**The Confident, the Ascetic, and the Vigilant Consumer: Discourses of Mass
Consumption and Subjectivity in Post-War Canada and the United States**

by

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A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

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Abstract

In the years following World War II, there was a proliferation of discourses about the growth of consumer society in Canada and the United States. Mass consumption became an important social, political, and even moral issue. Among the responses to the rise in the range and availability of consumer goods were: the celebration of mass consumption as a force for positive social change; the moralization of mass consumption, based on the perceived corrosive effects of 'consumerism'; and the development of a critical and vigilant attitude toward consumer goods that was refined and extended through the rise of state bureaucracies whose mandate was consumer concerns. This dissertation will explore a set of related discourses that arose from these issues and the different types of consuming subject that they produced.

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Chapter One: Problems in the Study of Consumer Culture

. . . the problem of choosing is a very recent one in the history of the world — that is to say, for the mass of people; and not even yet have we had time enough to build up a code of customary wisdom concerning it. (Tugwell, Munro, and Stryker: 1930: 545)

While terms such as ‘consumer culture’ or ‘consumer’ are commonplace in Western society, they convey a range of powerful and quite different, even contradictory meanings. ‘Consumer culture’ can be defined purely statistically by the range of consumer goods and the degree to which they are generally available. Associated with this particular meaning are phrases commonly used in economic reports in news media such as ‘consumer price index’ or ‘consumer confidence.’ Social and political crises are seen to precipitate crises of consumer confidence and the health of consumer culture is generally regarded as a crucial indicator of overall prosperity and growth. ‘Consumer culture’ can convey sensual and pleasurable images of the abundance of material goods and the creature comforts that they can provide. The phrase can also have extremely negative connotations of mass manipulation and exploitation, or of profligacy, waste and ‘consumerism,’ implying self-indulgent, mindless consumption that undermines communitarian ethics and ecological integrity. The companion term ‘consumer’ is equally complex in its diversity of associations. The consumer can be the unwitting target of advertising or conversely, a marketplace guerrilla who resists such manipulation through informed and strategic consumption; or an individual for whom consumption is a means to social status through the display of taste and connoisseurship; or one who expresses a sense of progressive politics and ethics through ‘responsible’ or ‘green consumption.’

There is obviously an enormous range of meanings associated with modern consumer culture but, as I will show in this dissertation, most were not in common circulation until the latter half of the twentieth century. Mass production and consumption in one form or another had existed since at least the early modern era, accelerating in the Industrial Revolution, but concepts that are now accepted without question, such as a 'consumer lifestyle' or the various ethical, moral and political implications of mass consumption, are more recent developments. Most of these appeared in their current form after World War II or were based on earlier ideas that took on new significance in the economic boom of the post-war period. The complex of discourses that has developed since the 1950s constitutes what we now perceive as a 'consumer culture' as much as the fact of the abundance of consumer goods themselves.

It is tempting to characterize contemporary mass consumption societies by one or another of the definitions listed above. Indeed, competing ideologies of the role of mass consumption and its implications for individuals and societies lie close to the heart of some of the most pressing current debates over globalization, the environment, and democracy. Mass protests at conferences of the World Trade Organization or at G-7 summits over the last several years have been led by political and social movements that have a strong critique of what they consider to be the exploitative nature of consumer capitalism and its desire for global expansion. A common media image of demonstrations at these events is the often violent attack on icons of consumerism, such as MacDonald's. In sharp contrast to this was the appeal

to consume as an act of faith in Western democracy following the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001. The diversity and intensity of views on the implications of mass consumption at both the personal and global level point to a pressing need for a sociological perspective on modern consumer societies that interrogates and explores this diversity of meaning rather than underwriting any particular version.

Given the variety of definitions listed above, it is clear that consumption in modern societies is not simply about the acquisition of commodities. Neither is a consumer merely someone who purchases goods. In the latter half of the twentieth century, it became normal for individuals in Western industrialized societies to experience the world as consuming subjects, viewing social, political, and moral themes through the lens of an ethos of consumption. The primary goal of this dissertation will be an historical investigation of the consuming subject in the post-war years and the diversity of forms that this subject took. I will identify and examine a number of the more significant ways in which individuals were increasingly addressed and shaped as consuming subjects and the various practical means through which the discourses addressing these subjects were expressed and made real.

Description of the Problem

The ubiquity of consumer goods in all aspects of modern life has led to a wide range of interest in mass consumption as a modern social phenomenon and it is not difficult to find both critiques and praises of consumer society throughout popular culture and popular media. In fact, there is a powerful social dissonance between the

popular critique of consumption as ‘materialism’ or ‘consumerism’ and the celebration of material wealth as one of the fundamental privileges of Western culture. For the most part, social and historical research on consumer culture has tended toward one of several directions: goods as artefacts and cultural markers of a particular epoch; the role of material goods as vehicles of individual self-realization; or the construction of social groups around issues of taste and consumption.

The first category, which lies mainly within cultural anthropology and the study of material culture, is represented by, for example, Bronner (1985, 1986, 1989, 1992), St. George (1988), and Schlereth (1985). Those who discuss goods as vehicles of self-realization include Appaduri (1986), Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981), and Douglas and Isherwood (1978). The study of the role of class and taste in practices of consumption which began with Veblen (1934 [1899]) was re-invigorated largely by Bourdieu (1984). I also include in this latter category much of the early work in cultural studies which investigated the relationship between class, lifestyle, and consumption. Richard Hoggart, usually regarded as the vanguard of cultural studies in the U.K., expressed what was then an unusual interest in the social context of popular culture (Hoggart, 1957). Later work at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies explored similar questions in relation to style and consumption, particularly in connection with youth and subculture, for example, Hall and Jefferson (1976) and Willis (1978). This was continued by others associated with the Centre such as Hebdige (1979, 1987).

However, the tension between the critique and acceptance of consumer culture also runs through the academic literature and, in general, the field of study has been dominated by a number of assumptions about the origins and historical development of consumer culture which have tended to limit the range of questions that can be asked. There has been an emphasis on the relationship between producer and consumer, and the overall increase in consumption in modern Western societies has frequently been regarded as a social problem caused either by the manipulation of the public or a moral decline and the subsequent growth of unrestrained desire. In addition, consumer culture is thought to have been born in a dramatic and sudden historical break, sparked by one or more of these causes. Such approaches have tended to be moralistic and nostalgic in their critique of consumption and this has served to constrain our understanding of the contours and characteristics of contemporary consumer societies. Below, I provide a brief critique of several of the more representative approaches to the study of consumer culture: the role of class emulation, social control, and moral crisis in the growth of mass consumption; and the idea of consumer culture as a sudden and rapid historical development.

Social Emulation

The theory of social emulation constitutes one of the most common accounts of the rise of a consumer culture. Successively lower social strata are thought to imitate the consumption habits of their superiors and the resulting 'trickle down' process transforms the luxuries of today into the mass consumer goods of tomorrow.

One of the most important and influential sources of this position is McKendrick (McKendrick *et al.*, 1982). McKendrick argues that the first fully developed consumer society appeared in England in the late eighteenth century and he places social emulation at the centre of this development. There was in this period a consumer revolution that was not confined merely to the upper class consumption of luxuries but, for the first time, was much more broadly based. This consumer revolution was a corollary to the Industrial Revolution, “the necessary convulsion on the demand side of the equation to match the convulsion of the supply side” (McKendrick *et al.*, 1982: 9). The force behind the groundswell in consumption was the overall rise in prosperity that accompanied the improvements in production, combined with a desire for social mobility which, McKendrick argues, was now possible in the fluid class situation of the period. Out of this milieu emerged entrepreneurial producers whose success lay in their ability to exploit and manipulate the desire for social emulation, particularly within the rapidly growing middle class.

The emphasis placed on the consuming habits of a relatively elite and thus relatively small group assumes that these practices were the object of imitation by lower social groups, presumably driven by status envy. However, in pre-modern and early modern Europe, social rank was more static, caste rather than class. As Hunt (1995) argues, the display of luxury on the part of the nobility in pre-modern Europe was less an expression of conspicuous consumption (and thus less a potential source of emulation) than “necessary confirmations of . . . social, economic and political position” (Hunt, 1995: 358). Weatherill (1992) further argues that while the rising

middle classes of the early modern era may have consumed some of the same goods as their superiors, one cannot simply conclude that the middle classes were necessarily acting in imitation of the landed gentry. Such consumption may just as easily indicate that they wanted these goods for reasons which had nothing to do with class envy.

Williams (1982) makes a similar point, arguing that mass consumption and consumer culture did not follow the lead of the elite and in fact “supplanted rather than replaced the aristocratic model” (Williams, 1982: 21).

Manipulation or Social Control

Despite a decline in elitist reactions to mass culture over the past few decades, the manipulated subject continues to haunt accounts of mass consumption. In many histories of consumer culture one can still find the assumption that the masses are seduced by advertising, marketing, spectacle, and display, and manipulated by producers who exploit a natural human proclivity toward greed, envy, unrestrained desire and self-interest. This is sometimes referred to as ‘hypodermic theory’ since consumers are considered as essentially passive and inoculated with desire, often in subliminal ways, which subverts their ability to make conscious decisions (for a survey and discussion of the various manipulation theories and their critics, see Leiss, Kline, and Jhally, 1990).

In some versions, the power of consumer culture is seen as soporific or hypnotic, putting the masses to sleep, a modern manifestation of ‘bread and circuses.’ The Roman satirist, Juvenal (ca. 60-140), in lamenting the decline of Rome from her

former glory, noted that the masses had lost interest in political issues and cared only about “Bread and the Games [often translated as ‘circuses’]” (Juvenal, 1967: 207). The phrase ‘bread and circuses’ is now used colloquially to imply much more than a decline in public involvement in politics. It frequently refers to a society in which mass media or mass entertainment is a deliberate tool of the state through which public attention and concern is misdirected. The position of early critical theory on popular culture (for example, Horkheimer and Adorno, 1990), or more recently, Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985) and Herman and Chomsky’s *Manufacturing Consent* (1988), share to some degree the view of mass society and the emphasis on consumer goods as deliberately trivializing and serving to obfuscate important social issues. Williams (1982), in her study of the department store in nineteenth-century France, speaks of the “numbed hypnosis” (Williams, 1982: 67) induced by a variety of modern sites of consumption from fairs to malls. Her discussion of the advent of electric light and its uses in manipulative advertising and display to produce an “Electrical Fairyland” (Williams, 1982: 85) parallels Leach’s idea of a “public dream culture” constituted in “color, glass, and light” (Leach, 1989: 104). Such spectacular displays blurred the distinction between “luxury and necessity, artificial and natural, night and day, male and female” (Leach, 1989: 132). Langman (1992) takes an extreme view of the anaesthetic effects of consumer culture and compares mall shoppers to the walking zombies of George Romero’s film, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978).

While one may occasionally sympathize with criticisms of the attempts of advertising to seduce, manipulation of the public by producers of consumer goods is an insufficient explanation of the rise of consumer culture. Even if we disregard the devaluation of agency implicit in such claims, there still remains, as Agnew (1992) has pointed out, an imbalance on the supply side of the equation: increased production is the motor of consumption with entrepreneurs instilling 'false needs' through the smoke and mirrors of advertising or display. There is also a tendency to emphasize the spectacular, misrecognizing the mundane and unremarkable daily experiences of the vast majority of consumers. Williams (1982) and Leach (1989, 1993), for example, describe the most luxurious of late nineteenth-century department stores in spite of the fact that most people during this period would never have been inside such a store and most likely would never have seen one. Similarly, hyperbolic descriptions of the contemporary shopping mall bear no resemblance to the vast majority of consumer environments in North America, such as discount chains, factory outlets, and retail warehouses, which are exceptional only in their degree of banality and repetition. The tendency to view the exceptional as the general leads one to ask where some critics of consumer culture do their shopping since there seems to be such a gross misrepresentation of the consumer experience. Sites of consumption that emphasise the spectacular, such as those mentioned by Williams, Leach, or Langman (see above), are important objects of study, but we also need to think about other much more mundane sites of consumption such as the huge bargain stores, the so-called

‘clubs’ which sell bulk products and require an annual membership fee, or the more recent phenomenon of the second-hand clothing chain store.

Such views of mass consumption and the consumer are, to a large extent, the legacy of Marxist and neo-Marxist mass culture theory, such as that of the Frankfurt School. Mass culture, and therefore consumer culture, represents the commodification of experience by capitalism and is considered to be a corrosive and corrupting force: leisure, culture, and pleasure are redefined by commodity production; traditional social practices and associations erode; and other social and cultural possibilities are occluded or denied. There is an implicit assumption that the driving force behind modern consumer societies is an essentially antagonistic relationship between producer and consumer, that is to say, individuals are the unwitting targets of producers and their attempts to encourage and manage desire as a fundamental goal of capitalism. Even in the context of cultural studies, which for the most part rejects the idea of mass manipulation, the consumer is still the intended object of seduction except that, in this case, the subject is posited as actively resistant. Thus, depending on the point of view, the consumer is either a manipulated shopper or erudite *bricoleur*, the former representing the heir to Marxism’s ‘false consciousness,’ the latter its revolutionary proletariat. In both cases, the manipulation thesis is accepted; the only difference in the latter (the revolutionary and resistant consumer) is the assumption that manipulation can be effectively undermined through the reshaping, conscious or not, of the meaning of the consumer good as text.

Psychological or Moral Crisis

A pervasive belief about consumer culture is that it is either a symptom of a psychological or moral crisis at a broad social level, or that it is the actual cause of this crisis. Consumer culture is seen to have originated and flourished during a period of decline in the authority of traditional sources of social and personal stability, which resulted in a turn to hedonism and an emphasis on private pleasure and indulgence; or, conversely, the decline of such authority is seen to have been precipitated by the rise of hedonism in the first place. In either case, the process is regarded as cyclical: the weakening of traditional social bonds produces the conditions in which hedonism and radical individualism can flourish, and vice versa.

Lears (1981), for example, argues that the rise of antimodernist sentiment among the American bourgeoisie in the late nineteenth century was a reaction to what was seen as a decline in moral authority brought about by the more corrosive effects of modernity, such as the rise of industrialization, bureaucratization, secularization, and the impact of these on the integrity and authenticity of the individual. One of the primary targets of antimodernism was consumer culture whose “growing requirements . . . accelerated the market’s ceaseless cycle of creation and destruction” (1981: 304). Adherence to traditional and what were seen as transcendent moral codes as a source of social stability was progressively replaced by a reliance on personal psychic security and physical health. Lears sees this process, which he describes as a shift “from salvation to self-realization” (Lears, 1983), as a primary factor in the rise of a modern consumer culture with hedonism as its principal affect. Indeed, one of the

central images of the modernist nightmare is that of “docile mass society — glutted by sensate gratification” (Lears, 1981: 300).

Lears does not conceal his sympathies with antimodernists such as Bell and Lasch (see in particular Bell, 1976 and Lasch, 1979) who also express a concern with moral and spiritual decline and have similar perspectives on the hedonistic quality of consumer culture. Their antimodernism is representative of a broader and vigorous rejection of the equation of technological development and the growth of material wealth with social progress. Each of these critics details the process by which the forces of modernity have eroded traditional modes of social solidarity such as community, family, and religion, resulting in the rise of an obsession with selfhood and an accompanying therapeutic sensibility which no longer “encourage[s] the subject to subordinate his needs and interests to those of others, to someone or some cause or tradition outside himself” (Lasch, 1979: 43). Ultimately, this kind of antimodernism simply reverses the equation. That is to say, rather than a necessary connection between material wealth and moral progress, it posits a similar connection between material wealth and moral decline. Brantlinger notes that this point of view, common in contemporary culture, dates to antiquity, and he summarizes it as follows: “Luxury undermines empires, which is another way of saying that civilization leads to the death of civilization” (Brantlinger, 1983: 34).

Horowitz (1985) and Hunt (1995) point out that such moral concerns over luxury and material wealth have a long history, certainly predating contemporary antimodernism. As Hunt comments, “virtually every conceivable ill, whether social or

personal, has been at one time or another laid at the door of luxury” (Hunt, 1995: 354). Hunt traces historical shifts in discourses of luxury and argues that these have operated at both the social and individual level. In the first case, luxury has been considered as a solvent, serving to loosen the bonds which maintained social stability; and in the second, it has been suspected of undermining or weakening the individual; and in both cases, the association with the effeminate or sybaritic has been a component of these discourses since the mythology of the Garden of Eden.

Implicated in this critique of luxury, and a common theme in scholarly as well as popular critiques of consumer culture, is the perennial concern with the opposition between what are perceived as false and real needs, the former associated with desire, hedonism, and individualism (even egocentricity), the latter with authenticity, self-sacrifice, and communitarianism. On one level, it might seem to make sense to distinguish between that which is absolutely essential to maintain life and that which is not, but as Weatherill (1992) argues, such a distinction between the essential and non-essential is simply ahistorical. The meaning of necessity has varied considerably over time and culture and she asks, most appropriately: “What were basic necessities? Did people die without them or were they just uncomfortable?” (Weatherill, 1992: 207). Preteceille and Terrail (1985) also point to the historical nature of needs and further argue that these are inextricably connected to the level of development of productive forces. It is therefore a mistake to regard the needs of pre-capitalist or primitive societies as somehow natural and that one can regain this natural state “by isolating oneself from the artificiality of modern life” (Preteceille and Terrail, 1985: 50).

Preteceille and Terrail argue, citing the work of Marshall Salins, that the category of luxury existed even in hunter/gatherer societies which did not merely struggle for subsistence but had both leisure time and material wealth beyond what was required for physical reproduction, due to the abundance of raw materials, simple methods of manufacture, and communal ownership. This level of luxury was, of course, both limited and relative, and constituted “a particular mode of consumption, a mode which is itself part of a specific mode of social production” (Preteceille and Terrail: 1985: 59).

The idea of a natural state of self-sufficiency, independence, or proximity to nature has been an important component of anti-modernism since the Industrial Revolution. Manifestations of this are diverse: the development of the landscape in painting and photography; the search for authentic folk cultures and art (from the African masks of Picasso to the ‘discovery’ of African American music by academic folklorists); and hippie culture of the 1960s (from the ‘back to the land’ movement to the identification with tribalism). In each case, the emphasis on pre-industrial or pre-capitalist social relations often involves an implicit denial of modern material pleasure. This tends toward a prelapsarianism which views modern consumer societies as morally fallen and psychologically weak, as opposed to earlier, more vigorous or authentic forms of culture in which indulgence and pleasure were kept at bay.

Consumer Culture as Revolution

The notion of a revolution in consumption out of which grew modern consumer culture is another common feature of many of the histories mentioned above. This assumption has come under increasing scrutiny and there is now considerable evidence to challenge it. Agnew (1992) provides an excellent overview of this position, which was greatly influenced by the *Annales* historian, Fernand Braudel (see for example, Braudel 1977, 1979). In general, it is suggested that modern material culture grew out of the slow and gradual growth of commerce and exchange, and that this process not only preceded industrial capitalism and the Industrial Revolution, but was a necessary precondition. Braudel argues that underlying all modern economic development was an extensive material life, a complex layer of routinized behaviour, activities and goods. He emphasizes the structures of everyday life and the repetitive and ritualized patterns which give inertia to the progress of history. By the early modern period in Europe (roughly the fifteenth to the eighteenth century), there was forming on top of this fundamental material layer a market economy whose history was one of uneven development, and which operated “between the ocean of daily life that lay stretched out beneath it and the capitalistic mechanism that more than once manipulated it from above” (Braudel, 1977: 41). Braudel rejects the received wisdom that capitalism was the driving force behind modern economic development and argues that the extent of any capitalism was constrained or enabled by these underlying layers. In Braudel’s description of economic history, the development of material culture, markets, and capitalism was a

process of very long duration, of microscopic and almost imperceptible change, the polar opposite of consumer revolution.

Thirsk (1978), Shammass (1990), and Weatherill (1992) also dismiss the idea of a consumer revolution, each investigating the rich material life that pre-dated the rise of modern capitalism. Thirsk argues that the increase in production and consumption was driven by a general trend toward more individualistic and materialistic concerns that resulted in the proliferation of a variety of grassroots economic schemes through which entrepreneurial individuals sought to increase their personal wealth. The vast majority of goods produced were considered trivial and frivolous (such as lace) but this activity, the goods it produced, the work it created, and the income it generated were the modest beginning of a consumer culture at all levels of society, even the lowest orders.

Contrary to the notion that households were more or less self-sufficient until after the Industrial Revolution, Shammass finds that there was an extensive, if not highly organized, market for a wide variety of goods. She cites a variety of activities relating to the manufacture of everyday goods in order to increase household income such as milling, malting, candle making, weaving, and the manufacture of small items of clothing such as hats and gloves. In addition, the presence of items such as linens, cottons, and house wares indicate an extensive early market for consumer durables. There was also a distinct shift in the domestic environment toward cordiality and creature comfort which implied new items of consumption such as tableware and bedding. Shammass concludes that the evidence does not support the idea of a

consumer revolution; it shows that there were historical shifts and changes “but no Origins of the Market, no Great Transformation in Consumer Consciousness” (Shammas, 1990: 294).

The search for the origins of modern consumer culture in a specific and even explosive moment obscures the longer and more gradual history, characterized largely by the mundane and the unexceptional. A more balanced view of the development of consumer culture might combine Braudel’s idea of the *longue durée* with a number of brief spurts of growth. This moves away from the notion of the sudden bursting forth of consumer culture but does not discard entirely the idea that there were crucial and even rapid moments of transition. The spread and development of material culture has been slow overall but has produced cumulative change which at certain moments created the conditions of its own transformation to a new and more extensive and sophisticated level of material development. For example, material goods as commonplace as modern kitchen appliances not only assisted in the preservation and preparation of food but were crucial in the transformation of the household from primarily a site of production to that of consumption. This was not a sudden change but one that was cumulative, with an impact far beyond the reaches of its initial context. In this process, what appear to be material necessities may disappear altogether, subsumed by the new, while at the same time, other forms of consumption previously marginal or even non-existent become central and seemingly indispensable. In this light, the ruptural moment of origin described by many historians of consumer culture becomes more modest, yet still significant, moments of transition during which

a previous level of material and social development gave rise to new sets of conditions, relationships, institutions, and practices.

New Questions

My criticism of these approaches to the study of consumer culture is not that they are without substance but that they tend to constrain the range of inquiry by assuming from the outset that mass consumption is a social problem or the product of a sudden and negative change in the structure of Western societies. The questions that can be formed within these confines address primarily the ways in which individuals are manipulated into non-essential consumption and the possibilities of resistance to such manipulation. Rather than either affirming or denying the validity of such questions, I am suggesting, as does Featherstone (1991), that there is a real need for a critical sociology of mass consumption that moves beyond notions of manipulation and exploitation but which also avoids a “reverse populist celebration of mass pleasures and cultural disorder” (Featherstone, 1991: 13).

In this dissertation, I shift the discussion to another terrain. Rather than dismissing views such as those outlined above, I place them within a more general economy of discourses on mass consumption, as does Foucault with the notion of the repression of sexuality. In a course outline on the study of sexuality in the ancient world, Foucault asks “How did the philosophical and medical techniques of living, on the eve of Christianity’s development, define and regulate the practice of sexual acts . . . ?” (Foucault 1997b: 89). This question, he points out, is based on assumptions

fundamentally different from the “good old repressive hypothesis and its customary questions (how and why is desire repressed?)” (Foucault, 1997b: 89) and thus leads to a completely different history of sexuality. In the case of consumer culture, I do not remove the idea of manipulation from the discussion but place it among other possible ways in which consumer culture is understood, and ask “What are the discourses through which subjects of contemporary consumer societies are shaped? How did these discourses come into being? What is their history?” One does not have to be for or against mass consumption to take stock of the various discourses which formed around it and to trace the ways in which individuals were shaped as consuming subjects.

My approach in this dissertation has been to examine several different types of subject that speak about mass consumption in different ways. I seek not to argue with them but to find the grounds on which they stand, to determine why their statements make sense, and to understand the social effects of such statements. The project is thus grounded in the work of Foucault and his concept of the production of truth, by which he does not mean the determination of truth in the absolute sense, but rather “the establishment of domains in which the practice of true and false can at once be made ordered and pertinent” (Foucault, 1991c: 79). One of Foucault’s primary interests was to explore the ways in which individuals govern themselves and others in relation to a specific value of truth. Foucault’s work on governance is therefore of particular relevance to this dissertation as is the work of others, such as Dean, Hunt, and Rose, who have further explored the field of governance along the lines outlined

by Foucault (see for example, Dean, 1994, 1996, 1999; Hunt, 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 1999; and Rose, 1996, 1999)

The Sociology of Governance

Governance does not refer exclusively to the actions of the state although the state may indeed be one source of governance. Indeed, as Hunt notes, one of the primary assumptions of the sociology of governance is that governing is not restricted to institutions that intentionally set out to govern. In addition to the governance of individuals by the state, “schools govern pupils, hospitals govern patients, stores govern customers and so on” (Hunt, 1999: 5). Governance thus implies a broader range of influence than that exercised by the state and includes any practice, programme, or strategy which attempts to regulate or shape the conduct of others (or of the self), whether individuals, institutions, or any other social aggregate. In this context, conduct is more than outward behaviour. It includes attitude, disposition, worldview, or anything that determines how a given subject understands and relates to the social world or to itself. In short (to quote a phrase commonly used in the sociology of governance), governance is about the ‘conduct of conduct.’

Foucault did not define a complete theory in his various discussions of governmentality, but rather outlined an area of inquiry which served as the basis for his own investigations, and those of others, into very specific instances of governance. Thus, rather than attempting to supply a detailed theoretical framework in this introduction, I introduce and apply concepts as required in the chapters that follow.

There are, nonetheless, some basic principles, in particular, those of problematization, rationality, and the freedom of the governed, that have general relevance to my dissertation and which therefore require some preliminary discussion.

Problematization

Dean (1999) argues that any analysis of governance must begin with the identification of problematizations which he describes as the act of calling into question some aspect of conduct. He also emphasizes the material and empirical rather than theoretical nature of this starting point. That is to say, he is not arguing for a general or abstract conceptualization of problematization but rather insisting on the specificity of analysis: problematizations “have particular dates and places, and occur at particular locales or within specific institutions or organizations” (Dean, 1999: 27). One of the fundamental arguments of this dissertation is that the complex of discourses which collectively constitute contemporary consumer culture first emerged as heterogeneous and mostly disconnected problematizations on the theme of mass consumption and its increasing importance in Western industrial societies. By problematization, I do not mean that mass consumption was considered as a moral or social problem, although that is certainly among the many ways in which it was problematized. Rather, I mean that concerns about mass consumption, whether moral, ethical, political, scientific, psychological, or sociological, formed the basis of a range of reflections and questions about conduct and subsequent interventions.

As consumer goods began to occupy an increasingly central role in the daily life of urbanized populations in the early twentieth century, new situations arose in which new forms of knowledge were required. How was one to protect oneself and one's family from physical harm or exploitation? How were individuals to differentiate among similar products? What sources of expertise were available to help in understanding the new terminology, nomenclature, technology, modes of purchase, and so on? As I will show in Chapter Four, in the early twentieth century such concerns about how one was to conduct oneself as a consumer were of acute importance and generated an extensive popular literature as well as a vast range of interventions including state regulation and legislation, and the formation of grass roots organizations. The transformation from customer to consuming subject involved the problematization of all aspects of the relationship between the individual and mass consumption.

What has been of primary interest in my research is not an explosion of consumer goods, but the explosion of discourse about consumer goods. Indeed, one of the primary features of contemporary consumer culture is the heterogeneity of discourse: consumption can be governed through 'discourses of virtue as well as of vice; the embrace of certain forms of consumption as well as resistance to or the complete rejection of other forms as 'consumerism' can be seen as evidence of ethical or moral behaviour; discourses of ethical consumption can also be joined to those of nationalism, ecological concerns, or civic duty. Evidence of attempts to problematize conduct are also extraordinarily diverse and is found not only in the formalized laws

and regulations of institutions, but in all manner of vernacular culture such as magazines, television programmes, films, and self-help books. My research has tended to emphasize these kinds of materials. For example, in documenting the practices of the federal government in managing consumer issues, I have been interested in the mundane (such as pamphlets, inter-departmental memos, information programmes, and letters to complaint bureaus) as well the more structured and formal modes of governance employed by state bureaucracies.

For the most part, the discourses of mass consumption that constitute contemporary consumer culture either grew out of earlier discourses or merged with them, transforming both in the process. For example, state regulations that addressed unfair business practices, such as those which involved the accuracy of weights and measures used in trade, dates to ancient times. This continued in the first half of the twentieth century with increasing demands for legislation dealing with false and misleading advertising. In the years following World War II, this suspicion of modern advertising methods merged with psychological theories of the consumer and precipitated a significant moral panic over subliminal advertising. The social effects of this panic were widespread and have not yet completely dissipated. Similarly, the moral critique of material wealth and luxury also has a long history and, in the post-war years, was transformed in a number of very subtle yet significant ways. While the religious motivations which often drive the suspicion of material wealth declined, there remained the residue of a moralizing reflex that combined with new fears about the relationship between mass consumption, social decline, and ecological

degradation, resulting in the proliferation of quasi-religious discourses of self-denial, such as the Voluntary Simplicity movement that appeared in the 1970s.

Rationality

One of the fundamental requirements of a system of governance is an underlying rationality which gives coherence to a particular discourse and set of practices. Rationality is not to be understood as necessarily logical in an absolute sense, but as an “intellectual technology” (Rose, 1999: 27) providing the framework of knowledge within which objects of discourse are identified, defined, and assembled, courses of action are outlined and followed, and conduct is prescribed or proscribed. Rationality is necessary in order for governance to be effective in that it must provide the principles, reasons, or explanations for specific practices of governance and it must allow for the creation of new and related practices. It represents the underlying grammar, so to speak, with which a particular value of truth can be spoken and understood. It also constitutes the authority, whether moral, political, intellectual, theological, and so on, which forms the basis for governance.

Rose (1999) notes that rationality is neither simply legitimization nor ideology but an inescapable component of every attempt at governance: “To govern, one could say, is to be condemned to seek an authority for one’s authority” (Rose, 1999: 27). In Chapter Four, for example, I discuss the rationality that gives subjects the authority to police consumer society, to become critical observers, to scrutinize the marketplace, and report infractions to the authorities. Even if the type of governance in question is

self-governance (that is to say, government of the self by the self), it must involve a logic by which the governor or governors can proceed and determine what is to be done, and by which the governed can make sense of and accept their own subjectivation. In Chapter Four, for example, I discuss a particular rationality which allows subjects to mount a moral rejection of consumer society through the cultivation of certain practices of consumption. On one level, this is a contradiction. However, it emphasises that rationality does not imply a pure logic but rather a structure of knowledge within which subjects can act in a way that is coherent to them. A particular rationality, however, does not exist simply as a set of abstract principles. Perhaps the most important single feature of the sociology of governance is the insistence on the materiality of the discourse and the ways in which rationality is inscribed in practice. Hunt describes this process as “what gets done” as opposed to “grand design” (Hunt 1996b, 425) and argues that the analysis of governance must focus on the actual mechanisms of governance, the specific practices, institutions, techniques, and so on, which produce subjects.

The Freedom of the Governed

Nikolas Rose points out that “to govern is to presuppose the freedom of the governed” (Rose, 1999: 4). One of the most important assumptions of the sociology of governance is the emphasis on the capacity of individuals to act and to understand the nature of their action. This is substantially different from the theory of ideology in which it is assumed that individuals are subject to a ‘false’ consciousness which

obscures the true motivation for their actions. In this theory, power is understood as negative, suppressive, obfuscatory, or coercive, “a systematic refusal to accept reality” (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: 129). Truth, it is argued, is therefore essentially liberating since it exposes the real forces directing human action. Foucault refers to this conceptualization of power as the “repressive hypothesis” (see, for example, Foucault, 1990a, 1991b, 1997b) and argues that the problem is not one of revealing hidden truths in order to liberate the subject from the effects of power but rather, it “consists in seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses that, in themselves, are neither true nor false.” (Foucault, 1997e: 119).

Foucault conceives of power as it is exercised “by some on others” (Foucault, 1997e: 340) and consequently, he defines power not as an abstract entity but as a concrete relationship. In such relationships, power is not exercised directly on others but only on their action and only insofar as they are free to act. Violence or direct coercion, as in the case of slavery, for example, closes down the possibility of voluntary action and thus does not constitute a power relationship. Power is not simply a struggle between opposing interests over the nature of truth and reality but “a question of ‘government’” (Foucault, 1997e: 341). Governance does not flow from the suppression of agency nor does it rely exclusively on the prohibition of conduct. Foucault points out that the word ‘conduct’ also means ‘to lead’ (Foucault, 1997e) and thus government involves the enlisting of agency in the shaping of conduct in particular ways. Governance assumes a field of possibilities and to govern is not

simply to limit action but to manage it: “[power] operates on a field of possibilities in which the behavior of active subjects is able to inscribe itself.” (Foucault, 1997e: 341).

This approach to power and subjectivity contests the notion that consumer culture is based on a dichotomous conflict between opposing forces on the terrain of mass consumption over truth versus falsehood or appearance versus reality. A basic assumption of this dissertation is that there is no singular consumer discourse but rather a multiplicity of discourses based on different truth-values with regard to the nature of mass consumption society. Chapters Two to Four are concerned with specific examples of consumer discourse, all of which are parallel but not directly connected developments. One is not the consequence of another. Each has its own conditions of emergence, its own historical trajectory, and each problematizes and rationalizes the conduct of the individual in relation to mass consumption in a specific way. There are, nonetheless, important points of contact and overlap between these different discourses, as well as contestations and confrontations, and these will be discussed in the final chapter.

Contemporary Discourses of Mass Consumption

The opening quote of this introduction was from an early attempt to understand and explain the significance of mass consumption in social and economic life, in particular, the role it could play in raising the standard of living. The authors noted that the range of goods available to the population in industrialized societies was relatively new and that society had not yet been able to develop “a code of customary

wisdom” (Tugwell, Munro, and Stryker: 1930: 545) regarding the implications of mass consumption. In a very broad sense, the goal of this dissertation is to examine not the singularity but the plurality of “customary wisdoms” about consumer society. I look at three common discourses of mass consumption that circulate in contemporary Canadian and American culture, and I argue that these discourses grew out of responses to the expansion in the range and availability of consumer goods that occurred in the decades following World War II. I seek to establish the origins of these discourses and I examine in some detail the historical preconditions which led to their development.

The specific discourses and related subjects that I chose to study are not exhaustive of the possibilities presented by contemporary consumer culture. They do, however, constitute a distinct set of problematizations of mass consumption based on a certain tension regarding material abundance. In the West, notions of democracy and freedom are closely linked with material wealth and a high standard of living, but there have also arisen deep suspicions of the nature of this wealth and the forces that produce it. The three discourses that I examine each occupy a particular discursive space regarding the degree of acceptance or rejection of consumer culture, and there are clear points of contradiction, friction, opposition, and antagonism among them.

Despite the insistence on the particularity of problematizations and the materiality of discourse in the sociology of governance, the starting point of my research was not the particular but the general. That is to say, the views of mass consumption that I chose to examine are very broad, diffuse, generalized and even

vague. The rejection of mass consumption that forms the basis of Chapter Three, for example, can be the basis of extreme forms of ascetic denial but can also circulate more broadly as a general kind of critique of ‘consumerism.’ I wanted to demonstrate that these general dispositions toward mass consumption are not free-floating with, somehow, social effects (a kind of Weberian *zeitgeist*), but the reverse: these generalized attitudes, which can be observed in a variety of attitudes and experiences in varying degrees, grew out of specific problematizations of mass consumption, the origins of which can be excavated. It is not that these generalized discourses resulted in specific types of subjects, but rather that subjectivities shaped in specific circumstances then became generalized.

In the first of the very broad discourses that I discuss, mass consumption is regarded as essentially beneficial and subjects are constituted as ‘confident consumers,’ that is to say, rational agents who view their individual acts of consumption (and whose acts are viewed) as having a significant impact on economic affairs and on society in general. The term “confident consumer” is obviously a play on words and in Chapter Two, I trace the development of the scientific measurement of consumer attitudes, commonly known as the index of consumer confidence, and examine the consequences of this for a wide range of practices of government (such as state policy on consumer issues) which increasingly associated individual freedom and citizenship with participation in consumer culture. I argue that the rise of this particular discourse of mass consumption in the years following World War II was a necessary precondition for the emergence of neo-liberalism (1) in the 1970s and 1980s

and its emphasis on individual responsibility and personal choice. The circumstances in which the consumer became an object of scientific discourse also illustrate the relationship between problematization and historical conjuncture. While problematizations are always situated in specific conjunctures, the circumstances in which the consumer was incorporated into scientific discourse constitute a particularly interesting example of the way in which seemingly disconnected interests can come together with unexpected and long-term results. In this case, attempts to quantify psychological attitudes merged with economic forecasting and the political interests of the post-war liberal state.

In Chapter Three, I explore the discourse of ‘consumerism’ in which mass consumption is rejected as fundamentally detrimental to the moral and psychological health of both the individual and society. This is essentially a moralizing discourse because it not only prescribes certain practices of consumption and certain attitudes towards material goods but it uses these as a proscriptive model for the governance of others. The consumer of this discourse assumes a moral authority not only over the self through a mode of consumption that it considers to be virtuous but, by displaying the self as a living example of this kind of virtuous consumption, over others as well. I describe this consuming subject as ‘ascetic’ because this term implies both the process of shaping the self through ethical practices, as well as the rejection of worldly pleasure which these practices putatively demonstrate. I argue that the discourse of the ascetic consumer is an example of the persistence of the moralization of luxury. The underlying rationality of this discourse, which took shape in the 1960s, was a

merging of the continuing antimodernist critique of mass society with the recasting of religious interdictions on material wealth. The result was a discourse of moral opposition to the perceived corrosive effects of consumer society.

