The culture of capitalism is devoted to encouraging the production and sale of commodities. For capitalists, the culture encourages the accumulation of profit; for laborers, it encourages the accumulation of wages; and for consumers, it encourages the accumulation of goods. In other words, capitalism defines sets of people who, behaving according to a set of learned rules, act as they must act.

There is nothing natural about this behavior. People are not naturally driven to accumulate wealth. There are societies in which such accumulation is discouraged. Human beings do not have an innate drive to accumulate commodities; again, there are plenty of societies in which such accumulation is discouraged. People are not driven to work; in fact, contrary to popular notions, members of capitalist culture work far more than, say, people who live by gathering and hunting (see, e.g., Schor 1999). How does culture, as anthropologists use the term, encourage...
people to behave in some ways and not in others? Specifically, how does the culture of capitalism encourage the accumulation of profit, wages, and commodities? How does it, in effect, encourage perpetual growth and what amounts to perpetual change?

It is not easy to describe the effects of culture on people’s lives; anthropologists have noted that culture consists of all learned beliefs and behaviors, the rules by which we order our lives, and the meanings that human beings construct to interpret their universes and their places in them. Yet, using these abstract descriptions, it is difficult to understand how pervasive our culture can be in determining our view of the world. It may help, therefore, to provide a metaphor for culture in the form of a practice of another culture: the sandpaintings of the Navajo of the American Southwest.

Among the Navajo people there is a healing practice in which a curer, using colored sand, cornmeal, or other bits of material, draws on the ground a miniature representation of the universe. Although there are perhaps a thousand versions of these drawings, each contains vital elements of what, for the Navajo, define the general conditions of existence. Navajo conceptions of space are indicated by symbols of the world’s directions and that of social life by the distribution of Navajo houses (hogans) and mythic beings; values are represented in the stories and chants associated with each sandpainting. Material items critical to Navajo existence (e.g., horses or ritual items) are also portrayed. Once the work is completed, the patient sits on or in the sandpainting, and a curing ceremony, accompanied by chanting and prayer, proceeds. Illness, the Navajo claim, is the result of persons’ losing their proper place in the world; the aim of the ceremony is to restore the patient to that place. When the ceremony is completed and harmony restored, the sandpainter destroys the painting.
Navajo sandpainting contains all the elements of what anthropologists often mean by the term *culture*. Like the sandpainting, a culture serves to define the universe as it is supposed to exist for a people. The sandpainting contains the key elements and symbols that people use to locate themselves in physical and social space. It affirms the place of the person in the created world and the values that govern people’s lives. Like the sandpainting, particular cultural representations serve as therapeutic frames that communicate to us who and what we are and how we figure in the larger order of things. These representations are therapeutic because they help people resolve the contradictions and ambiguities that are inherent in any cultural definition of reality and self.

Furthermore, every society has its sandpainters, those individuals who are given or who take responsibility for representing the universe to others and who have the power to define those elements that are essential for others in locating and defining their identities. In some societies, as among the Navajo, it is the curer, shaman, mythmaker, or storyteller; in others, it is the priest, poet, writer, artist, singer, or dancer. In capitalism, the sandpainter works in churches, synagogues, or mosques; in theaters; through television sets; at sporting events; or in the shopping malls that reaffirm the vision of abundance central to the consumers’ view of the world. Contemporary sandpainters, who include marketing specialists, advertisers, government agents, corporate public relations specialists, entertainers, and journalists, create a vision of the world designed to maximize the production and consumption of goods. They have helped to create a culture in which the prime elements are commodities and in which the consumer’s first duty is to buy (or “Shop till you drop,” as a popular bumper sticker advises). It is a culture in which virtually all our everyday activities—work, leisure, the fulfillment of social responsibilities, and so on—take place in the context of commodities, and in which shopping, like the sandpainting cure, serves as a therapeutic activity. These contemporary sandpainters construct for us a culture in which at one time or another every individual assumes the identity of consumer. The question we need to explore first is, *How was the universe of the consumer and the consumer herself or himself created?*

