production at the optimum level while using Keynesian techniques to bolster the purchasing power of consumers so that farmers and manufacturers would have a dependable market for their goods.

The great irony, Donohue cannot resist mentioning, is that the victory of this variant of New Deal liberalism also represented a triumph for Adam Smith. He had maintained that the producer and consumer shared a common interest in having the capitalist system work properly. If it did, Smith contended, there would be an exponential increase in the productive power of the economy and great prosperity for all to share. To a large extent, Donohue tells us, the New Dealers by the late 1930s had bought into this vision. At the same time Smith’s scheme relied on the consumer’s ability to make informed choices, selecting well-made items over those that were shoddy or overpriced, in order to keep the market competitive and honest. This too became a critical issue for liberals during the 1930s in the form of a movement for “scientific buying” that eventuated, after several twists and turns, in the formation of Consumers Union and its monthly publication, *Consumer Reports*.

Donohue ends with the middle-class consumer firmly in the saddle, dominating an economy in which “freedom from want” is seen less as a social objective than as an inherent human right. Throughout her presentation she admirably refrains from imposing her own opinions on her material, but then shifts gears in her conclusion as she reviews some of the critiques leveled against consumerism in the period since its ascent, most notably John Kenneth Galbraith’s charge in *The Affluent Society* that the new economy was ruinously shortchanging the public sphere in favor of the private household. She also takes note of the recent concern that the American way of life poses impossible demands on the Earth’s resources. If, she comments darkly, the depletion of those resources makes it “impossible to sustain the ever-increasing prosperity indefinitely, then the very foundation on which the liberal economic order rested” will prove to have been “made of sand” (p. 282).

Although Donohue’s tight focus on the inner logic of economic thought does not allow her to take it up, one could also say that the evolution she tracks involved a fundamental transformation in how American intellectuals related to their society. That transformation is Jonathan Hansen’s primary concern in *The Lost Promise of Patriotism: Debating American Identity, 1890–1920*, especially in regard to its impact on a small group of writers active from the 1890s through World War I whom he denominates “cosmopolitan patriots”—consisting of William James, John Dewey, Eugene Debs, Jane Addams, W.E.B. DuBois, Louis Brandeis, and, at

the margins, Randolph Bourne and Horace Kallen. What impresses Hansen is the ability of these thinkers to criticize sharply the changes overtaking the country while still maintaining a high degree of patriotic affection for it—something he views as having been possible for left-leaning intellectuals prior to World War I, but not afterward. His chief goal, accordingly, is not so much to answer a conventional historical question as to hold up his cadre of intellectual patriots as an inspirational model for the present day.

In his account the United States commenced its existence with a republican political tradition that emphasized civic virtue and encompassed what Alexis de Tocqueville called “reflective patriotism,” as opposed to the “instinctive patriotism” characteristic of monarchies. But that happy state did not last long. By 1800 republicanism was already giving way to a stress on self-interest, although capitalism did not gain full control until the 1890s. Its ascension set off a host of unfortunate developments, including jingoistic ventures in the Philippines and elsewhere, the draining of the democratic ethos from American politics and society, and an upsurge of self-centeredness, brought on when “many Americans adopted the catch-as-catch-can mentality of a mass consumer culture, navigating solitary paths to personal satisfaction” (p. 67). This was the situation to which Hansen’s cosmopolitans were responding by attempting to renew both republicanism and a version of patriotism in which “critical engagement with one’s country constitutes the highest form of love” (p. xv). In effect, they were trying to save the country’s soul by reminding it of what they regarded as its initial character before capitalism and consumerism started to change it.