Finally, in Chapter Four, I explore the view that while mass consumption is essentially beneficial to society, the relationship between producer and consumer is fundamentally antagonistic and exploitative in favour of the producer. The consumer is addressed as a manipulated but potentially rational actor who resists capitalist exploitation through organization, knowledge, and expertise. I trace this relationship throughout the twentieth century, concentrating on the years following World War II up to the late 1970s, emphasizing the changing and discontinuous nature of the discourse of antagonism between producer and consumer. I focus on the responses of the state and argue that there was an important shift in the way in which practices of governance by the liberal state understood mass consumption and the consumer. In the early twentieth century, the state intervened in mass consumption in order to protect populations from harm; by the 1970s, the consumer had become a distinct subject who required information in order to participate in its own self-protection. Individuals were increasingly encouraged by state bureaucracies in Canada and the United States to become vigilant consumers, personally active in the monitoring of consumer markets and in the detection and reporting of infractions.

It is not my intention to construct a general theory of the consuming subject. I assume from the outset that there is no single form of subject in contemporary consumer societies but rather a multiplicity of possible subjectivities. I am also

interested in the conditions under which specific discourses and related forms of subjectivity take shape and the ways in which they become more dispersed and generalized. Thus each of the three chapters that follow can stand on its own as an examination of the historical development of a particular form of consuming subject. At the same time, these chapters collectively demonstrate the potential diversity of subjectivity in relation to contemporary consumer culture.

Endnotes (Chapter One)

1. In the United States and Canada, the Reagan and Mulroney governments were commonly described as 'neo-conservative' while in the U.K., the term used was 'neo-liberal.' The former term indicates the shift back to Right-wing parties while the latter more accurately describes the political and social ideology of these parties. For this reason, I will use 'neo-liberal' in the rest of this dissertation.

Chapter Two: The Confident Consumer

An already fragile economy came tumbling down in the aftermath of the Sep. 11 terrorist attacks. While the experts play the stubborn optimists, the fact is nobody knows how far the new recession might go . . . everyone is sending a shaken public the same message: Spend, spend, spend, or pay an awful price. (MacDonald and Little, 2001)

. . . we already know that fear and psychological depressions are more dangerous than economic setbacks; in fact, they often cause such setbacks. The interdependence of cold, sober business statistics and deeply seated human motivations is obvious even to the completely untrained. (Dichter, 1947: 432)

Attitudes matter. (Katona, 1960: 53)

Among the many fears unleashed by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, was that the United States and quite possibly all Western nations would be plunged into economic crisis. While suspicions of a recession had been growing since early that year, they were greatly exacerbated by these events and as early as the day after, mainstream media began to report on the possibility of severe economic consequences. Among the issues that were of most concern in this regard was that of consumer confidence. Reports on consumer confidence are quite common in Western news media and usually appear with increasing frequency in the fall months, in anticipation of the Christmas shopping season. However, during that particular fall, political and economic apprehension over the state of mind of consumers was a pervasive media theme and reports of the rise or fall of consumer mood appeared almost daily. Some news agencies went further and commissioned their own surveys on consumer attitudes. *Money Magazine* and ABC News, for example, had a weekly

poll conducted for them and although the results showed that by early October the “buying climate” had improved, they were concerned that this might only be a “short-lived patriotic response” (Globe and Mail, 2001a).

Within weeks of September 11, the threat of economic disaster was sufficiently grave that Western governments made appeals to citizens to return to their normal activities in spite of lingering fears of further attacks. Many Western leaders, including Chretien, Blair, and Bush, actively encouraged citizens to go about their business, to travel, to go out, and to shop. The Globe and Mail noted “Uncle Sam apparently wants you to buy a car, take an airplane flight or buy a new sweater to support the war against terrorism” (Cox, 2001: A9). Popular sentiment among some Canadians led to an organized mass trip to New York City that was intended to show solidarity with New Yorkers as well as to help repair tourist confidence in the city, and thereby contribute to a restoration of consumer confidence in general. The “Canada Loves New York” campaign ran full-page ads in Canadian newspapers featuring an image of the Statue of Liberty draped in the Canadian Flag, encouraging Canadians to take the invitation of Mayor Gulliani and Governor Pataki to come to New York City (Globe and Mail, 2001b: A8). Special travel and accommodation rates were available for the special “Canada Loves New York Weekend” and there was a rally at the Roseland Ballroom on November 30 for which a Canadian passport would be the ticket of admission. The rally was a runaway success with significantly more people attending than had been anticipated. The original advertisement emphasized that this

event was about pleasure and solidarity, as well as having historical significance: “Be there . . . Make history. And have a good time” (*Globe and Mail*, 2001b: A8).

In these ways and many others, mass consumption suddenly became associated, even if only temporarily, with civic duty, citizenship, and international relations. Acts of consumption became acts of conspicuous patriotism and even acts of faith in consumer society, liberal democracy, and Western civilization. One of the questions that might be asked of these associations is: why did such language seem to make sense and have such popular appeal given that it was quite different from that used in other, similar moments of crisis? In both World War I and World War II, for example, patriotic duty with regard to consumption was fulfilled through participation in nationwide programmes of restraint ranging from public rationing to private austerity. Kyrk describes the American consumer during World War I as “the hero whose frugality and thrift would win the war. He was taught by the philosophy of the clean plate and the empty garbage pail” (Kyrk, 1923:2). Why, then, in the early twenty-first century did it seem reasonable that political leaders and other public figures could advocate mass acts of consumption as a legitimate form of collective response to external threat?

In this chapter, I examine the rise of the ‘confident consumer.’ As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the name is obviously a play on words. On the surface, it refers to an economic indicator, consumer confidence, which was developed in the post-war years as a scientific measurement of the relationship between the psychological state of individual consumers and the overall state of the economy. At

the discursive level, it describes subjects who view mass consumption as fundamentally beneficial and who consider themselves as powerful and influential participants in modern social and political processes through acts of consumption.

There are two aspects of this form of consuming subject in which I am interested. First, in terms of the way subjects understand the requirements of their own subjectivity, I use a question that Foucault posed with regard to his research into sexuality: “How had the subject been compelled to decipher himself in regard to what was forbidden?” (Foucault, 1988a: 17). In the discourse of the confident consumer, however, it is not so much a question of interdictions or limits but rather one of the attitudes toward the role of the self in the context of mass consumption, a role that requires active participation and contribution rather than restraint. Accordingly, we can reverse the question and ask: how does the confident consumer behave with regard to what is required or requested rather than what is prohibited? What is the mode of obligation (Dean, 1996) of the consuming subject? Reframing the question in this way also differentiates the confident consumer from the other versions of the consuming subject discussed in this dissertation, such as the ascetic consumer whose role is one of self-denial and restraint, and the vigilant consumer who practices circumspection and critique.

Second, I look at the consuming subject as an integral element in the rationality of liberalism in the post-war years and in the development of what I have called ‘choice politics,’ that is, the exercise of political freedom through freedom of choice. I argue that the rise of the confident consumer was the result of two factors:

the incorporation of the individual consumer as a significant element in the economy on the part of the liberal state; and the changing line of delineation between that which is private and that which is public in liberal forms of governance. Finally, I argue that the development of the confident consumer as a form of liberal subject was an important precondition for the subsequent rise of neo-liberalism.

The consuming subjects discussed in this chapter are not magically produced by the reporting of statistical indicators of consumer attitude in the news media, in spite of the fact that many citizens did indeed respond to the appeals to consume following the crisis of 9/11, thus displaying patriotic confidence in Western culture through consumption. Nonetheless, the development of the scientific measure of consumer attitudes played a pivotal role both historically and discursively in the production of the confident consuming subject and, for this reason, I provide a considerable amount of historical detail regarding the antecedents on which this statistical methodology was based and the historical context in which it took shape. During the 1930s, the conduct of individuals in the marketplace and their attitudes toward mass consumption became problematized in very specific ways by psychologists, social scientists, statisticians, and economists who were in the employ of marketing, advertising, public opinion surveys, and government agencies. In this way, the consumer became a significant object of study and consumer conduct was operationalized in scientific models that were used in economic forecasting, of which the Index of Consumer Sentiment, developed at the University of Michigan, was (and remains) the most prominent.

I also pay considerable attention to George Katona who was the major personality behind the development of this index. While he was certainly not the only figure involved in the rise of the scientific measurement of consumer attitudes, his writing and research were instrumental in this process and are representative of the significant shifts in attitude toward consumption on the part of economists and the state. In statistical models such as the Index of Consumer Sentiment, it is consumption and not production that is considered to be the driving force behind modern economies, and consumer attitudes and behaviour are the barometer of fair or foul economic weather. This view of the role of the individual in modern societies of mass consumption became the basis for the way in which a wide range of institutions, both state and private, understood and addressed consumers. The scientific rationalization of the consumer allowed the consuming subject to be shaped and delineated in ways that could be managed within other discourses. It defined a field in which other investigations of consumer behaviour could be located and from which other forms of knowledge about the individual in relationship to other categories, whether moral, ethical, political and so on, could be developed.

Once established in this way, the idea of the confident consumer was deployed to redefine other issues and concerns which became the grounds for a wide range of forms of governance, of interventions, programmes, policies, and so on, both public and private, through which subjects came to understand themselves as powerful consumers with the capacity to influence the fate of national economies, not simply through the traditional political institutions of liberal democracy but also, and perhaps

more importantly, through the nexus of mass consumption. Consumer confidence as a discourse expresses the idea that individuals can play an active role in maintaining economic stability and contributing to the overall psychological well-being of a nation through acts of consumption.

Attitudes Toward the Consumer Before World War II

For many public intellectuals in the first half of the twentieth century, consumers were irrational and mass consumption was simply evidence of a growing social pathology. The popular writer Walter Pitkin expressed a typically elitist opinion of the period when he claimed that a large proportion of the population in the United States suffered from what he called “consumer neurasthenia” (Pitkin, 1932: 104), “whose salient symptoms are an inability to enjoy or to work at any one thing long, a quick fatigue, a quicker boredom, and a vague yearning to find something new to try and taste” (Pitkin, 1932: 105). Some of his harshest criticism was directed at women consumers whose personalities were “often marred by erotic exhibitionism or related trends” (Pitkin, 1932: 70). His use of the term ‘neurasthenia’ is not surprising since this was a preoccupation of many middle class women in the late nineteenth century and he thus links a neurotic consumerism with effeminacy. While Pitkin conceded that mass consumption offered a higher standard of living to a greater number of people, his condescension was not uncommon nor was his view that the weak and credulous, easily manipulated by advertising, were their own worst enemy.

The consumer movements of the 1930s also saw consumers as victims but did not share the elitist view that this victimization was the result of intellectual or moral

weakness. On the contrary, a widening range of consumer advocacy groups argued that not only was consumption a democratic right of all citizens of industrial democracies, but that individuals could exercise political power through consumption to achieve this end, an attitude which was not new and which would intensify in the post-war years. Some groups sought to inform and educate individuals about consumer issues and, most importantly, to organize their consuming power into collective opposition to exploitation by capitalist industry. Others, mainly as a result of the Great Depression, had taken on increasingly populist, and in some cases, overtly socialist affiliations, and were viewed as a significant threat to the political status quo. They shared a fundamental belief that the Great Depression was the result of the unequal distribution, not merely of wealth but, more importantly, of purchasing power. Their critique of capitalism was not that industry failed to provide goods but that the economic system failed to promote the circulation of wealth in such a way that the masses would benefit (this is discussed in more detail in Chapter Four).

Despite these growing concerns about mass consumption, both optimistic and fearful, mainstream economists paid virtually no attention to consumer issues. They did not consider individual consumer behaviour or attitude, manipulated or not, to be of any significance to general economic theory and, in any case, they did not believe that such attitudes could be measured with the degree of accuracy necessary for economic calculation. Consumption was simply a corollary to production. Consumer choice was considered only insofar as it affected price and demand, but not in its own right; consumer spending was seen almost exclusively as a function of income and,

since income did not originate in the consumer sector, consumers were relevant only as the final recipients of goods. Although it was recognized that individual consumer attitudes could vary widely, mainstream economics held that these would cancel out and thus were not important to any general theory of economics. Classic English economics placed consumption alongside the other major economic sectors of production, exchange, and distribution, but this was purely for the sake of symmetry since they paid very little theoretical attention to it. Even the school of marginal utility, which attempted to deal at least to some extent with the process of consumption, assumed that the intent of consumers was purely instrumental and based on perfect knowledge of the market and other conditions. It emphasized the desirability of a commodity as the primary causal factor in consumer choice and reduced the consumer to an undifferentiated universal shop customer. Hazel Kyrk wrote in 1923 that the process of consumption as described by economists of marginal utility was “faulty and abstract,” “a process practically timeless and spaceless,” and that, in their model of human behaviour, “we cannot recognize ourselves or our fellows in the hedonistic, individualistic calculators whom they described” (Kyrk, 1923: 17). Consumers were regarded as necessary but not influential, and their psychology, history, class, gender, race and so on were simply irrelevant.

There were some exceptions to this general trend in economic thought, some of which were widely read, but these tended to be outside what had become the mainstream practice of economics and were more properly located in the theoretical discussions of other disciplines such as political economy, sociology, or social and

economic history. For example, Thorstein Veblen, in his famous *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (first published in 1899), saw consumption as an important force in modern economies and investigated the economic effect of the desire for social status on the part of the *parvenu* classes. But, at least until after World War II, his insights into emulation and distinction were considered more as a contribution to social criticism than to pure economics.

Simon J. Patten had argued as early as the 1890s that the United States was potentially entering a period of abundance and freedom from want in which mass production and consumption would promote greater social equality and security for all. His almost religious vision of a democracy founded on abundance was laid out in a very popular and influential work, *The New Basis of Civilization*, which first appeared in 1907 and remained in print for 16 years, going through eight editions. Similarly, Sombart's *Luxury and Capitalism*, published in 1913, gave great importance to consumption, arguing that luxury consumption in particular was one of the primary historical factors behind the development of modern capitalism. Nonetheless, despite the fact that consumers were becoming an increasingly prominent social and economic force, mainstream economists did not consider the consumer to be an important category and there were no major efforts to develop a theory of the consumer until after World War II.

In the years leading up to World War II, there were a number of factors that led to the development of the scientific measurement of consumer attitudes and their incorporation into the strategies of government of the liberal state. First, there was the

growing interest in the psychology of the individual within advertising and marketing and in public opinion surveys which had achieved considerable stature during the 1930s. In both cases, there was a development of scientific methods of inquiry and calculation based on aspects of personal psychology such as attitude, outlook, intentions, and so on. Psychiatry, psychology, and to some extent sociology, all of which sought to understand human behaviour in general, contributed to what might be called the 'interiorization' of the social actor, that is, the sculpting of an interior space of experience, memory, thought, desire, and so on, including a past which was determinant at a subconscious level on the present and the future.

This should not be understood as an attempt to discover and govern an interior space that already existed, but rather to create a specific form of interior space that could subsequently be governed. The goal of psychologists in the service of marketing and public opinion firms was substantially different from that of clinical psychology or those types of social science which sought to understand basic motives and drives, particularly from the standpoint of abnormal or deviant behaviour. In the context of mass consumption or public opinion, this interiorization was produced by the combination of the methodologies and techniques of psychology with those of statistics and economics which was then directed toward establishing a positivist framework through which subjects could be understood and governed, not simply as abnormal human subjects with problems that required intervention, but as rational and reasonable subjects whose opinions, behaviour, sentiments, fears and so on, were calculable, predictable, and efficacious in social, political, and economic affairs.

Second, after the experience of the Great Depression, there was a pressing need on the part of the liberal state for better tools of economic forecasting in order to ensure greater economic stability and the long-term survival of capitalism. Foucault's insights into the historical development of "the art of government" through the establishment of the economy as a distinct category (Foucault, 1991a) are very useful in understanding the transformation of strategies of liberal government during the rapid expansion of mass consumption in the post-war years and the later rise of neo-liberalism. Foucault traces the idea of modern governance to a recentring of the authority of the state toward what is now known as the 'economic.' This process involved a shift in the object of governance from territory to that of population, a shift that was accomplished to a large degree through the rise of statistics that identified specific regularities and characteristics such as rates of mortality and disease, which, in turn, allowed population to be understood as a distinct object. From this flowed new strategies and technologies of government which were directed at managing the population in terms of its wealth, its overall welfare including the health of individuals, and so on. The 'arts of government' became the management of all aspects of the population and this became synonymous with 'the economy.' As Foucault explains, "The constitution of a *savoir* of government is absolutely inseparable from that of a knowledge of all the processes related to population in its larger sense; that is to say, what we now call the economy" (Foucault, 1991a: 100).

There was in the post-war years a very similar process at work in the case of the response of the liberal state to mass consumption. The increasing importance of

the standard of living in industrialized societies and the various problematizations of the liberal individual in the context of rising mass consumption became a specific problem of government that pertained directly to the management of the population; and, just as statistics led to the identification of population as a governable space in the eighteenth century, so did scientific measurement place into a “grid of intelligibility and calculation” (Dean, 1996: 222) the characteristics and regularities of mass consumption and consumer conduct, moving both within the purview of the liberal state where previously they had been of little interest.

The Interiorization of the Subject

Advertising and marketing firms had been keenly interested in the consumer and consumer psychology since the late nineteenth century, but their forays into this field were still quite crude by modern standards. The primary goal of early advertising was to identify the producer to the consumer by means of the brand. The goal of advertising was viewed as straightforward and simple: to induce the consumer to buy. Consequently, early applications of psychology to mass consumption were directed at little more than understanding the relative appeal of different print and visual strategies. E.K. Strong, a contemporary psychologist involved in the field of advertising, defined the problem simply: “From a psychological standpoint there are two main problems to be considered in evaluating any advertisement. The advertisement must, first of all, attract attention. Unless it is noticed by the reader it has no value at all. It must, secondly, create a desire for the advertised commodity” (Strong, 1913: 394).

An early example of an attempt to develop a consumer psychology was the prototypical and widely-circulated advertising manual, *Advertising: Its Principles and Practice* (Tipper *et al.*, 1915). Tipper and his colleagues emphasized the need to establish a dynamic relationship between commodities and desires and saw this as a “strictly psychological” task (Tipper *et al.*, 1915: 63). This task, they argued, would require “knowledge of the laws of thinking, the laws of association, the phenomena and characteristics of memory, the facts of habit and the general characteristics of human action and human behavior” (Tipper *et al.*, 1915: 63). As was typical of many early and even later advertising manuals, it traced the evolution of human behaviour in pseudo-Darwinian terminology from primitive to higher forms through “the struggle for survival, supremacy, and comfort” (Tipper *et al.*, 1915: 75), using categories such as “The Original Needs of Human Beings” and “The Chief Human Instincts, Needs, and Emotions.” These categorizations often involved pure flights of fancy, completely uninformed by contemporary anthropology. For example, the list of basic human instincts identified by Tipper *et al.* are: “locomotion, taking nourishment, making vague sounds and random movements, fear, pugnacity, self-assertiveness, collecting and storing up objects, emulation or rivalry, hunting, curiosity, and perhaps the abhorrence of filth” (Tipper *et al.*, 1915: 78).

Despite these unsophisticated psychological and anthropological notions about human behaviour, the manual did attempt to investigate advertising in a broader context. It suggested that there was a need for a more detailed knowledge of markets and explored the characteristics of different potential market categories, such as

farmers, business men, and women. Nonetheless, in this manual and in similar attempts to develop a psychology of consumption, the imperative was the final transaction and thus the emphasis was always on 'making a sale.' Any notion of the consumer remained at the level of the anonymous customer, with no identity, no history, and no social or psychological characteristics beyond the primitive. Most conclusions about the consumer were simply speculation. Any empirical research was confined to the surroundings of the psychological laboratory where subjects were little more than a vehicle for response to stimulus in the measurement of the effectiveness of advertisements. However, after the crisis of overproduction that contributed to the Great Depression, it became clear to business that a greater knowledge of potential markets was necessary and, as a result, the role of psychology shifted toward identifying the consumer to the producer rather than the reverse, as had been the case previously. This did not obviate the earlier concern about the effectiveness of the individual advertisement, but it did require that the scope of inquiry be enlarged and during the 1930s and 1940s there were significant changes in the approach of business to issues of consumption and the consumer.

Henry Link, secretary of the Psychological Corporation of New York, a large consulting firm which assisted business in marketing, was an active contributor to public discourse on mass marketing. His major work on advertising, *The New Psychology of Advertising and Selling*, published in 1932, was indicative of the shift toward the exploration of consumer psychology. He stated that the main impetus for the research of his firm grew out of "the new emphasis on: *how to make what people*

will want to buy, as contrasted with the former emphasis on: *how to make people buy what we have already made*” (Link, 1932: 1). According to Link, one of the stumbling blocks in understanding markets was what he called “the ego-centric predicament” (Link, 1932: 15) or the hubris of business in assuming that all products were satisfactory and that the primary task of marketing was to break down the resistance of the customer whose personal wishes were of little consequence. Indeed, most early advertising manuals were written very much in the shadow of the nineteenth century travelling salesman and stressed the personality of the vendor rather than the views of the customer. Link’s comments identify a clear move in the opposite direction. Similarly, Ernest Dichter claimed that while industry had at its disposal powerful forces of production, it was still at a very primitive stage in understanding the consumer and that alliances between business and psychology were absolutely necessary “if we are to progress from a medicine-man stage of selling and advertising to a scientifically controllable one” (Dichter, 1947: 432).

Those marketing firms which employed large numbers of psychologists and supplied producers with market information (for example, Link’s Psychological Corporation) began to experiment with research methodologies that involved more field studies and a greater degree of personal engagement with subjects (for example, depth interviews, surveys and questionnaires, round table discussions, and consumer panels). As a result, the anonymous customer of early advertising manuals began to take shape in marketing theory as a more detailed and complex subject in a number of important dimensions. First, the consumer expanded inwardly, acquiring a distinct set

of psychological traits and motivations. Second, while the subject of earlier advertising experiments was often categorized by gender, basic social class, or region, the consumer of the new marketing research was a much more fully developed social being located within a more complex set of social characteristics, and involved in a more detailed and realistic social life. More importantly, for later developments such as predictive indicators, the consumer acquired a history. Whereas previously both the consumer and the process of consumption existed in a permanent present around the moment of the transaction, the new consumer existed in time with not only a relevant past but a future that was of increasing interest to marketers. In addition, there were concerted efforts to describe each of these dimensions in terms of data elements that could be tabulated and used in statistical evaluation.

Surveys of public opinion in the United States date from at least the early nineteenth century when straw votes (unofficial political polls) first appeared. By the 1930s, more technically sophisticated polls were a staple of the political scene in the United States. They were generally regarded with a high degree of trust and were thought to be a significant step in the direction of a more popular democracy, constituting a new voice of the people, “keeping the legislator in constant touch with public opinions” (Gallup and Rae, 1940: 21). Political polls were very popular and widely-reported but the polling of public opinion in general also became commonplace and several major organizations regularly published poll results on a wide variety of political and social issues.

Statistics and Economic Forecasting

The techniques and methodologies associated with the emerging consumer psychology and public opinion polls became of interest to economists, particularly those who were involved in the development of state policy, for the purposes of economic forecasting. Modern industrial states, in light of the experience of the market crash of 1929 and the subsequent Depression, began to intervene more directly in national economic affairs and sought more reliable means of prediction in order to inform both government policy and industrial strategy. There was also increasing awareness of the importance of mass consumption to the interests of the liberal state in terms of both industrial development and the socio-political implications of a greater standard of living. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the political turmoil of the 1930s presented a genuine threat to the long term survival of capitalism and there was therefore a recognition on the part of both government and industry of the hegemonic role played by mass consumption in political, economic, and social stability.

The governments of both Canada and the United States expressed increasing interest in issues of consumption during the 1930s and during World War II. For example, the United States government had conducted several major consumer surveys as part of the Works Project Administration, collecting data from a large number of households over a wide geographical area and including, for the first time, a relatively high proportion of personal interviews. Similarly, the Canadian government formed the Consumer Branch of the Wartime Prices and Trade Board, a

department dedicated to the problems of rationing, the education of the public in the observance of regulations on rationing, and the conservation of goods that were in short supply. This department was composed almost entirely of women volunteers and, although it was disbanded shortly after the War, the experience led to the formation in 1947 of the first major Canadian consumer advocacy organization, the Consumer's Association of Canada, which was exclusively female until the 1970s. In the United States, a number of different government departments began to conduct surveys on public attitudes toward a variety of war-related issues, not only economic, for the purpose of informing and communicating policy. The most important of these departments was the Division of Program Surveys at the Department of Agriculture, which used and helped to refine the survey methodologies of public opinion polls. In 1942, it conducted a survey for the War Finance Division of the Treasury Department to assist in improving the effectiveness of war bond drives. One of the goals of the survey was to investigate the link between buying patterns and the attitudes and expectations of consumers with regard to the economy. In this sense, it was a prototype of later psychological-economic surveys (See Likert, 1972; Curtin, 2000; and Katona, 1951).

It was not these initial attempts at consumer surveys, however, but a grave concern about post-war economic conditions that led to serious investigations into the relationship between consumer behaviour and the overall state of the economy, a move which had profound implications for post-war developments. As a result of the war effort, the United States and Canada had experienced high levels of employment

and production but toward the end of the War, both governments became deeply concerned about the potential for disaster in the approaching peacetime economy. In a presentation before a Congressional Committee on economic statistics in 1955, James Tobin recalled that toward the end of World War II, “some economists feared deflation and unemployment due to the cessation of war expenditures and the demobilization of the Armed Forces. Other observers feared that the accumulation of liquid savings during the war would result in an inflationary explosion” (Tobin, 1955: 375). Similar concerns were expressed in Canada, resulting in the establishment of the Department of Reconstruction in 1944 in order to maintain “high and stable employment and income” (Canada-Department of Reconstruction, 1945: 4) following the return of armed forces personnel to the civilian population. In anticipation of such problems, the governments of both Canada and the United States began to conduct surveys in a number of different economic categories and concluded that there were very real and immediate dangers unless the government intervened (1). The behaviour of consumers following the war was of intense interest, in part because of the unprecedented level of savings accumulated during the war, but also because of the growing recognition of the importance of mass consumption.

A major survey of the intentions of consumers with regard to their spending in the post-war years was conducted by the United States government in 1946, but it collected mainly ‘hard’ economic data and was not particularly interested in the psychological disposition of the consumer. However, the director of the initial survey, George Katona, encouraged the inclusion in subsequent surveys of questions

pertaining to the intentions of consumers and their attitude toward the economy. The survey, known as the Survey of Consumer Finances, quickly developed into a broader project that combined both economics and psychology. It was moved to the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan, where it continued to be conducted by former personnel of the Division of Program Surveys, including Katona. Economists began to pay serious attention to this method of economic forecasting and concluded that, in the new post-war environment of growing affluence and increasing consumer demand, previous models of economic forecasting, such as time-series analysis, were no longer adequate. James Tobin commented in 1951 that the value of such forms of inquiry was no longer in question: “The methodological issue, therefore, is not *whether* consumer surveys are to be used in short-term forecasting, but *how* they are to be used” (Lansing and Withey, 1955: 446). At a national conference held at Princeton University in 1957 on the significance for economic forecasting of what were now called ‘anticipations data,’ Hart *et al.* summarized the general recognition that individual behaviour would need to be an important variable in any future economic theory:

To account satisfactorily for economic change, we need to develop and test hypotheses about the way experience shapes people’s view of the future, the way this view of the future shapes their decisions, and the way further experience reshapes forecasts and plans. (Hart, Modigliani, and Orcutt, 1960: 5)

Likert (1972) notes that in the immediate post-war years, the United States government was initially sceptical of the ability of consumer attitude surveys to forecast economic change accurately. However, Likert adds, after some early

successes in predicting the state of the economy with data from the Survey of Consumer Finances when other traditional forecasting tools had failed, the government began to incorporate consumer surveys into economic planning. In 1953, the Federal Reserve Board set up five task groups on economic statistics, three of which were dedicated to the growing area of expectations data, “a field which a few years earlier had not existed” (Hart, Modigliani, and Orcutt, 1960: 3). Of these latter task groups, one was devoted entirely to consumer expectations and intentions. In its report to Congress, the Federal Reserve Board noted that “consumers may not behave in a manner that can be accounted for by economic factors alone, and successful prediction may require that ‘psychological’ influences be taken into account” (United States-Congress-Joint Economic Committee, 1955: 272). While stressing that the conclusions drawn from such survey data were still tentative, the Federal Reserve Board acknowledged that such surveys had the potential to “open up interesting possibilities both for those engaged in the practical operations of government and business and for the research investigator” (United States-Congress-Joint Economic Committee, 1955: 261) .

The report praised the value of the consumer surveys done by Katona at the Survey Research Center and recommended an increase not only in funding but in the frequency of the surveys. At the hearings held by Congress in the preparation of this report, there was strong support from both labour and business for further investigations into the systematic collection of data on the psychology of the consumer. Bert Seideman of the American Federation of Labor, for example, said that

trade unions had a particular interest in “this whole field of the development of survey techniques for obtaining information on consumers’ expectations, consumers’ attitudes, and consumers’ intentions” (United States-Congress-Joint Economic Committee, 1955: 378) adding that labour, perhaps more than any other group, regarded “the actions of consumers which eventuate consumer expenditures as playing a very strategic role in the entire economy” (United States-Congress-Joint Economic Committee, 1955: 378). Similarly, Harold C. Passer of Eastman Kodak argued for the importance of such surveys since they constituted “the only source of information currently available about the attitudes and intentions of consumers” (United States-Congress-Joint Economic Committee, 1955: 382).

As the standard of living and the availability of consumer goods became an increasingly important political issue for the liberal state, there was a subtle shift from a concern only with the production of wealth to its distribution, particularly in terms of the range and availability of consumer goods and the primary site of their enjoyment, the family home. The growing relationship between consumption and democracy was one of the foremost themes of the Cold War, exemplified in the opposition between state and market provision, not only in terms of a social wage but especially in terms of goods and services. The inability of the Soviet Union to ‘deliver the goods,’ so to speak, was a powerful cultural subtext, and was often exploited for political effect in events such as the famous ‘kitchen debate.’ The debate was really not much more than a brief exchange of words between Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and Vice-President Richard Nixon at an American Trade and Cultural Fair near Moscow in July

1959, held after a similar Soviet fair in the United States the previous month.

Khrushchev sneered at the materials used in the model home, commenting that they were flimsy and insubstantial and that houses should be built to last, to which Nixon responded that this was not necessary since the tastes and needs of future generations might be quite different.

This minor event, rooted in the rhetorical distinction between stability and state provision on the one hand and dynamism and markets on the other, was highly publicized in the West, particularly in the United States, where it served to further the perception of the Soviet system as dull, utilitarian and rigid, in contrast to American capitalism and its parade of consumer goods. It also entered the popular discourse of rivalry between the two superpowers and their relative ability to provide the 'Good Life.' In this new environment of the social and political importance of growing material wealth, there was an intense interest in greater knowledge of the consumer on the part of the state and business. The government surveys of consumer information, discussed above, demonstrated that the collection and intelligent analysis of reliable data was considered to be crucial to the maintenance of economic and social stability, and to the growth of a consumer society.

Psychological Economics and the Index of Consumer Sentiment

Katona (2), who had championed the government-sponsored consumer surveys during the war years, continued their development at the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan. He was not the only figure involved in the merging of psychology, sociology and economics, but he held a unique position in this process by

virtue of the degree and scope of his direct involvement and by the impact his work had on economic theory, state policy, business practises and, ultimately, popular culture and everyday life. He was initially a practising psychologist in Germany, very much influenced by the gestalt tradition. During the period of hyperinflation in Germany in the 1920s, he had published an article that attributed inflation to mass hysteria and, although he later rejected this view, the article was widely quoted and led him into the formal study of economics. He subsequently worked as both a psychologist and economic journalist, as associate editor for a popular economics weekly, *Der Deutsche Volkswirt* (The German Economist), and as German correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal*.

After Hitler came to power in 1933, Katona immigrated to the United States and became involved in business and psychological research, presenting courses and conducting surveys. By the end of World War II, he was with the Department of Program Surveys at the Department of Agriculture where he supervised the consumer surveys already mentioned. These initial surveys provided an ideal vehicle for an investigation of the relationship between economics and psychology, an idea which had been of great interest to Katona for some time. As Curtin (2000) points out, Katona “had clear and unmistakable intentions, and seized this opportunity to give life to an innovative research agenda” (Curtin, 2000: 3). Later, as a professor of both psychology and economics at the University of Michigan, Katona’s influence was crucial to the content and direction of research into what he began to call ‘psychological economics’ and later ‘behavioral economics.’

His views of the consumer in the post-war period are useful in understanding the implications of this research for the liberal state and as an example of a broader change in attitude toward the consumer and issues of mass consumption on the part of economists and government. Katona claimed that the modern era of mass consumption began to develop after about 1920 and expanded very suddenly and rapidly in the post-war years. Before this, he argued, the consumer had very little effect on the economy in general and thus the psychology of the consumer was not relevant. In primitive or poor cultures, most income was devoted to subsistence. Even in early industrial societies, economic activity was driven by a relatively small business elite; most income was spent on rent or perishables and since these expenses were not discretionary and could not be withheld, consumers did not exercise any power over the economy. However, in the years after World War II, there was an “income revolution” (Katona, 1960, 11) within the broad middle and upper-middle income groups and this had shunted the economic class structure away from a small upper class and a huge class of poor.

Katona noted a number of other crucial changes in the post-war economy of the United States. He mentioned the huge amount of savings accumulated by this class during World War II and the capacity that this gave to the individual to influence the economy. He also emphasized that the widespread acceptance of credit was crucial to the post-war boom. While credit had become steadily more available since the early twentieth century, he argued that “its almost universal acceptance is . . . a post-World War II development” (Katona, 1964: 18). Although Katona did not pursue

this, the role of credit in the development of modern consumer economies and the ‘confident consumer’ cannot be understated. Credit was in direct contradiction to traditional conservative values which had encouraged thrift and sacrifice. In the new era of mass consumption, “the restraint on worldly desires preached for so long made less and less sense as the factory system’s astonishing productive capacities became apparent” (Leiss *et al.*: 1990, 57). Up to this point, saving was a virtue and the goal of many households was to be able to purchase products of sufficient quality that they would not have to be replaced. A family would acquire a ‘good’ set of china or furniture, for example, and consumption of these items would then reach a sense of closure. The ethic of consumption that developed in the post-war years was a much more continuous and open-ended process, indicative of the acceptance by the new society of affluence and optimism about its future.

The rise in discretionary income and the importance placed on consumer goods, especially durables such as automobiles and household appliances, meant that consumers now had considerable power in the economy. Furthermore, Katona argued, the principle of the dependency of consumption on income assumed that “consumers are marionettes who do their spending according to what they make” (Katona, 1960: 22). This assumption was commonly accepted in contemporary economics as was the Keynesian principle that consumption would actually fall as income increased since it had been shown that at higher income levels, the tendency to consume was lower. As Curtin (2000) points out: “It was this facet of the Keynesian approach that led to the

prediction that shortfalls in consumer demand would precipitate another depression following WWII” (Curtin, 2000: 6).

To the contrary, Katona argued that with the new wealth of the middle class came the ability to plan, to withhold spending or not, and that this had profound implications for the business cycle. Katona went even further by reversing the accepted notion of the dependency of consumption on income. The desire to raise one’s standard of living through consumption could actually drive the desire for greater income. Consumption would not end with the satisfaction of basic wants; the achievement of higher standards of living simply created the conditions for rising expectations: “Accomplishment tends to raise levels of aspiration. Having achieved what we want, we often raise our sights. It is not the gratification of needs but failure and frustration which make us renounce further goals and ambitions” (Katona, 1960a, 24). Whereas in the past, the psychology of consumers, their intentions, attitudes, degree of optimism, had very little meaning, they were now of great interest, argued Katona, and the insignificant consumer of previous economic theory was now, as in the title of Katona’s most significant work on the subject, *The Powerful Consumer* (Katona, 1960).

Like many other psychologists who had experience in the investigation of consumer behaviour through survey methodologies, Katona argued that the gulf between psychology and economics was artificial. The term “economic behaviour” usually referred to the behaviour of prices or income rather than the actual behaviour of individuals and thus tended to reify economic data “as if money and prices

themselves were the actors influencing developments and not the human beings who have the money or set the prices” (Katona, 1951: 6). Katona sought to redefine the term, through the application of the philosophy and empirical methodology of psychology, to refer to the behaviour of real subjects “whose actions play a role in determining economic trends” (Katona, 1960: 8). He argued against the accepted notion that the personal attitudes of consumers would cancel each other out: “changes in consumer sentiment usually do not cancel out but rather resemble a contagious disease, tending to spread widely” (Katona, 1960b: 78). He therefore concluded that shifts in attitude, accurately measured and correctly analyzed, were harbingers of cyclical economic fluctuation. Commenting on the suggestion that economic shifts were the result of psychological factors, Katona said (in 1960):

... this is hardly new. What is new is that the psychological factors are susceptible to study, analysis, and measurement. Some people think that income, assets, debts, and their changes can be determined with ease and exactitude while the intangible state of confidence or anxiety is a matter of nonscientific feelings and opinions. During the last ten or fifteen years it has, however, been demonstrated that changes in the American people’s optimism or pessimism, in their feelings of security or insecurity, in their degree of confidence or mistrust and uncertainty, are measurable. (Katona, 1960: 4)

The philosophy and direction of the surveys conducted at the Survey Research Center and refined over the 1950s was fundamentally different from other consumer surveys designed by marketers or advertising firms to elicit responses about specific products, brands, advertisements and so on. Although many research firms had moved toward a more ‘conversational’ style in both interviews and questionnaires, the Survey of Consumer Finances used this technique to focus on a set of key questions that explored connections between the individual consumer and the state of the economy.