**REMAKING CONSUMPTION**

The consumer did not, of course, appear full blown in the early twentieth-century United States. Mass consumption of certain goods—notably addictive substances such as tobacco, opium, rum, gin, coffee, and tea—arguably fueled the Industrial Revolution and even Europe’s colonial domination of Asia, Latin America, and Africa. This consumption also defined the methods by which later commodities were produced, distributed, and consumed (see, e.g., Trocki 1999). But, since these items were physically addictive and required little marketing, merchants generally paid little attention to how these and other goods were marketed or displayed, assuming that when people needed their products, they would buy them. It was this attitude in the United States of a century ago that was to undergo a profound change.

The change did not occur naturally. In fact, the culture of nineteenth-century America emphasized moderation and self-denial, not unlimited consumption. People, workers in particular, were expected to be frugal and save their money; spending, particularly on luxuries, was seen as “wasteful.” People purchased only necessities—basic foodstuffs, clothing, household utensils, and appliances—or shared basic items when they could. If we look at a typical inventory of the possessions of an American family of 1870–1880, we find a pattern very different from that of today. In 1870, 53 percent of the population lived and worked on farms and produced much of what they consumed. One Vermont farmwife recorded making 421 pies, 152 cakes, 2,140 doughnuts, and 1,038 loaves of bread in one year (Sutherland 1989:71). Household items were relatively simple—a dinner table, wooden chairs, beds, and perhaps a carpet or rug. There were a few appliances to aid housework—cookstoves, eggbeaters, apple parers, pea shellers, and coffee mills—but most other housework required muscle; even hand-cranked washing machines were not available until the late 1870s. Although most people, except the poorest or most isolated families, did buy some ready-made clothing, most of the items people wore were made...
at home and were largely functional. Furthermore, because the vast majority of American families lived on farms, most of the family capital was invested in farming tools and implements. There were, of course, exceptions. The wealthy members of society competed with each other in the ostentatious display of wealth and luxury, as they had for centuries. But they represented a small percentage of the population.

Of course, Americans did not yet have electricity, the automobile had yet to be invented, and the money supply was far more limited than it is today. Nevertheless, to transform buying habits, luxuries had to be transformed into necessities. In America, this was accomplished largely in four ways: a revolution in marketing and advertising, a restructuring of major societal institutions, a revolution in spiritual and intellectual values, and a reconfiguration of space and class.

**Marketing and Advertising**

First, there was a major transformation of the meaning of goods and how they were presented and displayed. For most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, retailers paid little attention to how goods were displayed. The first department store—Bon Marché—opened in Paris in 1852, allowing people to wander through the store with no expectations that they make a purchase. Enterprises such as Bon Marché were devoted to “the arousal of free-floating desire,” as Rosalind Williams put it (McCracken 1988:25). The display of commodities helped define bourgeois culture, converting the culture, values, attitudes, tastes, and aspirations of the bourgeoisie into goods, thus shaping and transforming them (Miller 1994).

But Bon Marché was an exception. In stores in the United States, most products were displayed in bulk, and little care was taken to arrange them in any special way. Prepackaged items with company labels did not even exist until the 1870s, when Ivory Soap and Quaker Oats appeared (Carrier 1995:102). Shop windows, if they existed, were simply filled with items that had been languishing in back rooms or warehouses for years. Even the few large department stores of the mid-nineteenth century, such as that of Alexander Turney Stewart, the Marble Palace in New York, paid little attention to display. It was not until the 1890s and the emergence of the department store in the United States as a major retail establishment that retailers began to pay attention to how products were presented to the public.

The department store evolved into a place to display goods as objects in themselves. When Marshall Field’s opened in Chicago in 1902, six string orchestras filled the various floors with music, and American Beauty roses, along with other cut flowers and potted palms, bedecked all the counters. Nothing was permitted to be sold on the first day, and merchants in the district closed so that their employees could visit Field’s. Later, elaborate theatrical productions were put on in the stores, artworks were exhibited, and some of the most creative minds in America designed displays that were intended to present goods in ways that inspired people to buy them. The department store became a cultural primer telling people how they should dress, furnish their homes, and spend their leisure time (Leach 1993).