That much seems fine, if hardly earth-shaking, but Hansen soon makes broader claims for his writers, describing them as sharing a range of beliefs that, on inspection, seem nearly identical to those held by most left-leaning American academics in the early twenty-first century. Among other things, he tells us, they were staunch advocates of diversity, detested sexism and racism, favored social democracy and face-to-face community relations, and spoke out against foreign military adventures. Every now and then Hansen catches one of them lapsing from these standards and gently scolds him or her, but on the whole it is not hard to imagine his progressive reformers, as he depicts them, easily fitting into the politics of a typical American university today, save for one conspicuous exception—their ardent faith in their own country. Hansen deeply envies that attribute and wishes somehow to recapture it for “the contemporary Left,” which, he claims, has come to assume that nation-states are “ineluctably coercive” and so has “ceded the rhetorical terrain of the nation to cultural and political conservatives.” By contrast, his cosmopolitan patriots “greeted evidence of an emerging national consciousness at the end of the nineteenth century as an opportunity to generate the mutual obligation required of social and political reform” (p. 96). How, though, to make that past a usable one and restore a

sense of “mutual obligation” among American citizens given the reality of a highly individualistic consumer culture? In his words, “Where Tocqueville, Mill, and Emerson feared the ‘dumbing down’ of democratic society, Dewey and the cosmopolitans decried its numbing up—the development whereby the majority of Americans came to embrace commercial prosperity and consumption as the end of life” (p. 75).

As he responds to that question in the main body of his book Hansen seems consistently upbeat. He recounts with obvious admiration how Debs, DuBois and Addams—his central figures, chosen to represent the Holy Trinity of class, race and gender—came of age in their respective small-town communities, acquired the outlook of cosmopolitan patriots, and proceeded to do battle with the demons infesting their world. With each page he builds a portrait of how wise, committed, and advanced they were, especially by comparison to such ostensible bigots and imperialists as Theodore Roosevelt, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., Woodrow Wilson, and Herbert Croly. More than anyone, TR, with his visceral militarism and determination to pursue the white man’s burden, comes across as the chief villain, while the hero is clearly Addams, who put into practice at Hull-House Dewey’s prescription for “associated living” in which members of different social groups interacted with and learned from each other in “a constant and boundless exchange of experience and ideas” (pp. 67–9). Hansen also carefully discriminates between the kind of flexible approach typical of cosmopolitanism and the more rigid “universalism” of writers such as the playwright Israel Zangwill, which required ethnic groups to give up their unique cultural qualities in order to melt together into one assimilated American pot. The cosmopolitans, we learn, got it just right, contending that individuals should still belong to distinctive groups rather than assimilate completely, but on a voluntary, not inherited, basis. Presumably membership in such active, reciprocal communities would allow citizens to ward off the perils of excessive individualism and nationalism.

But then, in the opening sentence of the final chapter, the upbeat story comes to a sudden, crunching end. “The cosmopolitan patriots,” Hansen writes in dismay, “met their match in World War I.” Despite all their moral and intellectual virtue, the best that Debs, Addams, and DuBois could do when confronted by that crisis was “bald pronouncements and bland prophesizing” (p. 157). Addams was convinced that blame for the war lay with a group of aging, outmoded leaders who did not understand the new cosmopolitan world. What those men needed, she claimed, was to look at the relations among ethnic groups in cities like Chicago where “exigency demanded that neighbors regard one another sympathetically,” a process that was “laying the simple and inevitable foundations for an international order” (quoted on p. 146). Not surprisingly, such mushy, unrealistic statements at a time of national emergency drew brickbats even from her fellow reformers, as did her prescription for bringing peace to Europe

delivered before a Congressional committee: “find out what the matter is, and, in an intelligent way, try to straighten out the difficulty and have it explained to the people of both countries” (quoted on p. 173).

