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Albert Borgmann

University of Montana-Missoula, albert.borgmann@umontana.edu

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Reflections and Reviews

The Moral Complexion of Consumption

ALBERT BORGMANN*

Vigorous consumption is the sign of a prosperous and confident society. Some critics, however, find a high level of consumption morally objectionable. To see what is valid in these objections, one needs to understand the connection between consumption and the characteristic pattern of technology that is highlighted by the device paradigm and gives rise to paradigmatic consumption. Such consumption induces disengagement from reality and a decline of excellence. The response to these debilities is to accept paradigmatic consumption in some areas of life and to make room for focal things and practices in others. Research is needed to determine the social reality, and to probe the common awareness, of paradigmatic consumption and focal practices.

“Consumption,” Adam Smith said, “is the sole end and purpose of all production; and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to, only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer. The maxim is so perfectly self-evident that it would be absurd to attempt to prove it” (Smith [1776] 1985, p. 338). The central and final significance of consumption has, if anything, become more obvious in the 223 years that have passed since Smith published *The Wealth of Nations*. Vigorous and growing consumption is the chief indicator of a prosperous and self-confident community.

Consumption is naturally low when a country is too poor to produce much. The importance of consumption really comes into its own, however, when you consider a rich and productive country that fails to consume confidently. Vigorous consumption requires that consumers are confident of their future earnings and that they enjoy the purchase of consumer goods. One or both of these conditions may fail to obtain for virtuous reasons. People may prudently save for the future or refuse to indulge their greed. In any case, the body politic begins to suffer from constipation or, worse, sclerosis. Unemployment rises and public expenditures decline unless they are forced up to fight a recession. Some-

thing like this has been happening in Japan since the early nineties.

Consumption without corresponding production, to be sure, can be as debilitating as consumption that lags behind production. It leads to indebtedness, to inflation, and sooner or later to an economic correction or decline. But the painful reengineering and retooling that this country undertook in the eighties would have been pointless without the consumer confidence and spending that have contributed to the astounding economic boom of the nineties.

It is crucial to realize that the difference between faltering and growing consumption is not just a matter of abstract numbers we read about in the papers. In a declining economy the general mood is bleak; the world begins to look drab; dwellings are getting shabby. People hunker down and become suspicious. In a world of vigorous consumption, you see people swarming about the Home Depot, looking at paint sprayers, buying plumbing fixtures, and loading up lumber. Roofs are replaced, kitchens are remodeled, and plantings are added. Vacant lots are filled, historical treasures restored, and bridges rebuilt. Things look vital and hopeful.

To live is to consume. Social and philosophical disputes cannot possibly pivot on consumption versus no consumption. In its most fundamental sense, consumption is the absorption of something by some object to support the function or welfare of that object. Plants consume carbon; animals consume plants; humans consume animals. Consumption in this sense is a condition of life, and no one will oppose it. Life-sustaining consumption, however, can be a

*Albert Borgmann was born and raised in Freiburg, Germany. He received an M.A. in German literature from the University of Illinois (Urbana) in 1961 and a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Munich in 1963. Since 1970 he has been teaching in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812. Professor Borgmann's area of research is the philosophy of society and culture. His publications include *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life* (1984), *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (1992), and *Holding On to Reality* (1999).

simple affair and under natural conditions remains roughly constant per organism.

CRITIQUES OF CONSUMPTION

For at least a hundred thousand years, humans as hunters and gatherers lived in these natural circumstances. The fairly steady state of consumption began to be overtaken by significantly growing consumption in the nineteenth century and has kept growing since. This consumption in excess of sustenance is often what is meant by critics when they use the term “consumption.” Thus, one of the chief targets of social ecology has been termed the “all-pervasive, nihilistic culture of consumption” (Clark 1998, p. 355). But more mainstream social scientists like Juliet Schor and Robert Wuthnow have also criticized consumerism (Schor 1998; Wuthnow 1996).

