Consumerism

In 1962, President John F. Kennedy instigated a consumer bill of rights containing: the right to safety, the right to be informed, the right to choose, and the right to be heard (Etcheson). This consumer bill of rights, elaborated on in a later paragraph, demonstrates the power that the consumer has among the American Government. The power of the consumer does not stop there though; as well as having powers within the politics of the government, the consumer possesses environmental powers that affect the entire world. In a consumer culture, “people put pressure on forest, freshwater and marine ecosystems through the production and consumption of resources such as grain, fish, wood, and freshwater, and the emission of pollutants such as carbon dioxide” (Cahill). Erik Assadourian, writer of *State of the World 2010*, believes that the American way of life is not viable from the earth’s perspective, and we must do something to change the impact we are having on Earth’s ecosystems (Assadourian). If consumerism is not combated we will see a decline in the degradation of the earth, and the world as we know it will cease to exist. Is this a bad thing, if American consumers have everything they want at the palm of their hand?

The consumer bill of rights, initiated by President J.F.K., was the beginning of the rise of consumerism within the American population. The right to safety promotes the right of Americans to be protected against products that are hazardous to our health (Etcheson). The right to be informed protects the American consumer from information that is misleading or wrong, this bill stopped companies from false advertising in order to appease the consumer (Etcheson). The right to choose, grants the American consumer access to a variety of products at
competitive prices, this started the governments ban on the monopoly in order to keep prices fair for the consumer. The final right within President Kennedy’s consumer bill of rights is the right to be heard; this right merely states that the consumer’s interest will be taken into consideration when forming government policy (Etcheson). This Bill of rights enabled the American consumer to consume “safely,” however, when it comes to consumerism in America, safety is a relative term.

The Federal government has also initiated several agencies in order to protect the consumer. The Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) was initiated in order to, “eliminate the paradox of poverty…, …by opening for everyone the opportunity for education and training, the opportunity to work, and the opportunity to live in decency and dignity” (Ende). The Office of Consumer Affairs was established to advise and represent the president on the matters of consumer interest (Ende). The Department of Agriculture was created in 1862 and has had expanding responsibilities ever since; these responsibilities include: research, education, conservation, marketing, regulatory work, agriculture adjustment, surplus disposal, and rural development (Ende). The Department of Commerce, the Food and Drug Administration, the Federal Trade Commission, and the Consumer Product Safety Commission are a few more of the agencies implemented by the 1970’s. Each of these agencies demonstrates to us how much consumers have influenced the government of the United States in the 1960’s and 1970’s. After all, “the sixties were the birthplace of the styles and tastes and values that define our world” (Frank).

The downward spiral that is consumerism can be credited to the capitalist system, due to its “obsessive drive to increase material production in pursuit of profits” (Lowy). The capitalistic market, which is driven by profit and loss, contradicts the rationality of the living
environment because the living environment thrives on a system of long natural cycles, which are being destroyed by the search for quick profits (Lowy). Let us use disposable paper products as an example, in order to create these readily accessible and convenient products (paper towels, paper plates, diapers, and facial tissues) trees must be killed and processed accordingly. In China these goods combined hit a grand total of $14.6 billion dollars in 2008, which is an 11% increase from 2007 (Assadurian). The drastic shift in culture away from sustainable goods such as towels, handkerchiefs, reusable cloth diapers, and good old fashioned metal silverware has caused the rapid degradation of our natural forests, and the long natural cycles that nature had intended.

The type of consumerism that concerns me the most is consumerism that is based on “false needs.” These “false needs” could include, but are not limited to, things such as: bottled water, fast food, vehicles, pet supplies, and any other consumer items that are not pertinent to our comfortable living style. These are things that we have habitually grown to use every day, when in reality we could live without, or at least choose a more sustainable alternative. These “false needs” are products that have a strong affiliation to the, “system of mental manipulation called advertising” (Lowy). Advertising has caused consumers to buy bottled water as opposed to using the healthier, more accessible, and 240 to 10,000 times cheaper alternative of tap water (Assadourian). The $60 billion industry sold 241 billion liters of tap water in 2008 (Assadourian). These figures stand to illustrate how advertising pollutes one’s mental capacity, not unlike how we pollute the very world we live in. Advertising has infiltrated every single aspect of our lives: press, cinema, sports, religion, television, education, and radio just to name a few (Lowy). There is no escape from this advertising monster; no matter what corner of the
globe one travels to, there will be advertising there to greet you. How is a world run by consumerism able to sustain itself in the face of limited resources?

Consumerism does exactly what the American people want it to do, it gives people what they want; yet, these private choices of what to buy have social consequences and very public outcomes (Barber). For example, the bottled water that you consume does not only affect your pocket book, but harms the nation that houses the landfill your bottle sits in for the next 1,000 years (Knopper). In a world that is becoming more concerned about the environment, consumerism seems to be at an all time high (Consumerism). This contradiction in our values and norms is brought about by the private choices that we make every day, but as dysfunctional as these choices are, we keep making them (Barber). How does one make a change in the consumeristic choices of a culture full of consumers?

The needed change in the consumerism patterns of our population will have to start at the cultural level. The things that must be changed in order to curb this way of life are our values, beliefs, customs, traditions, symbols, norms, and institutions (Assadourian). Before we can change the way that we consume we have to change the way that we perceive consumption. Right now the perception is that consumption is what we are supposed to do, and no one thinks badly about using paper plates or bottles of water daily. These social processes are what need to be counter acted in order to create a more sustainable future for our generation and many more to come. One way to start the change is to provide a more efficient information system within all consumer markets (Aaker). With an information system that lets consumers know where the product came from and what environmental harm it can do, consumers would place more thought into the purchase of each item. If people really knew how much environmental damage they were causing with each paper product they used, perhaps they would curb their usage and
use only when necessary. Bill Taren, an anti consumerist cult hero, encourages this change in lifestyle by asking consumers to buy locally grown food and consumer goods (Hutson). He is raising awareness for the fight against consumerism by running for mayor of New York; his outreaches have gathered the attention of many consumers, but he constantly strives to reach more (Hutson).