Nor did his other heroes fare better. Debs, convinced that the war had resulted from a conspiracy of international capitalists, found the situation “confounding.” “[H]is rhetoric,” Hansen writes, “took [on] an abstract and idealistic quality reminiscent of Addams” (pp. 157–8). DuBois exhibited a naivety that was equally unappetizing, viewing the war as an immense opportunity for African Americans to obtain their long-denied rights if they would only throw themselves wholeheartedly behind it. For that reason he called on them to stifle dissent with a jingoism resembling that of the Wilson administration. Indeed, by the chapter’s end it is clear that cosmopolitan patriotism had proved to be remarkably hollow when put to its first real test. Its most deeply cherished tenets, from cultural tolerance to “associated living,” had disintegrated in the face of the powerful nationalistic impulses washing over American society. Struggling to salvage his position, Hansen contends that cosmopolitan patriotism’s real value had always been oppositional; though its adherents were not able to forestall war, “heroism would inhere in the dissident’s struggle to maintain open avenues of reconciliation. And in the perpetual campaign for political and economic justice” (pp. 146–7). But love of country was lost: “America’s wartime jingoism . . . soured the cosmopolitans . . . to the very concept of patriotism, which never recovered its association with critical vigilance” (p. 185). In the Conclusion, members of the group are referred to simply as “cosmopolitans.”

That failure should not come as a surprise. The naivety that Addams, Debs, and the others exhibited during the war had been present much earlier, stemming from the nineteenth-century culture in which they were raised and the great weight it placed on the value of innocence. Creatures of their own era, they would in many respects seem strikingly old-fashioned today could they somehow come back to life. Yet this part of their complex reality often gets set aside as Hansen strains to accentuate the aspects of their thought he finds appealing. Even worse are his portraits of figures he dislikes such as Roosevelt and Holmes, whom he accuses of promoting “a herd mentality averse to individual autonomy, creativity, and, hence, vital citizenship” (p. 17). Surely Holmes, who became one of the foremost champions of civil liberties in all of American jurisprudence, did not expect citizens to exhibit unquestioned loyalty to the state. Rather what he and Roosevelt praised was the willingness of soldiers in battle to follow orders blindly—an entirely different matter.²

2 On Holmes’s development as a civil libertarian, which occurred despite his deeply skeptical outlook, see Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Study of Ideas in America* (New York, 2001), 57–67. As Menand explains, Holmes believed fervently in social experiment,

One wishes that Hansen had undertaken some archival research on his subjects, or at least consulted their published correspondence, in order to know them better and thus avoid such misinterpretations, but the key problem remains the way he approached his task. He is certainly correct that a fundamental change took place in the first decades of the twentieth century in how American intellectuals related to the nation. Previously convinced that they could criticize and confront the society from within its fold, they increasingly felt the need to assume a detached and even alienated posture when doing so. They were on their way, in short, to becoming Jeremiahs. Had he posed the question of why that occurred, and then attempted to find an answer by sifting through the evidence in an open and balanced fashion while putting aside his quest to draw timeless lessons from historical materials, one feels sure that his book would have been far more valuable and convincing.

Here Hansen could take a lesson from Daniel Horowitz. *The Anxieties of Affluence* begins by asking how American writers from 1939 to 1979 dealt with what they saw as the increasingly worrisome reality of a society based on mass consumption. In effect Horowitz begins where Donohue leaves off, pondering the consequences of the consumerist revolution whose origins she traces. One senses that Horowitz has strong personal views on the subject, but he wisely puts them aside, preferring instead to sit back and watch while his extensive cast of characters does battle with the meaning of prosperity. He explores in depth a few themes along the way: a persistent tendency among his writers to take a moralistic stance toward consumerism, the rise and fall of a “cold war consensus” that locates the source of the country’s strength and virtue in its identity as a consumer society, and the efficacy of intellectuals as they venture into the public realm and engage a general audience on consumer-related issues. But surprisingly, although he touches on it over and over, Horowitz stops just short of identifying the most crucial finding that emerges from his material—a finding that nails down the peculiar and complex role that the figures he is writing about came to play in regard to the perils of an affluent economy. Even so, *The Anxieties of Affluence* represents by far the most important study we have of the relationship between American intellectuals and the modern consumerist way of life.

