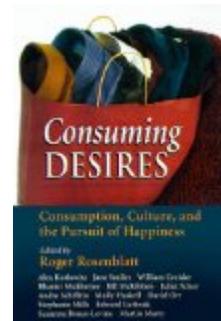


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Roger Rosenblatt, ed. *Consuming Desires: Consumption, Culture, and the Pursuit of Happiness*. Washington D.C. and Coverlo, California: Island Press, 1999. viii + 230 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55963-535-6.

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In the latter half of the last century, social scientists acquired prophetic authority. Americans stood accused by so many statistical studies: we were lonely in our crowds, conditioned by organizations, manipulated by hidden persuaders, and captivated by status seeking. We were judged guilty of not being able to help ourselves. Meanwhile, some social scientists advised businessmen on how to help themselves to our helplessness.

*Consuming Desires* continues the prophetic tradition, as a collection of essays with incriminating numbers on how little we save, how buying defines us, how television shapes or correlates with our consumption habits and perceptions of the world. And now, informed by global ecological concerns, America is accused of defining success through consumption for the rest of the world, making the U.S. a magnet for those seeking this happiness and a model for countries willing to sacrifice their environments in pursuit of domestic prosperity. Like most people who want to think they care, I have grown accustomed to the bad news and the guilt it awakens, even while I weary of hearing it one more time. But the numbers are there, and I accept the grim picture without feeling the need to check out the original studies so carefully endnoted. Instead, I try to remain alert for the point when the author preaches on, past Statistical Scripture, to tell me WHY we consume (sin) so much and WHAT path of salvation is open to us.

*Consuming Desires* contains a number of essays that consider sectors of consumption, such as movies, television, clothing, and the news. The central theme, however, has to do with the personal sources and impacts, the social and environmental impacts, of consumption when it becomes the primary means of pursuing “happiness.”

Although in many ways the least rigorous of the essays, Edward Luttwak’s “Consuming for Love” best represents these themes as well as different authors’ tendency to move from statistics to generalization, finally extending to the future.

Luttwak, a senior fellow at the Center of Strategic and International Studies, first raises concerns based on studies of comparative indebtedness, U.S. versus Asian. As compared to different Asian nationalities, we have much higher debt as a percentage of total incomes, debt is more heavily concentrated in the next-to-poorest twenty percent of households, and “much of” a “large portion” of total debt reflects the purchase of non-necessities. “To borrow at 18 percent...is a commonplace of American life” (53). Statistics then get elbowed aside, making way for an advance of generalizations. Luttwak assumes that we, as Americans, must be massively uneasy about national and personal debt; we sublimate this insecurity into Calvinist-style campaigns of prohibition and restraint – against drugs, welfare, pornography, abortion, smoking – against everything in short, but the one addiction that creates our insecurity in the first place, “the borrow-and buy habit.” Of course, our insecurity leads to more consumption. Debt insecurity is intensified by our loneliness: without families nearby, a price of mobile status-seeking, without belonging to neighborhoods, we buy ourselves gifts so that we will feel loved. (We try, but fail, to find complete substitutes for neighborhoods or family in cults, workplace, therapy groups, recreation or sports.)

I am fascinated by some of his assertions even while I question the social psychology behind them. Insecurity about debt? I haven’t heard much about that since the

early 90s, before the current prosperity. Nevertheless, Luttwak's solution to all this is to harken back to the late 1970s, when the government regulated the economy and sectors within it more tightly. A more rigid, more stable economy, he argues, would encourage companies and employees to stay put, encouraging family and neighborhood solidarity, leading to less insecurity, less need for love, less consumption. Was that the case? We were happier in the late 1970s, he says. Someone remind me: Saigon had fallen, Jimmy Carter was president, oil prices were rising, the Sex Pistols were touring America, and employees in the public sector (at least) were losing ground as the rate of salary increases fell behind inflation. Sorry. I can't remember the right data (Luttwak supplies none).

Once you get to the prophetic heart of this anthology, other essays array themselves interestingly. "False Connections" is about how youth purchases of brand names connected to the "other" white suburban or black urban youth-style sets up a false sense of community. Mukherjee's essay describes the attempt of Asian immigrants to

form new communities through malls. And, my favorite, Bill McKibben's "Consuming Nature," makes a case for leaving the natural environment alone, even from a natural (bacterial) modification which promises to alleviate pernicious blackflies that infest upstate New York. In the context of Luttwak's essay, the biting blackflies become a phenomenon we need to have inflicted on us, the price of belonging to nature's neighborhood. (In my part of the country, we might try to coexist with ticks.)

The various authors' views of the future range from concerns about world conflict or possible natural extinctions to a touching faith that capitalism or technology will evolve to restructure our priorities. Martin Marty urges we use what moral reason we have left to try to control consumption in our lives, while attending to the welfare of society and the environment. On the whole, *Consuming Desires* is actually an optimistic book.

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