Most critics oppose consumption for reasons that are external to consumption. In their view, the problem of consumerism would be solved if we could overcome the externalities of consumption so that people could harmlessly consume to their hearts’ content. Ecologists, of course, criticize consumption because it ruins the environment. Consumption will be fine once it takes a sustainable form. Ecological devastation is also one of the reasons why Juliet Schor advises a turn to a simpler life (Schor 1998, pp. xiii, 145). A second reason of hers, one that many economists stressed in the eighties, is insufficient savings. Savings, however, are intended for investment in research and development, capital goods, and infrastructure so that the production of consumer goods can be secured and expanded.

Both Schor and Wuthnow oppose consumption because of its displacement effect. Consumption displaces leisurely enjoyment or the devotion to family, community, or religion. Here, consumption in excess of sustenance is not criticized as such. Within appropriate limits it remains unchallenged.

To this rough conception of the detriments of consumption corresponds an equally simple notion of its attractiveness. “Man is an acquisitive animal,” says Lester Thurow, “whose wants cannot be satisfied. This is not a matter of advertising and conditioning, but a basic fact of existence” (Thurow 1981, p. 120). Wuthnow casts this condition in moral terms and calls it greed or materialism (Wuthnow 1996, pp. 26, 121, 272–276). But consumption as a basic fact of existence is, if anything, limited and steady. For Juliet Schor, consumption is the method by which we establish and convey our standing in society (Schor 1998, pp. 25–63). That is certainly so, but so far consumption does not differ from other means of distinction, such as education, heritage, denomination, and profession.

The external reasons for criticizing consumption deserve attention and support. There is one more cause that should make us look at consumption critically—social injustice. Extravagant consumption ties up wealth that should be used to help the poor. But if the intrinsic attractiveness of consumption is not understood, we do not know what we are up

against in our attempts at moderating consumption. Similarly, if we fail to grasp the intrinsic liabilities of consumption, we deprive ourselves of the means to break the spell of consumption. And finally, what we need to explain is not consumption in its basic or general form, but rather that species of consumption that is paradigmatic for our time.

PARADIGMATIC CONSUMPTION

We can begin to get a grip on paradigmatic consumption by considering its linkage to materialism. The devotion to material things can be an honorable and morally admirable orientation. Architecture, sculpting, and painting are materialist in this broad sense and so is the performance of music. Becoming intimate with a material thing, an instrument, is the burden and the delight of a musician. The same can be said of most sports. Success in skiing or tennis depends on one’s finesse and strength in dealing with an eminently material environment.

Paradigmatic consumption, to the contrary, attenuates human engagement with material reality. To understand this ironical turn of events we must go back to one of the founding promises of the modern era, the promise of liberty and prosperity. Liberty in this instance is ontological rather than political, the liberation not from the feudal order but from the pains and confinements of a recalcitrant reality—hunger, illness, cold, ignorance, immobility. This promise was part of the burst of inquisitiveness and energy that has ushered in a global development. Its theoretical side was science, its practical side, technology. The latter first manifested itself in widespread and inspired tinkering that improved the production and quality of daily implements. In the second half of the nineteenth century, scientific theory joined and potentiated technology.

The promise of technology became an enormously fruitful and beneficial reality. And yet, though originally plausible and applaudable, it underwent subtle and fatal changes that to this day are poorly understood. The drive to render the blessings of technology ever more refined and effective led to more and more complicated technological devices. Writing utensils were intelligible implements until the middle of this century, styluses that left a trace of graphite through abrasion (pencils) or a line of ink dispensed by a pen (fountain pen) or ball (ballpoint). Writing machines consisted of levers that impressed the relief of a letter through a pigment-saturated ribbon on a page (typewriters).

When typewriters became electric, the intelligibility of their machinery began to be veiled in obscurity. Today, word processing plus printing rests on such a complex apparatus of electronics and mechanics that the details of its working are impenetrable to most users. One gain of this development has been far greater ease of writing, gratefully acknowledged by those of us who made the transition from typewriter to word processing. Another gain is the much more refined appearance of written documents. The loss in this development has been the removal of the writer from the heft and feel of the earlier writing utensils and, if

anecdotal evidence is to be trusted, less succinctness and clarity of writing.