The heart of that relationship, one learns, has been the continuous stream of diatribes that intellectuals have delivered against materialism, which in turn has helped Americans put some limits on their self-indulgence even while they continued happily to indulge. What Americans definitely did not want, it seems, was to give up their golden calf for “the simple life” that the critics repeatedly

which meant he wanted the legal system to keep the nation open to all possibilities. That is a very different Holmes than the one who appears in Hansen’s book.

endorsed. Above all they did not want their government forcing them to do that. But, at least in the period Horowitz covers, they appreciated having assorted writers periodically scold them in order to preserve a set of values that had long been part of the nation's heritage and which they still honored. A colonialist might well detect a parallel here to the jeremiads delivered by the orthodox New England clergy before the American Revolution, which in the words of Perry Miller were "professions of a society that knew it was doing wrong, but could not help itself, because the wrong thing was also the right thing." Those sermons, Miller tells us, "berated the consequences of progress, but never progress; deplored the effects of trade upon religion, but did not ask men to desist from trading; arraigned men of great estates, but not estates." With some updating, that description could easily apply to the intellectual assaults on consumerism of the mid-twentieth century.³

This pattern is clearly visible during World War II, when Lewis Mumford and others expressed the hope that the willingness of citizens to sacrifice for the war effort would lead them afterward to "vanquish excess materialism" forever in favor of "comradeship, art and love" (quoted on pp. 38, 40). But the people thought otherwise. As Horowitz comments, Mumford learned "what later generations of writers would learn, often reluctantly: that the growth of affluence defied calls for chastened consumption" (p. 12). The late 1940s and 1950s would see a veritable debauch of buying, which met with the hearty approval of emigré authors such as Ernest Dichter and George Katona—two lesser-known but fascinating figures whom Horowitz to his great credit includes. Their works extolled the middle-class consumer as sensible, independent-minded, and the bulwark of the nation's democracy. Flattering as that portrait might have been to potential readers, their books did not sell. Americans were far more eager to be told by the likes of John Kenneth Galbraith and Vance Packard that they were succumbing to the lure of false advertising, which was convincing them to buy poorly made products they did not need, and that they were betraying the country's fundamental principles while doing so. Packard alone produced three number-one nonfiction best-sellers in the late 1950s informing Americans that they had once been a "frugal, hard-working, God-fearing people" but had now given themselves over to "hedonism" (quoted on p. 116). As Horowitz notes, "in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the educated public actually preferred jeremiads that warned of the dangers of an

3 Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Boston, 1953), 51, 41. Morris Dickstein, in his brilliant study of mid-twentieth century American novelists (a group Horowitz might profitably have added to his cast of characters), also stresses their adversarial, Jeremiah-like stance toward mass consumer culture. "Relentless self-criticism, not complacency, was the real key to postwar culture," he writes. See his *Leopards in the Temple: The Transformation of American Fiction, 1945–1970* (Cambridge, MA, 2002), 146 and *passim*.

excessively high standard of living to celebrations of middle-class consumerism” (p. 71).

By the 1960s, we are told, Americans were ready for a full-scale attack on suburban existence undertaken from diverse perspectives. As a feminist, Betty Friedan argued that a preoccupation with material goods had trapped housewives into a lifestyle that stunted their development as human beings. Michael Harrington wrote elegantly and passionately about how the suburbs blinded their inhabitants to the realities of poverty in American society, while Rachel Carson saw affluence as a direct threat to the natural environment. And in 1965 Ralph Nader published *Unsafe at any Speed*, a ferocious debunking of the automobile industry, whose product was at the very center of both suburban living and the ethos of consumerism.

