

The Age of Shopping

The modern capitalist economy must constantly increase production if it is to survive like a shark that must swim or suffocate. Yet it's not enough just to produce. Somebody must also buy the products, or industrialists and investors alike will go bust. To prevent this catastrophe and to make sure that people will always buy whatever new stuff industry produces, a new kind of ethic appeared: consumerism.

Most people throughout history lived under conditions of scarcity. Frugality was thus their watchword. The austere ethics of the Puritans and Spartans are but two famous examples. A good person avoided luxuries, never threw food away, and patched up torn trousers instead of buying a new pair. Only kings and nobles allowed themselves to renounce such values publicly and conspicuously flaunt their riches.

Consumerism sees the consumption of ever more products and services as a positive thing. It encourages people to treat themselves, spoil themselves, and even kill themselves slowly by overconsumption. Frugality is a disease to be cured. You don't have to look far to see the consumer ethic in action – just read the back of a cereal box. Here's a quote from a box of my favourite breakfast cereal, produced by an Israeli firm, Telma.

Sometimes you need a treat. Sometimes you need a little extra energy. There are times to watch your weight and times when you've just got to have something ... right now! Telma offers a variety of tasty cereals just for you – treats without recourse.

Health Treats offers lots of grains, fruits and nuts for an experience that combines taste, pleasure and health. For an enjoyable treat in the middle of the day, suitable for a healthy lifestyle. *A real treat with the wonderful taste of more* [emphasis in the original].

Throughout most of history, people were likely to have been repelled rather than attracted by such a treat. They would have branded it as selfish, decadent and morally corrupt. Consumerism has worked very hard, with the help of popular psychology ('Just do it') to convince people that indulgence is good for you, whereas frugality is self-oppression.

It has succeeded. We are all good consumers. We buy countless products that we don't really need, and that until yesterday we didn't know existed. Manufacturers deliberately design short-term goods and invent new and unnecessary models of perfectly satisfactory products that we must purchase to stay 'in'. Shopping has become a favourite pastime and consumer goods have become essential mediators in relationships between family members, spouses and friends. Religious holidays such as Christmas have become shopping festivals. In the United States, even Memorial Day – originally a solemn day for remembering fallen soldiers – is now an occasion for special sales. Most people mark the day by going shopping, perhaps to prove that the defenders of freedom did not die in vain.

The flowering of the consumerist ethic is manifested most clearly in the food market. Traditional agricultural societies lived in the awful shade of starvation. In the affluent world of today, one of the leading health problems is obesity, which strikes the poor (who stuff themselves with hamburgers and pizza) more than the rich (who eat organic salads and fruit smoothies). Each year the US population spends more money on diets than the amount needed to feed all the hungry people in the rest of the world. Obesity is a double victory for consumerism. Instead of eating little which will lead to economic contraction, people eat too much and then they buy diet products – contributing to economic growth twice over.

How can we square that consumerist ethic with the capitalist ethic of the business person, according to which profits should not be wasted, and instead reinvested in production? It's simple. As in previous eras, there is today a division of labour between the elite and the masses. In medieval Europe, aristocrats spent their money on extravagant luxuries, whereas peasants lived frugally, minding every penny. Today the tables have turned. The rich take great care managing their assets and investments, while the less well-heeled go into debt buying cars and televisions they don't really need.

The capitalist and consumerist ethics are two sides of the same coin, a merger of two commandments. The supreme commandment of the rich is 'Invest!' The supreme commandment of the rest of us is 'Buy!'

The capitalist-consumerist ethic is revolutionary in another respect. Most previous ethical systems presented people with a pretty tough deal. They were promised paradise, but only if they cultivated compassion and tolerance, overcame craving and anger, and restrained their selfish interests. This was too tough for most. The history of ethics is a sad tale of wonderful ideals that nobody can live up to. Most Christians did not imitate Christ, most Buddhists failed to follow Buddha, and most Confucians would have caused Confucius a temper tantrum.

In contrast, most people today successfully live up to the capitalist-consumerist ideal. The new ethic promised paradise on condition that the rich remain greedy and spend their time making more money, and that the masses give free rein to their cravings and passions – and buy more and more. This is the first religion in history whose followers actually do what they are asked to do. How, though, do we know that we'll really get paradise in return? We've seen it on television.

*The above is the final part of chapter 17 in the book, **Sapiens**, by Yuval Noah Harari.*