There is a pattern to the abstraction of some valued function or object from its tangible circumstances and to the concealment of the machinery that provides for the free-floating availability of the valued item. What is abstracted may be called the commodity, and the technological substrate it rests on, the machinery of a device (Borgmann 1984). If you trace the development of the automobile from the Model T to a contemporary model, you can see how the machinery—the engine, drivetrain, brakes, lights, and so forth—shrank and became more concealed and less intelligible to the layperson and how at the same time the commodity—personal transportation—improved in accommodation, speed, and safety. The most dramatic example of the shrinking and increasingly powerful and opaque machinery is the computer. In its first and relatively feeble incarnation (the Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer [ENIAC]), it was a behemoth occupying an entire room and exhibiting its functions in arrays of vacuum tubes, resistors, capacitors, mechanical switches, and cables. Consider now one of the contemporary endpoints of the computer's evolution, the notebook computer. It is incomparably more powerful and easier to use, while its machinery has shrunk to the point where the factors limiting its size are the requirements our bodies impose on it—the size of our hands and the sight of our eyes.

This pattern of development has asserted itself in manufacturing, transportation, and most consequentially in domestic life. The refrigerator, the microwave, the television set, the lamps, the furnace, and air-conditioning provide food, entertainment, light, and a pleasant temperature in the commodious way suggested by the word commodity, and these commodities are supplied by machineries that are concealed from view and understanding.

AN ALTERNATIVE CRITIQUE: THE DEVICE PARADIGM

The defining development of modern technology, then, is the rise of the device paradigm, the distinctive conjunction of an easily available commodity and a sophisticated and impenetrable machinery. It has changed the nature of consumption fundamentally. In premodern and early modern times, consumption rarely took place at a great distance from production. In most cases, in fact, the burdens of production reached and enveloped the point of consumption. The bread on the table came from an oven nearby. The water in the jug was drawn from a well the day before. There was no dinner for a family if none was cooked by some (female) member of the family. There was no news from the neighboring village unless someone walked the distance between the villages and conveyed the news in his or her head.

As technology progressed, more and more of these burdens were taken over by some machinery and disappeared from view. In the experience of consumption, the consumer good detached itself from the context of its production and

became instantly and easily available. Consumption became unencumbered enjoyment. One of the attractions of paradigmatic consumption lies in the purity of pleasure it promises. There is pleasure in a hard run, in cooking and serving a fine meal, in reading poetry to one another. But these pleasures are mixed up with strain, exertion, work, or mental effort. What humans have dreamed of in the stories of flying carpets and rock candy mountains is pleasure un-mixed with pain. The objects of such pleasures are commodities, and their enjoyment is consumption. Thus, we demand lean and healthy bodies without the pain of running, gourmet meals without the bother of cooking, entertainment without the labor of staging and deciphering it. But remember that the mortals whom the gods want to punish have their wishes fulfilled.

Paradigmatic consumption degrades the symmetry of humanity and reality. This decline remains hidden from us because it comes in the guise of liberation from labor and discomfort. Disburdenment in turn promises unprecedented riches. It would have been possible to retain the ties of the blessings of technology to exertion and responsibility. We could have made clean and plentiful water available by having four public faucets for each city block. We could have refused to develop television and provided entertainment solely through theaters and public libraries. But then getting water or a book would have taken much time. Now that water and entertainment are available at home and at our fingertips, there is room for a cornucopia of pleasures. In paradigmatic consumption, liberty takes the form of disburdenment and prosperity the form of limitless availability of consumer goods.

THE PRINCIPLE OF SYMMETRY

The principle of symmetry between reality and humanity says that the quality of the human condition and the quality of the material environment tend toward one and the same level. One reason our heroes have always been cowboys is that their posture, their clothing, and their faces directly reflect the grace of their horses and the grandeur of the West. Or so the advertisements had it. The ambiguities and shadows that have enveloped the cowboy indicate that things are not that simple.

To discover what sort of symmetry between human beings and their surroundings obtains in paradigmatic consumption, it is helpful to remember how humans first evolved and adjusted to their environment. Human evolution is the grand spectacle of an animal becoming open and attuned to ever higher levels and dimensions of reality. What evolutionary theory tells us in addition is that if the symmetry at whatever level fails to be well tuned, the animal species is bound to disappear. Fine attunement, to the contrary, is deeply pleasant.

