

**Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults,
and Swallow Citizens Whole**

Benjamin R. Barber

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Benjamin Barber's *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole* argues that ever-expanding capitalist commercial culture taints everything, marginalizing family life, religious life, and civic life, and reducing citizens to mere consumers whose private market choices give them what they want, but fail to give them what they want to want: a Benjamin Barber-style "strong" democracy in which we may need to be "forced to be free."

The argument of *Consumed* rests the false assumption that capitalism, in its contemporary incarnation, is in some sense overproductive. "Too many unprofitable products chase too few consumers, too many of whom must be prodded, pushed, and cajoled into consumption," Barber writes, citing journalist William Greider's *One World, Ready or Not* (p. 45). Barber accuses boosters of dynamic, free-market economies as having

failed to grasp that the modern economy decreasingly manufactures goods to meet “real needs” and increasingly manufactures “needs to address and absorb the commodity and service surpluses of overproduction.” (p. 45)

How Barber knows this to be fact—which would be the biggest social scientific scoop of the century—is left to the reader to piece together from Barber’s hand-waving assertions and hyperventilating anecdotes. Of course, a well-confirmed proposition in economics known as Say’s Law tells us that in a regime of freely moving prices and capital, long-run overproduction is exceedingly improbable, if not literally impossible.

Barber, who does not appear to understand how the markets he criticizes actually function, probably does not intend to say that goods are rolling off the line simply to rust in warehouses. The problem, as he sees it, is that we *are* buying all this stuff. Barber evidently means to assert what we might call the “moralized overproduction” thesis. The moralized overproduction thesis need not imply that Say’s Law is being violated on a daily basis, or is about to be. The moralized overproduction thesis instead states that capitalism is producing, and consumers are in fact consuming, goods and services that *ought not* to be either produced or consumed. Capitalism produces too much junk that we don’t really *need*.

The moralized overproduction thesis is the foundation of Barber’s claim that, at some point in the past, “productivist” capitalism, which set about meeting authentic needs, made a transition to “consumerist” capitalism, which induces and satisfies fake needs. Barber, setting himself up as a latter-day Max Weber, introduces the idea that contemporary capitalism creates and reinforces an “infantilist ethos” responsible for the “dumbing down of goods and shoppers” and the “targeting of children as consumers in a market where there are never enough shoppers” (p. 5). Infantilization “serves capitalist consumerism directly by nurturing a culture of impetuous consumption necessary to selling puerile goods in a developed world that has few genuine needs” (p. 81).

Barber claims that this is not false consciousness, but merely “limited consciousness” that causes “civic schizophrenia,” a division between what we want and what we “want to want.”

We actually do want what we are allowed to choose privately. But we are nonetheless worse off and have less liberty despite having more private choices, since those choices are in a domain where the real decisions are not being taken. We want what we want privately, but we want even more to be able to choose the public agenda that determines what our private choices will be [p. 141].

That is, what we *really* want is a new “democratic sovereignty to moderate market anarchy and market monopoly,” or “new forms of global civic governance” to battle “puerility, market chaos, and unrewarding private freedom” (pp. 338–39).

This raises a host of questions, none of which Barber answers. What is his theory of needs? How do you tell the difference between an authentic human need and an invented one? When exactly did the transition from productivist to consumerist capitalism take place? Barber indicates that one of the intermediate phases of capitalism, “managerial capitalism,” took us through the 1960s. What year was the sweet spot for authentic consumption, when capitalism gave us all that we needed and little we didn’t? Barber’s claims about transitions in the nature of capitalism appear to be completely arbitrary.

Take just one example of a recent dramatic advance in well-being. According to the Nobel-Prize-winning economic historian Robert Fogel, “Studies of changes in functional limitations among persons who have reached age 65 since the early 1980s indicate that such limitations declined at an accelerating rate during the balance of the 1980s and 1990s.”¹ Did these people not really *need* to have fewer functional limitations in old age? Does Barber think the technological innovations responsible have nothing to do with capitalism?

Barber claims that not only is modern capitalism no longer satisfying real needs, but is some sense making us worse off. The modern consumer, Barber writes, “is less the happy sensualist than the compulsive masturbator, a reluctant addict working at himself with little pleasure, encouraged in his labor by an ethic of infantilization that releases him to an indulgence he cannot altogether welcome” (p. 51). Not a pretty picture. But, again, Barber is simply making things up.