Advertising was another revolutionary development that influenced the creation of the consumer. The goal of advertisers was to aggressively shape consumer desires and create value in commodities by imbuing them with the power to transform the consumer into a more desirable person. Before the late 1880s, advertising was looked down on and associated with P. T. Barnum—style hokum. In 1880, only $30 million was invested in advertising in the United States; however, by 1910, new businesses, such as oil, food, electricity, and rubber, were spending $600 million, or 4 percent of the national income, on advertising. By 1929, advertising was an $11 billion enterprise, and by 1998, the amount spent globally on advertising reached...
$437 billion. By 2012, global advertising expenditures reached $498 billion (Lee 2012), or more than the GDP of Sweden.

By the early twentieth century, national advertising campaigns were being initiated and celebrities were being hired to offer testimonials to their favorite commodities. Advertising cards, catalogs, and newspaper ads became a regular feature of American life. Outdoor advertising—billboards, signs, and posters—appeared everywhere. Electrical advertising—neon and flashing signs—were marketed, and Broadway became famous as the “Great White Way.” Today, advertising plays such a ubiquitous part in our lives that we scarcely notice it, even when it is engraved or embroidered on our clothing.

Another boon to merchandising was the idea of fashion: the stirring up of anxiety and restlessness over the possession of things that were not “new” or “up-to-date.” Fashion pressured people to buy not out of need but for style—from a desire to conform to what others defined as “fashionable.”

It is hardly surprising, then, that the garment industry in America led the way in the creation of fashion; its growth in the early 1900s was two or three times as great as any other industry. By 1915, it ranked only behind steel and oil in the United States. Fashion output in 1915 was in excess of $1 billion; in New York alone, 15,000 establishments made women’s clothes. New fashion magazines—Vogue, Cosmopolitan, and the Delineator—set fashion standards and defined what the socially conscious woman should wear, often using royalty, the wealthy, and celebrities as models. In 1903, the fashion show was introduced in the United States by Ehrich Brothers in New York City; by 1915, it was an event in virtually every U.S. city and town. Relying on this popularity, the first modeling agency was founded in New York by John Powers in 1923 (Leach 1993:309). The entertainment industry contributed by making its own major fashion statements as American women of the 1920s sought to imitate stars such as Clara Bow.

The importance of fashion hasn’t changed, and fashion magazines remain, as film critic Manohla Dargis (2009) put it, “temples of consumption.” Reviewing the documentary, The September Issue, about the creation of a single issue of Vogue, she notes that the glossy images, expensive clothes, and accessories displayed in its pages are about creating desires and transforming wants into needs. The magazine, of course, wants to sell the stuff that adorns its pages; but, more than that, it wants to instill in the reader sets of aspirations. It seeks to define tastes using attractive models and celebrities to define what the well-dressed woman is supposed to wear.

Another addition to the marketing strategy was service, which included not only consumer credit (charge accounts and installment buying) but also a workforce to fawn over customers. Customers became guests.

William Leach suggested that service may have been one of the most important features of the new consumer society. It helped, he said, mask the inequality, poverty, and labor conflicts that were very much a part of the United States at this point in its history. If one wanted to understand how consumer society developed, Leach said, one could look at the rise of service. As economic inequality rose in America, and as labor conflict increased, Americans associated service with the “promise of America.” Service conveyed to people the idea that everything was all right, that they had nothing to worry about, and that security and service awaited them. Service expressed what economists then and now would refer to as the “benevolent side” of capitalism, that is, the side of capitalism that gave to people in exchange for a dependable flow of profits—a better, more comfortable way of life. In this view, capitalism did not merely “strive for profits” but also sought “the satisfaction of the needs of others, by performing service efficiently.” “Capital,” said one turn-of-the-century economist, “reigns because it serves.” (Leach 1993:146–147)
The Transformation of Institutions

The second way in which American buying habits were changed was through a transformation of the major institutions of American society, each redefining its function to include the promotion of consumption. Educational and cultural institutions, governmental agencies, financial institutions, and even the family itself changed their meaning and function to promote the consumption of commodities.