The human enterprise of technology began to dislocate the natural symmetry when it detached pleasures from their context of exertion. In the process, the factors that used to temper our desires were overcome and eliminated, and our desires began to run wild. The consequent damage is most

evident in the case of food. More than half of the population in this country is overweight. Our slack and shapeless bodies are symmetrical to the world of limitless and unencumbered food. A similar if less visible decline of vigor and definition has debilitated our mental lives. The common command of science, literature, history, politics, and economics is deplorably low.

Limitless wants and insatiable acquisitiveness are natural facts only in the unnatural setting of overabundance. The natural setting kept human appetites within bounds. Overabundance holds for information and entertainment no less than for the consumption of sugar and fat. After each episode of overconsumption we feel defeated and dejected, vowing moderation and self-discipline. But before long our craving returns, and we indulge ourselves once again.

We attempt to find a constructive response to this vicious circle by trying to regain the sense of freedom and richness that has animated technological progress for so long. Advertisements typically play on this yearning and stage the promise of liberty and prosperity with ever renewed inventiveness and finesse. And there is in fact a surge of real pleasure when first we get a car with air-conditioning and we are rid of dusty winds and sweat-soaked clothes. We feel richer when a new satellite link gives us access to television channels from all continents.

But these are parasitic pleasures. Their strength depends on the contrast of burdens and limits. Once the new pleasures have devoured and displaced the recollection of encumbrances, the pleasures themselves begin to fade. The newly acquired devices fade into the context of what we take for granted. Lately certain kinds of advertisements have appealed to the rueful consumer with a knowing sort of cynicism. ABC television had an advertisement that asked: "It's a beautiful day, what are you doing outside?" (Barron 1998).

There is, however, something profoundly incomplete, if not misleading, in analyzing the change of symmetry on the human side only. It is true that paradigmatic consumption leaves the variety and depth of our faculties feeble and atrophied. But if the analysis is taken no further, the most plausible cure within a technological culture is to design devices that call on a greater range of abilities than does the ingestion of food, sights, and sounds. Proponents of information technology are willing to indict the passivity of consumption and offer in its place interactive pleasures. But eventually, computer games and chat rooms leave us as sullen as television, chips, and beer.

FOCAL THINGS AND PRACTICES

What paradigmatic consumption displaces on the real side of the original symmetry are things that have a life and dignity of their own—mountains, works of art, playing fields, and sacred places. We can call such things focal and the devotion to them a focal practice. In the culture of the table, the food and its setting are the focal things. The preparation of the meal, the gathering around the table, and the customs of serving, eating, and conversing are the focal

practices. Focal things and practices disclose the world about us—our time, our place, our heritage, our hopes—and center our lives. They lead us to say: "There is no place I would rather be. There is nothing I would rather do. There is no one I would rather be with."

The paradigm of the technological device that underlies paradigmatic consumption suggests erroneously that the pleasures of these things and practices can be detached from their actual context and made available by some technological device—the elevation of a mountain by a travelogue, the drama of theater by a television show, the community of a Thanksgiving celebration by e-mail. The availability of a commodity, however, occludes or destroys the commanding presence of focal things and practices. Thus, sorrow at the loss of the real world deepens the dismay at our loss of physical and mental strength.

Disengagement and the weakening of our faculties are intrinsic to paradigmatic consumption. It would be tedious and faintly ridiculous to try and deepen one's children's appreciation of a dinner that arrived on their laps from the refrigerator via the microwave by recounting the marvels of industrial agriculture, food production, refrigeration, and microwave physics. Your children want to consume television while they are consuming their food. Nor is there much sense in trying to become an elegant and masterful operator of a CD player and amplifier. As a rule, a technological device does not offer enough variety and resistance of interaction to allow expert users to distinguish themselves from intermediates.

There are, to be sure, exceptions and mixed cases. A sports car can challenge your skills. An electric piano or guitar can provoke virtuoso playing. But the general tendency is to render commodities ever more instantaneous, ubiquitous, easy, and safe, that is, ever more skill-repellent. The development of the personal computer is the most recent example. One must remember, however, that the world of labor and production (as opposed to leisure and consumption), though deeply marked by the device paradigm, continues to require and reward skill.