Katona was not interested in the opinion of consumers on specific brands or their motivations for purchasing them, but on their outlook on issues of personal finances, patterns of consumption, the overall economy, and current social and political events, with the latter being of particular interest in forecasting potential macroeconomic change.

The surveys used a method of interviewing that encouraged “a conversation between interviewer and respondent instead of a cut-and-dried interrogation” (Katona, 1951: 313). Fixed questions were often preceded by brief statements of intent that were clearly crafted to make the interviewer appear interested not merely in collecting data but in the personal life and opinions of the respondent. They also made the respondents feel that they were, in fact, not respondents, but helpful contributors to the interview. For example, in the 1960 Index of Consumer Sentiment, consumers were asked a direct question about the current state of their finances: “Would you say that you (and your family living there) are better off or worse off financially than you were a year ago?” Significantly, this question was preceded with a statement fashioned to put the respondent at ease and convey the concern of the interviewer: “We are interested in how people are getting along financially these days” (Survey Research Center website, Index of Consumer Sentiment, see bibliography).

Most questions followed a “funnel arrangement” (Katona, 1951: 316) in which a general question was followed by successively narrower inquiries that Katona thought were particularly important when the questions dealt with personal issues or opinions. The 1949 Survey of Consumer Finances, for example, solicited the opinions

of consumers on credit regulation: “Have you heard of a regulation on the amount you pay down and the time you can take to pay for an automobile, furniture, or household appliance you buy on instalment? . . . What do you think of that regulation? . . . Why do you think so?” (Katona, 1951: 316). Overall, the surveys collected data in a number of key categories: general attitudes and the degree of optimism or pessimism toward changes in personal income and the overall economy; intent to purchase with regard to specific key items, mostly major consumer durables; and trends in commodity consumption (for example, attitudes about new consumer items such as compact cars).

The most important development in these surveys was the increasing inclusion of questions pertaining to specific external and topical events. Initially, Katona was concerned primarily with attitudes toward inflation and deficits but as the surveys developed, more questions were directed at instances of international tension, such as the Korean War, the U-2 crisis, or the Cuban missile crisis. Indeed, the crucial difference between these surveys and other similar consumer surveys was the increasing connection made between local and global events, and consumer psychology. Most significant was the implicit assumption that this connection was a feedback process. That is to say, major events such as elections, wars, disasters, and reports of economic prosperity or the reverse, were assumed to have an important effect on the individual psychology of the consumer. These events would be internalized as attitudes and dispositions that would in turn influence the future state of the economy.

By 1960 the surveys were conducted quarterly and the results made available in the Index of Consumer Sentiment, published by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan. This index combined the economic plans of consumers with their attitudes toward the current economic and political landscape in order to predict the future performance of the national economy. It increasingly forged a link between the consumer, the economy, and current events, by inquiring into the effects of the Cold War, international tensions, the threat of nuclear war, space exploration, and other events of topical interest. The Index was intended for wide use by business and government in order to plan more effective short-term economic strategy and policy. It was highly successful and is still perhaps the most significant indicator of its type (news media occasionally refer to it as “The Michigan Index”). It also formed the model for a wide variety of similar measurements, the most notable of which is the Consumer Confidence Index, currently reported by the Conference Board, the most popular and widely-quoted of such economic indicators.

Governance and Mass Consumption

The early success of analytical models, such as the Index of Consumer Sentiment, in predicting fluctuations in the business cycle led to their widespread use by a wide range of institutions, both public and private. This provided the impetus for the development of a vast array of technologies of governance, centred around the idea of the confident consumer, through which consuming subjects were addressed and understood by the state, business, and educational institutions. One of the most significant developments was that of the establishment of major government

departments whose primary mandate was the management of consumer issues (discussed in detail in Chapter Four). The rise of the consumer advocacy movement also had an enormous impact on the formation of state bureaucracies concerned with consumer issues, but it was the capacity to comprehend such issues through technologies of scientific and statistical analysis that allowed mass consumption to be an object of governance in the first place.

The discursive rationality based on statistical analysis allowed the consumer as subject to be shaped and delineated, to be 'made real' in a way that could be managed by the liberal state. Once established, the strategies of government directed at the confident consumer could be deployed to define or redefine other concerns. The language used to describe the confident consumer became the *lingua franca* of a vast range of practices and institutions, including national and international economic policies on issues as wide as local trade or foreign aid and development, educational programmes, or business philosophy, all of which addressed the consuming subject as efficacious and mass consumption as beneficial. For example, during the 1950s and 1960s, there were an increasing number of important conferences, both national and international, that addressed the issue of the economic importance to both the modern state and business of mass consumption and the consumer. Aside from the actual issues discussed at such conferences, there are two aspects of this development that are of interest. First, these conferences were not purely academic but a clear attempt to integrate the interests and forces of research, business, and government. They indicate the breadth of the rationality of the confident consumer and the degree to

which this functioned to splice together and channel a wide range of interests.

Second, conferences on these issues were simply unheard of before World War II and thus indicate that the concerns over the relationship between consumer psychology and economic well-being spread both widely and rapidly in the post-war years.

One of the most interesting events of this type was a major conference entitled “Consumption and Economic Development” organized at Princeton University in 1955 by Consumer Behavior Incorporated, which described itself as “a nonprofit organization established by a group of social scientists to promote research on consumer behavior toward the end of increasing our ability to predict what consumers will do” (Clark, 1958: viii). The influence of George Katona was obvious and, indeed, he was on the board of directors which also included a remarkable range of members from the U.S. government, business (for example, Ford, Goodyear, Pabst, Philip Morris, General Foods, Chrysler), consumer finance (Household Finance Corporation), academia (for example, professors of sociology, marketing, social relations, business), media (for example, Business Week), and private market and opinion research firms (Nielsen, Market Research Corporation of America, Politz). The collection of papers published from this conference included an introduction by Ruth Mack of the National Bureau of Economic Research, which partly funded the conference. Another significant example is that of the Consumer Behavior Symposium organized by the Graduate School of Business of Stanford University and held there in 1964, which was attended by a very similar range of interested parties.

Representative papers were collected under the title *On Knowing the Consumer* (Newman, 1966).

Whether or not Katona's theories have been supported by subsequent economic and social evidence, and whether or not the Index of Consumer Sentiment (and its later manifestations) are useful tools of economic forecasting is not at issue here. In any case, before the post-war economic boom, the rise in wages, and the establishment of credit as a norm, there was probably little need for economists to discuss the consumer in the ways Katona suggested; and as individual spending power became more significant, Katona was, in a sense, measuring a process already under way. That is to say, he saw the consumer as powerful while the consumer was indeed becoming more powerful and confident. Nonetheless, Katona was a key figure in establishing the significance of the consumer in economic theory and his Index does occupy a particularly interesting and illustrative historical position, insofar as it acted as a kind of conduit between two phases in the development of the consuming subject as confident consumer. The first of these phases was characterized by a refinement of the idea of the individual through the application of psychology within the fields of advertising and the management of public opinion. This placed a new status on the attitudes and opinions of individuals as consumers which was further focused and operationalized in a particular way in the statistical and scientific technologies of the measurement of consumer attitude. In the second phase of this development, the general acceptance of this index as a tool of economic planning brought about an even closer marriage of mass consumption and liberal democracy.

“What Kind of Person is the Consumer?”

The consumer became of central importance to the state for reasons other than the obvious economic benefits produced by high levels of consumption. Consumer issues also played a central role in the biopolitical strategy of post-war liberal government. Foucault uses the term “biopolitics” (see Foucault 1988b, 1997d) to describe a political technology that addresses populations in terms of certain kinds of problems such as health, life expectancy, famine, or disease. The well-being and happiness of the population is not simply the goal of good government, Foucault argues, but a fundamental requirement for the political survival of the modern state. Concerns over such issues as overall health and contentment, however, are significant only to the extent that the individual has some bearing on changes in the overall strength of the state, whether positively or negatively: “It is only insofar as an individual is able to introduce this change that the state has to do with him” (Foucault, 1988b: 152).

Thus it was essential that the relationship between the consumer and the economy be measured, understood, and integrated as part of the statistical apparatus, or “political arithmetic” (Foucault, 1988b: 151), of the state. Mass consumption was significant not only because it could ensure a greater degree of contentment by increasing the standard of living in material terms, but because it was also capable of enhancing the autonomy of the liberal subject by expanding the space within which subjects could engage in practices of liberty. For these reasons, Western governments increasingly developed strategies of governance directed toward the production of

confident consumers. The version of the consumer that emerged in the work of Katona and others during the 1940s, and which became incorporated into state and business policy by the 1950s, is a subject fundamentally different from that described by the critics of the excesses of consumerism during that period.

In *The Mass Consumption Society*, Katona asks: “In the era of mass consumption the question What kind of person is the consumer? becomes a crucial one” (Katona, 1964: 332). What are the characteristics and behaviour of the confident consumer and in what kind of behaviour does it engage? As Dean states, the question of the subject deals “with the position we take or are given in relation to rules and norms, with why we govern ourselves in a particular manner” (Dean 1996: 224). Katona’s question, with the individual consumer as the focal point, is most revealing when compared to the view of the consumer in another popular book written some thirty years earlier, *Successful Living in This Machine Age* (Filene, 1932), and thus separated from Katona’s work by the Depression, a world war, and the post-war economic boom.

Edward Filene was a wealthy Boston retailer who saw himself as a spokesperson for what he considered an optimistic new age of consumption that would transform American culture. In both books, there was a clear concern with what could be deemed appropriate individual conduct in a society of mass consumption but, in the earlier work, Filene was interested in how individual consumer behaviour could be shaped to the purposes of industrialists, businessmen, and government, for the benefit of all, including consumers and the overall economy. Katona, on the other hand, was

concerned in the first place with an understanding of individual behaviour, the influence of this behaviour on the economy, and the implications that this might have for business and government. Filene argued that an adjustment to new ways of being and new social roles was required on the part of individuals for them to be full participants in a society of mass consumption: “Mass production demands the education of the masses . . . the masses must learn to behave like human beings in a mass production world” (Filene: 1932, 231). Katona was concerned with the measuring of existing consumer behaviour in such a way that it could contribute to the regular adjustment of government and business. While Katona studied individual consumption only insofar as it contributed to an understanding of mass consumption, there was nonetheless a clear recasting of the question from one of ‘the masses’ in Filene to one of the individual ‘powerful’ consumer. It was no longer a task of determining *how* the consumer was to behave and how that task might proceed but rather one of determining *who* the consumer was and what kind of behaviour might be expected.

The Normalization of Normalcy

The confident consumer of the post-war years was clearly formed in contradistinction to other popular views of the period, particularly those expressed by public intellectuals who were strong and vocal critics of the rise of mass consumption. John Kenneth Galbraith, for example, voiced many of the criticisms now associated with the term ‘consumerism,’ such as the view of mass consumption as social decline, the threat of luxury, the opposition between needs and wants, and the idea that certain

forms of mass consumption express base or lower-class tastes. In contrast, the discourse of the confident consumer was directed toward the psychological and social normalization of the consuming subject. I use 'normalization' not in the sense of a discursive strategy through which certain characteristics or categories are linked to a specific value of truth and thus demarcated from other possibilities. What I mean is that the confident consumer was grounded in an epistemology of *normalcy* in contrast to other discourses of consumption in which the consuming subject appeared as *not normal*, that is, psychologically or morally deficient and thus prone to manipulation, subjugation, or excess. The discourse of the confident consumer as it developed during the post-war period was thus, in a very real and not metaphorical sense, an attempt to normalize normalcy. Not only was the consumer seen as psychologically normal, but the historical development of a mass consumption society was considered to be a natural and highly beneficial step in human progress which offered the greatest potential for the overall betterment of humankind.

The psychology of the normal consumer was connected to an ideology of independence, self-reliance, and ambition, a merging of classic liberalism and American exceptionalism. Ross (1991) describes American exceptionalism as an approach to political and social organization founded on the notion that the republic of the United States would "forestall the mass poverty and class conflict that modernity appeared to be creating in Britain" (Ross: 1990, 26). The principles of social mobility, capital accumulation, and property ownership would provide the ideological basis for the republic and, given the vastness of the unsettled American West, the United States

would thereby avoid the predictions of Malthus: “Drawing on the perpetually self-renewing dynamism of nature, they could develop in space rather than in time” (Ross, 1990: 25).

In the American exceptionalist version of liberal capitalism, the concept of class was not a consideration. If social position was not caste, it was therefore fluid and there were opportunities for mobility. Wage work need only be a temporary state through which the industrious passed on the way to the property ownership and economic independence of the petty bourgeoisie. The subject that grew out of this new hybrid of liberalism and exceptionalism was characterized by a sense of personal autonomy, confidence, integrity, and ambition and thus stood in contrast to other contemporary views of the consumer as manipulated victim. Katona argued that while the new consumers of the post-war era were not “ideal ‘rational men’” (Katona, 1964: 61), they were nonetheless “sensible and critical rather than foolish and gullible” (Katona, 1964: 59), “not easily swayed when it matters,” and “spurred on by success to higher levels of aspiration” (Katona, 1964: 4).

Desire, in terms of the pursuit of material wealth, was normalized through domestication. It was rendered safe by placing it within the context of the family and what was regarded as a natural human proclivity for greater creature comfort, security, and a higher standard of living. Individual acquisitiveness also lost its association with greed or self-indulgence and became a morally-sanctioned practice of personal improvement. Indeed, in this discourse, the absence of desire for material advancement would have been regarded as a clear indicator of the lack of ambition

and the rejection of 'normal' cultural values. Traditional ideas of restraint as a means through which to achieve moral or spiritual growth were considered not only unnecessary but a reversal of the natural order of human progress: "Most people attend to spiritual needs only after material wants have been taken care of, which is the case for a steadily increasing number of people in a mass consumption society" (Katona, 1964: 67).

Finally, mass consumption was normalized through discourses of democratization. In the early consumer surveys at the Survey Research Center, subjects were not merely a source of data but integral members of a democratic consumer society. In a very telling instruction in the early consumer surveys, interviewers were directed to address respondents "as equals" (Katona, 1951: 313). Indeed, in this discourse of normalcy, the field of mass consumption was regarded as simply another form of 'level playing field' in which the growing and affluent middle class could exercise autonomy and freedom. There was a clear rejection of the massification thesis (for example, Ortega y Gasset, 1950) in which the rise of mass culture signalled the triumph of the tastes of the lowest common denominator and was a harbinger of potential disorder. Katona argued that some economists, while recognizing the ascent of the consumer "deplore it, because, in their opinion, it results in a preponderance of lowbrow tastes" (Katona, 1964: 304). In contrast to what he perceived as an elitist vision of moral or intellectual decay which was an increasingly common theme among cultural critics from across the political spectrum, Katona's

society of mass consumption was unabashedly middlebrow: “Ours is a middle-class society with middle-class comforts” (Katona, 1964: 66).

One of the more prominent criticisms of mass consumption during the 1950s was the accusation that there was a direct link between private affluence and the poverty of the public sphere (for example, in education or health care). Galbraith (1958), for example, had recommended that consumer spending decrease in order to increase public investments. While conceding that the public sphere was indeed in need of attention, Katona insisted that the key to social progress was not in the redistribution of consumer affluence but in the ability of consumer society to motivate its citizens with the promise of the ‘Good Life’ through consumption: “People are willing to exert great effort if the effort helps them to achieve their own concrete goals, namely, a better life for themselves and their children” (Katona, 1964: 65). Katona took this conviction of the essentially moral and progressive nature of consumer society to the global level and argued against Toynbee’s suggestion that spending on “unwanted consumer goods” (Toynbee, quoted in Katona, 1964: 53) should be curtailed so that wealthy nations could raise the standard of living of other less fortunate ones. Katona argued that the question was not one of “cutting the pie into different-size slices, but rather exerting every effort to increasing the size of the pie” (Katona, 1964: 53). He pointed out that mass consumption was spreading across the world and that even the communist bloc countries were being tempted by the “sweet poison” (Katona, 1964: 67) of American consumer goods. Decent standards of living and the possibility of social improvement, he argued, were perhaps the best

guarantor of world peace and in this project, the moral destiny of the United States was to serve as a model for all:

By raising the living standards of the American masses and demonstrating to the world at large that it is possible for the great majority of the people to live decently, the United States has once again presented new goals and aspirations for all the world. Rather than having betrayed the ideals of her early history, she has once more demonstrated a dedication to the faith that mankind has it within its own power to better its way of life. (Katona, 1964: 53)

The Mode of Obligation

This vision of the power of economic growth and mass consumption to universalize democracy was unique neither to Katona nor the period in which he expressed it. It was widely accepted (and debated) then and now, currently forming the eye of the storm of debate that surrounds the globalization of trade. At the centre of this particular vision of mass consumption society was the unfettered individual of classic liberalism in a new form as the confident consuming subject. This subject had the same economic freedoms and civic responsibilities as its predecessor but now with greater personal autonomy through the expansion of personal choice in the marketplace. Consumer society did not produce the liberal subject, of course, but it did constitute a new terrain of development as well as a field of contestation over the nature of that subject. One of the questions that Dean (1996) asks of the subject of governance concerns the way in which subjects understand their own subjectivation with regard to a particular discourse, or their mode of obligation (this is related to ‘mode of subjectivation’ which is discussed in more detail in Chapter Three). In

contemporary movements which emphasise personal liberation, for example, we are compelled “to comply with an injunction to fulfil our potential” (Dean, 1996: 224).

The mode of obligation of the confident consumer is more complex since the subject must respond on two different levels. The subject must not only comply with the direct mode of subjectivation but must distinguish itself as a subject from other competing forms. While, as Dean (1996) points out, we are obligated in different ways to different forms of governance and thus can be citizens, parents, workers, and so on, I argue that each of these modes of obligation can be further broken down into competing versions, each with different rationalities which can stand in contradiction to each other. Thus, for example, the subjectivity of ‘mother’ can include working mother, stay-at-home mother, teenage mother, single mother, and so on, and while there may be important points of contact between each of these different forms of mothering subject, each represents a different regime of governance and mode of obligation. In each case, the subject may move from one mode to another and, indeed, the capacity or even necessity to inhabit different modes, perhaps even simultaneously, can generate subjective conflict at the interstices of these modes (consider, for example, the teenage, working, single mother). Similarly, the confident consumer has to distinguish itself from, at the very least, the other forms of consuming subject discussed in this dissertation and, again, while there may be linkages between them and while consuming subjects may move fluidly among them at different times for various reasons, they are also constituted by different modes of subjectivation which may be complementary or discordant.

At the most basic level, the confident consumer is obligated to participate in consumer society through a seamless and unproblematic relationship to the acquisition of goods. This is not to say that the confident consumer is not or cannot be critical, but rather that there is no fundamental suspicion of the concept of material gain or of the social and economic structure within which it is pursued. Indeed, the confident consumer views the range and availability of mass produced goods as fundamental to the standard of living of Western nations and associates its pursuit with the rights of citizenship and the basic freedoms of liberal democracy. It is thus not surprising that there were two significant types of interpretation of the terrorist attacks on the United States. On the one hand, it was frequently argued, particularly in the early days after the incident, that the explanation was to be found in the deprivation of the nations from which the attackers came or, at least, in a more general economic imbalance in the world and the indifference of the West to that inequality. On the other hand, it was claimed that this was an assault on the perceived decadence and excesses of Western culture and its desire to export this to the rest of the world. In both cases, what was at the core was a statement against the wealth of the West and the foundations upon which that wealth was understood to be based. Consequently, the encouragement to consume as a form of collective response rang true or did not, depending on the view one held of the place of mass consumption in Western society and of its role in global culture.

One of the most important characteristics of the confident consuming subject is that the forms of governance within which it was shaped were not directed toward

the establishment of constraints or limits in a negative sense. Rose (1999) stresses that strategies of government are not merely modes of domination but act “by reshaping the conduct of those who inhabit them without interdicting their formal freedom to conduct their lives as they see fit” (Rose, 1999: 23). On one level, this applies to all forms of governance and it is certainly true of different versions of the consuming subject: both the ascetic consumer and the vigilant consumer (discussed in the following chapters) relate to mass consumption society in modes of obligation that they experience as an exercise of freedom, even if this involves deliberate restraint from consumption. Nonetheless, the reshaping of conduct in a positive direction is best demonstrated in the genesis of the confident consumer in the absence of interdictions but with the imperative to exercise freedom. Indeed, in this discourse, the ability to participate in mass consumption is not a choice but a norm; to refuse participation, to not choose to choose, is not a valid choice but rather an explicit critique of the discourse on which choice is based.

In this light, mass consumption became a strategy of government with distinct positive effects and thus not merely a means of exercising control. Acts of consumption as an exercise of freedom of choice became merely one aspect of a technology of the self in which the abstract concept of choice was applied more generally to increasingly more aspects of conduct and in more diverse areas of human activity. Rose (1999) argues that forms of governance always interact with other discourses, particularly those of science, ethics, and morality, finding “novel spaces of deployment” and entering “new dynamics of antagonism and conflict” (Rose,

1999:24). One of the most significant examples of this process in connection with the rationality of choice was the use of that term in the abortion debate. To be sure, the concept of choice as free will had been a central aspect of classic liberalism, but I argue that it was through the rehearsal and refinement of that term in the context of mass consumption that allowed it to be deployed strategically and seamlessly in issues of human reproduction. It thus makes sense that opposing views have not attempted to refute the idea of choice but have simply turned the term in another direction, that is, ‘choose life.’

The Consumer Citizen of Neo-Liberalism

In discussing Foucault’s work on punishment, Dean (1996) suggests three categories through which the work of government is carried out that are particularly useful in understanding the relationship between the subject of classic liberalism and its transformation into the confident consumer: supervision, management, and normalization. In the first case, supervision was shifted to the consuming subject for self-management since in liberal discourse, the unfettered individual was the appropriate site for the pursuit of freedom, whether economic, political, social, or in this case, the exercise of choice as a category of freedom.

Management of the consuming subject was achieved in two ways. First, the consumer was incorporated into the formal economy as a recognizable force, a condition that did not exist in any real way before World War II. This was accomplished primarily through technologies of calculation such as the various

scientific measures of consumer attitude. Second, there was a redefinition of the space within which the liberal subject acted. That is, the extent of personal autonomy was defined by a moveable boundary between those aspects of consumption which would be private and those which would be under the control of the state. This effectively established the difference between state and market provision and it was the contestation of this boundary that became one of the fundamental principles of neo-liberalism, that is to say, that which was state became private. The movement of this boundary by neo-liberal governments was made possible by the same rationalities that produced the confident consumer in the first place: an extension of the power and autonomy of the liberal individual and an expansion of the space within which this could be exercised.

Finally, the normalization of the confident consumer within the context of liberal democracy was based on the right of participation in mass consumption as a specific political claim that was tied to a similar claim on the part of the liberal subject. The economic autonomy of the liberal subject was regarded as a solvent to what were perceived arbitrary constraints such as custom, tradition, class privilege, and hierarchy. This was extended, in the context of mass consumption, to choice in the marketplace as an exercise of political freedom. Interestingly, liberal economic freedoms were initially met with considerable resistance on the part of established authority in the eighteenth century and similar concerns were voiced regarding the ostensibly corrosive effects of mass consumption. The intensity of this debate has increased in contemporary Western democracies as the rationality of choice enters

more controversial areas such as that of reproductive technologies where the exercise of autonomy and freedom of choice is deployed in criticisms of traditional values, established forms of conjugal and family arrangements, or what were previously considered natural or biological categories (such as gender).

While it is tempting to see various forces and interests that ultimately contributed to the rise of the confident consumer as having a very clear teleology, they were in fact a hodgepodge of quite unrelated developments. There was no specific economic or political ideology or interest that directed, for example, the techniques of polling or consumer surveys toward their utilization by liberal governments in achieving long-term economic stability. No matter how clear this may seem from the perspective of the present, this was not inevitable. The process by which disparate discursive and practical elements come together to form a more or less coherent strategy of governance has been described by Rose as

contingent lash-ups of thought and action in which various problems of governing were resolved through drawing upon instruments and procedures that happened to be available, in which new ways of governing were invented in a rather ad hoc way, as practical attempts to think about and act upon specific problems in particular locales. (Rose, 1999: 27)

Rose gives the example of the rise of neo-liberalism and suggests that one cannot trace a clear and direct route from the theories of Hayek and Friedman to the government of Thatcher. In the process of applying various elements of these writings, such as critiques of welfare and taxation, to specific political problems, there emerged a new rationality which linked together various tactics “integrating them in thought so that they appeared to partake in a coherent logic” (Rose, 1999: 27) which

could then be understood as unified (neo-liberalism) and redirected at other objects (including neo-liberalism itself) to examine them in the same light.

In the case of the confident consumer, the specific political problem of the United States government during World War II, that of short-term economic forecasting in anticipation of post-war crisis, was quite unrelated to the various tools and techniques that it eventually employed. Only in retrospect can we see a connection between the use of psychology in market research and economic forecasting. Even the work of Katona, which ultimately had a direct impact on the policy of the United States government, was initially an investigation of the relationship between the disciplines of psychology and economics which simply used the field of mass consumption as an empirical testing ground.

The entrance of the consumer into economic discourse indicated a fundamental shift on the part of the state from a concern primarily with production to an increasing emphasis on consumption and its centrality in issues of citizenship. In general, those aspects of the citizen as worker or producer had predominated, but as the standard of living became progressively defined in terms of access to consumption, the category of citizen as consumer was of much greater concern to the liberal state. At the same time, one of the primary characteristics of post-war liberal government was the establishment of the welfare state, a development which would seem, at least on the surface, to be contradictory to that of the confident consumer. However, these are parallel developments separated not by opposing ideologies of the relationship between public and private, or between consumer society and the welfare state, but by

the moveable boundary that differentiates the space in which the liberal individual exercises freedom and autonomy from the space in which provision is the responsibility of the state. It is not that government has the responsibility over one and not the other, but that government determines the coordinates and thus the curve of the line that separates them.

Many of the strategies of government that developed in the post-war years constituted the rationality which allowed neo-liberalism to redraw this line. I do not mean this in the classic Hegelian/Marxist sense that the post-war liberal state contained the seeds of its own destruction but, as Rose (1999) says, that a particular form of rationality can often explain what appear to be contradictory developments. Rose gives the example of debates in nineteenth century liberalism over the reach of the state, the market, individual rights, and the form of governance which sought to reconcile the apparent contradiction between advocates of individualism and collectivism. A similar argument applies here: the post-war liberal state, in the face of the increasing political and social importance of mass consumption to the population, developed forms of governance that attempted to transcend the vastly different demands of market autonomy and state provision.

The redrawing of the space in which the liberal subject exercised autonomy was initially within the sphere of consumption and constituted the origin of what we might call 'choice politics' which has two main characteristics. First, the exercise of political rights and not merely the degree of personal autonomy became associated with the logic and procedures of the market. As Rose points out, one of the primary

features of liberalism is that subjects are “active in their own government” (Rose, 1996: 45). Neo-liberal governments furthered this expansion by rearranging the relationships between the state, the citizen, and many of the institutions of state provision. State services, in some cases entire departments, were privatized with employees rehired as contract workers; different forms of arm’s length managerial relationships were utilized which effectively placed market expectations and demands on to government services; and, in general, there was an atmosphere in which the status of citizen with rights and obligations was restructured around the rationality of choice in a market place. In this process, categories such as patient or student became respectively health care consumer and education client, implying a substantially different relationship between citizen and state.

The recent public hearings in Canada on the future of public medicine conducted by former Saskatchewan premier, Roy Romanow, underline the opposition between an earlier form of liberal subject and that which has developed in a mass consumption society, that is, the confident consumer. The model of the relationship between the individual, citizenship, and society on which the idea of national health care was first based was that of the citizen with rights and responsibilities. As both the individual and mass consumption became more significant in the ways outlined in this chapter, the earlier mode of citizenship came into conflict with the emerging citizen consumer (confident consumer) who exercised individual and collective power through personal choice in a marketplace. It is thus not surprising that one of the competing models of a modern health care system is one in which individuals are

expected to have a greater responsibility through the exercise of choice. Neo-liberalism has not been an unfolding of liberalism in the colloquial sense of that word, that is, a more 'broad-minded social atmosphere' or the increase of freedom in some abstract sense. It has been what Dean (1996) describes as the enfolding of the political power of liberalism in new ways and in new spaces and one of the most important forces in this transformation has been the forms of governance derived from the rationality of the confident consumer.

Endnotes (Chapter Two)

1. For a discussion of the anticipated economic problems in the post-war economy in Canada, see Canada-Department of Reconstruction (1945), OECD (1965) and Firestone (1955). The situation in the United States, as well as the potential value of economic and particular consumer surveys, was discussed at length in a Congressional Committee in 1955. See United States-Congress-Joint Economic Committee (1955) which includes a presentation by the economist James Tobin (Tobin, 1955).
2. Biographical information on Katona and background information on the consumer surveys conducted by him is from Katona (1951, 1960, 1964, 1972, 1975), Mueller (1960, 1963), Likert (1972), Zahn (1972), and Curtin (2000). Katona's theories of psychological economics as they apply to the discussion here are outlined in three major works: *Psychological Analysis of Economic Behavior* (Katona, 1951); *The Powerful Consumer* (Katona (1960a); and *The Mass Consumption Society* (Katona (1964). I also refer to Katona (1960b, 1962, 1975), Katona and Morgan (1980), and Survey Research Center (1962).

Chapter Three: The Ascetic Consumer

'Tis a gift to be simple. (nineteenth-century Shaker hymn)

Am I missing much of the richness of life by being preoccupied with the search for social status and consumer goods? What is my purpose in life? How am I to take charge of my own life? (Elgin: 1982: 1)

In living simply, we choose to shift our attention and effort toward a more wholistic, balanced, integrated, proportionate and appropriate pattern of living. This new pattern honors both the inner, non-material, aesthetic and spiritual aspects of our lives as well as their material and physical aspects. We attend to what we wear, where we live, and how we move about in the world, but also we attend to what we say, the directness of our gaze, the singleness of our purposes in choosing our involvements and making our commitments. (Burch, 1995: 49)

Despite the enormous material wealth of Western societies, or perhaps because of it, one of the most pervasive themes in relation to mass consumption is that of a concern with 'consumerism' and 'materialism.' This view is one among a group of critiques of modern consumer society that are linked to a wide range of issues, such as ecology, waste problems, or the national and global distribution of wealth, all of which constitute a significant factor in the contemporary political landscape. This chapter focuses on a specific form of this critique which regards the material wealth of modern Western culture as a source of decadence in the true sense of that word. That is to say, consumer culture does not simply represent indulgence, although that is certainly a key aspect of this critique, but more importantly, it is seen as manifestation of a decline or deterioration of social values through an obsession with consumer goods. Within this discourse, to be a consumer is to be in a relationship of subjugation to the

powers of consumerism and to oneself, that is, at the mercy of one's own desires, driven by what are perceived as wants and not needs.

It is clear that people living in modern Western societies cannot completely avoid consumer goods. One participates in consumer culture one way or another whether one likes it or not. Mass consumption is not an option but an integral part of everyday life and survival in modern industrial societies. Thus, it seems reasonable to ask how a subject can live in contemporary Western culture while holding the view that mass consumption is fundamentally decadent, a moral decline, or a pathology, without experiencing a profound contradiction at the personal level. Through what rationalities, then, do subjects reject 'consumerism' and through what practices do they negotiate their way in consumer societies?

In this chapter, I investigate a type of subject that I call the 'ascetic consumer.' The term 'ascetic' is most commonly associated with restraint or self-denial, but it can refer to a very wide range of practices directed at self-improvement. Nonetheless, for reasons discussed below, I deliberately use 'ascetic' in the narrow sense of abnegation. The confident consuming subject of the previous chapter views mass consumption as a great personal and social benefit, with the power to promote global equality and even world peace, while the ascetic views the same forces as a source of social decline that alienates humans from their true nature and has the potential to threaten global catastrophe. Both types of subject are seen to have the same range of effect and influence. That is to say, personal choices and decisions have a significant impact on

a much larger, even global scale, but for the ascetic consumer, acts of consumption become means of negation.

It is not my intention to provide a general description or history of the social and political concerns, such as the anti-globalization or ecological movements, that are frequently associated with this critique of consumer society. What I examine in this chapter is a particular discourse on mass consumption that can often be found within such movements but that also exists external to and independent of them, with less specific political objectives, as a critique of 'consumerism' or 'materialism.' What differentiates this discourse from others is that mass consumption becomes a domain of moral concern. I will discuss this in more detail below, but for the moment, suffice it to say that for the ascetic consumer, indulgence in consumerism is regarded not only as a personal weakness or possible threat to the environment, but as detrimental to the moral quality of the individual and, as a result, to society in general. Ascetic consumers do not, strictly speaking, constitute a genuine moral regulation movement, as defined by Hunt (1999). That is to say, there are no organized and overt attempts to control directly the conduct of others, no legal strictures, and no formal sanctions. However, a distinct moral authority is assumed and exhibited in dispositions and practices that are intended not only as evidence of the virtue of the practitioner but, equally importantly, as a model for others and a standard by which their conduct can be judged.

I suggest that this view of mass consumption is an instance of the perennial discourse of the moralization of luxury. In tracing the history of sumptuary

legislation, Hunt (1995) argues that by the twentieth century, the moralization of luxury had dramatically declined. He points to several possible examples of the survival of this discourse, such as the neo-liberal attack on inflation or the concern with issues of health and physical fitness, but in general, he suggests that the critique of luxury had lost “both its conventional and its moral force” (Hunt, 1995: 363). It is clear that actual legislation directed at the regulation of luxury had all but disappeared, perhaps lingering into the post-war years in the form of ‘blue laws,’ which prohibited or restricted the sale of certain goods or entertainments, such as alcohol and movies, often on Sundays. Furthermore, the pursuit of luxury has acquired to a large extent very positive connotations without which modern consumer society could not thrive.

However, I will demonstrate that luxury has also retained its negative associations through a new form of moralization that took shape in the latter half of the twentieth century and reprised, in modified form, the earlier theological cautions against material wealth as an impediment to salvation and a detriment to proper Christian living and moral order. The appearance of this discourse is an example of a process described by Hunt (1995) in which discourses are not merely replaced but tend to recombine or couple with others. The rationality underlying the new moralization of luxury was a merging of the continuing antimodernist critique of mass society with the recasting of religious interdictions on material wealth. The result was a discourse of moral opposition to the perceived corrosive effects of consumer society.

Asceticism and Consumption

The term ‘ascetic’ is central to my analysis and since it is commonly associated with religious solitude or monasticism, it is important to establish clearly the way in which I intend to use it. The primary meaning of the Greek root of ascetic, *askeo*, is to work on raw materials, as in smoothing; it also means to practise exercises, to train (the adjectival form, *asketikos*, means ‘laborious’). It can also mean to adorn one’s person (1). At a minimum then, the ascetic is one who works on the basic material of self through exercises or practices directed at developing an inner state which also has an exterior and visible manifestation. Foucault’s various explanations of the idea of care of the self (for example, Foucault, 1988a, 1988c, 1990b, 1991b) are very much related to this definition of asceticism which he describes as “an exercise upon the self by which one tries to work out, to transform one’s self and to attain a certain mode of being” (Foucault, 1991b: 2).

In the modern West, ‘asceticism’ is used much more narrowly and is most commonly associated with the practices of early Christian monasticism, implying a complete withdrawal of the ascetic from the normal social world and an engagement with deliberate deprivation in terms of sustenance, human contact, and even the senses in some cases. Foucault correctly rejects this version of asceticism as a general definition since it has “bad connotations” in terms of the renunciation of pleasure (Foucault, 1997a: 137). Nonetheless, the particular meaning of asceticism that I have chosen to explore in the context of mass consumption not only deliberately retains these “bad connotations” but emphasizes the aspects of abnegation and the denial of

pleasure, in terms of material acquisition or possession, that have gathered around the term. I do not intend this as a general definition of asceticism but merely one that I want to explore since it clearly delineates what I see to be the principal characteristics of a specific problematization of conduct in relation to mass consumption.

The definition of asceticism that I use in this chapter thus has two basic characteristics. First, the ascetic is one who engages in a process of self-examination and inward investigation that has as its goal the achievement of a deeper level of self-understanding, a new way of relating self to self and self to the world. Second, the ascetic rejects material indulgence as a precondition for the inward journey. This rejection must also be manifest in outward signs, such as behaviour, conduct, or appearance, as evidence of the interior process of self-investigation. For the purposes of this chapter, I deliberately exclude the more extreme and obvious forms of rejection of the modern material world, such as the so-called intentional communities, the 'back to the land' movement, or traditional religiously-based agrarian societies such as Old Order Mennonites. I am also omitting forms of self-denial that are related to projects of physical self-improvement such as diet for weight loss and exercise for health or for a more attractive body. While both of these are characteristic of asceticism in a more general sense, it is neither the complete absence of consumption by means of a retreat from the modern world into communities of deliberate poverty nor the cultivation of health or beauty that I want to investigate. My focus is on the practices through which a subject cultivates and demonstrates an attitude toward mass consumption that is one of moral critique through abnegation. Ascetic consumption is a fundamentally moral

discourse because it not only prescribes ethical practices for the self, it seeks to establish such practices as normative, thereby implicitly proscribing the conduct of others.