These writers, along with others Horowitz discusses, took their causes into the political arena, giving rise to movements for consumer protection, women’s rights, environmentalism, and more. Nader in particular became a one-man reform industry, pushing through an astonishing array of laws and regulations to, as he once put it, save consumers from their own “indiscretion and vanity” (quoted on p. 169). In the 1960s middle-class Americans were open to this style of reform in part because the economy was doing so well—GDP grew by fifty per cent during the decade—and partly because the “cornucopia of the postwar world had brought forth a plethora of increasingly complicated and often dangerous goods” for them to contend with (p. 173). Under these circumstances they were delighted to have their government act to make the good life easier, safer, and cleaner. Nor did a figure like Nader threaten their ability to buy to their heart’s content, since for him “it was the dangerousness of consumer goods that was the problem, not their surfeit” (p. 176).

In the 1970s, as inflation and unemployment rose sharply, so did the moralistic onslaught against the excesses of affluence. Horowitz recounts how “three of the nation’s leading intellectuals,” Daniel Bell, Christopher Lasch, and Robert Bellah, “chastised Americans” for their self-indulgence and hedonism, taking their fulminations to a new level (p. 205). Lasch contended that capitalist materialism had caused the nation to fall prey to narcissism, a psychological disorder that normally afflicted individuals, but which Lasch turned into “a social illness” that, he believed, “appeared in every corner of the culture” (p. 214). His book was so popular that, despite its heavy academic prose, it soon became a national best-seller, while Bell’s and Bellah’s works were the subjects of widespread discussion.

It was one thing, though, for that message to go forth from a group of university professors, but something else when the President of the United States took it up. Horowitz devotes his final chapter to Jimmy Carter’s notorious “malaise” speech of July 1979, calling it “surely the most sustained attack any American president had ever made on consumer culture” (p. 239). Bell, Lasch, and Bellah had acted as

informal advisers to Carter in preparing the speech, although Horowitz suspects that the president, with his strong religious views against materialism, would have said pretty much the same thing on his own. In the face of a major energy crisis, Carter called on Americans to practice self-sacrifice and conservation. They responded by electing Ronald Reagan, who used the “malaise” speech as a highly effective weapon in the 1980 campaign. Bellah and Lasch, meanwhile, were deeply disappointed that Carter had not pummeled the people enough for their sins (Bell, for his part, thought nothing would help). Although Horowitz never clearly explains why he chose this incident to culminate his story, the reader can easily draw the appropriate conclusion. The scoldings of intellectuals about consumer culture may serve a useful public purpose, but they must not enter mainstream politics. The people can be hectored from the sidelines, not from the White House.

Horowitz ends with a brief epilogue describing the way a small group of “post-moralist” writers in the last two decades of the twentieth century came full circle, embracing Bellamy’s vision with few if any reservations. Taking their cue from the anthropologist Mary Douglas, they argued that people acquire possessions because they find vital symbolic meanings in them—meanings which intellectuals need to learn how to read properly rather than simply disparaging or dismissing them. Although Horowitz refers to these writers as “post-moralist,” one wonders if they might as aptly be described as “postmodernist,” reflecting the penchant of that movement to champion popular culture and taste. Postmodernism, Fredric Jameson informs us, “replicates or reproduces—reinforces—the logic of consumer capitalism,” which is why it tends to have a difficult time condemning the people’s desire for material goods.⁴ As examples of this position Horowitz quotes the literary critic James B. Twitchell, for whom the problem is “not that we are too materialistic, but that we are not materialistic enough,” along with the historian Jesse Lemisch, who asks “what, after all, is the matter with food in abundance, and wonderful material goods?” (pp. 254–5).

And yet the qualms and ambivalence persist. Despite the benefits it has brought, the victory of consumer capitalism remains hard to take. “A January 2002 cartoon said it all,” Horowitz writes in his last sentence, summing up the nation’s reaction to the 2001 terrorist attacks; “on the sweatshirt of a woman pushing a shopping cart appeared the words, ‘Ask Not What You Can Do For Your Country, SHOP’” (p. 256). Lost patriotism, indeed.

4 Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” in E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Postmodernism and Its Discontents: Theories, Practices* (London, 1988), 29.