For most people, it is their free time (as distinguished from working time) that they consider truly their own and the sanctuary of their deepest aspirations. Paradigmatic consumption has invaded and degraded this realm, and most of us react with resignation. When the American Academy of Pediatrics advised parents not to let their children watch television during their first two years and in their later years not to let them have a television set or computer in their rooms, the parents interviewed by the media found those suggestions unrealistic (Mifflin 1999). In part, this reaction simply reflects the entrenchment of paradigmatic consumption.

More broadly, however, the entire exchange shows that the moral significance of paradigmatic consumption is clouded to the point of concealment. Pediatricians would not presume to make recommendations on moral grounds. Ethics is a private or religious matter. The parents on their part have no private or religious discourse to fall back on in their attempt to answer a critique of paradigmatic consump-

tion exclusively on the basis of health. Some of the churches inveigh against greed and materialism. But parents sense rightly that an affirmative attitude toward the material world can be morally appropriate. They also know that greed, constrained by law and the market, makes for a more hopeful society than renunciation or apprehension.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTED DIRECTIONS

What then? The first point that needs to be made is a moral one in a new key. Paradigmatic consumption is not a crime, a sin, or an evil in the traditional sense. But it is intrinsically disengaging. If it dominates our leisure, it debilitates our physical and mental vigor and displaces or destroys focal things and practices. The second point is the acknowledgment that paradigmatic consumption and the culture of technology are so intertwined that a complete return to a life of engagement is no longer possible or desirable. From these two points follows the third. We should within limits accept paradigmatic consumption appreciatively and cheerfully. But the gains of safety, ease, space, and time carry an obligation to clear a central space in our lives for the engagement with focal things and practices.

Safety, ease, ubiquity, and instantaneity are features we should accept and even improve when it comes to health, transportation, and utilities. Within this technological setting we must make room for engagements such as the culture of the table, the culture of the word, the culture of the arts, for athletics, and for philosophy and religion. Devotion to focal things and practices will break the spell of paradigmatic consumption and free up wealth for environmental stewardship and social justice.

Aspirations of this sort cannot afford to be naive about paradigmatic consumption. It is deeply entrenched and humiliateingly seductive. It is the default culture that clicks in wherever moral ignorance or indecision prevail. It takes a principled and communal dedication to focal concerns if a life of engagement is to prosper.

To counter the promise of liberty and prosperity that speaks from every advertisement in support of paradigmatic consumption, the engaging life needs an initial appeal of its own. It must be the appeal to excellence and gratitude. We all aspire to excellence and realize that paradigmatic consumption is not the place to attain and practice it. We would also like to be graced by things and practices that enduringly gladden our hearts, and we must admit that the rush of gratitude prompted by a new toy is fickle and fleeting. The promise of excellence and gratitude may draw us to focal things and practices. If the promise succeeds in doing so, it will become superfluous. Focal things and practices are their own reward.

All this is said in a hopeful vein, and social research is needed to test and temper it. The distinction between devices and focal things is foreign to social science and the Census Bureau. There is at best scattered and indirect evidence on how people divide their time and money between focal things and practices and the acquisition and paradigmatic consumption of commodities. Although worthy beginnings have been made by

consumer researchers such as Mick and Fournier (1998) and Thompson (1994), there is still little evidence on how aware consumers are of the difference between focal engagement and paradigmatic consumption.

More generally, prosperity can be divided into wealth and affluence. Wealth is the condition where social arrangements are conducive to focal practices and to communal celebrations (i.e., focal practices writ large). Affluence is the social condition that encourages paradigmatic consumption. Little is known about the balance or imbalance of wealth and affluence and, once more, on the general awareness of that distinction. Nor is there much discussion of the role or responsibility government has in adjusting the balance.

Finally, it is still unclear why the attractiveness of paradigmatic consumption is so persistent. The history of technology has recorded the grand hopes and predictions that have greeted the arrival of newspapers, of electricity, of the radio, of the telephone, of television, and it has often been left to the reader to compare the halcyon pronouncements with the sobering results. Similar forecasts about information technology have once again captured much of the public imagination. Why is there no collective memory of the earlier disappointments? Research is needed both to answer these questions and to determine whether the questions are the right ones in the first place.

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