In the case of the ascetic consumer, there is not a total rejection of mass consumption, but rather the denial of particular forms of consumption and the acceptance and cultivation of others. The most crucial characteristic of ascetic consumption is that it is not demonstrated through simple abnegation. Indeed, I will argue that the practices of ascetic consumption can involve a wide range of goods. The ascetic consumer moralizes consumption in such a way that the practices and objects of consumption become outward signs of the virtuous inner state of moral objection to consumerism. This is, of course, paradoxical, and in a sense, it is Veblen turned inside out: in order to demonstrate a virtuous opposition to materialism, the ascetic consumer must consume, but in very specific ways that the subject deems as moral and normative both for the subject itself and for others. It is therefore a kind of anti-consumption, demonstrated through conspicuous acts of self-restraint or, at least, self-control.

In modern mass consumption societies, a variety of consumption practices are thus ascetic in that they are intended both as a cultivation of self and as a means of displaying this process. The term ‘conspicuous consumption’ was coined by Veblen (1934 [1899]) to describe the socially aspirant display of wealth by the *nouveaux riches* of American culture around the turn of the twentieth century. But in a modern consumer culture, all consumption can be conspicuous. That is to say, as goods

became more generally available, the practice of consumption became more a part of everyday life and a means of acquiring and displaying taste, *savoir faire*, or esoteric knowledge, and thus indicative of one's position in a social, and not merely economic, order. The most extensive theorization of this process of distinction is found in the work of Bourdieu (1984). However, in his analysis of taste, Bourdieu is primarily concerned with the role of consumption as a vehicle for class aspiration and in establishing and maintaining social hierarchy. While consumption retains this capacity to differentiate between social strata, in a broad middle class consumer culture consumption as display is less directed toward a vertical hierarchy than it is toward horizontal differentiation, that is, within rather than between social levels. However, not all forms of distinction are ascetic. Asceticism requires not simply the display of social status, hierarchical or not but, more importantly, the intent of self-transformation and the active participation in this process through a variety of practices or exercises directed toward self-awareness and self-knowledge. Simply to distinguish oneself from others through consumer goods does not necessarily imply the cultivation of a new mode of being.

Antimodernism and the Decline of Religious Authority

Since the middle of the twentieth century, there has been a dramatic reduction in participation in mainstream religious institutions. Western societies in general have experienced broad secularization and a marked decline in the moral authority of religion. There has been, however, a parallel development which might be called

‘spiritualization’ that accompanied the retreat from religion and whose growth has continued to the present. This very loose movement has many different manifestations but one of its main characteristics, and the one that is of interest here, is the way in which it recontextualized many traditional religious motivations. While there was an increasing interest in non-traditional or non-Western religious practices including eastern philosophies such as Buddhism and Hinduism, this period also saw the emergence of completely new religious groups such as the so-called New Age religions or neo-paganism (2). Some of these new sects included more or less coherent theologies, dogmas, sacraments, and rituals, but the idea of a personal spirituality without any connection to a formal creed, doctrinal system, or organization is the most salient characteristic. The cultivation of personal spirituality became and remains a widespread pursuit in Western societies and practitioners generally regard this as the result of the failure of traditional religions to provide meaning. As a contemporary Jungian psychologist involved in this movement puts it: “We are living in an era of unparalleled impoverishment and depreciation of the human soul. The collapse of our religious forms has been followed by a general demoralization of the dominant (Western) culture. No myth remains to sustain us” (Jaffe: 1999, 7).

Within most of these new quasi-religious trends, whether organized and formalized or not, is an explicit condemnation of the perceived massifying tendencies of modern society and among the primary targets is ‘consumerism’ or ‘materialism.’ This condemnation takes two general and complementary forms. On the one hand, modern society, in both its material temptations and complexity, is seen as an

impediment to inner growth. Reduced contact with the modern world is thus a prerequisite for self-realization. Typical of such criticisms is the following from a self-help book published in the late 1980s, *Living with Spirit in a Material World*. The author, a psychotherapist, expresses fears that “the overly materialistic nature of life in America now may inhibit [the contemporary generation] from developing the nonmaterial values (call them spiritual or psychological or creative) needed to live up to its potential in the future” (Blum, 1988: 11).

On the other hand, the development of inner spirituality is seen as a means of coping with what are seen as the numbing and depersonalizing effects of modernity. Burch (1995) outlines a series of practical exercises designed to help people reduce their consumption and he describes the development of inner spirituality through this process as “an act of *self-defence* against the mind-polluting effects of over-consumption” (Burch, 1995: 13). In a pamphlet written in the 1930s, Gregg (1936) notes that the simple life, free from the burden of excessive material possessions, is not an antiquated mode of living but “a corrective to our feverish over-mechanization” (Gregg, 1936: 10).

What links both of these responses to contemporary consumer culture is the underlying rationality of antimodernism that had become intertwined with earlier religious motivations, including the moralization of luxury. This was not a simple transfer of traditional forms of Protestant restraint in material acquisition to a new context but a much more complex process that involved the uncoupling of the moralizing discourse of luxury from its previous religious mooring and its recoupling

with the antimodern attack on massification. Hunt (1995) argues that Kuhn's model of scientific revolution, in which a paradigm is subsumed and replaced by a successor, is not paralleled in the social world. Discursive formations do not exist by themselves but almost always "in distinctive coupling with other discourses or discursive elements" (Hunt, 1995: 370). Rather than disappearing, they tend to recombine with other existing or emergent trends. The decline of mainstream religion and the survival of its moral critique of luxury in modified form in the antimodernism of the contemporary spirituality movement is a particularly interesting example of such a shift.

The discourse of antimodernism has been one of the most resilient forms of social critique for the last century. It has been particularly fruitful in generating and underwriting a wide variety of political and social movements which are actively suspicious of industrialization, technological development, bureaucratization, and the idea of progress in general. As Brantlinger notes, in these various forms of opposition to modernity, mass culture can be seen "either as a symptom or a cause of social decay," a position which he calls "negative classicism" (Brantlinger, 1983: 10). These movements should be seen neither as inherently conservative or reactionary nor as merely constituting a rejection of modern society. Antimodernism can take this form (and frequently does), but it must also offer alternatives to modernity, many of which are seen as quite progressive. What frequently links various critiques of modernity is an appeal to an historically prior culture, a Golden Age of social and moral values from which contemporary society has fallen. Brantlinger identifies the fundamentally

eschatological nature of such positions, which usually warn of a “secularized Judgement Day in which democracy, or capitalism, or Western Civilization, or ‘the technological society’ will strangle upon its own contradictions, chief among which is likely to be an amorphous monstrosity called ‘mass culture’” (Brantlinger 1983: 18).

Lears (1981, 1983) documents the central role of antimodernism in a cultural crisis in the United States around the turn of the twentieth century, and his observations are useful in understanding the more recent rise of the new spirituality. Antimodernist sentiment among the American bourgeoisie in the late nineteenth century was, Lears argues, a reaction to the rapid industrialization of this period. The beginning of the shift in population from the rural to the urban resulted in feelings of dislocation and unreality, and the growth of large scale corporations and bureaucracies threatened to erode a sense of self, creating a fear of social impotence and personal disintegration. Antimodernists had little faith in the idea of progress and felt that they were forced “to choose between a life of authentic experience and the false comforts of modernity, between Christ and the Grand Inquisitor” (Lears, 1981: 300). The quest for authenticity took many forms including the valorization of pre-industrial and pre-capitalist social relations, earlier forms of production that involved craft work rather than machines, and cults of martialism and mysticism. Fears of moral and physical weakness were met with the cultivation of activities that challenged the natural world and placed a high value on hardship and endurance. Lears is careful to note that all of these responses were not merely reactionary or representative of an “escapist nostalgia” (Lears, 1981: 6), but constituted a conscious and deliberate protest against

specific aspects of the modernist ideology of progress and its putative violation and erosion of the social and moral structure of American society.

In attacking and resisting the effects of modernism on individual autonomy, Lears argues that the quest for authenticity became ultimately self-referential and circular, producing, ironically and inadvertently, a cult of “therapeutic self-absorption” (Lears, 1981: 303) which not only lost its ability to mount a social critique beyond concerns with the self, but constituted a means of accommodation with those tendencies of modernism that eroded and suppressed the social and the local. This concern with psychic well-being was not confined to the realm of professional therapy or medical practice but rather was dispersed through a range of institutions and social practices, forming “a constellation of concerns about the self, energizing a continuous, anxious quest for well-being” (Lears, 1981: 304). The idea of social stability defined primarily in moral terms was replaced with personal psychic security and physical health. Lears describes the weakening of traditional religious interdictions on conduct, accompanied by the rise of a more secular desire for self-fulfillment, as a move “from salvation to self-realization” (Lears, 1983). This was also, Lears argues, a primary factor in the rise of a modern consumer culture with hedonism as its principal affect. Indeed, he observes, one of the central images of the antimodernist nightmare was that of “docile mass society — glutted by sensate gratification” (Lears, 1981: 300).

Lears’ analysis of the rise of a therapeutic culture out of the crisis in moral authority is echoed by Lasch (1979, 1984, 1991) who offers a very similar view of the effects of modernism in the latter half of the twentieth century. Like Lears, Lasch is

concerned with the structure of moral authority and the collapse of the normative bases of social life. Lasch sees the rise of industrial capitalism as forming “a complex, interlocking network of technologies based on mass production, mass consumption, mass communications, mass culture” (Lasch 1984: 53). He seeks to discover the ways in which the various institutional and cultural sites of this network produce “personhood” (Lasch, 1984: 53). For Lasch, the modern individual that emerges is essentially narcissistic (Lasch, 1979), but he uses this term in a very specific way, taking great pains to differentiate it from ‘hedonistic,’ particularly in the sense in which the latter is used in critiques of consumerism. Narcissism is not hedonism; it is not self-seeking egoism but rather a heightened “concern with the self . . . a concern with its psychic survival” (Lasch, 1984: 16). It implies a disintegration of the self and a desperate turn to “self-management” in which people try “to piece together a technology of the self, the only apparent alternative to personal collapse” (Lasch, 1984: 58).

According to Lasch, the narcissistic self, characterized by a chronic anxiety and insecurity, is reinforced through a variety of practices in advanced capitalist societies in which the individual is subjected to self-scrutiny and the observations of others. The result is the rise of a therapeutic sensibility and of professions associated with its management, replacing traditional methods and sites of social and moral integration and creating a context in which the individual is increasingly dependent on bureaucratic institutions. At a broad historical level, Lasch notes that this transition has been from a society in which a religious teleology of salvation and the place of the

individual in the social whole has been replaced by “psychic security” (Lasch, 1979: 33). But the latter is essentially “anti-religion” (Lasch, 1984: 42) since it has no sense of an historical future and is thus concerned only with a static present and the liberation of the self. In contrast to religion, it does not encourage the individual “to subordinate his needs and his interests to those of others, to someone or some cause or tradition outside of himself” (Lasch, 1984: 43). In a similar way, Lasch argues, the therapeutic culture is undermining the efficacy of politics, transforming social problems into personal complaints which are subject to the intervention of therapeutic techniques. It is important to note that Lasch does not consider these personal problems to be illusory, but merely that their source has been obscured, shifted from the public to the private, the result of which is a complete erosion of normative authority and legitimation at the social level.

There are striking similarities between the concerns of antimodernists in the late nineteenth century, as documented by Lears, and those of their more contemporary counterparts such as Lasch. While there are some important differences between Lears and Lasch in their description of the nature of antimodernism in these two periods, they converge in their recognition of what they perceive to be the principal effects of modernity on the individual: a fear of loss of self and personal disintegration and the subsequent search for authentic forms of experience; and a turning away from external religious codes of morality toward secular and personal definitions of integrity.

I find the description of antimodernism in both Lears and Lasch to be useful in understanding the motivations of the ascetic consumer. However, it is vitally important to recognize that these are descriptions of the *perceived* effects of modernity and not to fall into the trap of sociological realism. As Dean (1996) argues, what is important in the study of historical subjects is “not so much what human beings really are or have become but how they think about who they are, and the consequences of this” (Dean 1996: 210). What Lears and Lasch provide is a description of two similar problematizations of the individual in the context of mass society that were the result of the continuing conflict between modernity and its critics; and both provide a detailed inventory of the responses of a specific group of subjects in each historical period. What is at stake in my discussion of the rise of the ascetic consumer is not whether modernity was or was not a corrosive social force but rather how this type of consuming subject understood itself in relation to the negative perception of modernity and the discourses and practices that sprang from this.

Religion Versus Spirituality

In his description of the rise of a therapeutic culture, Lears notes an interesting paradox of the antimodernism of the American bourgeoisie of the late nineteenth century. He argues that the strategies used to confront the ideology of progress led to the construction of a form of self that was reproductive of the very social relations it sought to resist. In the case of the waning of religious moral authority in the period following World War II, a very similar paradox obtained. This was not a case of

history repeating itself, which in any case it never does, but rather of antimodernism confronting a new set of historical parameters and finding a new space of deployment. In both periods, the relationship between the individual and religious authority was problematized in a specific way. In the earlier moment, the result was a restructuring of mainstream religious thought around new conceptions of personal goals while, in the later period, there was widespread abandonment of religious institutions.

As suggested earlier, the decline of mainstream religion was not merely a process of secularization but also one of 'spiritualization,' that is, the proliferation of alternative forms of non-dogmatic, unstructured, and unorganized religious practice, and the general dispersion of a diffuse form of personalized religious affect. The force behind this fundamental change was a general distrust of institutions and bureaucracies as well as a fear of massification and the loss of self that was at the core of antimodernism. This discourse was redirected at the edifice of traditional religion itself in the post-war years, resulting in a shift in the ontological status of the subject within the context of religious practice.

Traditionally, entry into a Christian religious community (and this is also true of Islam) required an acceptance of group interdictions as a precondition for spiritual development; one became a Christian or a Muslim and developed spiritually within the confines of the faith. However, in the context of the antimodernist sentiment of the post-war years, organized religion, and not only Christianity, was increasingly associated with the imposition of dogma and tradition from above and the consequent narrowing of individual experience. The idea of spirituality had always been

subsumed within the lexicon of religious language but during the second half of the twentieth century these two terms, 'religion' and 'spirituality,' became progressively separated ideologically. Spirituality was no longer considered to be the essence or even an element of religious experience; rather, for an increasing number of people, personal spiritual development was seen as an alternative or even an antidote to institutionalized religious practice, a form of resistance to what was perceived as theological containment and the stultifying effects of the mass/Mass. It became a case of a personal spirituality *versus* organized religion.

Evidence of this loose and extremely broad spiritual movement — if indeed it can even be called a movement — can be found in many other social developments of the late twentieth century. These range from those that seek to intervene in the political sphere, such as the Green Movement, to those which focus almost entirely on personal development, such as the multiplicity of self-help groups that have continued to proliferate since the 1960s. Common to an extraordinary number of such groups along this spectrum is the articulation of their theory and practice to the idea of personal spiritual development or to what is believed to be the inherently spiritual qualities of the objects of their concern (for example, nature, relationships, emotions, health, psychological analysis, lifestyle).

Ascetic consumption is a key example of the connection between antimodernism and the new spirituality in the way that it brings together and focuses aspects of a number of these other movements, such as ecology, personal psychology, spiritual growth, and self-help. As a moral statement against mass consumption, it is

applied in a very broad way to material acquisition, lifestyle, relationships, politics, and overall world-view. In advocating the cultivation of personal spirituality as a corrective to materialism, Danesh, a psychologist involved in this movement, describes those who subscribe to traditional models of religious faith as follows:

Their main objective is to get something — in this case God's favour, admittance into an everlasting paradise, and preference over the ungodly. In form, if not also in substance, this attitude parallels the materialistic approach to life, in that it likewise concentrates on the accumulation of wealth, attainment of ongoing pleasure, and power over others. (Danesh, 1994: 31)

In one sense, ascetic consumers are akin to Becker's moral entrepreneurs (Becker, 1963) but while the latter actively crusade for a moral issue and seek to establish enforcement agencies, ascetic consumers are closer to the economic entrepreneurs of neo-liberalism who pursue their goals in a less formal manner, in the private and not public sphere. Indeed, the discourse of ascetic consumption has defined a broad and productive space for a remarkable proliferation of organizations, groups, practices, workshops, consultants, spokespersons, authors, publications, and consumer products that are directed toward a type of non-traditional religious self-fulfillment through practices expressive of the idea of personal restraint and abnegation.

The Moral Subject

The contemporary concern with the constitution of selfhood is frequently considered as evidence of a new and radical phase in the progressive rise of a form of individualism that has undermined social stability and the sense of a public good.

Lasch's critique of modernity, discussed above, constitutes but one example of a common view of the decline of traditional social bonds, the disintegration of self, and the subsequent rise of a subject in existential crisis whose desperate search for meaning and authenticity is thwarted by media and consumer culture, both of which offer shallow, temporary, and ultimately unfulfilling solutions to the question of being. But, as Dean points out, the concern for self "is neither as new nor as prolific as has been thought" (Dean, 1996: 214). He argues that the search for self-identity is both quite old, dating to antiquity, and relatively rare. It should not be understood as characterizing an entire historical period or as an indication of a general erosion of social bonds and the subsequent valorization of the asocial individual, but rather as the product of specific problematizations that occur at specific historical moments. Similarly, Rose (1999) argues against a general history of the development of the human subject from traditional non-individuated organic subjects to the autonomous liberal individual and finally to the decentred, fragmented subject of advanced capitalism or postmodernity.

As with the confident consuming subject of the previous chapter, the emergence of the ascetic consumer has to be understood within the context of forms of governance in advanced liberal societies. As Dean (1996) suggests, our contemporary social and political climate is one in which subjects are virtually obligated to take care of all aspects of their lives. Neo-liberalism raised the stakes and, while neo-liberal practices of governance do not resort to direct forms of coercion, there has been an increasing tendency toward both the creation and maintenance of the conditions which

encourage self-governance, as well as the revision and the active elimination of many forms of state provision and direct involvement with populations (for example, the social wage, earlier forms of welfare). Thus, while one may argue with Lasch's analysis of the historical trajectory of the narcissistic self, his notion of a therapeutic culture and the accompanying anxiety about the self is very helpful in situating the dramatic proliferation of technologies of self-governance through which subjects seek to work on themselves, exploring a continuously growing list of concerns, improving and refining ever-multiplying qualities or aspects of self. Thus the rise of ascetic consumption is not the desperate response to processes of massification by a fractured and disintegrated self; it is, rather, a moralization of mass consumption that is part of a process of self-refinement exercised in new spaces and contexts which were opened up by new forms of governance and which continue to expand and evolve.

It is difficult to separate the ascetic consumer from other subjects within the wide range associated with the new spirituality, the ecological movement, self-help groups, and so on. In order to render the specific characteristics of the ascetic consumer more precise, I will use a set of categories outlined by Foucault in his analysis of the moral subject in relation to sexuality (Foucault, 1990b). I also rely on other elaborations of the concepts involved by both Foucault and others (for example, Foucault, 1991b, 1997f; Rabinow, 1997; Dean, 1994, 1996).

Foucault explores the differences between types of moral subjects through a number of key aspects of the process through which individuals constitute themselves in relation to a prescriptive moral system. First, the actual object of governance or

what will be the “ethical substance” (Foucault, 1990b: 26) must be determined: “which is the aspect of the part of myself or my behavior which is concerned with moral conduct?” (Foucault, 1997f: 263). In contemporary Western culture, the primary site for the cultivation of moral conduct is feelings, whereas for Christianity, it was desire, and in Kantian philosophy, intentions were the salient point (Foucault, 1997f). Using the example of marital relations, Foucault says that there are a number of different ways in which partners can exercise fidelity. This can be accomplished through the observance of rules relating to the acts involved or through incorporating the “essence of fidelity” (Foucault, 1990b: 26) into a more general attitude of resistance to temptations. Thus, careful observance and vigilance regarding the “contrary movements of the soul” (Foucault, 1990b: 26), and not merely the specific acts, can be the site of moral governance.

Second, Foucault cites the “mode of subjection (*mode d’assujettissement*)” (Foucault, 1990b: 27) (3) or the way in which the individual recognizes itself as obligated by the system of rules: “the way in which the individual establishes his relation to the rule and recognizes himself as obligated to put it into practice” (Foucault, 1990b: 27). There can be quite different ways, such as through religious laws, cosmology, or rationalism, in which different individuals relate to the same rule. Using again the concept of fidelity, Foucault provides an example of two quite distinct modes of subjectivation in relation to the same precept. In Ancient Greece, the ruler of Cyprus claimed that he was faithful to his wife in order to demonstrate his suitability as a ruler. To be fit to govern, one must be able to govern oneself. On the

other hand, the Stoics practised marital fidelity because they regarded it to be the rational belief of a member of the human community (Foucault, 1997f: 264).

Third, Foucault mentions the practical and material means, the “ethical work” (Foucault, 1990b: 27) through which a subject governs its conduct in accordance with the moral code and transforms its mode of being. This is perhaps the most important and diverse category and there are a wide range of approaches to the art of self-governance. Foucault provides a detailed inventory of the various practices directed at the cultivation of self in the ancient world which included physical exercise, diet, conversation, the production of written records of experiences, counselling and being counselled, medical care, tests of will through deprivation, and the monitoring of thought (Foucault, 1988c: 58-64). In short, the actual practices involved in caring for oneself can be extensive and find their specificity in the objects to be governed and the goals, or telos, of that governance, the latter of which is the final category Foucault outlines.

The telos of governance concerns the way in which individual actions express an overall pattern of moral conduct or the type of moral subject that the individual endeavours to create. Thus, while certain actions or attitudes express fidelity, these can also be situated in a whole way of conduct directed toward control of sexual desire and an overall “mastery of the self” (Foucault, 1990b: 28). In the following sections, I use these four categories (ethical substance, mode of subjectivation, ethical work, and telos) to examine in detail the ascetic consumer as a specific type of consuming subject.

The Inner Self (Ethical Substance)

The spirituality movement is only one among a range of forms of modern asceticism. I emphasize the connection between ascetic consumption and the new spirituality since it is the quasi-religious aspects of the latter that are central to my arguments concerning the ascetic consumer. The target of the practices of the ascetic consumer is closely related to that of contemporary spirituality, that is to say, the ethical substance which the ascetic consumer seeks to transform is a self that has been corrupted by the trappings of modern life, such as ‘consumerism’ and acquisitiveness. The self, in this case, is understood in the dualistic sense of a ‘true self’ contained or trapped within what might be called a false self. The former concept, the true self, implies that there is an authentic or true mode of being which is outside of or beyond one’s everyday experience of oneself. This has been obscured from the purview of the individual by the unconscious false self created by the complexity and materialism of modern culture. The practices of ascetic consumption are thus directed toward the discovery of the true self through a removal of those aspects of the modern world which suppress it.

As mentioned earlier, one of the meanings of asceticism in the ancient world was to work on raw materials or smooth; in the context of ascetic consumption, the process is closer to that of a removal of extraneous material, the accreted layers deposited by culture and consumerism, in order to reveal the true self as a work of the art of living. The key modern text on the Voluntary Simplicity movement (4) states

that a life of material and spiritual simplicity “allows the true character of our lives to show forth — like stripping, sanding, and waxing a fine piece of wood that had been long painted over” (Elgin, 1982: 131). Storms (1983) argues that the complexity and urgency of modern life compels one to seek meditative simplicity and notes:

Seeing so clearly my need to slow down gave me the desire to peel off quickly and completely the accumulated layers of embeddedness that, like layers of old paint, keep us from seeing the finely-grained unique self underneath. But I knew the process of letting go had to be done slowly and gently to discover the true self underneath. (Storms, 1983: 29)

The pursuit of a true or authentic self is often associated with attempts to reduce complexity in one’s life, to lower the noise so to speak, so that the self can emerge. The comment of a respondent to a survey done by Elgin suggests that the process can sometimes be reversed, that is, pursuit of self leads to abnegation: “In realizing true identity (a continuous process) voluntary simplicity naturally follows” (quoted in Elgin, 1982: 27). Complexity can be simply the effect of modern society or it can be purely psychological in origin, a natural part of human experience. Burch (1995), for example, comments on an experience during a workshop of several weeks duration on an island in Northern Ontario during which there was little contact with the trappings of modern civilization. During this time “Layer after layer of something burdensome was peeled back leaving me feeling open, sensitive, vibrant and energized” (Burch, 1995: 11). In *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, Trungpa (1973) compares the unenlightened self to a junk shop and describes the true self, before the clutter of philosophy and the accumulation of other aspects of culture, as a room with “white-washed walls and a very simple floor with bright lamp burning in

the ceiling. There was one object of art in the middle of the room and it was beautiful” (Trungpa, 1973: 16).

Knowledge of self is also an essential component of the philosophy of Voluntary Simplicity. According to Elgin, individuals have been conditioned by modern society into a state of self-unconscious and automatic patterns of behaviour. Therefore “the process of realizing who the ‘self’ really is — is crucial to self-determination and voluntary action” (Elgin, 1982: 113). Elgin further argues that all major religions have recognized that there exists a natural state of “continual mental distraction” and “social facades” (Elgin, 1982: 115) through which we must penetrate in order to reveal “our spontaneously arising self” (Elgin, 1982: 116). Gregg (1936) underlines the importance of reducing complexity and in doing so summarizes the relationship between self-governance as a mode of self-realization and the consequences of this process for the governance of others:

The way to master the increasing complexity of life is not through more complexity. The way is to turn inward to that which unifies us all — not the intellect but the spirit, and then to devise and put into operation new forms and modes of economic and social life that will truly and vigorously express that spirit. (Gregg, 1936: 10)

The true self exists under a variety of names depending on the particular group in question and, in many cases, it is virtually indistinguishable from the idea of spirituality in general. The cultivation of spirituality is akin to the search for a true self and, in this sense, it reveals the influence of eastern philosophical traditions, particularly Buddhism. However, the ethical substance is also not unlike the soul of traditional Christian theology in which the faithful work upon the soul in order to

achieve salvation. In the rationality of the new spirituality, which recontextualizes this theology and underwrites in part the discourse of the ascetic consumer, the subject acts upon the inner/true self (spirituality) through a variety of practices that include abnegation and which are directed toward reducing the effects of the external world so that the inner being can either emerge or become available to ethical practice. In general, however, the conception of this inner being or true self varies considerably and is represented by an extremely eclectic and esoteric nomenclature.

There is also a common association made between the process of self-discovery and the techniques and concepts of psychotherapy. Jaffe (1999), for example, argues that “in our materially oriented society it is easy to become hypnotized by the world of money and objects and forget the riches of the inner world” (Jaffe, 1999: 11). As an alternative, he sees the therapeutic strategies and concepts of Jung forming the basis of “a new religion, whose central value is that of consciousness” (Jaffe, 1999: 12). Blum (1988) uses the strategies and language of psychotherapy in order to “deliver ourselves from the oppressive weight of materialist obsession” (Blum, 1988: 79). He occasionally refers to spirituality as an “inner voice” (Blum, 1988: 37) and suggests that listening to this voice is “a first step toward a reincarnation of the self, that is, a new self” (Blum, 1988: 41). Blum notes that although ‘spirit’ is often used in a way that is close to the traditional notion of God, he avoids the latter word since it tends to restrict the free play of meaning. Spirit can be represented by a wide range of ideas such as “‘the force’ (as in *Star Wars*). It can be humanity or nature or art or love. It can even be life itself” (Blum, 1988: 31). Despite

the diversity of descriptions and metaphors, however, what emerges from a very wide range of writers who deal either directly or indirectly with what they see as the moral problem of 'materialism' and 'consumerism' is a relatively consistent view of a true self, spirit, or life potential that, because of the nature of modern mass society, is unrealized, unfulfilled, or unexamined.

World-Negation (Mode of Subjectivation)

Foucault's idea of the mode of subjectivation, or the position subjects take in relation to a specific prescriptive or proscriptive code, is extremely helpful in differentiating the subject of ascetic consumption from other related discourses such as those of the ecological movement or the new spirituality. Both of the latter, for example, cite mass consumption as the source of a plethora of social and personal ills and thus usually advocate fundamental changes in patterns of consumption as a means of achieving spiritual self-fulfillment, improving psychological or physical health, or working toward global ecological security. The ecological movement presents the most difficult problem in clearly defining ascetic consumption since practices of abnegation are often directly linked with ecological concerns.

While there is obvious and extensive common ground between the ecological movement and ascetic consumption, I suggest that there are two primary differences which can help to clarify the relationship of subjects to each. First, the primary goal of the ecological movement is one of conservation and while there may be a deification of nature, such as in the concept of 'gaia' (5), quasi-religious assumptions

are not a necessary characteristic of practices directed toward ecological goals. Second, while there are assumed personal benefits derived from adherence to ecological principles in consumption that may serve as inducements to involvement (for example, reduced health risk through reduction in pesticide use), it is not the moral state of the self but the physical state of the environment that is of primary concern. While these two goals are not mutually exclusive, the emphasis in ascetic consumption is clearly biased toward the self. Blum claims that the plan for his book, *Living With Spirit in a Material World* was “to help people heal themselves from the damage inflicted by our culture’s obsession with materialism” and, of the many paths one could take, Blum suggests that “the most efficient way to real change is not necessarily by working on handling issues in the world but rather by working on yourself” (Blum, 1988: 212).

Burch (1995), in his manual on the development of personal spirituality through reduced consumption, further underlines the difference between ascetic and environmentally conscious consumption by arguing that the most important ‘r’ of the famous four r’s of the ecological movement (‘reduce, reuse, recycle, recover’) is ‘reduce.’ For Burch and other advocates of a lifestyle of material simplicity, the primary purpose of a reduction in consumption is not merely the positive effects on the environment but, more importantly, the effects on the self, since this “involves a review of basic life goals, how we spend our time, talents and treasure, and the role accorded to material consumption as a means of pleasure, health, self-esteem or public reputation” (Burch, 1995: 41). Indeed, Burch is even critical of recycling, one of the

core philosophies of the ecological movement, arguing that “because it promises consumption without guilt . . . recycling never requires that we cease doing a thing, only that we do the same thing differently” (Burch, 1995: 40). In a workshop guide devoted to reducing personal dependency on material culture, Burch includes a session entitled “Simplicity: The First ‘R’” (Burch, 1997: 16).

There is no clear separation between the practices of the ecological movement and ascetic consumption and there is no completely distinct space within which each operates. Furthermore, the rationality of ascetic consumption derives a great deal of its intelligibility from environmental arguments; a lifestyle considered to be ecologically and socially responsible includes forms of abnegation. Nonetheless, ascetic consumption is first and foremost *ascetic* in the broadest sense of that term, that is, directed inwardly, as a cultivation of self, based on the moralization of mass consumption. The common sentiment, that ‘all things are connected,’ has obvious ramifications, in terms of consumption and its effects, for persons involved in either ecological practices or social movements concerned with distribution of wealth. However, in either case there is no essential requirement for the development of a personal spiritual essence in relation to other aspects of reality as advocated by Blum (1988) when he states: “I am related not only to hungry children in Africa but also to the rings of Saturn” (Blum, 1988: 35). Environmental and social concern depends on neither spirituality, asceticism, nor moralization, and is primarily directed outwardly toward more or less clearly defined social and political goals.

Most importantly, the ascetic consumer perceives there to be a moral and an immoral mode of consumption. The subject of this discourse distances itself from the complexity of mass society and the contamination of mass consumption as a purificatory statement, an ongoing ritual cleansing of self. Gregg (1936) compares excessive eating to an excess of possessions; the former is physically harmful while the latter is psychological unhealthy. He proposes that the cultivation of a materially simple lifestyle would form “part of a code of moral hygiene necessary for a healthy and vigorous spiritual life” (Gregg, 1936: 22). Similarly, Burch (1995) suggests that simplicity in lifestyle and possessions brings together ecological, social, and global concerns and thus “for many people voluntary simplicity might be an *act of moral consistency*” (Burch, 1995: 24). Participation in consumer society serves “to project systemic evil elsewhere in the world” (Burch, 1995: 25) and thus, he continues, since ordinary individuals have no real political power, personal acts of restraint in consumption become moral statements. Furthermore, simplicity in consumption, according to Burch and others, constitutes non-violent action since any form of production involves “the cutting, grinding, tearing, milking, dismembering, uprooting, crushing, heating, freezing, etc., of some living or formerly living thing” (Burch, 1995: 33). The very act of possession, argues Burch, links us to violence and the maximization of possessions which is the goal of consumerism. Consumer culture maximizes violence since “what we make is literally built of the corpses of other beings” (Burch, 1995: 33).

The subject also relates to ascetic consumption as an expression of an essentially eschatological view of social history. Like ‘asceticism,’ the term ‘eschatological’ has a common meaning, that is, the idea of apocalypse or the end of the world through some cataclysmic event of divine origin. I will use the term in a much more sober fashion, derived from Crossan (1999), who argues that there has been considerable confusion over both ‘eschatology’ and ‘apocalypse’ and the relationship between them. Crossan explores the term as a descriptor of various religious and social movements that see themselves in stark opposition to deeply-held social norms. Eschatology expresses

a profoundly explicit *no* to the profoundly implicit *yes* by which we usually accept life’s normalcies, culture’s presuppositions, and civilizations discontents. It is a basic and unusual world-negation or rejection as opposed to an equally basic but more usual world-affirmation or acceptance. (Crossan, 1999: 259)

Eschatological philosophies or movements presume that there is something “profoundly and radically wrong” with the world to the extent “that only something profoundly and radically opposite could remedy it” (Crossan, 1999: 259).

Eschatology is fundamentally “this-world-negating” (Crossan, 1999: 259).

Furthermore, Crossan argues, the mandate of the program of world-negation is divine or transcendental in origin. Eschatological challenges to the current reality can take a variety of quite different directions, Crossan suggests. For example, apocalyptic eschatology is the form most commonly associated with contemporary Christian fundamentalism and expresses the classic jeremiad that ‘the end is near,’ that is, that divine intervention will restore justice and punish the wicked. For my purposes, the

most important variant of eschatology is what Crossan calls ascetic eschatology. This involves a negation of the world through a withdrawal from normal human life (and thus Crossan uses ascetic in the common sense of abnegation). Extreme forms include monasticism and the practice of celibacy but, in general, and at a minimum, there is a real sense of the ascetic being “out of this world” despite the fact that ascetic practices “may be conducted privately so that nobody else knows about it or done publicly so that everyone knows about it” (Crossan, 1999: 283). The world is not necessarily fundamentally evil in this version but is simply “inferior to higher realities” and thus “the material world and the physical body could be taken as distractions to mind, soul or spirit” (Crossan, 1999: 284). Asceticism, Crossan argues, is by its very nature a threat to the normal social world through practices which present radical alternatives.

The idea of simplicity as a moral and eschatological response to material wealth is, of course, ancient; but the idea of civilization destroying itself through its own development has found fertile ground in modern, technological society, and is one of the pillars of the discourse of ascetic consumption where it retains the moral edge that is not a necessary component of antimodernism. As Gregg predicts:

Our technology is overdeveloped. It rests on a moral foundation which had developed in a simpler world and was intended for simpler conditions. Our civilization is like a huge engine resting on too small and weak a foundation. Its vibrations are tearing the whole thing to pieces. In order to carry the load and strain we need to develop strong self-control and group and individual morality. (Gregg, 1936: 8)

Elgin (1982) offers a similar but much more detailed eschatological view of modern history driven by industrial development and ending in social collapse. He outlines a theory of successive stages of social growth that are like seasons, beginning

with the high growth and social optimism of spring followed by the “full blossoming” (Elgin, 1982: 67) of summer. In the case of modern industrial society, the second phase, summer, is the period in which the dreams of material abundance were achieved. During this period, growth continues but more slowly and social cohesion weakens. The autumn period of this scenario is one of “initial decline” and “an era of cynicism and scepticism” in which social consensus dissolves and “the dream of material abundance and ease rapidly [becomes] a nightmare” (Elgin, 1982: 67). The final stage, winter, is an “era of despair” characterized by chaos, confusion, a complete collapse of social cohesion, and institutions that are “increasingly out of control” (Elgin, 1982: 68). Elgin’s summary of this last period is pure apocalyptic eschatology, bleak and pessimistic: “the situation has become intolerable and untenable. The need for fundamental change is inescapable” (Elgin, 1982: 69).

Elgin places Western civilization somewhere in the third stage of development, the autumn of initial breakdown. He sees the final stage not as an abrupt or sudden change but a drawn out period of “disharmony, discord, desynchronization, and fragmentation” (Elgin, 1982: 77). Neither is it inevitable that this period continue. We are faced with two choices. If we continue along this path, our civilization will stagnate and human creativity will be smothered by “a web of authoritarian bureaucracy” (Elgin, 1982: 78). The alternative is a revitalization of civilization through the efforts of grass-roots organizations and the liberation of creativity from “bureaucratic bondage” (Elgin, 1982: 79). While optimistic that civilization can indeed be saved, he stresses the urgency of the situation and warns that the end may

indeed be near: “the amount of time we have to mount a creative, grass roots response to our rapidly changing conditions is very short. We have no room for complacency” (Elgin, 1982: 76). Elgin envisions a period of “intense social learning” (Elgin, 1982: 82) and the overall raising of consciousness, assisted by the cooperation of mass media and led by small groups of the enlightened whose lifestyles will serve as models for others: “new ways of living and working (developed by creative minorities) meet with the sympathy of the majority and the overall social agenda begins to shift. This is a very demanding period, requiring the utmost in commitment and personal responsibility” (Elgin, 1982: 84).

Elgin’s description of the decline of Western civilization and its revitalization by an elite spiritual vanguard echoes the sentiments of Gregg who suggested in the 1930s that in a period of rapid social transformation, there emerges a possibility of genuine moral change led by “a group which combined simplicity of living, disciplined non-violence, and wise changes in economic and social practice” who could possibly “mold a new nation” (Gregg, 1936: 19). The predictions of Elgin, and to a lesser extent Gregg, are an interesting combination of elements of apocalyptic, ethical and ascetic eschatologies. They constitute a complex discourse with a wide range of entry points for the subject, that is, there many different ways in which the ascetic consumer can recognize itself or be interpellated as part of this eschatological trajectory. All of these place the subject in a position of negation toward modernity and materialism and engage the subject as an active participant in processes of social change through this negation. Identification with this discourse through this particular

mode of subjectivation also allows the ascetic consumer to see itself as separate from the mass of others as an enlightened subject whose sacrifices are not only moral statements about the present but whose ethos becomes a model for others. The public conduct of the ascetic consumer thus becomes not only an outward sign of the inner state of moral purity but acts as a form of governance of others since the system of moral conduct with which the subject complies is offered as a means of personal and global salvation.

