The Incomplete Human / We teach our kids to be consumers rather than thinkers

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Abstract:

Advertising is our culture's propaganda, its clarion to consumption. Our children are spoon-fed a daily mega-dose of ultrasophisticated marketing, even on the campuses of public schools. Bloated with corporate hype about everything from crotch odor to gas additives, we practice our patriotism at the mall. Feeding the beast has become our national raison d'etre.

No group is more exploited by our market culture than teenagers. Remember how important it was to fit in in high school? Remember how painful it was when you didn't think you did? Joe Camel is such a powerful messenger to teens not just because of the drug he deals but because of the savoir-faire he exudes. Then there are the clothes, the cars, the booze and the sexy bodies that look just so.

Despite our flashy modernity and bull markets, ours is the imagination of scarcity, of economic paranoia. No amount of wealth can ever fully assuage our fear of not having enough. When Thomas Malthus argued at the end of the 18th century that human population inevitably outstrips its ability to produce, he laid the groundwork for the harshly competitive society Darwin would soon stamp with a "scientific" imprimatur. "The Descent of Man" replaced the Bible as our origin narrative.

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Full Text:

Dan Hamburg, a former member of Congress, is executive director of Voice of the Environment, a Bolinas-based nonprofit.
WHAT IS MOST STRIKING about American culture, aside from its unprecedented ubiquity, is its celebration of consumption. The economy is our religious faith, consumption our orthodoxy.

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Because we perceive that there isn't enough to go around, winners and losers have to be determined. Our children learn that society is a set of stairs; they must compete and prove their merit first in the classroom, then in the marketplace. Their relative success is evidence of their relative stature as humans, of their degree of selectness.

Those who fall short fall back -- even to the street, to joblessness, homelessness, hunger. As Thomas Hobbes said, for the riffraff, life is "nasty, brutish, and short." Welfare moms, illegal aliens, SAT flunkers -- bring on Nature's broom and sweep them down the drain of history! Progress is the province of the winners, of the strong.

As parents, we send our children a mixed message. On one hand, we teach compassion, generosity and humility. These are the attributes that create strong families and communities. On the other, we teach that "out in the real world" they will contend aggressively for the top job, the prestigious address, the glitzy car. For consolation, it is considered normal, even noble, to "burn out" from 60-hour weeks and spirit-numbing commutes.

Consumer culture, bourgeois culture, is threatened not because it is wrong or bad, but because it is incomplete. While it has done a terrific job of mastering the processes of material production, it has failed almost as grandly to answer fundamental questions about ecological sustainability and the ethical distribution of the Earth's resources.

In fact, we are much more. We are the only creatures who define ourselves, who define what it is to be alive. We are the only beings who create culture, even as culture is creating us. We must teach this lesson to our children -- that they live in a specific culture, that they can know it, and therefore, that they can change it.
We need a shift in thought no less dramatic than that of Columbus when he insisted he could reach the East by sailing west, no less dramatic than that of Copernicus when he said, "It may seem absurd, but the Earth also moves."

We stand at a crossroads. A turn toward a better world is both necessary and attainable -- necessary because the environmental and social costs of this culture are too high; attainable because we have the capacity to do so.

Imagine a world in which our young people could grow up without constant admonishment to get those grades, get into that school, and follow the narrowing pathway to material salvation. Imagine a world in which success had more to do with personal peace than with purchasing power. Imagine a world in which every human being was valued simply for being the remarkable creature each of us truly is.

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