Before 1900, the contributions of universities to the capitalist economy largely dealt with how to “make” things—that is, with the production of commodities. Virtually no attention was paid to selling or keeping track of what was sold. For example, there was no systematic examination of mass retailing, credit systems, or banking offered by America’s schools or universities. In the twentieth century, however, that began to change. For example, in New York City there was the good-design or arts-in-industry movement; schools, such as the Pratt Institute and the New York School of Fine and Applied Arts (now Parsons School of Design), developed and began to prepare students to work in the emerging sales and design industries and in the large department stores. The University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School for Business and the Harvard School for Business introduced programs in accounting (virtually nonexistent before then), marketing, and sales. In 1919, New York University’s School of Retailing opened; in the mid-1920s, Harvard and Stanford established graduate business schools as did such schools as Northwestern and other universities in Michigan, California, and Wisconsin soon after. Today, there are virtually no two-year or four-year colleges that do not offer some sort of business curriculum.

Museums also redefined their missions to accommodate the growth of the consumer culture. The American Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Newark Museum—all heavily endowed by wealthy patrons such as J. P. Morgan—began to make alliances with business. Curators lectured to designers on Peruvian textiles or primitive decorative art. The head of the American Museum of Natural History, Morris D’Camp Crawford, assisted by the head of the anthropology department, Clark Wissler, urged businesspeople and designers to visit the museum. Special exhibits on the history of fashion and clothing were arranged, and Wissler even borrowed the window-display techniques of New York department stores for his exhibits (just as window-display designers had borrowed the idea of the mannequin from anthropologist Franz Boas’s exhibit of foreign cultures at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago). The editor of Women’s Wear magazine praised the museum for being “the most progressive force in the development of the designer” (Leach 1993:166).

The second set of institutions to aid in the development of consumer culture comprised agencies of the local and federal governments. The state, as an entity, had long taken a lively interest in commerce within its borders (as we’ll see when we examine the history of global capitalist expansion in Chapter 3). But prior to the twentieth century, the state’s concerns focused largely on the manufacture of commodities, the organization of business, the control of labor, and the movement of goods. It wasn’t until the twentieth century that state agencies began to concern themselves with the consumption end of the business cycle. In fact, it may not be an exaggeration to say that the government did more to create the consumer than did any other institution.

Nothing better represents the increasing role of the federal government in the promotion of consumption than the growth of the Commerce Department under Herbert Hoover, who served as its head from 1921 until his election as president in 1928. When the Commerce Building opened in Washington in 1932, it was the biggest office structure in the world (and was not surpassed in size until the Pentagon was built a decade later). At the time, it brought together in one building virtually all the government departments that had anything to do with business, from the Patent Office to the Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce (BFDC), then the most important agency of the department. From 1921 to 1930, the congressional appropriation for the BFDC rose from $100,000 to more than $8 million, an increase of 8,000 percent. The number of BFDC staff increased from 100 to 2,500.
Hoover clearly intended the Department of Commerce to serve as the handmaiden of American business, and its main goal was to help encourage the consumption of commodities. For example, between 1926 and 1928, the BFDC, under Hoover’s direction, initiated the Census of Distribution (or “Census of Consumption,” as it was sometimes called) to be carried out every ten years. (It was unique at that time; Britain and other countries did not initiate government-sponsored consumer research until the 1950s.) It detailed where the consumers were and what quantities of goods they would consume; it pointed out areas where goods were “overdeveloped” and which goods were best carried by which stores. The Commerce Department endorsed retail and cooperative advertising and advised merchants on service devices, fashion, style, and display methods of all kinds. The agency advised retail establishments on the best ways to deliver goods to consumers, redevelop streets, build parking lots and underground transportation systems to attract consumers, use colored lights, and display merchandise in “tempting ways.” The goal was to break down “all barriers between the consumers and commodities” (Leach 1993:366).