Cleansing the Self (Ethical Work)

In a no doubt unintended but classic understatement, Foucault observes that the notion of morality is “ambiguous” (Foucault, 1990b: 25). The term can imply a code or set of rules, a “prescriptive ensemble” (Foucault, 1990b: 25) that is imposed externally by various social institutions such as the church or the family, but it can also refer to the behaviour of individuals in terms of their degree of conformity with the code. In addition, there are the practices through which individuals shape themselves as ethical subjects of the code. Most importantly, these three aspects are inseparable: “there is no specific moral action that does not refer to a unified moral conduct; no moral conduct that does not call for the forming of oneself as an ethical subject; and no forming of the ethical subject without ‘modes of subjectivation’ and an ‘ascetics’ or ‘practices of the self’ that support them” (Foucault, 1990b: 28).

Foucault differentiates between systems of morality which emphasize either the code or the ethical practices. In those systems which focus on the code and the

sources of authority which enforce it, the process of subjectivation tends toward the legalistic or “quasi-juridical” (Foucault, 1990b: 29), with the conduct of the subject referred to laws and punishments. In contrast to this are systems in which adherence to rules is less important than the relationship that the subject develops with itself, “in his different action, thoughts, and feelings as he endeavours to form himself as an ethical subject” (Foucault, 1990b: 30). When practices of the self are the primary means of subjectivation, what Foucault calls “ethics-oriented morality” (Foucault, 1990b: 30), the actual rules and specific behaviours prescribed are likely to be more rudimentary and less organized than with code-oriented morality.

Rabinow (1997) suggests that code-oriented morality is represented by the major monotheistic world religions and that ethics-oriented morality is typical of the ancient world. Foucault does indeed associate ethics with Greco-Roman culture but he resists the kind of formal distinction offered by Rabinow. Referring to code-oriented morality, for example, Foucault points out, “it would be quite incorrect to reduce Christian morality . . . to such a model” (Foucault, 1990b: 30). In reality, these two systems — code-oriented and ethics-oriented morality — are not completely distinct and every discourse employs codes as well as ethical practices. The case of ascetic consumption is a particularly interesting hybrid. On the one hand, the prescriptive framework of ascetic consumption is not rigorously structured. Rather than a set of specific rules or legalistic strictures governing the type of dress, food, activity and so on, the subject of ascetic consumption is encouraged to seek personal solutions to what it sees as the moral dilemma of life in a mass consumption society.

On the other hand, while ascetic consumption does not have the characteristics of a formally organized religion, there is nonetheless, an implicit assumption of universality of principle through the appeal to a quasi-religious spirituality which serves to direct conduct in a manner that transcends the individuality of practice.

Ascetic consumption is a discursive attempt to organize austerity into a unified moral system that, if not actually imposed, has aspirations to universal acceptance. Although restraint can be associated with many different contemporary social concerns, such as the problems of waste or global distribution of wealth, in ascetic consumption it is viewed as a fundamental moral principle through which self and therefore the world can be transformed. The emphasis is not primarily on the acceptance of a formal or external system of moral conduct, but on a process of personal growth and development in which the moral and quasi-religious rejection of consumerism is the underlying rationality.

This is obviously quite distinct from rules of conduct governing consumption which clearly outline the specific objects to be regulated or which are forbidden. Kosher law or sumptuary legislation, for example, while possibly followed in varying degrees of obeisance, nonetheless describe in detail the actual materials and practices involved, the subjects who are the intended target, and the penalties for infractions. In the case of ascetic consumption, only the nature of the relationship between the subject and mass consumption is conceptualized and even this is not particularly clear or detailed in terms of specific materials or practices. As a respondent to Elgin's surveys comments: "voluntary simplicity has more to do with the state of mind than a

person's physical surroundings and possessions" (quoted in Elgin, 1982: 26). Another respondent notes that inner growth "is a daily way of life . . . tailored to our own particular situations" (quoted in Elgin, 1983: 37). This should not be surprising given that the moralization of mass consumption has to be situated, paradoxically, in the era of the expansion of mass consumption, when personal choice became one of the primary characteristics of governance in advanced liberalism. Furthermore, in such a social environment, the ability to adapt moral codes to personal context is not only a freedom but to a large extent, an obligation. Elgin directs practitioners of voluntary simplicity "to search for a workable and meaningful alternative to the emptiness of a society obsessed with material consumption and display," and he sees this process as a continuous, long-term "living experiment" (Elgin, 1982: 31, 33).

Ascetic consumers are thus enjoined to seek a level of simplicity that expresses the moral opposition to consumerism in ways that are appropriate to their particular life situation rather than to follow a specific set of interdictions with regard to material consumption. Gregg advises, with regard to a reduction in personal consumption, "I shall not attempt to set a standard for anyone, for that is a matter which each must settle for himself" (Gregg, 1936: 13). Burch (1997) dissuades participants from judging others in a workshop intended to reduce consumption through the study of daily routines and time management. The goal, he cautions, is not the observance of specific rules, and he emphasizes the aspect of personal choice: "we are simply trying to become *aware* of [time] and choose it consciously rather than live impulsively" (Burch, 1997: 20).

This does not mean, however, that compliance with the moral system of ascetic consumption is less stringent than a code of conduct based on clear rules. Indeed, the ways in which subjects are entreated to engage can be, in fact, extremely detailed, involving virtually every aspect of daily life including one's personality, relationships, speech, clothing, and so on. While many forms of moral regulation apply to clearly demarcated areas of life or activities, ascetic consumption is part of a whole way of life involving an attentiveness to one's involvement in everyday routine and through which the relationship of the subject to consumption is transformed. Gregg offers a detailed plan for the re-ordering of life by means of this technique of attentiveness which, while written in 1936, is remarkably similar to the ethos of contemporary ascetic consumption. The following quotation illustrates the extent to which the ascetic consumer must pay attention to the self in order to refine and cultivate as well as cull and discard aspects of conduct in the process of self-formation:

Inasmuch as the essence of the matter does not lie in externals but in inner attitude, let us discuss certain ways by which that attitude can be cultivated. Since simplicity means the supplanting of certain kinds of desires by other desires, the best aid in that process is directing the imagination toward the new desires. We must try, of course, to understand intellectually all the implications of the new desires, but further than that, make the imagination dwell upon them in spare moments, and just before going to sleep and just after awakening. Read books or articles dealing with them. Associate with people who have ideas similar to those you wish to cultivate. Exercise your discrimination in the relative values of different modes of living, and in the little details that compose them. Practise the desired simplicity in small ways as well as the large. Provide as many small stimuli as possible for this line of thought and conduct. Inasmuch as competition and emulation, especially the variety known as 'keeping up with the Joneses,' lead to complexity of living and inasmuch as competition is encouraged by a sense of diversity and exaggerated individualism, we will help ourselves toward simplicity by cultivating a strong and constant feeling of human unity. Try to cultivate the ability to work without attachment to the fruit of works. If you realize that the

purpose of advertising is to stimulate your desires for material things, you will be wise to avoid reading many advertisements. At least exercise selection in doing so. (Gregg, 1936: 28)

What Gregg is suggesting is what became, in later critiques of consumerism and in the spirituality movement in general, the concept of ‘mindfulness’ which may be the single most important ethical practice in the discourse of ascetic consumption. Mindfulness is an extreme form of self-consciousness in which the subject attempts to focus on every moment and every detail of experience in order to render it more visible to the gaze of governance. Burch (1995) argues that the technology of consumerism encourages the desire for greater material possession and distances us from a sensory reality. The technology of voluntary simplicity is not simply the discarding of possessions or their replacement with simpler versions, and the experience of simple living is not simply an intellectual exercise; rather “it is something we *become*, not something we *think*” (Burch, 1995: 61). Through cultivation of mindfulness, which is “an attitude of the *body* as it is of the mind” (Burch, 1995: 60), we develop an intense physical and mental knowledge of “*why* we are choosing to own something, the *extent* of its usefulness, the *fullness* of our enjoyment and use of it, and the *effects* it has on our lives” (Burch, 1995: 44).

All aspects of everyday life and even the stream of consciousness are submitted to close scrutiny and investigated from the standpoint of spiritual development with the purpose of discarding those elements, attitudes, tendencies, shortcomings, errors, and defects that obstruct the development of the true self and that do not contribute to the project of the art of life. This process can result in a

system of moral stricture that is actually much more complex and extensive than a clear set of moral codes. The lens through which one searches for personal imperfections increases in its power of magnification through usage, and new areas of potential concern continually come into focus. It is a situation like that of the sorcerer's broom in the Disney film, *Fantasia* (1940), which continues to reproduce itself, creating a never-ending parade of problems for an anxious Mickey Mouse.

The practices of ascetic consumption are thus not simply directed toward a reduction in consumption as a means of controlling waste, reducing expenses, and so on. Although many subjects of this discourse may see these aspects as concrete benefits, the practices of ascetic consumption are concerned with the cultivation of a moral subjectivity in relation to mass consumption. The process of reduction through careful attention to detail has a parallel in the ecological movement but again, with different intent, interests, and goals. Since at least the 1970s, there has been an abundance of books, checklists, articles, pamphlets, and so on, which test and direct people on a variety of ecological topics, from the proper method of garbage disposal to energy consumption in the home, all geared toward waste reduction and conservation. In the discourse of ascetic consumption, reduction is about the discarding of physical, mental, emotional, psychological and spiritual excess in order to develop mindfulness and self-awareness and to allow the true self to emerge. What is intended is a mental and physical minimalism to which Burch refers as “‘De-Junking’ Mind and Heart” (Burch, 1997: 30), and which Gregg compares to the climbing of Mount Everest, that is, a task that took great planning since the climbers could take only equipment and

supplies that were absolutely necessary. Similarly, in the art of life one should pay attention to “inner and outer condition,” “discarding possessions and activities irrelevant to the main purpose” (Gregg, 1936: 3, 4). Gregg was writing in the 1930s and thus his approach to ascetic consumption is perhaps more traditionally goal-oriented but the idea of discarding as a means of emphasising development is in accord with more current versions of ethical work in which the subject is entreated to increase self-awareness.

Burch provides a series of practical exercises and workshops which are intended to help participants “become more awake and mindful of [their] experience” (Burch, 1995: 97) in exploring their relationship to consumption and the role that material possessions play in their life. In an exercise entitled “The best things in life,” individuals are instructed to make two lists, one of items of material culture, the other of non-material culture. The latter category includes “creations of human beings that are essentially invisible or non-material” (Burch, 1995: 69) such as stories, songs, legends, philosophies, scientific theories, and so on. The participants are then instructed to compare the length of these lists and to ask themselves what the difference in length might mean, particularly in terms of “the ideas of development and civilization” (Burch, 1995: 70).

In another version of this exercise, participants describe important or memorable experiences in their life and then examine the extent of the role of consumer goods in the experience. In another exercise, “The uses of nothing,” the purpose is to develop images of life with less consumer goods and is intended as a

strategy of resisting the kind of advertising that promotes consumption as a means of self-fulfilment. Participants imagine themselves on an island that can easily sustain a comfortable life in terms of basic physical needs. They list activities that they would find rewarding in this environment and assess the ecological and social impacts of those activities. The exercise is then repeated several times during which they imagine bringing with them items of progressively greater monetary value. They record and review their observations and feelings and then ask whether or not these items improved the quality of personal and communal life on the island. Finally, they are asked to examine what this experience reveals regarding the messages of consumerism. Other exercises involve meditative sessions in which individuals imagine alternative futures in relation to material culture or in which they explore the difference between wants and needs.

One of the most interesting exercises provided by Burch is “Logging the daily round,” which is directed exclusively at the individual and not the group or workshop context. Burch explains that most of our daily activities are unconscious or automatic; we are, of course, in a conscious state but we are not mindful. He proposes this exercise through which we can become more aware of our activities and thus derive more pleasure and meaning from them or, or as Elgin puts it, “to live more deliberately, intentionally, purposefully” (Elgin, 1982: 10). The individual is to keep a journal of all daily activities for a week, hour by hour, no matter how apparently trivial or insignificant. In order to ensure that the participant does not forget to log these activities, Burch suggests that they may wish to set aside specific times each day or

perhaps to remind themselves with the alarm function of an electronic watch (there seems to be no sense of irony in this statement). When the log is completed, the individual reviews and interrogates the entries to determine the extent to which these activities further life goals, are rewarding or satisfying, or focus on material culture. The purpose is to eliminate, change, or reorganize those aspects of the daily routine in a way that brings the participant closer to “the things you find most rewarding and important in life” (Burch, 1994: 74). They are then to design a new weekly routine that would help in the pursuit of these goals and to discuss the new plan with a friend or partner.

Mindfulness, by itself, is simply a form of careful observation. However, there are two characteristics of ascetic consumption that are derived from the cultivation of mindfulness which have important ramifications for the way in which the self is developed as a moral subject. First, mindfulness is deployed as an intense and very intimate form of self-scrutiny, a means of correcting and modifying not only personal behaviour in terms of actions in the material world but also in terms of personal responses to the material world. Thus, for example, one changes not only what one consumes but, more importantly, one attempts to change the motivations for consumption in the first place. Each of the exercises mentioned above is quite different from, for example, questionnaires that help homeowners reduce energy consumption; here, the subject examines in a very intimate way its personal relationship to mass consumption. This involves a process of testing through which actions, feelings, desires, memories, and experiences are compared to a set of moral

criteria which allow the subject to cull and weed those tendencies or beliefs that inhibit progress toward the achievement of a moral self or discovery of the true self. The exercise involving the daily recording of activity is striking for the degree of vigilance, the level of detail, and the importance placed on the deeply private nature of the process. As a means of reducing complexity, the exercise seems paradoxical in that it emphasizes continuous and intense observation, regularly punctuated by periods of recording. In any case, nothing is to be left out, “no matter how personal or trivial it may seem” (Burch, 1995: 72), and participants are coaxed to reveal such detail by the assurance that this information is intended “for your eyes only. Make no judgments and don’t censor your entries” (Burch, 1995: 72). Burch further notes that it is common for one’s behaviour to wander and thus he instructs the participant to “be gentle with yourself” (Burch, 1995: 72).

The intimate tone of this intense inward and self-conscious examination enlists the subject not as an authoritarian enforcing a strict moral code but as a gentle and even forgiving confidant to whom the subject confesses and with whom the subject engages in a dialogue directed toward moral growth. This is different in kind than the self-punitive form of regulation that is usually associated with the term ‘ascetic.’ Here there are no punishments, consequences, or sanctions other than the perception that one is not progressing sufficiently along the twin paths of spiritual refinement and material reduction. Unlike the process of testing described by Foucault in connection with the care of the self in the ancient world (Foucault, 1988c), there are no clear points of arrival where the subject can claim to have mastered a particular virtue or

quality; indeed, one of the most salient characteristics of ascetic consumption (and this is true of the new spirituality and self-help groups in general) is that there are no precise markers of moral progress and, most importantly, no end point. Ascetic consumption, self-realization, and the inward spiritual examination are not goals but practices of vigilance which, once undertaken, constantly deliver up new aspects of the self as objects of care. As Foucault observes: “Problematization and apprehension go hand in hand; inquiry is joined to vigilance” (Foucault, 1988c: 239).

The second important characteristic of mindfulness is the didactic way in which it is utilized, not in the sense that these exercises are themselves didactic (which they are), but rather in the sense that consumption itself becomes didactic. This happens in two ways. First, the ascetic consumer itself becomes a teacher, instructing, monitoring, and guiding the self through what it sees as a consumerist maze, selecting, sorting, discarding, and rejecting those aspects of consumer society which are morally detrimental. Second, the different types of goods and services, the contexts for consumption, and practices of consumption that are to be acceptable to the ascetic consumer, must exhibit some didactic value or contribute in some way to personal spiritual or moral growth. Consumption as a practice containing a moral lesson or some inherent good becomes the defining characteristic, displacing but not discarding the idea of consumption as a material pleasure. The latter is not entirely rejected in that creature comfort or even pleasure for its own sake can be part of the meaning of an act of consumption, but this must be qualified by the didactic component. The relationship between these two components, pleasure and learning, is quite malleable

and is not a one-to-one correspondence with each present in equal measure. In general, practices of ascetic consumption and the goods and services involved must be articulated, at least to some extent, to the idea of consumption as a moral exercise involving personal growth.

Thus, as well as a form of observation of self, mindfulness can also be directed at the outer world in a very similar way so that no aspect of material experience remains unexamined. Through careful and mindful observance, the types of material possessions and the uses to which they are put, the activities in which one engages, and the quality of human relationships (as Gregg suggests above) become problematized as domains of moral concern. At one level, this can focus purely on sensual experience but, more importantly, the sensual is connected to the moral or, at the very least, the spiritually introspective. Simple daily chores or experiences become the occasion for intense scrutiny as in the following example in which the making of a meal is examined as an experience combining material, social, personal, didactic, moral, and spiritual elements:

I once watched a friend preparing a vegetable salad. She concentrated very closely on each step of the preparation process, examining the lettuce leaves one at a time as she washed them, watching the water rinse over the leaves and glitter and reflect in the sunlight of her kitchen. She dried and blotted the leaves, gently feeling each leaf through the moist texture of the towel she used. Next, she washed a sweet red pepper, then carefully dissected its seeds, weighing the knife in her hand, slicing with almost surgical attention to her movements, watching the light red juice of pepper stain the knife blade as she sliced the fruit to include it in the salad. Item by item, she proceeded this way, washing, feeling, smelling, breaking and cutting, placing and mixing the various parts of the various living things that would become our meal. Our conversation during this time was measured, thoughtful, and relaxed. I was as absorbed in watching her as she was in preparation. My total experience of

this particular salad was very different from the way we have been taught to perform such tasks. (Burch, 1995: 57)

The characteristics of mindfulness that I have described act as the primary guiding force in exploring the personal relationship to the spiritual and material worlds and to consumerism. It acts like a flashlight that can be carried by the subject and used to illuminate specific objects or areas of concern. On one level, this is completely open-ended and personalized, but there are nonetheless modalities or regularities that emerge when this principle of mindfulness is directed at the moralization of mass consumption. I am reluctant to give specific examples because of the danger of these being perceived as the essential form that ascetic consumption takes. Nonetheless, I offer the following with the caveat that the techniques of self-governance of the ascetic consumer can be deployed in a wide variety of domains, and that what follows is but one modality of the discourse.

Using Crossan's notion of world-negation, the forms that consumption take in the discourse of ascetic consumption must somehow negate the world of mass consumption without completely abandoning the idea of a mass consumption society. The result is alternative forms of consumption which, on the surface, can resemble those of the mainstream but which are perceived as different in kind by ascetic consumers. In choosing examples, I draw on my personal observations in Ontario, Quebec, the north-eastern United States, and Los Angeles, in which there are any number of retail outlets and services which cater to the sensibility of ascetic consumers. In all of these geographical areas, there are numerous bookstores which include almost exclusively material directed toward the cultivation of personal

spirituality and self-help in relation to a wide range of topics and different aspects of life, such as inner growth (for example, *Care of the Soul*), mothering and child care (for example, *Birthing from Within*), games for children (for example, *Spirit Games*), cookbooks (for example, Feng Shui cooking), yoga, meditation, alternative health practices, simplicity, ecology, exotic cultures and religion (for example, Tibetan Buddhism). There is usually a music section with both recorded and printed music from a similar exotic and spiritual orientation, such as traditional classical music but with overdubbed environmental sounds (for example, Mozart with waterfalls), exotica such as traditional Thai music, New Age music (for example, for relaxation and healing), contemporary alternative music on spiritual themes, and music for meditation. These shops also usually include an assortment of small gift items on similar themes such as postcards of animals or of exotic locales.

In some cases, related shops of similar interest are clustered together and it is not unusual to find health food stores beside bookstores, New Age gift shops, and organic restaurants. The gift or specialty shops are particularly interesting because while the items they contain are not usually found in mainstream malls, the overall function of the shop is more or less the same as in the case of its mall equivalent, that is to say, the sale of small items of curiosity or decoration suitable for gifts. A small gift shop not far from where I live, for example, has a mainly Tibetan theme. One can find statues or icons of Buddha (from small, inexpensive brass or terra cotta versions to much larger and more expensive ones), prayer wheels, singing bowls, prayer flags, clothing from Tibet, Nepal and Thailand, and a variety of other small items that

represent alternative spiritual concepts (from crystals to reproductions of Eastern Orthodox icons).

What underlines all of this material is an emphasis on processes of self-discovery, which may or may not be within a purely spiritual or religious context, and on the didactic nature of the products. Often connected to this retail network is an extensive parallel network of supportive services ranging from various forms of therapeutic massage and spiritual therapies to instruction and workshops in such practices. For example, in Ottawa, there is a local publication distributed in such shops (*Tone: a forum for the consciousness-raising community in Ottawa*) which advertises a remarkably wide range of such services including yoga and meditation, holistic cleansing, advanced energy healing, zen shiatsu, reiki, neurolinguistic programming, art therapy, crystal therapy, colour therapy, tarot counselling, Core Belief Engineering, lymphatic massage workshops, third eye readings, and Angel Readings (with a certified Angel Therapy practitioner and certified Angelspeake [sic] facilitator).

I emphasize that this constitutes merely one manifestation of the many possibilities of the moralization and negation of mass consumption presented by the discourse of ascetic consumption. The important point in connection with these examples is that they are extensive and that one can engage in numerous acts of consumption from basic groceries to clothing and gift items while at the same time displaying a moral disposition toward mainstream consumption through what ascetic consumers see as a form of negation. All of these goods and services combine the

notion of the cultivation of self with an inherent didacticism. Furthermore, this is not an inexpensive mode of consumption, and it is clear that it involves mainly those with ample economic and especially cultural capital. One aspect of this form of consumption that I find particularly interesting and revealing is the numerous instances of purificatory products and services that deal with both mental and physical cleansing. This is due in part to their relationship to alternative health practices, but it is clear that in ascetic consumption there is a special interest in the cleansing of both mind and body. There are numerous methods of meditation and relaxation to heal or protect the mind from the negative effects of mass consumption and mass society, and there are products and services devoted to a cleansing of the body and its various orifices. This purging of both the spiritual and physical self is perhaps the most obvious and powerful example of the aspect of negation that is at the heart of ascetic consumption.

Enlightened Consumption (Telos)

As pointed out earlier, ascetic consumption has clear links to many other contemporary discourses such as various types of antimodernism, the new spirituality, and ecological discourses. Also, through the display of esoteric knowledges in consumption, it is implicated in processes of distinction. Nonetheless, I have consistently resisted reducing it to any of these and have argued that while it can occupy some of the same space, its singularity rests not merely on a critique but on a moralization of mass consumption. Thus, the telos of ascetic consumption is not the

product of an intelligent or critical consumer but of a moral consumer, that is to say, a subject for whom mass consumption is fundamentally a moral and not an intellectual problem. The disposition of the subject and the related techniques and practices of ascetic consumption represent a moral rejection of mass consumption that is paradoxical since it cannot be completely realized within the context of a modern society.

In resolving this paradox, the programme of conduct that emerges takes the form of an eschatological negation of the perceived immorality of consumerism. This encompasses a number of related goals. First, there is the attempt to purify the subject of the effects of mass consumption in order to discover the true self, to allow the subject to relate to modern mass consumption society in a way that does not contaminate or at least maintains a degree of discursive separation from direct involvement. Second, while many forms of self-governance are directed at a mastery of self, the ascetic consumer is also interested in a mastery or at least a careful management of the forces of mass consumption that impinge upon the self. Thus, the acts of consumption themselves must be purified through their articulation to a didactic or moralistic sensibility. Finally, the form of self-governance of the ascetic consumer acts as a means of the governance of others through the display of moral superiority, by dividing the world into those who are enlightened and those who are not, between forms of consumption that are moral and those that are not. The ethos of this subject, that is, the programme of conduct and the strategies of consumption in

which it engages, is offered as a moral and normative alternative to mass society and “the evil of addictive acquisition” (Burch, 1995: 20).

Who Are Ascetic Consumers?

As Foucault has insisted, there is no general theory of the subject nor can there be a history of the progressive development of the subject. Problematizations of conduct are historically specific as are the various forces that act upon them in such a way as to produce new modes of being. Nonetheless, there is an interesting and striking parallel between the context of the ascetic consumer and that of the ascetic of ancient Greece and Rome as described by Foucault (1988c, 1990b). Foucault notes that the increased emphasis on austerity in sexual matters did not involve a corresponding increase in legislation. The moral philosophers who encouraged this austerity did not seek to establish uniform interdictions or punishments but encouraged austerity as a means of leading a life “different from that of ‘the throngs’” (Foucault, 1988c: 41).

Similarly, during the period in which mass consumption became increasingly moralized as ‘consumerism,’ moral legislation with regard to consumption not only did not increase, it was breathing its last in the form of ‘blue laws,’ almost all of which disappeared by the 1960s in most parts of Canada and the United States. There were still some instances that lingered (such as gender restrictions in some taverns, the barring of the serving of alcoholic beverages on Sunday without an accompanying meal) and, in some cases, they sparked intense but brief public debate (for example,

the prohibition against Sunday movies and sporting events). But, for the most part, they were considered minor annoyances or quaint anachronisms that had little life left in them. Indeed, if there was a general sentiment toward mass consumption during the first few decades following World War II, it was one of a growing celebration of abundance and choice and the slow disappearance of a society in which the fulfilment of basic needs was a struggle. The question arises then as to the reason for the moralization of mass consumption at this particular historical moment

I suggest that the moralization of mass consumption that developed during this period was to a very large extent linked to class and, in this way, resembles the increase in sexual austerity as described by Foucault, as well as the bourgeois antimodernism described by Lears. Foucault notes that the phenomenon of the care of the self in the ancient world involved only a limited number of privileged social groups that were the “bearers of a culture” (Foucault, 1988c: 45) and it is clear that Lears is also discussing a specific fraction of the middle and upper middle class (Lears, 1981 and 1983). It is important to emphasize that this was not merely a process of distinction but in each case, the ancient world, the Gilded Age, and the post-war economic boom, conduct was problematized in a way that led to an emphasis on the formation of selfhood by a group or class of people who had the resources, in terms of both economic and cultural capital, that allowed for such pursuits. Ascetic consumption cannot be reduced to class or social privilege, but it is clearly less a phenomenon of those for whom material acquisition is relatively difficult or who are relatively less endowed with cultural capital.

As consumer society became entrenched in the decades following World War II and the fulfillment of basic material needs became more commonplace in Western industrial societies, particularly North America, material acquisition as a means of self-fulfillment or a social and personal objective began to lose its power of attraction for many, particularly more highly educated members of the middle and upper-middle classes. There was a restructuring of goals for these elements of society and the idea of the cultivation of personality, personhood, and lifestyle became of greater interest as the distance from basic needs grew. At the same time, consumer culture and consumers became progressively more sophisticated in their tastes and demands. In the earliest days of the post-war boom there was an emphasis on basic consumer durables such as white goods (that is, major kitchen appliances such as stoves and fridges, so named because they were always white), houses, and automobiles, but this quickly expanded. Markets for goods became more specialized and detailed as did consumers who were now more educated and more demanding, exercising sophisticated tastes and following diverse interests. Among these interests was the turn 'inward' and the rise of socially conscious patterns of consumption.

The cultivation of self, then, was not the result of a narcissistic anxiety about selfhood. It was the response of an educated elite who distanced themselves from mass consumption by means of a moralizing discourse that merged residual religious sentiments with contemporary antimodernism. As consumer society became more developed, pervasive, and sophisticated, so did the strategies and technologies of ascetic consumption. There developed loose networks of practitioners, experts,

intellectuals, counsellors, advisors, groups and institutions, as well as consumer goods and services, all linked by a general disposition that attempted to refute and negate consumerism. Most importantly, the subjectivity of the ascetic consumer became dispersed throughout modern society as a general moralization of mass consumption that could be taken up at will, at different times, and in varying degrees of acceptance.

Endnotes (Chapter Three)

1. I am grateful to Gregory MacIsaac of the College of Humanities at Carleton University, Ottawa, for assistance with Greek etymology.
2. See Robbins and Palmer (1997), Hanegraaff (1996), Berger (1999), Woodhead (2001), and Emberly (2002).
3. ‘*Mode d’ assujettissement*’ is translated as “mode of subjection” in *The Use of Pleasure* (Foucault, 1990b: 27). In an interview (in English) with Paul Rabinow and Herbert Dreyfus in 1983, Foucault uses “mode of subjectivation” (Foucault, 1997f: 264) which is noted parenthetically as equivalent to “*mode d’assujettissement*.” I will use ‘subjectivation,’ as does Foucault. *Assujettissement* is derived from *assujétir*, to subjugate or to maintain someone in a state of obedience. However, *assujettissement* is most commonly used in French in connection with the obligation to pay taxes. Given the nature of Foucault’s work in general, it seems likely that he uses *assujettissement* rather than *assujétir* to imply that one is not only the subject of discursive practices but also actively engages in practices of self-governance, that is to say, one is obliged to pay taxes but one can also understand oneself as part of society and pay taxes willingly. I thank Jacqueline Couture, a conference interpreter for the Government of Canada, for help and suggestions in understanding this phrase.
4. The Voluntary Simplicity movement is a loosely connected organization based on the ideas of Duane Elgin (Elgin, 1982). Its basic principle is the general disengagement with modern material culture and the idea of consumerism in particular and a development of inner spirituality. Elgin derived the basic idea and the name from an earlier religious pamphlet (Gregg, 1936). Voluntary Simplicity is representative of a more broad and general critique of consumer society that is manifest in an attitude of restraint and negation to material acquisition.
5. See Bunyard and Goldsmith (1988), Deane-Drummond (1993), Lovelock (1995), or Primavesi (2000).

Chapter Four: The Vigilant Consumer

We can't protect the consumer. We can only make sure the he protects himself. (John Turner, Minister of Consumer and Corporate Affairs, in Baxter, 1967: 17)

It is easy to wax enthusiastic in support of the consumer much as everyone is in favor of mother love and kindness to small children. But just how much support and protection does the consumer need? in what areas? We must be specific and we must realize that ultimately a fair and efficient marketplace is the consumer's best protection. (The Business Quarterly, 1967: 70)

Margaret Kearny in her 'Consumer Column' in The Daily News recently wrote: 'We can make laws to protect consumers but we cannot make laws to protect consumers from themselves.' Discuss fully what point is being made here (8%). (Question on a Grade 10 examination in Consumer Education, St. John's, Newfoundland, 1978) (National Archives File: Consumer and Corporate Affairs, 5071-1) (National Archives of Canada, 1978b).

The discourses of mass consumption discussed in the previous chapters stand, more or less, at two ends of a spectrum representing the degree to which mass consumption is accepted or rejected in contemporary Western culture. The confident consumer embraces consumer society while the ascetic considers it to be a moral problem. The consuming subject discussed in this chapter occupies a position somewhere in between. In this discourse, mass consumption is viewed as essentially beneficial, with the ability to deliver a higher standard of living and greater creature comfort, but the relationship between producer and consumer is assumed to be fundamentally antagonistic and exploitative in favour of the producer. The consumer is addressed as a manipulated but potentially rational actor who resists exploitation through a conscious and critical approach to consumption.

This is, of course, nothing new; the wise and wary stance towards sellers and their goods is as old as, and probably older than the phrase *caveat emptor*. In modern consumer culture, this antagonism is expressed in discourses arising out of the relationships among three different forces which are seen to be in mutual opposition but which often form alliances for various reasons: the consuming public; producers and related industries such as advertising and marketing; and the state, understood not as a coherent, unified whole but as a complex set of disparate and sometimes contradictory practices of governance. In this triad, the state is perceived in a number of different ways with regard to the regulation of mass consumption: it can protect individuals from harm in the form of hazardous goods; it can mediate between consumers and business; or it can be responsible for the maintenance and enhancement of the conditions of production and consumption.

The history of the relationship among these three elements is not simply one of the growing power or powerlessness of individuals as consumers. It is not a question of the increased ability of individuals to resist, through organization and education, or of producers to manipulate by means of more effective advertising strategies, or through more sophisticated communications technologies. Nor is this history one of the increasing intervention and regulation in issues of mass consumption on the part of the state, as a response to increased pressure by organized consumer groups. In this chapter, I will argue that the rise of a 'consumer consciousness' was the result of two related developments: the attempt by the state to manage an increasingly urban population in an industrialized society of unprecedented productive capacity; and the

responses by individuals to the new problems and issues presented by the growing reliance on mass-produced goods.

Chapter Two documented the entry of the consumer into scientific and economic discourse, and the significance of this for the post-war liberal state. This chapter takes a somewhat longer historical perspective in order to demonstrate a gradual change in the practices of government on the part of the liberal state with regard to issues of mass consumption. I will argue that over the course of the twentieth century, there was a subtle yet significant shift in the object of governance from that of a collective population which needed to be protected from harm to that of a distinct subject who needed to be informed in order to be active in its own protection, a shift from 'buyer beware' to 'buyer aware.'

Urbanization and industrialization also brought a new set of problems to individuals as mass-produced goods occupied a greater role in daily life. There were growing demands not only for protection from exploitation or even physical harm, but also for new forms of knowledge in order to navigate the growing marketplace for consumer goods. The rise of the consumer movement is clearly related to this development. However, I will argue that concern over issues of consumption from the kind of critical point of view typical of consumer organizations, such as consumer advocacy groups, was not a continuous development. It took on different emphases and was directed at different areas during the twentieth century as mass consumption developed and expanded and as the relationship between the population and mass consumption changed. Initially, what we may regard in retrospect as a nascent

consumer movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was actually a series of often unrelated campaigns directed at the problems experienced by a rapidly growing urbanized population. These concerns included what might be seen as consumer issues, such as food purity and cleanliness, but were not limited by this definition, and extended to other social problems that were not directly related to mass consumption. As consumer goods became more pervasive and as individuals became more conscious of themselves as consumers, the idea of choice itself was problematized. Personal choice in consumption, on the scale afforded by modern mass production, was a growing phenomenon, and the interests of the consumer movement, such as it was, were redirected toward the education of individuals as consumers in matters that ranged from basic daily living to activism against manipulation and fraud in the marketplace. In addition to this turn, the discourse of antagonism became highly volatile in the 1930s as mass consumption became linked to discourses of democratic rights.

In the post-war years, as the idea of a consumer society became synonymous with Western democracy itself, the consumer movement grew very vocal and more visible to a broad public in the West in general. In Canada, the increase in consumer legislation and the establishment of state bureaucracies dealing with the consumer were at least in part a product of the mounting pressure on both government and industry from a public demanding greater regulation and protection. While increased protection for individuals may well have been the result, I will argue that this development was also the result of a somewhat different process, directed by the

rationality of liberalism, in which the Canadian state attempted to avoid direct intervention in the market by enjoining citizens to be active in their own protection. As a result, the responsibility for the regulation of mass consumption was increasingly moved to the individual. One of the characteristics of this shift toward individual responsibility was an increase in the production and dissemination of consumer-related information and the rise of state bureaucracies whose mandate was the management of consumer issues. By the 1960s, individuals in Canada were encouraged by a variety of institutions to become not only acutely conscious of themselves as consumers and critical of goods and services, but personally active in the monitoring of consumer markets and in the detection and reporting of infractions to news media and other appropriate agencies, both public and private. They were entreated to become vigilant consumers, collectively constituting a critical *vox populi* of consumer culture.

Foucault and Liberalism

The specific technologies that arose within the modern state as a means of managing consumers and consumption must be situated within a particular rationality of liberal governance that sees the mechanism of the market as a natural phenomenon. Foucault (1997c, 1997d) argues that liberalism is not a specific or coherent set of abstract principles but rather “a form of critical reflection on governmental practice” (Foucault, 1997d: 77). He contrasts liberalism with “reason of state” (Foucault, 1997c), a form of governance which broke with the idea that rule was based on divine

or natural law. In the philosophy of reason of state, the state was its own rationale and practices of government were thus directed toward strengthening the state itself; it assumed that the state existed *a priori* which implied, therefore, that government must be exercised. Liberal governance, on the other hand, proceeded from an entirely different ontological rationalization, assuming as its basis not the state, but society. Technologies of liberal government thus flowed from the basic principle that government *per se* was already excessive and must be continually questioned as to whether it was necessary or useful. The guiding principle of liberalism was “one always governs too much — or at any rate, one always must suspect that one governs too much” (Foucault, 1997d: 74). Liberalism was thus not a utopian ideal but a constant critique of the practice of governing in which the idea of the market and the theory of political economy played a central role. The market, however, did not produce liberalism but functioned as a test of the limits of government, “a locus of privileged experience where one can identify the effects of excessive government” (Foucault, 1997d: 76).

The technologies of government directed at the management of the consumer that developed in the Canadian state in the 1960s serve as an interesting challenge to Foucault’s idea that liberalism is based on the principle of a critique of excessive government. In early liberalism, the market did indeed serve as a privileged sphere in which the limits of government were tested, but this was based on the fundamental assumption of classic liberalism that the operations of a free market were entirely natural, a process that intervention could only disturb. As a result, since the eighteenth

century, liberalism has been directed in no small measure toward the protection of the market from forms of intervention which would dampen or impede what are considered to be its natural functions. It is important to emphasise that this does not imply a lack of governance on the part of the state but rather a tendency toward specific forms of governance which, while appearing transparent, maintain quite often complex relations between markets, populations, industry, and the state. The impulse that leads away from obvious intervention in markets is therefore not a rejection of governance but simply a desire to govern economic relations in certain very narrow ways and not others. Liberalism is thus a critique of government only insofar as government affects the market. It is powerfully linked to the principle of a free market as the basis of civil society and as the source of personal autonomy and liberty. The legal framework that developed in liberal societies in order to maintain the autonomy of market operations has always been extensive, whether or not this has been accompanied by extensive forms of governance in other spheres. Liberal governance, from neo-liberal to openly interventionist, assumes a free market whether it considers it to be fragile (and thus requiring certain forms of intervention as protection) or robust (and thus requiring protection from intervention).

