

The Socially Engineered Society

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Prior to the Great Depression of the 1930's, conventional wisdom, a term coined by John Kenneth Galbraith in *The Affluent Society*, believed that the cornerstone of the American economy was production. However, a nearly polar reversal occurred in the postwar era. The consumer, rather than the producer, became the pacesetter of the economy – controlling the consumer meant controlling the economy. But who, if anyone, was controlling the consumer in postwar America? How was the consumer controlled? How successful was this control and how was America affected? These are the questions of primary concern.

First, the consumer abstraction must be analyzed. Every dollar-wielding or income-bearing individual whether he or she, white or black, young or old, rich or poor, falls under the collective entity of the consumer. Such a diverse group, by conventional wisdom, is thought to be composed of individuals, each of whom casts an individual ballot at the polls, spends an individual dollar at the stores, and has an individual lifestyle, a term coined during the 1960's by the Stanford Research Institute. However, a more thorough investigation shows a stratification of individuals into largely uniform groups. For example, as Lizabeth Cohen demonstrated in *The Consumer Society*, white, middle-class families began congregating in homogeneous suburban environments in the 1950's, shopping in the same shopping center, living in similar houses, and watching the same mass media television. Similar classifications can extend this model to blacks, teens, seniors, and women.

The Frankfurt School, of which George Katona and Ernest Dichter were a part, indeed placed “emphasis on the role of mass media” (Horowitz 149) and on the homogeneity of consumer culture. These two individuals perhaps had the greatest impact on consumer culture in postwar America. Katona recognized “that it was [the upper middle class] spending on automobiles,

appliances, and leisure that made a crucial difference in the nation's economic activity." (Horowitz 153) Katona probed this group with surveys of consumer finances and expectations to determine the relationship between economics and human psychology. Although these surveys were path-breaking, they were by no means as comprehensive as the work of Ernest Dichter. Dichter recognized that people will lie when presented with certain questions directly. Instead, Dichter utilized a technique called depth probing to explore the reasons behind the seeming irrationality of the human psyche. Throughout these depth interviews, a small group of people was gathered to simply talk freely. The idea was that as one individual said something, another would oppose the statement, and others, feeling that the atmosphere had become less formal, would rapidly voice their views. This process would allow Dichter to explore the true reasons behind irrational human logic.

The discoveries Dichter found were extraordinary. First, Dichter noted that "companies . . . must sell emotional security or go under." (Packard 32) Second he recognized that "nothing appeals more to people than themselves." (Packard 49) Essentially, companies need to cater advertisements to the consumer to obey these new rules. For example, Betty Crocker manufactured a new type of cake mix that only required the housewife to add water in order to prepare. The product did not sell. Dichter recognized that the housewife felt guilty, that she was not putting forth enough of her own labor into providing food for her family. Dichter suggested that Betty Crocker instruct the housewife to add an egg to the mix, in spite of the fact that an egg powder substitute added in by the company was more effective. This would eliminate the impediment of guilt that the housewife felt. Indeed, sales of the cake mix profoundly increased. Essentially, Dichter had demonstrated a method by which the consumer's inhibitions could be removed and desires augmented in order to sell a product.

However, the inhibitions of the consumer were not necessarily being removed in the Betty Crocker case. Rather, they were being circumvented. After all, the housewife was still conscious of the idea of not putting forth enough of her own labor into her family's sustenance. This form of advertising is not so much engineering of the society as it is catering to ideology of consumer culture. The consumer's views are not being engineered artificially (i.e. engineered by a corporation for the sole purpose of profit.) Dichter did explore the more dangerous form of advertising as well, where consumer's views were in fact being engineered. For example, in 1946 tea sales were falling rapidly. Dichter recognized that consumers associated tea

with “sissies and club ladies,” (Packard 143) colds, insipid colors, and the Boston Tea Party. Dichter suggested that the tea industry start a “corrective campaign . . . with the writers of American histories. Americans should be taught . . . that the Boston Tea Party was not a protest against tea but rather a dramatic expression of the importance of tea in the life of Americans in revolutionary times.” (Packard 144) Furthermore, Dichter suggested that the industry portray tea in vibrant red and orange colors, conveying a manly, hearty connotation.