Almost every indicator of human well-being has improved since 1970. Contrary to the dated passage Barber takes from Robert Lane’s *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*, average self-reported happiness levels have in fact increased in the United States and the main nations of the European Union. An even better measure, “Happy Life Years,” developed by sociologist Ruut Veenhoven, shows that people generally are living happily longer—and *especially* in advanced capitalist countries. The strongest predictors of a high score on the happy life years index is GDP per head, economic freedom, and pluralistic tolerance. The UN’s Human Development index, which attempts to operationalize Amartya Sen capabilities theory of well-being, shows some of the world’s most commercial, advertising-saturated cultures—including the United States and Japan—in the top ten. The trend in suicide is down in the United States has been in steady decline for many decades. People continue to live longer. People continue to get taller, a sign good of nutrition and physical robustness. The real material standard of living of the least well-off in consumer societies is leaps and bounds above what it was 30 years ago.

¹*The Escape from Hunger and Premature Death, 1700–2100* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 110.

If capitalism has stopped meeting real needs, we should not see improvement in almost every indicator of well-being in capitalist nations. But we do. I have no doubt that many of us consume lots of things that Barber disapproves of—and having read this book, I have a very good sense of which things those are—but there is nothing to be said in favor of the moralized overproduction theory in the absence of a theory of needs, and evidence that our current patterns of consumption are not meeting real needs.

Barber's implied theory of well-being centers on a notion of thick civic and democratic participation straight out of Rousseau. Again: "We want what we want privately, but we want even more to be able to choose the public agenda that determines what our private choices will be." But Barber fails to provide any evidence that most people in fact do want this, or that people who live in places where markets are more heavily regulated by democratic choices are any better off.

When Barber writes, "We are divided within ourselves, by what we want and what we want to want. What we want is usually private, what we want to want is frequently public" (p. 136), he is simply confused. I want a climate of liberty. That's a first order desire for a public good. And I also "want to want" to exercise this afternoon, even though I'm feeling lazy. That's a second order desire for something private. If I am frustrated by the lack of liberty (in the same way that Barber is frustrated by the lack of coerced democratic deliberation), it may be simply that others want it less than I do. How does it help to say that, although they don't want what I do, they "want to want" it? Or, if everyone would like both lower taxes *and* a tax-financed subsidy for their sector of the economy, chances are one of those desires is going to be frustrated for most everybody. It illuminates nothing to be told that we all "wanted to want" lower taxes, but frustrated ourselves by seeking subsidies. We simply wanted both.

Barber in places seems to grope for the point that individual choices can produce negative externalities and that there are such things as collective action problems. Well, yes. But he does not avail himself of the vast literature available on this topic, or on the topic of the reliability of mechanisms of democratic choice in ameliorating negative externalities and providing public goods. He simply charges ahead, assuming his brand of "strong democracy" as a cure-all, brandishing precisely the conception of positive liberty that Isaiah Berlin warned us against.

Barber's hero Rousseau equated freedom with self-rule, and self-rule with obedience to the "general will." The general will can be independent of, and is often be at odds with, the individual will, as individuals are often deluded as to their own interests. That's what Barber means when he says:

Contrary to intuition, by constraining choice in the private sector, we can actually facilitate the sense of liberty we feel. This may explain the paradoxical phrase Rousseau used to capture his crucial conception of public liberty – that we can actually be "forced to be free" [p. 142].

Maybe it takes the edge off when you're shoving something down someone's throat to say that you are giving them what they wanted to want, but I doubt it. At the heart of *Consumed* is a strong, comprehensive conception of the human good that centers on a certain kind of ideal of social embeddedness and collective choice—a conception most of us do not share. Barber seems to dislike consumer capitalism so much because it is so at odds with the ideals that moves *him*. If his argument is going to be persuasive, those ideals need to move us too, but Barber is too busy mugging, skylarking, and relentlessly repeating himself to give skeptical readers reason to see the appeal in his moral vision.

The same goes for the empirical story Barber tells. *Consumed* is a book teeming with factoids, but starved of data. One would not say that Barber “marshalls evidence” to the defense of his position. For instance, someone should tell him that gung-ho advertising executives advertising the effectiveness of advertising is not in fact the best evidence of the effectiveness of advertising. The argument of *Consumed* is a barrage of small facts tenuously connected by undermotivated pet theories exhumed from the graveyard of 20th century social theory—Freud, Marcuse, Adorno, Dewey—which at best add up to a vague impression that there may be some evidence that supports the thesis.

In an increasingly complex and perplexing world, big-think books that attempt to comprehend and give meaning to this dizzying welter are most welcome. However, Barber's synthesis may leave readers understanding rather less about commercial capitalism than when they started.

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