Foucault compares post-war German neo-liberalism with the American neo-liberalism that grew out of the economic theories of the Chicago school. The former assumed regulation of prices by the market to be fragile and thereby requiring the support of social intervention in the form of unemployment insurance or public housing. The latter regarded the market as a nearly transcendent philosophy of social

organization and sought to extend market principles to other spheres that traditionally lay outside of economics. In both cases, there was hardly an avoidance of governance. Concrete and quite extensive practices of government flowed from each. It is therefore not a question of a critique of the degree of governance, whether too much or too little, but rather a question of the forms and the directions that governance can take while conforming, in varying degrees, to the rationality that the market is a natural phenomenon. Rather than assuming that liberalism is an avoidance or at least a questioning of governance in general, as Foucault suggests, we need to pay attention to the actual practices of governance that emerged as an exercise of the rationality of non-intervention in market relations. In describing the historical changes in the issues of mass consumption in this chapter, I examine corresponding tactics of governance that developed within the Canadian state. In the post-war years, governmental practices that arose in order to deal with mass consumption were not *extensive* in that they avoided direct intervention into the free market. Nonetheless, as I will show, they were extremely *intensive* in that they involved the deliberate cultivation of complex and detailed relationships between consumers and state bureaucracies.

In terms of actual historical examples, I refer to both the Canadian and American context since there are many interesting points of contact between them. I emphasize Canadian developments around issues of purity in the early part of the twentieth century. I then examine in some detail the growth of a popular literature directed at consumers in the 1920s and 1930s that for the most part originated in the United States but which had a wide readership in Canada. Finally, I focus specifically

on developments within the Canadian state in the 1960s that resulted in the discourse of consumer vigilance.

Purity and Cleanliness in the Urban Household

As with the moralization of luxury, the antagonism and suspicion between seller and buyer has a very long history and has often been at the centre of a range of social conflicts. Laws governing the price of staples, for example, have been the cause as well as the result of much social upheaval. Beginning in the Middle Ages, England had a succession of Corn Laws that were a constant source of tension and provided the fuel for many social movements (such as the Anti-Corn Law League founded in Manchester in 1839). Similarly, demands for legislation aimed at misleading advertising gathered momentum throughout the first half of the twentieth century and resulted in the establishment of legislation governing industry practices and standards. In the post-war years, there was a significant moral panic over subliminal advertising and the social effects of this panic have not yet completely dissipated. However, as discussed in Chapter Two, before World War II, the modern state had little interest in the individual as a consumer other than tangentially, such as through the regulation of weights and measures which were as much a means of broadening trade as they were protection of the population from unfair business practices.

While governments did not consider mass consumption to be an important economic issue, it was nonetheless an increasingly important social issue. Since the late nineteenth century, organized groups had been active in the politics of mass

consumption and had pressured the state to intervene on behalf of the public, particularly in terms of standards of basic necessities and protection from impure or dangerous foods and medicines. Most of these groups did not see themselves primarily as devoted to consumer issues and a survey of the various campaigns reveals a concern with a range of social problems that were the result of urbanization, industrialization, and proletarianization. Of particular interest here were those issues related to basic necessities and, for that reason, the groups that formed around these issues were almost exclusively female in membership. The production of basic goods, which had previously been centred in the home and was primarily the responsibility of women, was becoming increasingly industrialized. Time-consuming and labour-intensive items such as gelatine became commercially available by the late-nineteenth century and this process increased as urbanization made available large and concentrated markets for such goods. An equally important consequence of urbanization in connection to home production was that families were no longer able to keep animals which provided a regular supply of milk, eggs, and meat. The relationship between the household and such commodities was increasingly mediated by mass markets.

As a result of these changes, women were no longer directly involved in the production of what might be called life-goods, but were nonetheless still considered responsible for the acquisition of these goods as well as for the care of the household and its members. Thus while universal suffrage was probably the most important objective of feminism during this period, women were also extremely active

politically in a remarkable variety of campaigns which brought together domestic and civic issues through the model of the household, the control of its goods, and the care of its members. The economy and society, whether at the municipal, national, or even international level, was regarded simply as a large household and thus could be managed as such. Strong-Boag (1975) demonstrates that women of the National Council of Women of Canada, the first national women's organization, saw themselves "not merely as ordinary housewives but as super-housewives. The city was only a larger home to be planned and organized" (Strong-Boag, 1975: 315). The idea of home economics as an area of study and as a profession for women also developed during this period and, by the first decade of the twentieth century, there were national and local institutes for home economics or 'household science' in both the United States and Canada (for example, the Winnipeg School of Household Science was founded in 1902, the American Home Economics Association in 1908). In this period of maternal feminism, "middle-class women began to assert a voice in public issues through their status as housewives, interweaving public and private values in an agenda that sought to increase women's rights and bring a homelike nurturing into the public sphere" (Wallace, 1994: 93).

Household management and care as applied to the new problems of urbanization led women's groups toward involvement with a wide range of contemporary social issues. The agenda of the 1909 conference of the International Council of Women in Toronto, for example, listed a diversity of interests and concerns. The political and legal rights of women, particularly suffrage, were of

central importance but the Council was also engaged in issues such as public health (and the role of government in this area), child welfare, infant mortality, pure food, the supply of pure water and water pollution, and the education of mothers. A section of the conference was reserved for special reports on public health, in particular the care of infants and children, public housing, the working conditions of women, and tuberculosis (International Council of Women, 1909a and 1909b). Heads (1997) notes that the aims of the Manitoba Home Economics Association, founded in 1911, were also quite diverse and included “professional enhancement and mutual help, the promotion of informed consumption and lobbying for a government experimental station to test textiles, food, and all things connected to the home” (Heads, 1997: 74). Its members were active in local campaigns to improve the quality and safety of the food supply and often visited local businesses involved in food production, reporting their findings to municipal officials.

Since children were of special importance to the household and family life, there was an almost universal concern on the part of women’s groups in this period over the purity of milk and its availability to mothers and children. Strong-Boag reports that during World War I, the image of motherhood became an important symbol of care, strengthening the link between the domestic and civic, and providing the occasion for a wide variety of interventions into problems of food, purity, and cleanliness:

Energetic Montreal members coordinated the city’s efforts to standardize its many milk depots. In Ontario, the council asked, as one way of speeding reform, that milk by-laws no longer required the signature of the Minister of Agriculture. In many towns pure milk campaigns climaxed with the crusade

for the tuberculin testing of herds. The Ottawa Local Council which also pioneered in attempts to secure a municipal abattoir was a particularly insistent advocate of these tests. Pure water supplies were widely prescribed as another minimum requirement of urban life. Nor was that all. Councils agitated their home town medical talks, clean-up days and anti-fly campaigns. (Strong-Boag, 1975: 311)

Sorenson (1941) describes a similar situation in the United States where national women's clubs and women's magazines (such as *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Collier's*) led campaigns for government testing of food products and against patent medicine fraud. The General Federation of Women's Clubs organized a Pure Food Committee, and Housewife's Leagues in many major cities applied pressure on government for legislation that would establish standards and eliminate deception. Their influence contributed to the passage of the first food and drug act in that country in 1906.

Care of the disadvantaged, the vulnerable, or the weak and defenceless of the 'urban household' was of special interest to these women's groups. The problems of single women adapting to the urban environment led to a variety of projects such as campaigns under the banner of 'white slavery' directed against sexual exploitation and for equal moral standards for men. Women were also involved in organizations which trained young women for the labour market, such as the Girls' Industrial Institute in Toronto, in order for them to better adapt to urban life. Members of The National Council of Women of Canada participated in mentoring young working class women through Girls' Friendly Societies (similar to contemporary Big Sisters organizations). Many of the organizations affiliated with the National Council of Women operated homes or institutions dedicated to the care of infants, orphans, mothers, 'newsboys,'

the aged, 'friendless women,' 'incurables,' and others who were casualties of rapid urbanization. (1)

Labour organizations were also been involved in consumer issues and in some cases, their goals overlapped with those of women's groups, particularly with regard to effects of proletarianization and the living and working conditions of working class people. The National Consumers League, founded in the United States in 1899, was one of the earliest and was established through the efforts of the Working Women's Society and liberal clergy such as the Christian Socialists. Sorenson (1941) states that the primary goal of the National Consumers League was legislation that would regulate not consumption but labour. It followed a strategy of education and information directed mainly at women consumers in order to establish "consumer responsibility" (Sorenson, 1941: 125) by drawing a connection between goods and the conditions under which they were made, a policy that has striking parallels to the objectives of many current consumer campaigns (for example, the boycott of Nike). The Consumers' League of Massachusetts, for example, commissioned a young William Lyon Mackenzie King to do a study on the working conditions of women and girls in the Boston area in 1899. Having listed the hardships of these women and the demands placed on them by their employers, King concluded:

What, it may be asked, is the relation of the consumer to the conditions that have been discussed? Are they, to any degree, the result of his action, or subject to his modification? To both these questions, the answer is unmistakably, yes. The hours during which stores are kept open, and the methods according to which they are conducted are determined largely to suit the convenience of the consumer; they are arranged so as to secure, if possible, his patronage. Herein lies at once the responsibility and the power of the

consumer, though, strangely enough, he pays, as a rule, little regard to either. (King, 1898: 17)

Labour was also frequently involved in the establishment of consumer cooperatives which, based on the model of the Rochdale weavers in mid-nineteenth century England, attempted to utilize the collective buying power of its members in order to meet their consumption needs while eschewing profit. Such cooperatives were generally more successful in the United Kingdom than in either the United States or Canada, although there were notable exceptions such as the Antigonish cooperative movement in Nova Scotia that began in the late 1920s. The occupations of its executive underline the fact that it was very much a product of the labour movement: “The president is a blacksmith, and other board members come from such callings as machinist, accountant, patternmaker, electrician, boilermaker, furnaceman, millwright, mailman, carpenter, wiredrawer” (Sorenson, 1941: 138).

The Regulation of Life Goods

Despite the fact that many of these organizations, from women’s groups to labour, often focused on specific goods, they were quite different from the consumer movement that developed in the latter half of the twentieth century. In the case of women’s groups, there was clearly a link to the idea of household and the care of its members in a period when both home production and the traditional modes of domestic care were undergoing deep change because of rapid urbanization and industrialization. Similarly, labour organizations were also often involved in issues of consumption and, in many cases, followed similar routes and pursued the same goals;

but their motivation was also quite different from later consumer organizations in that they were primarily interested in working conditions and these were being transformed by the same forces operating on the household. The major step toward modern consumer society came with the shift from life-goods to goods which were not immediately necessary and which the individual could exercise greater discretion in purchasing. H.R. Tosdale observed in 1933 in the *Harvard Business Review* (Tosdale, 1933) that one of the most significant changes in the American economy since the early 1920s was the increasing proportion of consumer spending directed toward optional or postponable purchases, or what might be called choice-goods, and not simply basic staples or necessities.

I use the terms ‘life-goods’ and ‘choice-goods’ rather than ‘needs’ and ‘wants’ because the latter pair often connotes ‘real’ and ‘false’ needs, or genuine necessity and hedonistic desire. To suggest a shift from needs to wants implies a move toward desire for its own sake and is often associated with ideas of moral decline. The emphasis on life goods and the struggle with municipal authorities over the conditions under which they were produced and distributed was largely related to concerns over security and safety in a rapidly changing urban environment. The practices of governance that were developed within the state in response to these issues were thus directed not at the individual as a consumer but toward the protection of the population in general. Indeed, as I have argued previously, the consuming subject did not yet exist; there was not yet any broad connection between acts of consumption and individual identity. Consequently, governance in terms of the consumption of life-

goods was clearly pastoral: a concern with the population in general and with the well-being of each of its members. The first federal official responsible for such matters,

H. Sugden Evans, described his task as follows:

It must be conceded that few national outlays can be more productive to a country's welfare and stability than that which tends to ameliorate the health of its people; whether it be a development of manly vigor, intellectual and mental attainments, or the securing of sound, wholesome and invigorating food and pure medicines — in a word, the maintaining of the *mens sana in corpore sano* [sound mind in a sound body] of the nation. (H. Sugden Evans, in Davidson: 1950, 21)

The first legislation in Canada that dealt with food purity, passed in 1875, was the result of a social movement that sought the regulation of impure liquor, although the act that was finally accepted was more general in intent, as revealed in its official title: *An Act to Impose Licence Duties on Compounders of Spirits and to Amend the Act respecting Inland Revenue and to Prevent the Adulteration of Food, Drink, and Drugs*. While this act, known more simply as the Adulteration Act, and later similar legislation (the act was repeatedly amended in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) was intended to protect the population from clear health hazards, it is important to note that these laws were almost exclusively under the mandate of government agencies whose responsibility was trade and commerce, a theme continued throughout the twentieth century in both Canada and the United States. As I have suggested and will argue later, one of the principal elements of the rationality of governance on the part of the state with regard to consumer issues has been an interest in the maintenance of a free market. In calling for legislated standards for food in 1909, the Chief Analyst in charge of administering the Adulteration Act noted that,

despite the importance of such standards for the overall well-being of the population, one must not be hasty because of the potential effects on trade: “I have realized the necessity of well considered action; and have been particularly anxious not to advise rash measures in a matter which, by injudicious precipitancy must seriously hamper trade, and bring discredit upon honest efforts for food control” (Anthony McGill, 1909; quoted in Davidson, 1950: 45).

After the passage of the Adulteration Act in 1875, the Canadian government appointed test analysts in Halifax, Quebec City, Montreal and Toronto and, slightly later, in Saint John, St. Hyacinthe, Ottawa, London, and New Westminster. Their primary task was to investigate the adulteration of goods, a very common business practice in the late nineteenth century, and which the government considered an impediment to trade because of the way in which it undermined consumer confidence (to borrow a phrase that appeared much later). However, since there were no legal standards, very little enforcement or prosecution followed, despite the fact that test results showed widespread adulteration and contamination. One strategy taken by the government was to publish the results of tests along with the names of vendors in local papers in order to shame them publicly. To remedy the lack of standards, a Chief Analyst was appointed in 1884 and the first national test laboratory was established in the West Block of the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa (it was moved to a more suitable location a few years later). The department began to publish the results of tests in a bulletin that was circulated widely and regularly published in the press. Despite these efforts, by the turn of the century the department had established only

one legal standard, for tea. Until 1910, when the department set standards for milk, meat, grain, maple products, and beverages, it tended to rely on the purity laws that had been passed earlier in the United States. Over the next decade, amendments covering more products were added to the Adulteration Act as testing continued.

During the first few decades of the twentieth century, the regulation of the purity of food and drugs increasingly became an issue of public health rather than purely commerce, partly through the efforts of the purity campaigns but also through the publication and enforcement of standards by the federal government. The growing scandal over patent medicines during this period encapsulated two aspects of consumer discourse that became of greater significance later. First, it demonstrated a constant tension in consumer societies between the interests of commerce and broader public issues, in this case health, and the tactics of governance of the state in mediating this. Second, it previewed in some ways the debate over the right of consumers to have complete information in order to function intelligently in the marketplace.

Patent medicines were so-called because their formula was 'patented,' that is, their contents were proprietary and not made public. By the late-nineteenth century, patent medicines had become very popular and profitable as well as notorious, and there are endless examples in popular literature of travelling medicine shows that sold dangerous medicines to customers whom they regarded as unsuspecting 'hicks.' In many cases, these remedies were simply alcoholic beverages sold in the guise of drugs in order to avoid excise duty, but some contained more dangerous and addictive

substances such as cocaine, morphine, and heroin. In any case, their contents, which sometimes caused injury and even death, were guarded secrets. There was very little control over patent medicines and they were widely available through druggists, travelling salesmen, and mail order.

In 1908, the British Medical Association tested a wide range of such medicines and published their contents in *Secret remedies, what they cost and what they contain* (British Medical Association, 1910). This may well have been the first of a type of publication that became standard by the 1930s. In any case, it was regarded as a milestone and “a revelation to the man on the street” (Davidson, 1950: 50). Such exposés, as will be shown below, became a linchpin of the growing consumer movement in its demand for more product information and greater transparency on the part of manufacturers. Around the same time, the Canadian government was also investigating the content of patent medicines and, in 1908, passed a law regulating content and requiring that certain contents be declared on the label. Since its inception, the main interests of the Adulteration Act and the department which administered it were trade, commerce, and the maintenance of fair and open market relations. The purity campaigns and the growing regulation and publication of the content of food and drugs helped to shift the discourse toward the growing area of public health and indeed, in 1920, responsibility had moved to the newly-established Department of Health and the Adulteration Act became the Food and Drug Act.

The Problematicization of Choice

Once the conditions of the production and distribution of life-goods were secured — or at least when struggles over life-goods became of broad public interest and thus subject to greater scrutiny and control — the focus of the growing consumer discourse began to shift to the relationship between individuals and choice-goods. With the development of more extensive markets for consumer goods in the first quarter of the twentieth century, it was no longer a case of the replacement of basic life-goods made in the home by mass-produced equivalents. As more and more aspects of daily life became commodified or industrialized, mass consumption became a normal and commonplace activity for urbanized masses. While not on the scale it would reach in the latter half of the twentieth century, mass consumption of a comparatively wide variety of life-goods and choice-goods was becoming a simple fact of daily life. A manual on establishing consumer cooperatives, written in Newfoundland in 1940, illustrates the growing centrality of mass consumption even in a part of the North American continent that was sparsely populated and still relatively rural: “we are all consumers. You began to be a consumer when your parents started to buy things for you before you were born. You will still be a consumer until your relatives have paid your funeral expenses and your bills” (Richardson, 1940: 126).

Life-goods did not imply discretionary spending, and the exercise of choice in their acquisition was not a significant issue in early consumer campaigns. For example, the establishment of standards for the purity of milk and adequate mechanisms for its distribution were of primary concern rather than the degree of

choice one exercised in its acquisition. With the expanding range of consumer products, however, individuals began to develop a consciousness of themselves as consumers, as people whose needs, desires, and interests were increasingly satisfied through mass-produced goods. The relatively unmediated relationship between people and goods was being radically transformed by changing conditions of production, distribution, and consumption, and there was a recognition that the new age of mass consumption presented unique problems that required both a change in attitude and increased knowledge. As Sorenson noted in her history of the consumer movement:

No longer does the American housewife get eggs from her own hens or shoes from the village cobbler. The old close relation between production and consumption has disappeared. We now depend on a complex industrial system to satisfy our wants. As consumers, we are faced with special problems. (Sorenson, 1941: 3)

The population of both Canada and the United States depended increasingly on money purchase in markets for the satisfaction of wants and as the range of choice in goods and services multiplied, the idea of choice itself became problematized. Individuals began to experience the need for a greater knowledge both of mass-produced goods and of modern forms of consumption that were increasingly complex. The need for information in terms of safety and security was recognized much earlier, not only in the quest for purity in life-goods, but also with products such as patent medicines whose composition and contents were not made known to the public. The very real threat to health posed by such medicines was one of the main reasons for the establishment of legislation regulating their content in both Canada and the United States very early in the twentieth century. Concern over such issues did not cease and

has remained an important component of the consumer movement even to the present as evidenced by recent debates over organic farming standards in the European Union and over the export potential of genetically modified organisms (GMO) crops in North America. While choice presented individuals with greater autonomy and the possibility to enhance substantially their material comfort and enjoyment of life, its exercise also implied an increased risk and thus demanded greater knowledge, skill, and new modes of conduct.

Inform and Expose

Previous campaigns for purity and standards did not disappear but were transformed through a merger with the new issues that were a consequence of the problematization of choice, that is to say, a demand for greater information about goods, how to relate to mass markets and, in general, how to conduct oneself as a consumer. An extensive popular literature on mass consumption began to develop and it took one of two general forms that often overlapped in content if not in style: the informative, which sought to educate individuals in practices of informed consumption; and the exposé, which attacked misleading advertising, false information, and shoddy products. While depending on quite different rationalities, both constituted attempts to govern the conduct of individuals as consumers in their relationship to the marketplace for goods. On the one hand, individuals were encouraged to educate themselves in terms of their daily needs and to take practical and rational approaches to fulfilling these through market mechanisms. On the other,

they were addressed as potential victims for whom information was a key weapon in their defence.

The informative strategy was an extension of the home economics movement which had been growing in importance since the turn of the century and had founded numerous educational institutions. The movement was also influential in establishing departments within the state both in Canada and the United States that included home economics and issues of mass consumption in their mandate. Typical of the literature that began to appear in the 1920s was *The Education of the Consumer* (Harap, 1924), a manual on the development of consumer education programmes that was directed mainly at teachers but also assumed a broader audience. Harap was primarily an educator in economics and he argued that the relationship between producer and consumer had become overly complicated, to the detriment of the consumer. He further noted that those in positions of authority saw this not as a public issue but simply a consumer's problem. If that was the case, then educators had a national responsibility: "the schools of our nation must prepare the consumer to work on this problem intelligently" (Harap, 1924: 56).

On the surface, the range of topics covered by the manual appears to be somewhat limited, dealing with what might be considered basic needs: food, housing, household materials and skills, fuel, and clothing. However, Harap's approach to each was extraordinarily intensive. For example, the manual discussed in great detail virtually every aspect of food consumption such as dietary needs, quality, quantity, cost-effective consuming, dietary planning, milk consumption, milk standards,

vegetables, cereals, bulk buying, packaging, and cash versus credit. Also provided were detailed statistical information and corresponding tables on rates of consumption, caloric and nutritional content, and other scientific aspects of food consumption. The sections of the book dealing with other categories of consumption are equally detailed. With regard to accommodation, for example, Harap discusses everything from technical aspects such as size, number of rooms, space, and so on, to government assistance in ownership. Harap's goal was to provide consumers with factual information in order to move them away from what he saw as bad habits based on custom and tradition, and toward a more scientific and rational approach to consumption. Consequently, he paid little attention to other growing concerns of the period such as false advertising, exploitation, or manipulation. Unlike many other critics of mass consumption, he was not at all nostalgic about the past, homespun goods, or friendly and familiar retailers. He regarded consumer needs to be a technical problem which could be solved through scientific analysis and education.

At the other end of the spectrum from Harap's somewhat sober view of mass consumption and the consumer was *Your Money's Worth* (Chase and Schlink, 1927), a very popular and widely imitated exposé which the famous American sociologist Robert S. Lynd described as "the Uncle Tom's Cabin of the abuses of the consumer" (Lynd, 1936: 497). Chase and Schlink wrote somewhat nostalgically about an earlier period of self-sufficiency and independence in which local producers were kept honest by wary consumers, particularly the housewife who was a "canny purchaser" (Chase and Schlink, 1927: 27) and would not tolerate low quality and dishonest practices.

But with the industrial revolution, they observed, that which had been home-made became mass-produced; traditional, self-sustaining communities disintegrated; and consumer became alienated from producer: “With the manufacturer shipping his goods into the void, and the consumer buying the product of heaven knows whom, a thousand miles away, the old intimate contact between maker and consumer was lost; the whole system for judging sound values went into decay” (Chase and Schlink, 1927: 28).

In a chapter entitled ‘Along Main Street,’ Chase and Schlink describe the disappearance of the traditional small-town store using as an example the modern drugstore which, they observed, had become “one of the nerve centers of up-to-date merchandising” (Chase and Schlink, 1927: 45). The aisles were now filled with a confusing array of all types of goods: patent medicines, toilet products, tobacco, cheap novels, stationery, pens, with perhaps a traditional mortar and pestle somewhere at the back of the store. “Here the consumer meets the products of a thousand manufacturers. Gone the narrow functions of the old time apothecary” (Chase and Schlink, 1927: 45). Most of their book deals with consumer fraud of one type or another, such as misleading advertising, excessive price, medical and non-medical ‘quackery,’ and assorted dishonest practices.

Chase and Schlink were supportive of standardization, which was becoming a growing concern for the nascent consumer movement, but feared that too broad an application of this principle might limit or restrain the capacity of the market to enhance the ‘Good Life.’ Thus they differentiated between standards which applied to

basic necessities or industrial technology and those which would narrow or restrict consumer choice: “What we argue for are more standards in certain things, to the end that there may be less standardization in general living” (Chase and Schlink, 1927: 169). Generally, while embracing the power of mass markets to raise the standard of living, they were nonetheless concerned over the growing alienation of the consumer. They described consumer society of the 1920s as a bewildering world and consumers as “so many Alices in the Wonderland of salesmanship” (Chase and Schlink, 1927: 260), manipulated into buying what they did not always want or need. *Your Money's Worth*, like many other consumer exposés of the period, argued for greater organization on the part of consumers: “It is the consumer’s move. If he wants to leave Wonderland there is a way out, and the clear possibility of drastically reducing the cost of living. He can get his money’s worth if he is willing to organize to get it. The market always responds to organized pressure” (Chase and Schlink, 1927: 264).

Until such time as consumers were able to organize effective opposition to business, Chase and Schlink proposed a list of key strategies that were very much like those taken by post-war consumer groups. While they suggested that individuals pressure government, particularly for industrial standards of production and product information, they focused on direct actions that could be taken by individuals such as: demanding the scientific facts on which advertising claims were based; buying competitively; boycotting dishonest firms and supporting honest ones; reporting infractions to media, authorities, and better business bureaus; calculating unit costs while shopping; paying close attention to labels; and making products at home (not the

basic life-goods which had been the object of concern of earlier campaigns, but products such as pesticides, floor waxes, polishes, household cleaners, the formulas for which could be obtained from government sources). The success of *Your Money's Worth* led Schlink and Chase to establish the first national testing organization, Consumers' Research, in New York in 1929. Its main targets were false advertising and shoddy products, and while it did some of its own testing, for the most part it hired private laboratories. It published the results of tests, product comparisons, and other consumer information in a newsletter which became popular very rapidly with approximately 50,000 subscribers by 1935. (2)

There were two important characteristics of the contemporary discourse on mass consumption that began to take shape in this literature, whether it was intended as purely educational or whether it took a more aggressive stance. First, mass consumption was increasingly considered as a totality or, at least, a reality from which there were increasingly fewer exceptions. Second, the individual was problematized as a consuming subject at all times and in all aspects of daily life. Like water for fish, mass consumption became the medium of life for increasingly urbanized masses and presented a vast and growing range of opportunities for the scrutiny and intervention of consumer activists. The idea of an organized effort on the part of consumers, whether simply for the dissemination of information or as a means of arousing public passion over the excesses of business, emerged as a distinct position. This was an important step beyond the previous notion of the individual as a consumer only when engaged in specific acts of consumption or in relation to specific goods or types of

goods. The pure milk campaigns of earlier in the century, while often highly political, were singular as to the object of their efforts and were intended to solve specific problems for a general population; in contrast, later projects directed at the education of the rational consumer brought together a wide range of goods and services under the banner of the individual consumer and, as in Harap's manual, were remarkably broad and detailed in their description of the objects and activities where information and guidance was required. Similarly, the exposé sought to reveal fraud and misinformation in virtually every possible area of mass consumption. Thus there was an interesting reversal in the nature of the growing consumer discourse: earlier, the objective of interventions had been the control of specific items in the interest of the population; now, it was the development of a general awareness of mass consumption for the consumer as an individual subject.

Chase and Schlink's best seller (it sold more than 100,000 copies, which was a quite remarkable accomplishment during that period) was simply one of many similar works that followed over the next several decades, some of which were also authored by members of Consumers' Research. By far the most popular, at 250,000 copies, outselling even *Your Money's Worth*, was *100,000,000 Guinea Pigs* (Kallet and Schlink, 1933) which argued that consumers were little more than laboratory animals in the eyes of corporations who had no concern for product safety. Other titles by members of Consumers' Research that warned about potential dangers and unscrupulous practices, often referred to as 'Guinea Pig' books, included *Counterfeit-not your money but what it buys* (Kallet, 1935), *Eat, Drink, and Be Wary* (Schlink,

1936), and *Skin Deep* (Phillips, 1936), an investigation of the health hazards of cosmetics. One of the most influential exposés of the 1930s, and one that did not originate with Consumers' Research, was *American Chamber of Horrors* (Lamb, 1936), which dealt with dangerous products that the government was unable to control because of a lack of legislation. Each of these titles was somewhat less ambitious in breadth than *Your Money's Worth* and focused on more limited areas of consumption but, taken together, exposés such as these constituted an assault on what the authors and their public saw as the dangerous excesses of industrial capitalism and the possible action that consumers could take, both individually and collectively.

An important although not necessarily logical corollary to the rationality that one was *always* a consumer was the assertion that *everyone* was a consumer. This had profound implications for the political debate that had begun to develop around the growing consumer movement. Consumer advocates argued that if these assumptions were true, then the consumer interest was distinct and could not be subsumed by other smaller movements or other groups, such as labour who, it was argued, often attempted to represent consumers but did so only in relation to their own agendas. A further implication was that the consumer interest was synonymous with the public interest, and consumers, as citizens and not merely as individuals with interests in specific goods, had rights which the state had a responsibility to protect. For some, this was the obvious role of government: "In a democratic culture in which the consumer occupies a position of such relative disadvantage in relation to business, one turns finally to the role of the government as a surrogate responsible for 'the public

interest''' (Lynd, 1936: 504). Lynd and others argued that the development of an organized movement was therefore crucial in order to pressure government in this direction. The opposition to this argument, quite often the voice of business, based its rationale on the same logic, that is, that everyone was a consumer. It concluded, however, that if this were the case, there was no specific consumer interest outside of a general public interest. Consequently, it was argued, the idea of a consumer movement was misguided and could only result in unnecessary intervention in market relations.

The Consumer Interest

The debate over the nature of the consumer movement and what the appropriate response of government might be to the problems of the consumer was, not surprisingly, greatly exacerbated by the Depression. Indeed, for many people, mass consumption became a touchstone by which to judge the relative success of the economic system and its social effects: if capitalism was prone to such periodic upheavals and if it was unable to guarantee even basic needs, then its future was surely in question. Broadly speaking, concerns over the consumer had shifted from the problems of urbanization and industrialization to questions of the legitimacy of liberal capitalism itself. The earlier campaigns for food purity and standards had become incorporated into initiatives promoting the rights of individuals to participate fully in an industrial democracy. Questions of the ability of capitalism to provide the 'Good Life' thus took on a new urgency in the politics of the 1930s.

There were two general directions taken by those pursuing the consumer interest and these were expressed, more or less, by the ‘inform and expose’ approaches described above: first, the problems of the consumer were simply technical and could be solved through rational means such as scientific investigation and education; second, the problems of the consumer were merely the surface indicator of a deeper, structural problem in the nature of capitalism that could be solved only through significant changes in economic and social organization. Harap’s manual of consumer education exemplified the first category. While remarkable in its detail, it did not question or even discuss to any extent market principles or capitalism. Harry Tosdale, in the *Harvard Business Review* (Tosdale, 1939), while expressing suspicion over the anti-business sentiment of the growing consumer movement, conceded that one of the main sources for dissatisfaction was the temporary failure of capitalism, in particular, the inability of purchasing power to keep pace with the increasing desire for commodities. Nonetheless, while admitting that some government intervention on behalf of the consumer might be required, he stressed that this should only be minimal, confined to product standards and the regulation of unfair business practices, and only in order to ensure an equitable market: “No reasonable person objects to governmental and moral control which will eliminate fraud and misrepresentation from the contacts of sellers with buyers” (Tosdale, 1939: 513).

Similarly, Dameron (1939), in his review of the consumer movement, supported consumer groups in their intention to inform and educate consumers, but warned that certain elements were clearly anti-capitalist and tended to focus on

isolated incidents of false advertising or dishonest business practices in order “to foster fear and suspicion in the minds of consumers” (Dameron, 1939: 271). He was especially critical of “the ‘protest group’” (Dameron, 1939: 271) of writers such as Chase and Schlink, whom he accused of dramatizing consumer weaknesses and thereby sparking the modern consumer movement which he saw as largely misguided and unnecessary. Like many others who defended business against a rising tide of consumer activism, Dameron was supportive of educational programmes that would assist consumers in making wise choices, but he was highly critical of any government intervention in the marketplace on behalf of the consumer. He referred in particular to the platform of the Democratic Party which, in 1936, stated: “We will act to secure to the consumer fair value, honest sales, and decreased spread between the price he pays and the price the producer receives” (quoted in Dameron, 1939: 278). This, he insisted, was not only a radical and unprecedented departure from the traditional role of government, but the Democrats had got it backwards: “inasmuch as consumption depends on industry, the government can best help the consumer by helping business” (Dameron, 1939: 272).

Such fears on the part of business concerning the political intentions of the still somewhat unorganized consumer movement were not groundless. For many consumer advocates, the problems presented by mass consumption were not simply technical but systemic. It was not mass production and its capacity to raise the standard of living that was in question but the economic system in which it operated, a system which, it was argued, led inexorably to unequal distribution and exploitation.

Thomas Swann Harding, in a book on consumer fraud directed at mainstream audiences, *The Popular Practice of Fraud* (Harding, 1936), argued that fraud, by which he meant unfair or misleading practices, was not simply an aberration that could be controlled by regulation. Capitalism had, in fact, institutionalized fraud; it was an inescapable characteristic of an economic system based on profit. Capitalism was also prone to periodic crises which simply exaggerated this natural tendency so that “fraud increases by leaps and bounds as efforts are made to survive the depression” (Harding, 1936: 22). Legislation would thus be insufficient and Harding suggested that a complete change in the orientation of the economic system was required: “It is perfectly possible to conceive of an economic system in which the market would be purified of fraud. But it would inevitably be a system wherein the provision of quality goods and of services for all would be fundamental, rather than the making of a profit on a transaction, as is the case at present” (Harding, 1936: 22).

Christine Fredericks, writing about the role of women in a consumer society (*Selling Mrs. Consumer*, Fredericks, 1929), expressed similar sentiments even before the onset of the Depression. In some ways, she continued the political and economic criticisms of capitalism offered by women’s campaigns of the early twentieth century and, while not as socially radical as her predecessors, Fredericks was nonetheless highly critical of what she saw as the pointless pursuit of technological development for its own sake or for the narrow goal of profit, an economic philosophy that was “dangerous and unsound” (Fredericks, 1929: 4). She expressed lofty aspirations for a consumer society that would transcend traditional economic theories. She saw a great

potential for human advancement in “our new vision of increased consumption and consumer welfare,” and hoped that America’s contribution to civilization would be a consumer society which would foster “the spread of wealth in the form of goods for consumption to all classes, to a degree never known before, and on a principle which is a complete overturn of old hard-and-fast economic principles” (Frederick, 1929: 4).

“Guinea Pigs No More!”

The anti-capitalist position taken by many consumer advocates was a cause of considerable concern in more conservative circles, particularly business, where this was seen as evidence of subversive socialist sentiment or worse. J.B. Matthews was one of the most interesting figures in this debate because of the way in which his politics on consumer issues changed so radically. Matthews had been active on the extreme left in the 1920s and joined Consumers’ Research in the early 1930s, which at that time was seen as a very progressive organization. In 1935 there was an extremely bitter and quite violent strike by employees of Consumers’ Research and a split in the ranks led to the formation of a rival group, Consumers’ Union. Within a few years, Matthews had done a complete about-face and became a virulent opponent not only of the left but of consumer organizations with any connection to leftist politics, particularly Consumers’ Union which, he claimed, had been the result of an attempted communist takeover of Consumers’ Research.