Hoover also emphasized individual home ownership. In his memoirs, he wrote that “a primary right of every American family is the right to build a new house of its heart’s desire at least once. Moreover, there is the instinct to own one’s own house with one’s own arrangement of gadgets, rooms, and surroundings” (Nash 1988:7). The Commerce Department flooded the country with public relations materials on “homebuying” ideas, producing a leaflet entitled Own Your Own Home, along with the film Home Sweet Home. They advocated single-dwelling homes over multiunit dwellings and suburban over urban housing. The leaflet recommended a separate bedroom for each child, saying it was “undesirable for two children to occupy the same bed—whatever their age.” Regardless of the reasons for these recommendations, the materials produced by the Commerce Department all promoted maximum consumption. Thus, the government responded, as much as did educational institutions, to the need to promote the consumption of commodities.

Another step in creating a consumer economy was to give the worker more buying power. The advantage of this from an economic perspective is not easy to see. From the point of view of an industrialist or an employer, the ideal situation would be to pay as low a wage as possible to keep production costs down and increase profits. However, each producer of goods would prefer other producers to pay high wages, which would allow the other producers’ workers to buy more products. The idea that higher wages would serve as an incentive for laborers to work harder or that higher wages might allow the worker to become a consumer occurred relatively late to factory owners and investors. The working class, they assumed, would work only as hard as they needed to get their basic subsistence, and to pay them more would only result in their working less. And when an occasional economic boom gave workers the spending power to consume at a higher level, the middle and upper classes would condemn them for their lack of thrift.

The economic power derived from turning workers into consumers was realized almost by accident. As industry attempted to increase efficiency, it developed new methods. Henry Ford introduced the assembly line, one of the apparently great innovations, to the manufacturing of automobiles. Workers occupied positions on the line from which they did not move (“Walking,” Ford said, “is not a remunerative activity”) and from which they would perform a single task. It was a process that required almost no training and that “the most stupid man could learn within two days,” as Ford said. In essence, each worker had to repeat the same motion every ten seconds in a nine-hour workday.

Workers resisted this mind-numbing process. When Ford introduced his assembly line, absenteeism increased and worker turnover surged. In 1913, Ford required 13,000 to 14,000 workers to operate his plant, and in that year 50,000 quit. But Ford solved the problem: He raised wages from the industry standard of two to three dollars per day to five dollars, and he reduced the working day to eight hours. Soon labor turnover fell to 5 percent, and waiting lines appeared at Ford hiring offices. Furthermore, production costs for Ford’s Model T fell from $1,950 to $290, reducing the price to consumers. Most importantly, the rise in wages made Ford workers consumers of Ford automobiles, and, as other manufacturers followed suit, the automobile
industry grew. By 1929, there were 23 million automobiles in the United States; by 1950, there were more than 40 million. Today, including light trucks, there are 1.3 cars for every individual.

In addition to the money coming from higher wages, buying power was increased by the expansion of credit. Credit, of course, is essential for economic growth and consumerism, because it means that people, corporations, and governments can purchase goods and services with only a promise to pay for them at some future date. Buying things on credit—that is, going into debt—has not always been acceptable in the United States. It was highly frowned upon in the nineteenth century. It was not fully socially acceptable until the 1920s (Calder 1999), at which time it promoted the boom in both automobile and home buying.

The increased ease of obtaining home mortgages was a key to the home-building boom of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, a boom that in turn fueled subsidiary industries—appliances, home furnishings, and road construction. By 1960, 62 percent of all Americans could claim to own their own home—up from 44 percent in 1940. By 2008, U.S. homeowners owed more than $10 trillion in mortgages. Home mortgages had the further function of disciplining the workforce by forcing it to work to make credit payments. At the same time, homeowners gained a capital asset that served as a hedge against inflation. Automobile loans also added to consumer debt and, similarly, fueled subsidiary economic growth—malls, highways, vacation travel, and so on. Credit cards gave holders a revolving line of credit with which to finance purchases. U.S. household debt reached over $13 trillion in 2008, before falling to $11½ trillion in 2012 as a result of the 2007–2008 recession, while 20 percent of American households have more debt than assets, or 40 percent when real estate is factored out. This debt represents enormous confidence in the future of the economy because this money does not exist. Lenders in our economy simply assume that the money will exist when it comes time for people to repay their debts.