The campaign worked remarkable well with tea sales rising 25 per cent. This example is more disturbing than the case of Betty Crocker since the consumer’s view of tea was being erased and rewritten with a version that the tea industry preferred. Certainly this example constitutes control of the consumer, but the devastating effects are mild. The more disturbing portion of this example of social engineering, however, is the manipulation of American history, traditionally taught to young innocent children who take as fact the teachings of grade school. Mutating these fundamental teachings in turn decreases the credibility of the source. Should the children that were taught the altered version of the Boston Tea Party one day learn the true (or at least true according to what I personally was taught) version of the Tea Party, they will be naturally led into questioning what else that they have been taught was a lie of a corporation, and may in turn be forced to discard their entire database of historical teachings, contaminated with the virus of doubt.

If the circumvention or mutation of consumer inhibitions is one form of social engineering, fabrication of desires is the other. A passive form of desire fabrication, analogous to the circumvention, as opposed to mutation, of consumer inhibitions, begins with the recognition that “nothing appeals more to people than themselves.” (Packard 49) This enables manufacturers to build in “traits known to be widely dispersed among the consuming public [in order to] spark love affairs by the millions” (Packard 49) with consumer products. Notably, various brand names carry different connotations. For example, consumers who would like to be seen as lawyers, doctors, or people important within their community may purchase one brand of gasoline. Consumers who are of the chatty, small-town, friendly type buy a different brand of gasoline. Younger consumers buy yet another brand of gasoline. In fact, the bonds to a brand are so strong that consumers are willing to pay more and drive further for a particular brand, in spite of the fact that most gasoline brands are largely equal. This apparent irrationality can be exploited by a

corporation when marketing a product, as was done for decades by cigarette companies.

However, this is still a mild form of consumer control, if that. The consumer still has a choice, and his choice is not being swayed. Rather, the producers are tailoring products, or at least the images of the products, to the consumer. The active form of social engineering of consumer desires is the true fabrication of desires that would otherwise not exist. This is the form of consumer control that is most controversial and seen as depriving consumers of choices. Unfortunately this is also the form of social engineering that is most difficult to prove. Perhaps the best evidence of this form of consumer control is presented eloquently by Galbraith:

The even more direct link between production and wants is provided by the institutions of modern advertising and salesmanship. These cannot be reconciled with the notion of independently determined desires, for their central function is to create desires – to bring into being wants that previously did not exist. (Galbraith 127)

In 1987, the advertising industry had an estimated expenditure of approximately 110 billion dollars. This figure has only been increasing since. However, these figures do not prove that the advertisements are effecting forms of consumer control. They only serve as strong suggestions that such continuing expenditures are linked with effectiveness. For example, when an automobile manufacturer produces a new model of a certain vehicle and advertises to owners of previous models of the same vehicle on the grounds of obsolescence, the consumers who purchase the new model may have made an unbiased choice to purchase the vehicle, perhaps based on the good performance of the older model and the features of the newer model. On the other hand, the consumers may have been force-fed the strong-handed brainwashing of ‘marketing’ for profiteering.

All of the above arguments can naturally be extended to the political arena, where the consumers become the voters, and buying power becomes the ballot. The idea that any control of voters exists, that an advertising agency can sway voter choice, is far more foreboding and undermines the fundamental democratic value of individual choice. Fortunately, the passive forms of engineering inhibitions and desires towards a candidate in the voting consumer are not so shameful. In fact, the candidate is simply adjusting to

the demands of the voters, generally perceived as a virtue. Whether he will maintain these adjustments once elected is less certain. On the other hand, the active forms of inhibition and desire engineering, the ones where our inhibitions are mutated and our desires fabricated, are the true Iagos. Here free choice is minimized or eliminated altogether, though the voter is unconscious of this manipulation. However, proving this form of consumer control is even more difficult in the political arena.

The general conclusions of these arguments can be emphasized more formally. The consumer is most certainly controlled, both passively and actively in his or her inhibitions and desires. The passive forms are accepted as more honorable and are easily apparent, whereas the active forms are more difficult to isolate, especially with regard to desires for consumer goods and politicians. These forms of manipulation are also more offensive, perceived as shackling and enslaving. However, when the unwashed masses are in control of a most precious country and economy, let us hope that a virtuous auditing force corrects their imperfections. Perhaps once in a while a good brainwashing is necessary to maintain a clean society.