In 1939, he testified before the Dies Committee on Un-American Activities, accusing several consumer groups (such as the League of Women Shoppers, the Milk

Consumers Protective Committee, and particularly Consumers' Union) of communist affiliations. The League of Women Shoppers had been formed in New York in 1935 because of a strike at a large department store in which women customers organized a boycott to support the employees. Under the slogan 'Use Your Buying Power For Justice,' similar leagues formed in other cities and, by the late 1930s, were able to exert significant influence on employers in other disputes. This and other related organizations became a target of Matthews' red-baiting, and he turned his new political views into a career as a professional anti-communist. He was extremely active on the right and, in 1953, was hired by Joseph McCarthy as executive director of an investigative committee for the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Matthews claimed that *Red Channels*, the infamous blacklist, was compiled from his collection of the letterheads of subversive organizations (including many consumer groups). Matthews was, however, too extreme even for McCarthy and, after he wrote an article accusing the Protestant clergy of communist sympathy, he was fired. Matthews finished his years as a key figure in the ultra-right John Birch Society. (3)

Matthews' main contribution to the contemporary discourse on mass consumption and the consumer, *Guinea Pigs No More!* (Matthews, 1936), was, somewhat surprisingly in light of his politics, a critique of both the Left and 'Big Business,' then as now a euphemism for capitalism. He outlined a position that was not merely consumer advocacy but placed the consumer at the centre of political and social organization. Matthews' politics changed radically by the end of the decade,

but his vision of a consumer state in 1936 was in very important ways a crystallization of many of the consumer critiques of capitalism that were gaining currency at that time. He argued that the conflict between producer and consumer should be resolved in favour of the latter, not a particularly radical position, but to this he added that the interests of both capitalists and socialists were fundamentally opposed to such a solution. For Matthews, the consumer trumped both citizen and worker:

The mere statement of this conflict between producers and consumers suggests instantly to all but avaricious financiers and orthodox socialists, trade-unionists, and labor-liberals, that it should be resolved strictly in the interests of consumers. Man has necessities and rights in goods as a consumer which rise above all other claims in goods. (Matthews, 1936: 11)

As in many other of the ‘guinea pig’ books of the period, Matthews provided a long list of examples of the “gymps” or “frauds . . . hazards, disabilities and losses to which he [the consumer] is subjected in the market place” (Matthews, 1936: 77). While claiming that such a list could constitute a manual for salesman, he pointed out that he was not attacking specific businessmen; such tactics were merely the rules of the game (much as Harding had argued in *The Popular Practice of Fraud*). It was not human nature that had to be changed but this game of business that served to victimize the consumer. The interests of consumers and of those who opposed them were not only easily and clearly distinguished but, more importantly, and much more radically, they constituted a new form of class opposition and antagonism that superseded that of labour and capital:

Whatever a predatory business enterprise is *for*, consumers, if well-advised, are *against*, and vice versa. A congressional hearing on food, drug, and cosmetic legislation is simply a legislative front where economic classes, consumers and

anti-consumers, that are in daily conflict, press their respective, and easily to be differentiated interest. (Matthews, 1936: 193)

In some ways, Matthews' philosophy identified with the 'production for use' slogan that was popular in the 1930s, that is, the idea that the forces of production should be used to benefit the masses, producing what they need and not merely what capitalists could make and sell for their own profit. He attacked the idea of a consumer society based merely on the abundance of goods or a wide range of choice, proposing instead more control over production and distribution by the consumer. At the same time, he rejected the socialist notion that a change in the ownership of the means of production was necessarily of benefit to consumers. He anticipated in some ways the Green movement of the latter twentieth century in arguing that chemicals such as pesticides were a product of processes of industrialization and that ownership by the proletariat would not necessarily make a difference since the efficiency in production achieved by such measures would equally benefit workers. Socialists, like the capitalists they opposed, he argued, "are also afflicted with the megalomania of the mass production of giant farms, and giant food factories, and the attendant — although unsuspected to them — mass attack upon the well-being of consumers" (Matthews, 1936: 39).

Similarly, his criticism of the automobile industry, that it was concerned primarily with style and irrelevant innovation as a means of maintaining high turnover, was very much like that of the consumer movement of the post-war years. He suggested that the consumer desire for reasonable price, durability, and safety was of no concern to either the industry or organized labour. This was, he noted, a paradox

because workers were also consumers. However, since they were concerned mainly with their own income or the ownership of the means of production, there was no need for them to question what was produced, how it was produced, or even why it was produced. While many on the left praised the industrial practices of the Soviet Union in meeting the needs of workers, Matthews rejected this vehemently. *Caveat emptor*, he argued, had limited use in capitalism because of the systemic tendency toward exploitation, but in the Soviet Union it was entirely meaningless since citizens had no status as consumers and absolutely no recourse to market mechanisms. The solution to the unequal distribution of the fruits of modern industry was to be found not in minor adjustments to the existing system but in an entirely new relationship between production and the masses. For Matthews and for many others, this meant a consumer society in a strict sense:

At every point in the problem of consumption, whether touching on the question of adequate monetary income or the problem of appropriate quality in goods and services, the state must intervene in order to insure minimum justice. Only a consumers' state can be expected to intervene for such ends. (Matthews, 1936: 219)

The Right to a Fair Market

This was an extremely volatile period during which there were serious threats to the economic and political status quo. Matthews was typical of a range of voices calling for fundamental change, many of which had coalesced into organizations that were gaining considerable popularity and in some cases genuine political power throughout Canada and the United States. These ranged from labour organizations, trade unions, socialists, and communists, to more radical and fringe groups that

engaged in a variety of populist, quasi-socialist, and even fascist politics. Along with many of the consumer critics cited above, many shared a fundamental belief in the failure of the capitalist system to fulfill its promises of abundance and provide the 'Good Life.' Robert S. Lynd, a prominent sociologist and spokesperson for consumer issues, expressed a common and powerful sentiment of the day: "The insistent question today is: What in the world is the economy of a democracy all about if it isn't about enlarging the capacity of the mass of its citizens to live?" (Lynd, 1940: 10).

The extent of the response of the Canadian or American state to the economic and social effects of the Depression and the anti-capitalist sentiment that it fostered is not important to this chapter. What is of interest is the degree to which the practices of government that developed in this period reflected the growing attention given to the consumer as a distinct subject. In the United States, President Roosevelt stated that one of the goals of National Recovery Administration (NRA) was to restore the "vast consuming capacity" (quoted in Campbell, 1940: 27) of the population, and in order to accomplish this, wages were increased, steps were taken to reduce unemployment, and direct control over prices was exercised. In addition, the government formed a Consumer Advisory Bureau, ostensibly to deal with consumer issues. However, as Persia Campbell pointed out in her assessment of the consumer policies of the New Deal (Campbell, 1940), these moves did little to advance a consumer position in the long run. Over the previous decades, she noted, public opinion toward the idea of competition had changed fundamentally and was now focused on the degree of fairness or unfairness of competitive practices rather than the

real purpose of business competition which, she argued, was “the satisfaction of consumer wants” (Campbell, 1940: 18). The actions of the National Recovery Administration (NRA) were in keeping with this sentiment and, consequently, changes in policy were directed toward developing standards of fair competition rather than the interests of citizens as consumers:

We have become producer rather than consumer conscious. We seem in danger even of forgetting that the end of the productive process is the satisfaction of consumer wants. We talk of profit as the motivating force of industry, rather than of consumer demand with profit as a recompense for service. (Campbell, 1940: 23)

Consumer demand, she argued, was no longer the powerful regulating force that it should be because the current tendency toward monopolistic practices, industrial collaboration, and misleading or fraudulent information had thwarted its success. As long as consumers were kept in the dark about products and exploited by fraud, they could not rely on the traditional relationship between quality and price, and the system would not function as it should. While there had been some government intervention in terms of food and drug legislation, and through the investigation of misleading advertising, she argued that consumers did not have sufficient information to allow them to make intelligent choices. Most importantly, Campbell insisted, the solution was not simply legislation supporting fair business practices as had been the strategy of the NRA. While business and labour were powerfully organized, consumers were not. The Consumer Advisory Board of the NRA, while inadequate and doomed to failure, was a step in the right direction and she strongly recommended that a government agency be established to provide information to consumers which

would allow them “to play an intelligent role in the market place” (Campbell, 1940: 265).

The Canadian government took a very similar position to that of New Deal policies in the United States in dealing with the conflict between individuals as consumers and business. In 1934, in response to the Depression, the Canadian government established a Royal Commission whose mandate was “to inquire into, and investigate the causes of the large spread between the prices received for commodities by the producer thereof, and the price paid by the consumers therefor” (Canada-Royal Commission on Price Spreads, 1934: 1). Some contemporary economists (for example, Taylor, 1935) suggested that since there was an election looming, the motivation for this commission was perhaps political. This might explain the highlighting of the consumer in the wording of the mandate, since it was not consumer issues that were of primary concern to the Commission but rather problems of concentration and rigidity in production and the dangers of government intervention in the economy. To cite the consumer so prominently in its mandate was perhaps a deliberate appeal to the growing self-consciousness of individuals as consumers. In any case, the Commission included a substantial section on consumption which reflected many of the concerns raised by the consumer movement, as described above. It noted the decline of a personal relationship between producer and consumer, and claimed that in the new relationship, the latter was at a disadvantage, confused by the enormous range of goods and hampered by a lack of clear and straightforward information. The perennial *caveat emptor* took on new meaning: “The buyer may still

beware, but he no longer knows of what he must beware” (Canada-Royal Commission on Price Spreads, 1934: 234). As evidence presented to the Commission demonstrated, the consumer was also the victim of unfair business practices and thus the Commission concluded: “There would, therefore, seem to be a strong case for taking some action designed to protect the consumer against practices of this kind” (Canada-Royal Commission on Price Spreads, 1934: 235).

At the same time, the Commission was very concerned with the possible effects of intervention in the economy and an entire section was devoted to exploring “The Problem of State Control” (Canada-Royal Commission on Price Spreads, 1934, 248-274). On one level, this was clearly in anticipation of the negative response of industry to the final recommendations (see for example, Curtis, 1935, and Taylor, 1935), but it is also an interesting illustration of the liberal rationality of non-intervention. The Commission argued that the rise of imperfect competition, in which concentration of control distorted market forces, was the root of many current economic and social problems. Since a return to the situation of simple competition under *laissez-faire* was not possible, government intervention in the economy was required: “Under present conditions, then, the question is not intervention or non-intervention but merely the nature and extent of intervention” (Canada-Royal Commission on Price Spreads, 1934: 249). Addressing the multiplicity of radical voices that characterized this period, the Commission carefully summarized the overall strategy that capitalist democracies needed to follow in order to satisfy the demands of the population for material security while at the same time ensuring,

within carefully marked limits, the free reign of the market and, hopefully, the long term survival of capitalism:

We are convinced that certain forms of intervention are likely to be less expensive than the wastes of goods and of life that the collapse of the economic system, even if it still retains recuperative power, periodically occasions. We believe, however, that the loss of political freedom and individual liberty would be too high a price to pay for the autocratically planned economy of state capitalism, fascism, or communism (even if they should achieve their avowed economic goals), and we are confident that it is still within the capacity of Anglo-Saxon nations to work out a system of social control in which freedom can be preserved without economic paralysis and in which, without dictatorship, production can be made less unstable and the distribution of wealth less unequal and less inequitable. (Canada-Royal Commission on Price Spreads, 1934: 249)

This rationality clearly informed the Commission's recommendations for action on behalf of consumers. It noted that since there was no organized consumer movement, it was the responsibility of government "to pay special attention to the interests of the consumer" (Canada-Royal Commission on Price Spreads, 1934: 235). However, it argued that while the government should play a major role in establishing and enforcing product standards and trade practices, the best guarantor of consumer protection lay in the actions of informed consumers in a fair marketplace. Action on the part of private groups was welcomed, in particular where it contributed to consumer education since this would help government "in the dissemination of information and in the policing of trade" (Canada-Royal Commission on Price Spreads, 1934: 235). It suggested that radio and schools be considered as tools in consumer education and described briefly a curriculum very much like that outlined by Harap (see above). It claimed that any action taken to protect consumers would also be of benefit to "the honest and reputable manufacturer and merchant" by

promoting fair competition (Canada-Royal Commission on Price Spreads, 1934: 235).

But it was clearly and very firmly resistant to the idea of regulating trade practices.

The areas in which government could actually play a direct role were those which in fact had already been developing since the late-nineteenth century: standards which controlled adulteration, marking and labelling, weights and measures, and false and misleading advertising. Overall, the Commission advocated a combined effort between government, business, and consumers, but the emphasis was clearly placed on consumers and their responsibility toward themselves; and rather than direct intervention in market processes, other than in the short term during the current crisis, the Commission clearly saw information and education as a strategy through which individuals would intervene on their own behalf:

Unless consumers are prepared to exert a reasonable discrimination in purchasing, nothing short of absolute paternalism can protect them. But they must be informed of the principles of merchandising and the standards of quality of goods they buy. We, therefore, regard consumer education as the most important and effective guarantee against illicit practices in trade. Few of the evils, disclosed in the evidence by which merchants have been able to impose upon their customers could persist in the face of an active, intelligent and organized public opinion. (Canada-Royal Commission on Price Spreads, 1934: 235)

Mass Consumption and Biopolitics

There are two aspects of the consumer discourse of this period that are particularly interesting and require explanation. First, there was a profound lack of response on the part of the state to an increasingly strident, vocal, and occasionally quite radical consumer movement (even if it was still largely unorganized). Demands ranged from the call for the establishment of a government department that dealt

exclusively with consumer concerns to more revolutionary cries for a complete dismantling of capitalism and the foundation of a society based around the consumer as citizen.

Despite these wide criticisms, actions taken by both the Canadian and American governments were minimal. Direct intervention in the economy was extensive and included clear steps to encourage mass consumption, but the latter constituted an attempt to revive economic strength through a restoration of the productive output of industry and was therefore derived from an understanding of mass consumption as the necessary, but not politically important, end result of production. There was some recognition of the importance of growing consumer consciousness insofar as the language of the state at least to some extent spoke to the desire for greater consumer information; but, significantly, the education of citizens in issues of consumption was not considered to be an affair of government. In fact, the acknowledgement of the need for consumer education was a manifestation of the tactic of non-intervention: consumers were citizens who needed to be informed so that they might be involved in their own protection and thereby participate in maintaining fairness in the marketplace.

The second point that needs explanation is that the rationality which allowed the state virtually to ignore the nascent consumer movement was very similar in tone and in content to that of the Canadian state in the 1960s. The latter situation will be discussed in more detail below but, briefly, in both cases there was a recognition that information and education were of central importance, allowing citizens to act in their

own best interest. The state would thereby be relieved of the need to intervene in the marketplace on their behalf and could avoid the dangers of interfering with the natural functions of the free enterprise economy. Also, in both cases, there were similar social forces in conflict, that is, there was pressure on the state from the consumer movement to act on their behalf and equal pressure from a business community to resist such action, which they felt would stifle economic freedom and therefore constrain liberty itself. In the 1930s, practices of governance on the part of the state with regard to the consumer changed very little; in the 1960s, however, the Canadian government established the Bureau of Consumer and Corporate Affairs and by the end of the next decade was extremely involved in the governance of consumers and consumer issues.

Given the remarkable similarity of circumstances and overall rationality, what explains the equally remarkable difference in response? It could be argued that the consumer movement was simply more powerful by the 1960s and thus had a greater impact on government policy. However, as noted above, the voices that were raised on behalf of consumers and against capitalism during the Depression were not trivial and were, in many cases, much more strident and radical than in the 1960s. While somewhat less organized as a movement, concerns about consumer products were widespread in popular culture during the Depression.

I suggest that the answer lies in the changing relationship between the governors and the governed, in this case, between the modern liberal state and consumers. It is a mistake to think of the different elements and their relationships in the history outlined thus far as constants: producers produce, consumers consume, and

the state intervenes either to protect consumers or maintain capitalism, or a hegemonic combination of both. As I argued earlier, concerns about mass produced goods in the early-twentieth century were substantially different than those of later periods and have to be understood in the context of the ongoing process of urbanization. The consumer of 1900 was not a distinct subject from the standpoint of the state but part of a larger population whose needs in terms of sustenance and health were the object of the practices of governance that regulated and controlled the quality of food, water, and drugs. The consumer of only a few decades later was much different; in fact, it was during this period in which choice became problematized that we can first begin to speak of an actual consuming subject, that is to say, a subject with a consciousness of itself as a consumer.

As I argued in Chapter Two, from the standpoint of the state, the consumer as a distinct subject simply did not exist until the post-war years when it began to take shape within a scientific discourse that saw its actions and attitudes as crucial to economic forecasting and planning. This led to practices of government on the part of the state that were increasingly attentive to the role of mass consumption in a rising standard of living and its importance to biopolitics. The state began to recognize that there was a powerful reciprocal relationship between mass consumption, the well-being of its citizens, and overall national economic well-being. That is to say, the maintenance of mass consumption by the capitalist state was not merely about delivering the goods, even though the success of Western capitalism in this regard was a powerful tool in Cold War rhetoric. Consumer goods were not simply to keep

people happy; in fact, according to the scientific measurement of consumer attitudes, people had to be happy in the first place in order for them to consume and thus contribute to overall prosperity. In light of the recognition of the economic importance of the individual consumer, the task that government set for itself was not merely to manage the new economy of mass consumption for the happiness and well-being of the population, but to manage the economy *via* the population *and vice versa*. Thus, the demands voiced by the growing consumer movement for a federal agency to act on their behalf were answered not merely because of their intensity but because the state understood mass consumption in this new context. The decisive factor was a fundamental change in the conception of the governed by the governors, that is, the emergence of a subject whose personal attitude and role in mass consumption was of central importance to the state in the management of an urbanized population and a modern economy.

Post-War Contentment and Resentment

The post-war economic boom brought about the growth of a broad middle class based not only on relatively high and increasing levels of disposable income but also on greater material and social security. The ethos of middle class life emanated from the family home as the site of consumption of major durables from white goods to automobiles, all of which were seen to enhance the degree of personal and household autonomy. There were also completely new categories of consumption involving new types of choice-goods, many of which required complementary or

continuous consumption. For example, hobbies such as woodworking or hi-fi equipment (see Keightly, 1996), which became an important form of male leisure in the 1950s, often involved assemblages of related goods and continual replenishment or replacement. In general, there was more leisure time and greater levels of consumption as well as completely new forms of both.

The continuing problematization of choice led to responses that were increasingly extensive, complex, and sophisticated. As was the case in the pre-war years, virtually every aspect of daily life that involved money purchase was a possible area of concern requiring scrutiny and information. As the range of consumer goods and services expanded, so did the range of competing sources of information; and, as the amount of requisite consumer knowledge increased, there was a proliferation of experts whose role was to assist individuals in negotiating their way through this information. Along with consumer exposés of potential danger or fraud, there was a substantial increase in 'best buy' information, for example, product comparisons or value shopping guides, as well as consumer magazines and organizations that disseminated such information. In addition, as consumer goods became increasingly important as an indicator of cultural capital, sources of information that established criteria for what might be called 'erudite buy' became more common. For example, glossy magazines such as *Playboy*, directed mainly at middle and upper middle class males, began to guide their readers in the selection of goods, such as clothing, food, wine, music, and hi fi equipment. Consumption always had class connotations, but

linkages between certain practices of consumption and cultural sophistication became more widespread.

Exposés of consumer products and false advertising continued to arouse public sentiment and a new avenue of investigation opened up, exemplified by Vance Packard's *Hidden Persuaders* (Packard, 1957). This highly influential book was the best-selling work of non-fiction in the United States for six weeks after its initial publication and it remained in print for decades. By 1970, it had gone through more than 40 printings and the phrase "hidden persuaders" entered the vernacular as a generic description of manipulation in advertising. As with *Your Money's Worth* three decades earlier, Packard's exposé both expressed and shaped critical and negative public sentiment toward the consumer industry. Before Packard, campaigns against misleading advertising had been concerned mainly with fraudulent claims and called for laws requiring such claims be factually supported. Packard instead focused on new tactics of manipulation which, he argued, attempted to influence consumers at a deep psychological level. The main target of his exposé was Ernst Dichter and his theories of motivation (see Dichter, 1960), which Packard and his supporters saw as an insidious threat to personal freedom. This position was very similar in kind to the attacks on fraud since the attempt to influence individuals through subconscious association in advertising would deprive them of the facts and thus interfere with their ability to make conscious and wise choices. However, what made Packard's exposé alarming to the general public was the idea that not only was information withheld but

that other information was planted in the mind without consent by large and impenetrable organizations with their own agenda.

Similar popular exposés, such as *Subliminal Seduction* (Key, 1973), took Packard's thesis further and argued that advertisers embedded words in images in order to arouse the viewer sexually, which would make the product more desirable. Key's claim that the word 'sex' could be found in the ice cube in an ad for Gilbey's Gin is now legendary. Equally famous was the claim made by advertiser James Vicary who, in 1957, said that he had influenced movie patrons by embedding messages of only thousandths of a second in duration into films. He stated that phrases such as 'eat popcorn' or 'drink Coca-Cola' had resulted in higher sales. Despite the fact that there was never any reliable demonstration of the efficacy of such techniques and that Vicary later recanted it as a hoax in 1962 in the journal *Advertising Age*, the idea of subliminal messages directed at naïve consumer victims became urban legend.

The demand for information, expertise, and mediation in such a highly 'consumerized' culture (that is, one in which individuals had a new and acute awareness of their status and power as consumers) gave considerable importance to organizations which addressed issues of mass consumption. The Consumers' Association of Canada (CAC), for example, founded in 1947, was involved in the dissemination of information about various consumer products, but it was also extremely politically active in a variety of areas and lobbied the federal government on key issues. It was initially a women's organization (it allowed men to join in 1961)

and, since the domestic sphere was still considered to be the responsibility of women, many of the concerns of the CAC paralleled those of women's groups from the early part of the century. For example, the CAC was interested in food purity, health, and nutrition issues, some of which were recast in the ecological discourse of the 1960s. The role of government in the establishment of health care had been a concern of first-wave feminism and the CAC continued this by lobbying for universal health care. But it was also very much involved in many other consumer issues such as problems of credit, product safety, and price control. By the early 1960s, the CAC was involved in product testing and regularly published the results in a magazine (*Canadian Consumer*) which was distributed to a growing membership. Most importantly, the CAC saw itself, as did most other consumer advocacy groups of the period, as representing the voice of consumers in a struggle between the public, government, and industry. In 1960, it began to campaign for the establishment of a government department that would intervene on behalf of a consumer interest. Indeed, in 1968, following the formation of the federal Bureau of Consumer and Corporate Affairs, the logo adapted by the CAC (a stylized human figure holding a pair of scales) was intended to express the balance between these forces that would be necessary in order for consumer society to be of benefit to all.

Consumer issues became increasingly politicized in the early 1960s and this brought greater pressure for the Canadian (and American) government to take action. Two of the most important and interesting examples of this development were a product of the growing importance of the automobile and the rise of supermarkets.

With the rapid expansion of the population into the suburbs, the automobile had become the single most important consumer durable, both for consumers and for industry. While the automobile was not an essential in the sense of a life-good, neither was it a luxury for most people in the Canadian and American context in which daily commuting had become a necessary reality. In the 1950s and even into the 1960s, the idea of a 'Sunday drive' (that is, a leisurely outing with no particular destination in mind) was still a common family practice but declined as automobiles became a standard household requirement.

The automobile rapidly became one of the main targets of the consumer movement since it brought together a wide range of concerns. The most important of these was safety, as evidenced by the enormous success of Ralph Nader's famous assault on the automobile industry, *Unsafe at Any Speed* (Nader, 1965). The Nader campaign spawned many imitators including the Automobile Protection Agency in Montreal which, by the early 1970s, was lobbying the federal government on a variety of consumer issues, not only automobiles. 'Naderism' became the popular term for widespread and growing critical consumer consciousness directed not only at the automobile industry but consumer products in general. The pilot programme for CBC's consumer program *Marketplace* in 1972, entitled *Rust in Peace*, was devoted entirely to automobiles and featured an interview with a Nader representative on automobile safety and testing. As the most expensive family acquisition other than the home, the automobile focused attention on quality and value and the idea that consumers were exploited through pointless stylistic innovation which ignored other

more important considerations. Product comparison magazines that featured the automobile became widespread, and those vehicles found lacking due to specific problems, such as rust or unreliability, were often the target of intense organized public campaigns. Finally, automobiles also became a focal point for the ecological movement even before the oil embargo of the 1970s (the first so-called ‘compact cars’ appeared in the 1950s, although they became much more popular in the next decade).

Supermarkets were not a post-war innovation but grew rapidly in that period, eventually becoming the norm for the vast majority of the population in Canada and the United States. Large chains had been the object of social action by women’s groups since the 1930s, such as the demonstrations in support of labour by the League of Women Shoppers and, in the early 1960s, there were sporadic and in some cases very effective boycotts of grocery chains in Canada and the United States by women. A boycott in Ottawa in 1966 started quite modestly but within days had grown to involve approximately 14,000 area housewives. Within a week of the first protest, it had inspired similar boycotts across the country (4). Chain stores and department stores in general had been regarded as one of the prime causes of the decline of the small town Main Street since the late nineteenth century. A political cartoon that appeared in 1898, shortly after the publication of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, depicted the department store as a nest filled with the skulls of small shops that had been bled dry by a vampire bat labelled “Greed” (Lamolinara, 1995: 69). However, the housewife boycotts of the 1960s were not a protest over the disappearance of ‘mom and pop’ grocery stores, and supermarkets were generally well-received. The main organizer of

the 1966 Ottawa boycott, Nadine Wilson, noted in a *MacLean's* article entitled *Why Mrs. Wilson Went Militantly To Market*: "I love going to supermarkets . . . If I can get a babysitter, quite frankly it's two hours' relaxation" (quoted in Campbell, 1966: 1). The main impetus for the boycotts was a general complaint about high prices, but there were other issues, such as quality or misleading labelling, that resonated with the demonstrators.

The rise of the modern supermarket itself was not the object of protest. The symbol of the supermarket simply allowed more general concerns about modern consumption to be gathered and focused. As with the automobile industry, the chains were representative of a perceived increase in personal vulnerability relative to the power of industry or 'big business.' In the case of the automobile industry, this vulnerability was seen to be most evident in the threats to life and limb that were the result of bad design and a disregard for human safety (it makes sense then that the movement began with a campaign against a notoriously unsafe car, the Chevrolet Corvair). In the case of supermarkets, the lack of control over price was an indicator of the degree to which domestic life was inextricably linked to mass consumption. This was understood as an increasing lack of autonomy and a sense that individuals were powerless relative to business. While modern industry brought with it a cornucopia of consumer goods, it was also perceived as monolithic and unresponsive. This suspicion was accompanied by a deeper fear that industry was not only becoming increasingly effective in the subliminal manipulation of desire, but that such manipulation was one of its prime objectives. Nadine Wilson of the Ottawa boycott

warned that, despite the convenience of supermarkets, one had to be wary of the attempts to control the psychology and behaviour of consumers: “I go crazy in a store like that. Women have to realize they are fighting experts when they shop. Everything you don’t need is at eye-level” (quoted in Campbell, 1966: 1).

The Informed Consumer

The desire for greater information as a tool in negotiating the complexities of modern mass consumption society was accompanied by demands for greater government protection. This was not merely a request for more legislation controlling unsafe products or dangerous goods, but for a monitor in the true sense of the word, that is, a mechanism that would not merely regulate and observe but one that would keep order, admonish the recalcitrant (in this case, business) and, most importantly, one to which transgressions could be reported with impunity. Demands for such a consumer bureau had been made since the 1930s but these increased in frequency and intensity in the post-war years. In the United States, pressure from consumer organizations led President Kennedy in 1962 to issue a Consumer Bill of Rights. While this was largely symbolic, it summarized the goals of contemporary consumer activism in four principles: the right to be informed, the right to safety, the right to choose, and the right to be heard (see Cartwright, 1966). Of these four, the desire for information had been a perennial demand both of the consumer movement and of government which, as we have seen, had always argued that complete and accurate information was the key to a fair marketplace. The right to safety had been of

continuing interest to the state since the turn of the century. The right to choose was a Cold War confession of faith in consumer democracy and, again, not entirely new. But the fourth implied an official mechanism through which the individual could complain and be heard.

Consumer groups had attempted to fulfill this role but most complained that they had neither the resources nor the funds to be an effective monitor. Numerous editorials began to appear in the popular press in the early 1960s, voicing the common concern that consumers needed precisely such a watchdog to be “a real champion of the buying public” (Toronto Star, 1966a: 6). Fullerton, in a similar editorial entitled “The little fellow needs a break” (Fullerton, 1966), expressed a current sentiment that the individual consumer was powerless against the monolith of modern industry. He listed a variety of areas in which government needed to intervene to protect consumers and added: “One could go on to document the needs for consumer protection in other areas, but the principle is clear — our society is becoming increasingly complex and impersonal, and the power of the organized and large is growing relatively faster than that of the unorganized and small” (Fullerton, 1966: 19).

As a result of the combination of these kinds of voices and the recognition by the state that the consumer had become a distinct object of governance, the Canadian government established the Bureau of Consumer and Corporate Affairs (CCA) in 1967. For the most part, this department was a merger of others and its mandate was not substantially different from the various departments it brought together under one roof: competition (including the investigation of fraud and unfair business practices),

securities, bankruptcy, patents, legal metrology (weights and measures), and other aspects of the regulation and maintenance of markets. In addition to these duties, the CCA would attempt to co-ordinate the activities of other departments that had an interest in some aspect of the welfare of consumers (for example, product testing at the Food and Drug Directorate). The overall emphasis, however, was clearly on the proper functioning of a free and fair market rather than on any legislation directed at consumer protection *per se*.

In an interview with the *Financial Post* (Baxter, 1967) not long after the establishment of the department, John Turner, its first minister, was insistent that consumer protection was synonymous with a fair market and among his first duties would be to review the various Acts that maintained competition and fairness. One of the reasons for the establishment of the department had been the recommendations of a government inquiry into prices held the previous year which had been driven in part by increasing consumer agitation over food prices (see Canada-Parliament-Special Joint Committee on Credit (Prices), 1967). Nonetheless, Turner was equally adamant that his department would not intervene in any way to regulate price: “This is a free-enterprise competitive economy and if it functions properly it will produce fair prices. Government’s role is to ensure it does function properly to ensure there is competition” (Turner, quoted in Baxter, 1967: 17).

The *Financial Post* further noted that while there was “heavy pressure to do ‘something’ to protect consumers” (Baxter, 1967: 17) it was not clear, other than ensuring market fairness, just what that ‘something’ might be. Turner suggested that

the answer was consumer education; a task which he assured would be one of the most important in the new department. Repeating what had become, since the 1930s, a near theology of the consumer interest, Turner added that government could not actually protect consumers but only provide them with the means of self-protection:

All government can do is ensure that the public has the information on which to base sound decisions. That goes for the housewife buying groceries or the investor buying stocks. They both have the right to know the facts about what they are buying. After that it is up to them. (Turner, quoted in Baxter, 1967: 17)

The government philosophy of information as a means of consumer self-defence was appositely expressed on the cover an early consumer education pamphlet: a caped and rosy-cheeked warrior woman, resembling a combination of Wonder Woman and Xena of 1990s television, with raised sword and a shield on which was the symbol of a scales weighing produce on one side and money on the other (Information Canada, c. 1971).

One of the most important aspects of the underlying rationality of this new interest in consumer issues on the part of the state was an assumption that citizens, as consumers, were experiencing an increasing sense of powerlessness relative to industry and government. Since any form of market intervention other than that directed toward fair competition lay outside of the boundary of liberal governance, the specific technologies devised by the Canadian state with regard to the consumer were in accord with the general strategy, outlined in Chapter Two, of expanding the space within which the individual could exercise freedom and autonomy. The moveable boundary between state and market provision in this case was determined by the

degree to which the liberal subject would become active, not merely in consumption as was the case with the confident consumer, but in the policing of the market itself. Thus, the new department included within its domain not only the responsibility to educate and inform consumers, but also the active monitoring of their dissatisfaction and the provision of an official conduit for their complaints. The education pamphlet mentioned above told consumers that the new era of mass consumption held many benefits for them, but that the government recognized a need “for controls that are beyond the power of the individual to exercise” (Information Canada, c. 1971). The purpose of the Department of Consumer and Corporate Affairs was to fulfill this need by serving as “the eyes and ears of all of us” (Information Canada, c. 1971).

Initially, the attempts to educate the consumer were quite simple, such as informing the public through a simple subscription newsletter about topics covered under existing legislation or about new legislation dealing with hazardous products. However, by the early 1970s, the very plain newsletter had evolved into a much more colourful pamphlet entitled *Consumer Contact* that covered not only issues that were of obvious consumer interest, but topics that were only marginally related, if at all. Thus while there continued to be information provided about dangerous products or comparison shopping, there were also many articles on the safety aspects of various activities and events such as Hallowe’en, cycling, or boating. The department explained that it was “interested in the physical, as well as the economic, well-being of all consumers” (*Consumer Contact*, October, 1974).

CCA also became extremely active in a wide variety of other programs, for example: the production and distribution of information kits and pamphlets on a range of topics from safe parenting to shopping; the staging of puppet shows which demonstrated hazardous product symbols to children; sponsoring a travelling 'Consumer Van' which distributed consumer information. It published a regular bulletin entitled *Protect Yourself* which encouraged individuals to be more reflective about themselves and their actions as consumers: "What is the free enterprise system to you?"; "Think about your buying habits"; "What do you think about when making a purchase?" The bulletin occasionally included a 'Consumer Quiz' that described situations in which consumers had to know the law and their rights as consumers. This particular idea was the basis for a weekly television game show sponsored by CCA which involved contestant couples engaged in "fictitious market confrontations" (*Consumer Contact*, May 1973). The goal was for "competing couples to amass points by deciding who is right or wrong in the disputes they act out" (*Consumer Contact*, May 1973).

In these ways and many others, CCA not only sought to inform citizens about protective legislation, which was their primary mandate. It also attempted to instruct them in the practices of consumption at a very broad and inclusive level. In the process, the critical attitude toward consumer goods and services was transformed into a more generalized disposition through which individuals scrutinized increasingly numerous and diverse aspects of their daily activities.

The Consumer Informant

The most significant innovation of the CCA was the establishment of a ‘listening post’ for consumers (*Consumer Contact*, February 1973). Within a few years of its inception, it had set up regional offices across Canada that had on staff what it called “Consumer Consultants” whose job it was “to provide assistance to the consumer on a one-to-one basis” (National Archives of Canada, 1980a: 2). It also instituted a simple national address, Box 99, Ottawa, that served as common point of contact for consumer information and complaints, a move which, as the department noted in retrospect, “was pioneering at the beginning of the consumer era” (National Archives of Canada, 1980a: 1). There were very few organizations in the late 1960s where complaints could be addressed, and the introduction of these government channels was an attempt to convey a sympathetic and responsive attitude on the part of the state to consumers and the difficulties they experienced in negotiating their way through modern mass consumption society. Box 99 and the Consumer Consultants constituted, as Information Canada described it, “somebody to talk to” (Information Canada, c. 1971). The official newsletter of CCA underlined the personal character of its services by reporting the appointment of a new director for its Consumer Services Branch in 1973. The article noted that Box 99 not only listened to consumers but had “a two-way switch” (*Consumer Contact*, February 1973). It published a picture of the new director, Gladys Dunn, and explained that: “Box 99 is a real address. Working behind that symbol on your behalf are people with sympathetic ears and a proven

ability to listen to consumers. Miss Dunn directs the work of the Box 99 staff. She listens to consumers” (*Consumer Contact*, February 1973).

More than simply listening to complaints, however, CCA attempted to provide resolution either in the form of information or actual intervention. The response might be to supply the requester with appropriate detail regarding the legislation covering the problem, if any, or to redirect the inquiry to the proper agency, whether another government department or private organization. It might also involve intervening on behalf of the complainant through action that included, in some rare cases, actual prosecution. The most important aspect of this new process was that consumers were not only supplied with information as a means of self-defence but that, through the ‘listening post’ function, they were encouraged to report their personal experiences and problems and were given the hope that government could act on their personal behalf.

With both of these innovations (the Consumer Consultant and Box 99), there was a recognition that the management of consumer dissatisfaction was crucial to the overall strategy of governance in which mass consumption was a key element of biopolitics. They were also an attempt to nationalize and personalize consumer issues in such a way that the problems of the individual consumer became the problems of the nation. In one sense, this could be seen as a kind of pastoralism in which the care of each of the governed was of interest to the governors (Foucault, 1997c); but the important difference was that, in this case, the sheep, so to speak, had the capacity not only to bleat and be heard, but were asked to participate in the care and management

of the flock by scrutinizing the pasture and reporting problems to the appropriate shepherd.

Although the CCA encouraged consumers to be involved in their own protection as well as using the services of the department to intervene if necessary, the emphasis was clearly on the former. A fundamental policy of the CCA was to direct the complainant to follow every other possible course of action before contacting the department. In all of the public literature in which a complaint procedure was outlined, it was emphasised that the CCA was the last step. The official newsletter of CCA explained: “of the thousands of complaints that come into Box 99 every year (we guarantee answers) the most frustrating letters to handle are those where Box 99 is the first point of complaint” (*Consumer Contact*, May 1972). The newsletter article also noted that direct reporting of problems to the firms involved frequently achieved the best results. Businesses contacted by CCA, they reported, were often surprised that complaints had been made and were eager to help: “Businessmen know the value of keeping customers happy, and those who don’t try don’t last” (*Consumer Contact*, May 1972).

Both Box 99 and the network of regional offices and its Consumer Consultants were victims of their own success. Despite repeated insistence by the CCA that it should be contacted only after other options were exhausted, the department was flooded with complaints and requests for information. Early proponents of the CCA had often referred to it as a potential ‘watchdog’ in Ottawa who guarded the interests of the consumer. But, to extend yet another animal metaphor, the effect of monitoring

through these kinds of programs did less to guard the front gate as it did to ‘release the hounds’ nationwide. As consumers became more vigilant throughout the 1970s, both the volume of complaints and the breadth of situations and topics they covered expanded dramatically. Automobiles and related issues (for example, tires, service, rust) garnered the most complaints, but the department received letters concerning interest rates, eye glasses, magazine subscriptions, organization funding, clothing, service charges, hockey pucks, and many other goods and services not covered by legislation and not within the mandate of the department (see National Archives of Canada, 1978c).

By the mid-1970s, the barrage of complaints and enquiries was recognized as a significant problem and this led to serious policy concerns within the department. Rather than simply informing citizens of their rights and any accompanying legislation, the technologies of governance employed by the CCA had served to rehearse consuming subjects in a variety of vigilant practices through which authority could be exercised. As consumers accepted this mantle of subjectivation, with considerable eagerness it would seem, there was an accompanying inflation in terms of the meaning and content of complaints which came to cover a diverse range of social ills that were neither part of the mandate of the department nor even consumer-related. As an internal CCA study lamented: “A perception has arisen that the Department is responsible for solving any problem” (National Archives of Canada, 1980a: 3).

In order to stem the tide, there was a move to eliminate or at least reduce significantly the volume of complaints handled. An internal memo noted that staff had been directed to avoid mediation for consumers who contacted CCA before using others means. It stated that Consumer Consultants “will give advice as to what the consumer should try to do and at the very end, only if the province will not take it, will attempt mediation” (National Archives of Canada 1978a). This was, effectively, a shift to a policy in which the department would help those who helped themselves. Throughout the late 1970s, in order to reduce the volume of complaints, CCA attempted to educate consumers in the “self-help philosophy” (National Archives of Canada, 1980b: 4) and it began to shift some of the responsibility for complaint handling onto provincial and private organizations (see National Archives of Canada, 1980a). It commissioned a task force in 1980 to determine more efficient means of handling consumer complaints and enquiries, but the final report was not optimistic about the trends. The high volume was not simply the function of a growing population, it found, but, ironically, the result of the success of the department in promoting itself. The report predicted that volume would, in fact, continue to grow “not in direct proportion to population increase, but rather in proportion to public awareness of the department” (National Archives of Canada, 1980a: 22).

The department also contracted a number of private studies to examine alternate methods of handling complaints but, as a report from the London regional office noted, despite attempts to convince consumers that CCA was a court of last resort, they would continue to contact the department concerning “any and all types of

problems —sometimes not even consumer oriented” (National Archives of Canada, 1980a: 4). Eventually, the responsibility for the actual handling of individual complaints was moved to the provincial governments and in 1995, with a much more industrial mandate, Consumer and Corporate Affairs was merged with the ministry of Industry, Science and Technology and became part of Industry Canada.

Archival records on the Department of Consumer and Corporate Affairs during the first dozen years of its existence show a distinct shift from a sense of optimism in dealing with consumer issues at a personalized level to a mood of frustration and resignation in the face of a seemingly endless and growing flood of complaints, not all of which were even relevant. When the department cut back on such staff and expanded its information services in an attempt to shift the focus from mediation to referral, the result was simply fewer staff to respond to increasing complaints. An employee of the Consumer Services Branch who was normally not involved in responding to consumers complained that he had been assigned a consumer file requiring a response (known as a yellow docket). He resisted furiously, complaining that these dockets represented a “yellow peril” and if he accepted this one, it could only lead to more: “If I am ever to receive one of them, someone will decide that I’m an ‘expert,’ and one hundred more will be lurking behind the next partition just waiting to attack” (National Archives of Canada, 1979a). With the increased emphasis on referrals rather than mediation, employees also complained about “the frustration of being a human telephone book” (National Archives of Canada, 1980a: 22). The London regional report mentioned above summed up the near despair of the

consumer complaint staff during this period. While the department attempted to shift responsibility and examined new ways of dealing with complaints, the report noted, with what seemed like complete resignation, that any such studies were purely academic and probably a waste of time: “The mail arrives and the phone rings. Someone must reply” (National Archives of Canada 1980b: 4).

The state was not the only institution groaning under the weight of a vigilant and complaining public. The capacity of industry to respond effectively to its constituency also became a serious problem. In a study commissioned by the CCA in 1979, Dr. Mel S. Moyer of York University pointed out:

Many writers have suggested that the consumers’ faith in the business system is affected to a significant degree by their ability to get redress when the system fails them. If that is so, then managers who work toward more effective complaint-handling systems will be promoting their own organizations and protecting the system in which they operate. (c. 1979b)

In fact, during this period, complaint handling emerged as a discipline in its own right, becoming a major technical concern on the part of many institutions. This was also a period in which social complaints in general became institutionalized in a variety of ways. The experience of the liberal state in Canada and the practices it developed were but one instance of a widespread trend. The ability to exercise personal authority and power not only through traditional liberal democratic means but in ways that required government and industry to be responsive in modes that were personal and personalized was becoming one of the most demanded characteristics of modern citizenship. Other ‘listening posts’ had sprung up, including newspaper columns, magazines, and radio and television programs, all of which solicited and

acted on consumer complaints, exposing ‘rip-offs’ and demanding action from either government or industry or both. There were also frequent calls for the establishment of an arms-length public mediator or ombudsman who would intervene on behalf of citizens in disputes where there was felt to be an obvious imbalance or abuse of power (there are now such services at both the federal and provincial level).

Being Vigilant

In this chapter, I have argued that the history of the relationship between producer and consumer in the era of mass consumption cannot simply be reduced to either the increasing power of consumers (the result of greater government protection) or their increasing powerlessness (in the face of more sophisticated and invasive forms of exploitation and manipulation). The idea of *caveat emptor*, while expressive of what is no doubt a permanent state of affairs, has also served as a focal point for a wide range of quite diverse social concerns: the problems of urbanization in the early twentieth century; the problems of social adjustment to a greater reliance on mass production; the instability of capitalism and the resultant rise of a radical politics based on an association between mass consumption and democracy; and the perceived threats to personal autonomy and freedom by monolithic institutions in the post-war years. The vigilant consumer was thus neither simply the realization of grass-roots activism nor the co-opting of such activism into the goals of capitalism, but the emergence of a form of consuming subject for whom critical observance and vigilance represented both the exercise of personal autonomy and a form of citizenship.

The attempt to engage citizens at a personal level by addressing them as vigilant consumers, active in the policing of the marketplace, had quite unexpected and, depending on point of view, even disastrous results. While governing does assume the freedom of the governed to act, managing consumers by expanding the range of their freedom to include the capacity and power to monitor created further problems of management for the state which were solved only partially through the shifting of responsibility to other jurisdictions. As consuming subjects within this discourse of heightened observance, they took on the conditions and terms of their subjectivation and responded accordingly, conducting themselves as vigilant consumers and using this subjectivity as a lens through which to scrutinize and examine virtually all aspects of daily life, including increasingly remote and unrelated activities and interests.

One of the most interesting examples of the degree to which the vigilant consumer became a broadly disseminated discourse was a CBC television drama, *McQueen*. While it lasted only one season (1969-1970), it was illustrative of a number of characteristics of the discourse of vigilance. The main character of the series, McQueen, is a newspaperman whose column, *The Actioneer*, is ostensibly a consumer watchdog. However, the range of problems encountered by McQueen each week was extremely diverse and most of these were not consumer-related. He investigates and exposes typical cases of consumer fraud such as baldness cures, misleading contracts, phoney talent agencies, and so on. But he also attempts to help a young American draft dodger, who has proven himself as a loyal civil servant, to

remain in Canada; he intervenes on behalf of high school students who are victims of an oppressive dress code; he goes undercover to fight for tenants rights; and he assists in the plight of the exploited elderly. In several episodes, he is forced to deal with the many layers of complex and impersonal bureaucracies which at best try patience and at worst are filled with corruption. In one case, a drunk driver loses control of his car which subsequently lands upside down on the lawn of a suburban couple. They are unable to get it removed because they are not the legal owners and the entire episode is devoted to the maze of municipal bureaucracy through which McQueen must negotiate on their behalf. While many of the shows were deliberately humorous (the episode just mentioned was entitled *There's a Car Upside Down on my Lawn*), there is nonetheless a generally serious undertone. The McQueen persona is much closer to that of the classic private detective of American hardboiled fiction (such as Dashiell Hammet or Raymond Chandler) than to a consumer advocate. He has an office staff of attractive young women, he is a master of undercover work (including disguise), and he is very much the urban sophisticate. Also, the overall look and feel of the program frequently articulates a *film noir* sensibility: the city at night, dark streets, seedy nightclubs, questionable characters.

Viewing these programs in the Public Archives more than thirty years after their production was at first a disconcerting experience because, on the surface, this seems an odd collection of themes and an unusual form of presentation for a program based on consumer advocacy. The first question that sprang to mind was: what allowed this program to make sense in the first place? What was the specific

discursive framework in which these stories could be created and have resonance? It seems to me that what gathered these programs together and rendered them more or less coherent was the theme of the powerless underdog and the unresponsiveness of institutions to their constituency. The discourse of the antagonism between consumer and producer is but one manifestation of this discourse and thus, in one week, McQueen could expose the practice of misleading contracts at a local furniture store and the next week attempt to find work for a lonely senior citizen, investigating conditions for the elderly in the process. McQueen acted on behalf of the underdog and was thus the vigilant consumer *par excellence*, investigating, probing, exposing, and reporting on all that entered his domain. It is unlikely that such a program would make sense now. While the vigilant consumer remains as a more or less distinct form of consuming subject, this particular discourse has become more dispersed and generalized throughout modern consumer societies and constitutes one of the modes through which the consuming subject responds to issues of mass consumption.

Endnotes (Chapter Four)

1. 'Newsboy' was the term given to male youth of the urban underclass who sold newspapers on street corners in order to supplement family income. 'Friendless women' were those, both young and old, who did not have family or community support. The younger were often unwed mothers while the older were widows with no family and no income. There is a burial plot in the 'poor section' (that is to say, at the back where no individual headstones are allowed) of Beechwood Cemetery in Ottawa, dating from the early twentieth century, that was sponsored by The Home for Friendless Women, an organization affiliated with the National Council of Women of Canada. Nearby is the plot of another affiliated group, the Protestant Orphans Home. For a complete list of the organizations connected to the Council and its members in the late nineteenth century, see National Council of Women of Canada (1894).
2. The Consumers' Research Archive at Rutgers University maintains a website of very useful information on this organization, including a chronology of events and biographies of all the principle members (see web resources in bibliography). See also Sorenson (1941) for a contemporary perspective on the early years of Consumers' Research.
3. Sorenson describes in detail Matthews' first report to the Dies Committee and the reaction to it (Sorenson, 1941: 131-136). See Schrecker (1994) for an account of Matthews' later affiliation with McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee.
4. See, for example, *Ottawa Citizen* articles entitled "Buyers gird for boycott" (*Ottawa Citizen*, 1966a: 1), "Shoppers gather for war" (*Ottawa Citizen*, 1966b: 21), "Boycott response 'terrific'" (*Ottawa Citizen*, 1966c: 1), "Store boycott victory claimed by both sides" (*Ottawa Citizen*, 1966d: 1). See also *Toronto Star* articles entitled "It's Loblaw's, Safeway's turn to talk today" (*Toronto Star*, 1966b: 1), "Luck? It's a crime" (*Toronto Star*, 1966c: 1), "Wives to fight price with Friday 'shop-in'" (*Toronto Star*, 1966d: 1).

Chapter Five: The Agonistic Space of Contemporary Consumer Culture

From the outset, the purpose of this dissertation was not to construct a general theory of the subject in consumer societies. The intent was to step back from some of the more common assumptions that circulate in both the academic literature and in the popular imagination. I sought to avoid the perennial temptation to reduce subjects in modern consumer societies to simply a product of the logic and telos of capitalism. I wanted to disrupt the theory that the driving force of consumer culture is the struggle between producer and consumer in their respective roles as exploiter and exploited or manipulator and resistant subject. My main objective was to demonstrate that there is no single consuming subject and that the various responses to the continuous and dramatic rise in material wealth and standard of living over the last century were diverse, discontinuous, and contradictory.

The main problem with consumer culture conceived primarily as a strategy of manipulation is that the range of possible critical interventions is thereby constrained: subjects are either unconscious of their manipulation, or they struggle against it. Implicit is the assumption of a deeper reality underneath a surface appearance which critical analysis seeks to reveal in order to expose what consumer culture ‘really is.’

Each of the studies presented in this dissertation can stand on its own as an exploration of a particular discourse of mass consumption. Each represents a specific problematization of the relationship between the subject and the material wealth of a consumer culture. Each of these problematizations has its own conditions of emergence, mode of governance, type of subject, its own time and place and historical

development. There can be interesting points of contact and exchanges among these quite different discursive spaces but there are no necessary connections or causal links. The range of subjectivities that I have presented certainly does not exhaust the possibilities found in contemporary consumer culture. The common thread linking these three studies is that they constitute a collective reflection on the tension over the discursive connection made in Western society between material wealth, personal autonomy, and democracy.

Most of the conclusions to be drawn from this research are, therefore, found in each chapter and relate to the specificity of locale, conjuncture, and historical trajectory. There are, however, some general issues that require further discussion. In this chapter, I will first briefly examine two aspects of this research which have theoretical bearing on subjectivity and discourse: the relationship between the concrete circumstances out of which discourse emerges and the more generalized and diffuse forms in which it can circulate; and the ways in which an individual can simultaneously inhabit multiple and even contradictory subjectivities of consumption. I will then make some general statements about the historical development of consumer culture in the twentieth century. Finally, I will comment on the agonistic relationship that exists between these different discourses and the way in which this tension has been played out in different conjunctures. I will also speculate about the significance of this relationship for the future development of consumer culture in Canada and the United States.

Discourses as Diffuse

Discourses are not simply replaced but tend to couple with others producing new hybrids (Hunt, 1995). As an illustration of this process, I argued that the moralization of luxury found a new sphere of deployment in the latter half of the twentieth century, combining with the resilience of antimodernity and new quasi-religious movements to produce a moralizing discourse whose target was ‘consumerism.’ Also, a discourse may simply disappear when its particular truth-value can no longer be sustained or becomes incompatible with other, ascending values. However, one of the purposes of my research was to investigate yet another possibility, that is, the way in which discourse seems to circulate as a vague, disconnected disposition, not solidly grounded in a specific set of rules or practices. Foucault notes that the rules of conduct prescribed by a particular discourse need not be explicit but can be conveyed in “a very diffuse manner” (Foucault, 1990b: 25), forming “a complex interplay of elements that counterbalance and correct one another, and cancel each other out on certain points, thus providing for compromises and loopholes” (Foucault, 1990b: 25).

My analysis of the ascetic consumer is very specific in terms of the rules and statements of the discourse, the type of subject produced, and the practices of consumption generated. However, the underlying rationality on which the moral condemnation of ‘consumerism’ is based has become much more widespread and generalized, a common vernacular response to what is perceived as consumer excess. It can be invoked in a wide variety of situations, even if not strictly practised by those

who invoke it, and even if not realized in specific material practices. The discourse of ascetic consumption thus has both a very concrete manifestation in contemporary consumer culture as well as a more general meaning. It can be 'between couplings,' so to speak, neither in decline nor ascendant, but dormant, lingering as a disposition that can become active when required and dropped just as easily when no longer useful. It can be voiced and make sense without serious or long-term commitment to its implications on the part of the speaker.

The following examples illustrate this point. First, a common response of many friends and colleagues, upon hearing that the general topic of my dissertation was consumer culture, was the assumption that I would be mounting a moral or ethical critique of the excesses of consumer society and the social problems that were the result. These statements made sense to those who voiced them despite the fact that most of the speakers were active and willing participants in consumer culture (more confident or vigilant than ascetic). This reaction is not a serious criticism of consumerism and does not lead most individuals into practices that moralize their own consumption, although they may be more willing to moralize the consumption of others. It is based on a very diffuse and lingering reaction to luxury that can be deployed at certain moments as a means of distinction through a demonstration of virtuous restraint. Second, among the current concerns with regard to the terrorist attacks against the West is the material wealth of consumer societies, which is seen as an embarrassment of riches that produces resentment in poor nations. Such an opinion was expressed by Prime Minister Chrétien in a controversial CBC television

interview, first aired in September 2002. There was much criticism of his statements but there was also widespread agreement. Without entering this debate, it is clear that the suspicion of abundance (usually defined in terms of consumer goods), while largely dormant in Western culture, can become very powerfully and politically active under the right circumstances.

In researching each of the categories of consuming subject in this dissertation, my approach was top-down. That is to say, I started not from a specific example of the particular discourse but from observations of these vague generalities. In each case, the discourse in question was very free-floating and disconnected, cropping up in many different situations, appearing as different attitudes, or related to different experiences. I was interested in exploring the relationship between discourse at this very diffuse level and its more concrete manifestations. In the case of consumer confidence, for example, I was intrigued by the way in which that term seemed to operate at a very broad and general level, emanating 'from the top'; but it also had profound meaning in terms of practices and attitudes 'from the bottom,' at an individual level. In one sense, consumer confidence is simply a statistical measure of the relation between individual attitude and market performance. At the same time, however, the reporting of this index informs individuals on a regular basis not only of their status as consumers but of the social, economic, political, and more recently, patriotic significance of this status.

The actual conduct of a confident consumer, however, is not constrained by a specific set of practices that can be enumerated like a checklist. To be sure, the

imperative to consume is quite clear, but the discourse links together in a much more subtle and complex way, personal conduct, mass consumption, standard of living, and liberal democracy. In this sense, the discourse of the confident consumer resembles, for example, that of neo-liberalism. That is to say, there are very few, if any, specific acts that could be associated with a subject of neo-liberal discourse. Rather, neo-liberalism delineates a way of thinking that can be brought to bear on a wide variety of objects not necessarily connected in any logical way. Most importantly, the effects of such discourses are not limited to the sphere in which they first appear; the confident consumer is not confined merely to the realm of consumption any more than the subject of neo-liberalism is restricted only to the critique of the welfare state. If discourse can be described as a set of rules or statements that define a particular truth-value, producing subjects that conduct themselves within its domain, then the confident consumer conducts itself in terms of the parameters of this discourse not only in relation to mass consumption, but brings this subjectivity to bear on other domains as well.

A discourse thus has specificity in terms of its effects in the particular domain in which it is first realized but is not limited to that domain. It produces subjects who bring their subjectivity to new spaces and contexts, attaching and recontextualizing elements of the discourse in new applications, and thereby transforming both the discourse and the space in which it is deployed. However, in the process, discourse can also become diffuse, dilute, loosely defined, mobile, or even dormant, acting through a more general attitude rather than a specific set of practices, or defined by a

specific and limited set of objects. The process is not one in which a generalized discourse without concrete origins produces different types of subjects; rather, subjectivities which have their origins in specific concrete circumstances become generalized and provide the basis and opportunity for further concretizations.

The Multiplicity of the Subject

The process just described, in which subjectivity becomes generalized, thereby creating opportunities for subsequent concretizations, is very much related to my second point, that of the multiplicity of individual subjectivities. It is not only possible but inevitable that any individual will be the subject of different discourses. As Dean argues, “there is no single mode of subjectivation corresponding to an age, an epoch, an institution or even a single individual” (Dean, 1996: 224). Each of us is subject to endless practices of governance. We can be citizens, parents, men, heterosexuals, and so on; but it is equally important to take into consideration that subjects can take on the conditions of their own subjectivation more or less completely and with varying degrees of commitment and consistency. The degree to which they accept these conditions may serve to exclude other possibilities. What I have described in this dissertation are subjectivities that can be inhabited in varying degrees and that circulate in a more general way, allowing them to be used and discarded more easily, much like consumer goods themselves. There are also degrees of compatibility between different types of subjectivity. It is not likely, for example, that a firmly committed ascetic consumer would share much common ground with the confident

consumer. Indeed, the differences between these two views of consumer society are a source of tremendous friction in the debates over the globalization of trade. But, as I suggested above, both of these discourses can circulate in very diffuse and general ways and thus be more readily taken up and put down by the same individual without apparent contradiction.

It might be useful, therefore, to distinguish between subjectivities that express what are perceived as relatively permanent characteristics of the individual and those subjectivities which are inhabitable in varying degrees, for varying periods of time, and for different reasons. The more a subject takes on or 'lives inside' a particular subjectivity, or the more closely it is defined in relation to a value of truth, the more likely it is to be exclusive and prohibitive of other possibilities. Sexual identity is an example of a more 'monopolistic' type of subjectivity which not only expresses what is perceived to be the essence of the self, but also clearly and firmly delineates a space whose boundaries are difficult to transgress.

On the other hand, the consuming subjects that I have discussed in this dissertation represent types of subjectivity that can be either narrowly or broadly defined. They can be distinct positions representing distinct groups of individuals whose worldview, modes of conduct, and practices come into sharp conflict with each other. At the same time, they can collectively represent a set of strategies with which subjects can negotiate the complexities and contradictions of a modern consumer society. One can be at one moment a critical consumer, actively involved in campaigns for or against different products or industry practices. In the same moment,

one can be engaged as an ascetic consumer in the moral critique of excess in other spheres of consumer culture. Without experiencing any dissonance, one can also understand personal autonomy as inextricably linked to freedom of choice, as exemplified by the abundance of consumer goods, and a fundamental principle of Western liberal democracy.

General Historical Observations

Mass consumption existed well before the modern era, but the consumer as a subject in its various forms was the result of two significant developments in the twentieth century: the problematization of choice; and the increasing significance of mass consumption to the liberal state. The first of these, the concern with choice, grew in relation to the degree to which mass-produced goods became a normal part of everyday life. The first broad markets for consumer goods were not the product of the Industrial Revolution but of global trade and colonialism. Goods such as cotton and silk fabrics, coffee, sugar, chocolate, and tea circulated widely in Europe as early as the seventeenth century. However, it was not until industrialization and urbanization that mass-produced consumer goods began to occupy a greater role in daily life in Western culture, transforming the role and routine of the household and its relation to consumption. Needs, wants, desires, and interests were increasingly satisfied through consumer goods and, by the middle of the twentieth century, domestic production had been almost completely eclipsed by money purchase. There had been popular protests over food and other essential goods since the early modern era, but the concern over

the control of life goods in the early twentieth century was the result of the industrialization of domestic production and the problems presented by a rapidly urbanizing population. This period was an important moment of transition between the industrial age of the nineteenth century and modern consumer society.

These new levels of consumption also gave rise to new needs, wants, and interests, and mass consumption continually transformed the conditions of its own existence. The creation of new life circumstances and contexts for consumption, through the proliferation of consumer goods and the increasing reliance on money purchase, resulted in an unprecedented degree of personal choice. While consumer goods were widely regarded as a deliverance from dearth and a release from drudgery, the expansion of personal autonomy and freedom through choice also had profound implications. Choice became the basis for a process of continual problematization which resulted in the rapid proliferation of new forms of knowledge and understanding, new experts and new forms of expertise, and new modes of conduct and behaviour. Before this period, it is possible to refer to individuals involved in exchange in the market as 'consumers,' but it is only with the problematization of choice in the first half of the twentieth century that the consumer as a social subject or, more accurately, as a range of distinct subjectivities forming around mass consumption, began to take shape.

The second development of significance in the twentieth century was the rise of practices directed toward the governance of mass consumption and consumers on the part of the liberal state in both Canada and the United States. Since the late-

nineteenth century, state governance of mass consumption has had two broad and related objectives: securing and maintaining the reliability and integrity of markets in order to promote trade and commerce; and ensuring the health and well-being of the population. The rapid industrialization and urbanization of the late-nineteenth century brought these economic and biopolitical concerns together, and early state regulation of the purity and safety of life goods was inseparable from market regulation. The two areas continued to merge and, by the 1950s, the biopolitical objectives of the liberal state had expanded to include an intense interest in the role of mass consumption in political strategies which sought long-term economic growth, stability, and overall social well-being. The consumer became an object of statistical analyses which informed the economic planning of both the liberal state and capitalism. Consumers were not only regarded as a significant factor in economics and politics but came to regard themselves as efficacious in the overall state of society through the exercise of choice in the marketplace.

As consumer goods became a measure of standard of living and overall social contentment, choice in the marketplace became increasingly associated with personal autonomy, political freedom, and Western liberal democracy in general. As a result, the consumer became the subject of a wide range of governmental practices directed toward the management of populations through mass consumption and *vice versa*. That is to say, the ability of industrial capitalism to provide consumer goods became a measure of political success; and the capitalist economy became increasingly oriented around mass consumption and thus more dependent on the attitudes of consumers. At

the same time, however, there has been a continual tension between two distinct roles the state plays in the governance of mass consumption. On the one hand, the state attempts to guarantee the security of individuals in mass markets, protecting them from physical harm, psychological manipulation, and exploitation; on the other, at the core of liberalism is a tendency away from direct intervention in markets. As a result, state practices of governance with regard to mass consumption have tended to emphasise the responsibility of individuals in the exercise of their own freedom and autonomy, and the notion of choice has become progressively foregrounded in strategies of liberal governance.

Consumer Discourse in Tension and Conflict

It is important to understand that the discourses of mass consumption described in this dissertation were parallel developments. That is to say, one was not the result of another; they do not follow a historical sequence. Each of these discourses grew out of unique historical precedents and took on a new form in the context of post-war abundance which formed the common ground for these different responses. It might be tempting, for example, to characterize the rise of a counter-culture in the 1960s as, at least in part, a reaction to the embrace of consumerism in the previous decade and, indeed, this is a commonplace assumption in received wisdom regarding the post-war years: the essentially conservative belief that the 'Good Life' could be defined in terms of GNP and standard of living was strongly rejected in a more liberal and socially-conscious period. The immediate post-war period was most definitely one of

rapid industrial growth during which the middle class expanded and enjoyed a greater level of material comfort. I have argued, however, that the conditions which produced the discourse of the confident consumer were the same that produced its opposite or at least, its strongest critic, the ascetic consumer. The success of industrial capitalism in raising the material standard of living also resulted in an inflation in the capacity of goods to act as markers of success. There was a shift in a fraction of the middle class toward the cultivation of the self through activities that emphasised personal growth.

Quite early on, market analysts became interested in this phenomenon and the impact that this might have on the consumer industry. The Stanford Research Institute (SRI), a private firm which supplies market intelligence to industrial clients, predicted in a study published in 1960 (Stanford Research Institute, 1960) that consumer markets would be radically changed by this shift. It argued that there was a natural predisposition for ‘self-betterment’ and that this had been satisfied in the United States in the post-war years through the acquisition of major consumer durables and other consumer goods that previously had been out of the reach of the majority of citizens, but which were now accessible because of greater disposable income. It noted that the consequences of rising incomes in the post-war years were diverse: “specialty markets became mass markets; instalment credit was eagerly seized as a means of achieving the ‘Good Life’; the swing to the suburbs maintained its pace; ‘luxury’ items became ‘necessities’; people who could afford it lived surrounded by the physical symbols of success” (Stanford Research Institute, 1960: 3). This would continue, the report stated, and the majority of the population would be concerned with “materialism and

conformity” (Stanford Research Institute, 1960: 4) which would be the basis for the future growth of major consumer markets. However, it predicted, most presciently, the rise of another social group for whom personal improvement and social status was no longer associated with material gain:

The shape of the consumer markets of the future, although not their size, will be influenced by impending change in how self-betterment is viewed. Of particular significance during the 1960s is the probable emergence of a large group of prosperous, pace-setting families who will reject materialism as their way of expressing self-betterment and replace it with individualistic ‘self-realization.’ This group may well shun efforts to emulate the very wealthy simply because status attainment through consumption will be so easy as to be pointless. Rather, this group is likely to turn to less conspicuous forms of consumption — perhaps to intellectual activities, to experimentation and a variety of experience, to work in the public interest, and to the pursuit of excellence in general. This change should eventually establish a new set of goals for larger social groups striving to move upwards. (Stanford Research Institute, 1960: 4)

Although not directly credited in this study, one of the major contributors was Arnold Mitchell, who later became famous for his development of a marketing strategy known as VALS (Values and Lifestyles). Indeed, Mitchell made the concept of lifestyle a fundamental principle of modern marketing and advertising (see Stanford Research Institute, 1969, 1974; Mitchell, 1983). Most significantly, for my research, Mitchell co-authored with Duane Elgin a report for SRI on the concept of the pursuit of a materially simple lifestyle as the basis for an emerging and important consumer market (Stanford Research Institute, 1976). Elgin was later the founder of the Voluntary Simplicity movement (discussed in Chapter Three), but this report was not intended as a recommendation for personal restraint in consumption. On the contrary, it was a recognition that such values constituted an emerging social trend that

marketers needed to address. It provided a detailed analysis of the impact on the consumer industry and outlined strategies for the design of products and services that would meet these new demands.

The new strategies of 'self-betterment' and distinction did not imply a simple change to non-material pursuits or a necessary rejection of mass consumption. Indeed, mass consumption did not decline during the years in which the counter-culture flourished but continued to increase dramatically. Opposition to consumerism was expressed not through abstention but through active participation in new practices of consumption. Thus one of the manifestations of the critique of consumerism and materialism, a critique which existed before World War II, was a form of distinction that, ironically, was more widespread because there were more opportunities, in terms of consumer goods and practices of consumption, through which this could be expressed. Similarly, the rise of a critical consumer consciousness, of which the vigilant consumer is one example, was not simply a reaction to the new abundance of the post-war years. As I have shown, it can be traced historically as a continuing problematization of consumption that took new form and direction *through* and not simply because of the increase in the range of consumer goods. Thus the history of critical consumer consciousness is not simply one of a continuing resistance to the attempts of capitalism to manipulate. Rather, it is a history of the problems of governance involved in the changing relationship between state and population on the terrain of mass consumption.

Each of the discourses I have discussed problematized the conduct of the individual as a consumer in quite different ways and, as a result, they entered into a relationship of mutual tension which has been, since World War II, the basis for a continual political and social polemic about mass consumption, as the examples just given demonstrate. One of the main determinants of the politics of contemporary consumer culture is the specificity of the agonistic space created by the intersection of these discourses in different conjunctures and the different ways in which this has been resolved, or the new problematics which are created as a result. A particularly illustrative example of the intersection of these discourses in a particular conjuncture is that of the confrontation over the issue of consumption that contributed to the first major success of neo-liberalism in the United States with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980.

As Mitchell had predicted in his market analyses, simplicity as a lifestyle choice was becoming an important social force in the 1970s. A wide range of popular and populist publications such as *Small is Beautiful* (Schumacher, 1973), *Diet for a Small Planet* (Lappé, 1971) or *The Whole Earth Catalog* (1969) promoted the philosophy of frugality, not only as a personal and social virtue but as an ecological necessity. Mitchell notes that there was also considerable interest on the part of business and the press in the rejection of mass consumption as a lifestyle choice. After the publication of his report on voluntary simplicity, co-authored with Elgin (Stanford Research Institute, 1976), Mitchell and his colleagues presented seminars to a wide range of consumer and marketing firms throughout the United States.

Initially, the impact of this philosophy on business was relatively minimal, but by the late 1970s and early 1980s, a significant element of the consumer industry was directed toward satisfying this particular taste. The J.C. Penney Corporation, for example, one of the oldest and largest general retailers in the United States, had been interested in consumer education as a business practice since the 1960s and had established a Consumer Affairs Department which was very involved in the publication of consumer education materials. In the early 1980s, J.C. Penney engaged Elgin as a consultant, developing a consumer programme based on his ideas. In 1983, it published a special issue of its consumer newsletter, *Forum*, entitled “Voluntary Simplicity: A Lifestyle Alternative” (J.C. Penney, 1983). This issue included a special article by Elgin explaining the basic philosophy as well as an extensive questionnaire with which consumers could determine their particular lifestyle category and refine it along the lines of voluntary simplicity.

After the experience of the energy crisis of 1973-1974, the idea of restraint gained considerable public sympathy in the United States. Shi (1985) notes that President Jimmy Carter had taken this new sensibility very seriously and was quite familiar with most of the popular authors on this subject, even inviting Schumacher (author of *Small is Beautiful*) to the White House in 1977 (1). In speeches given during this period, Carter frequently expressed the growing opinion that there were clear and looming limits to growth and, citing Lasch’s *Culture of Narcissism* (Lasch, 1979), he referred to a “paralyzing spiritual ‘malaise’” (Shi, 1985: 271) at the heart of American culture. In a key address to the nation in 1979, Carter appealed to the public

in language that could have been taken from the pages of Elgin's *Voluntary Simplicity* (Elgin, 1982). Carter stated that "owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning" and that, while some preferred to stay on "the path that leads to fragmentation and self-interest" (Carter, quoted in Shi, 1985: 271), there was another route which would lead to a restoration of traditional American values, such as frugality, Christian simplicity, and community. The energy crisis was merely the first step on the road back and would serve as a test of the moral resolve of the nation. The rationality that directed the Carter policy was a mixture of the discourses of moral abnegation and critical consciousness. Restraint and denial were advocated as moral practices in and of themselves, but these virtues were also tied to consumer advocacy and a growing ecological consciousness. From the point of view of the Carter administration, there was also a clear association with what was regarded as traditional Christian values of simplicity and mutual help, and American self-reliance.

In stark contrast to this 'more is less' campaign was the Republican challenge that 'more is more' (Shi, 1986: 272). Shi notes that Reagan also articulated his rhetoric to Christian morality but, in this case, it was a striking illustration of the Weberian link between Protestantism and capitalism. Reagan "combined an outspoken defense of conventional Christian morality with an equally enthusiastic endorsement of unfettered economic gain" (Shi, 1972: 273). This was not the only issue at stake in the American election of 1980 but neither was it trivial. In both camps, there was a clear appeal made to a previous, if imaginary, period of self-reliance and nobility of spirit; but one road led back to abnegation and sacrifice for a

greater good while the other pointed forward to even greater prosperity and personal wealth, a 'shining city on the hill' (a phrase often used by Reagan). In spite of the reality of the energy crisis, the call for restraint by an American president after such a long period of prosperity and optimism was unprecedented. The Carter administration had seriously overestimated the degree to which austerity would be a persuasive option to a population accustomed to material comfort and convenience. It seems likely, as Mitchell and Elgin concluded (Stanford Research Institute, 1976), that support for a policy of retrenchment based on the link forged between morality, ecological concerns, and consumer advocacy was concentrated in a relatively small but well-educated middle and upper middle class elite.

These were opposing views of consumer society and outlined entirely different modes of conduct for the citizen as consumer. Interestingly, the neo-liberalism of Reagan, Thatcher, and Mulroney also espoused a philosophy of restraint, but only in terms of the scope of government with the issue of market versus state provision playing a key role. Nonetheless, one of the most important aspects of neo-liberalism was the way in which it presented the enhancement of personal autonomy, particularly through the exercise of choice in the marketplace, as an antidote to a general anxiety over the growing complexity of modern society and its institutions. The development of practices of governance within the Canadian state directed at responding to consumer complaints is an interesting example of the shift from an earlier form of liberal governance to that of neo-liberalism. The establishment of a bureaucratic structure for the management of consuming subjects was in part an attempt to respond

to demands for greater transparency, that is, a demand not only for information from both industry and government about products and the operations of the market, but for real and tangible demonstrations of sincerity and openness on the part of those with authority. Such demands were quickly transformed into critiques of government *per se* through the suspicion that the goal of bureaucracy was not to strive for transparency but merely to ‘handle’ complaints, to manage and control dissent. It is thus not surprising that the consumer complaint-handling apparatus of the Canadian government was almost entirely dismantled in the 1980s and those responsibilities were transferred to the private sector and smaller departments within provincial governments.

The idea of a ‘human scale’ that was at the heart of the critique of mass consumption and modern institutions thus assumed a much different meaning in neo-liberalism. It became part of the critique of government as monolithic, unresponsive, and even malign. The neo-liberalism of the 1980s and 1990s sought to shift responsibility into the realm of the personal through tactics of governance that ranged from council house ownership in the U.K. to workfare in Canada. As I argued in previous chapters, the rise of neoliberalism, which disassembled the welfare state in varying degrees in different Western nations, was based in no small measure on a rationality derived from the discourse of consumer choice. Indeed, the establishment of choice as a central problematic was a fundamental precondition for neo-liberalism and the strategies and tactics of governance that defined it.

What is significant about these different conjunctures, such as the election of Reagan in 1980, is the degree to which competing discourses of consumer culture shaped and directed political debate and social consciousness. The current issue of the implementation of the Kyoto Protocol in Canada is remarkably similar to the confrontation between Carter and Reagan in the late 1970s, particularly in the relative weight given to the consumer choice. In the 1970s, the issue that galvanized concern was the energy crisis and the Arab oil embargo; currently, the issue is climate change. But, in both cases, the impact on the everyday life of individuals, as consumers, is central, both to supporters and critics of the Kyoto Protocol. The appeal for personal sacrifice, fundamental change in the goods and practices of consumption, greater consumer information, and the regulation of industry are all regarded as necessary and inevitable in order to avoid the disaster of climate change by those who support the Protocol. In contrast to this is the position that what is at stake is not only the future of the economy but the daily life of consumers, their material comfort, convenience, freedom, and lifestyle.

In a recent interview on CBC Newsworld, the President of the Ontario Chamber of Commerce, Len Crispino, took exception to the accusation that he and other business leaders were simply yielding to the demands of oil companies on the issue of the Kyoto Protocol:

This is not just an oil patch issue. Eighty per cent of greenhouse emissions are really caused by you and I, consumers, not necessarily the producers of energy, and I think that it's really, really important that Canadians understand the implications of this, that consumers understand what it . . . will mean for them on a day-to-day basis. (Len Crispino, CBC Newsworld, October 23, 2002)

The occasion for this interview was a speech on the Kyoto Protocol given by the Premier of Alberta, Ralph Klein, to the Empire Club in Toronto. Crispino commented that no one was opposed to measures that would reduce greenhouse gases (“We’re all pro-environment,” he insisted) but added that he shared Klein’s scepticism, calling it a “wake-up call” to Canadians. The interviewer, Nancy Wilson, responded, underlining the central role that consumers play in this debate: “When you say ‘wake-up call,’ do you mean that you really think that people, consumers, haven’t really grasped the kind of choices they will have to make if they really want to implement the Kyoto Protocol?”

As was the case with the energy crisis of the 1970s, the eventual outcome of this debate will be determined in large measure by the degree to which one particular version of consumer discourse, or perhaps alliance of discourses, is able to predominate. As I suggested earlier, consumer subjectivity is not necessarily fixed. Individuals can migrate relatively easily from one to another. Thus the shaping of the discursive space through, for example, the ideological work of the different interests and forces involved, is extremely important. What is striking about so many contemporary social and political issues, such as health, education, human reproduction, and democratic process, is the extent to which they are inseparable from the realm of the consumer, regardless of the particular discourse to which they are articulated, whether the confident, ascetic, or vigilant consumer, or other possibilities not discussed in this dissertation. At a more mundane level, it is clear that consumer culture is much more than the sum of the goods that circulates within it. It is

constituted by the discourses that problematize individual disposition and conduct with regard to mass consumption; and it is characterized by the extent to which the behaviour and attitude of individuals in daily life is the product of varied consumer subjectivities.

Endnotes (Chapter Five)

1. David Shi, in his history of the doctrine of simplicity in the United States, gives a detailed and insightful account of the impact of this doctrine on the Carter administration and its role in public policy leading up to the election of 1980. See Shi (1985), Chapter Ten.

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