None of this would have been possible without a government financial policy that put limits on interest rates ("usury ceilings"), passed "truth-in-lending" laws, made it easier for certain groups (women and minorities) to borrow, and offered subsidized student loans. Thus, credit increased consumer debt while creating a "mass market" for consumer goods, which served further to stimulate economic growth (see Guttmann 1994).

In addition to changes in the way workers were viewed and the expansion of credit, there had to be a change in the way retail establishments were organized. The emergence of the consumer was accompanied by an enormous growth in retail chain stores. Until this point, people shopped in small stores or large family-owned department stores. The 1920s saw the rise of the large retail conglomerates. In 1886, only two chains operated more than five stores; in 1912, 177 companies operated 2,235 stores; by 1929, nearly 1,500 companies were doing business in 70,000 outlets. In 2012, Wal-Mart alone had over 8500 stores worldwide, and, with over 2 million employees, is the largest employer in the world (Copeland and Labuski 2013).

The Transformation of Spiritual and Intellectual Values

In addition to changing marketing techniques and modifying societal institutions to stimulate consumption, there had to be a change in spiritual and intellectual values from an emphasis on such values as thrift, modesty, and moderation toward a value system that encouraged spending and ostentatious display. T. J. Jackson Lears argued that, from 1880 to 1930, the United States underwent a transformation of values from those that emphasized frugality and self-denial to those that sanctioned periodic leisure, compulsive spending, and individual fulfillment (Lears 1983). This shift in values, said Lears, was facilitated in American life by a new therapeutic ethos, an emphasis on physical and psychological health. This shift was promoted in part by the growth of the health professions and the popularity of psychology, along with the increasing autonomy and alienation felt by individuals as America ceased being a land of small towns and became increasingly urban. Advertisers capitalized on these changes by altering the way products were advertised; rather than emphasizing the nature of the product itself, they began to emphasize the alleged effects of the product and its promise of a richer, fuller life. Instead of
simply being good soap, shoes, or deodorant, a product would contribute to the buyer’s psychological, physical, or social well-being (Lears 1983:19).

Clothing, perfumes, deodorant, and so on, would provide the means of achieving love; alcoholic beverages would provide the route to friendship; and the proper automobile tires or insurance policy would provide the means of meeting family responsibilities. Commodities would be the source of satisfaction and a vital means of self-expression. Ponder, for example, the following description by a forty-year-old man of the relationship between himself and his expensive Porsche:

Sometimes I test myself. We have an ancient, battered Peugeot, and I drive it for a week. It rarely breaks, and it gets great mileage. But when I pull up next to a beautiful woman, I am still the geek with glasses. Then I get back into my Porsche. It roars and tugs to get moving. It accelerates even going uphill at 80. It leadeth trashy women…to make pouting looks at me at stoplights. It makes me feel like a tomcat on the prowl….Nothing in my life compares—except driving along Sunset at night in the 928, with the sodium vapor lamps reflecting off the wine-red finish, with the air inside reeking of tan glove-leather upholstery and the…Blaupunkt playing the Shirelles so loud that it makes my hairs vibrate. And with the girls I will never see again pulling up next to me, giving the car a once-over and looking at me as if I was a cool guy, not worried, instead of a 40-year-old schnook writer. (Belk 1988:148)

In the late nineteenth century, a series of religious movements emerged that became known as mind-cure religions. William James, in his classic 1902 book Varieties of Religious Experience, drew attention to the mind-cure movements, although he was not the first to use the term. These movements—New Thought, Unity, Christian Science, and Theosophy, among others—maintained that people could simply, by an act of will and conviction, cure their own illnesses and create heaven on earth. These movements were, as William Leach (1993:225) phrased it, “wish-oriented, optimistic, sunny, the epitome of cheer and self-confidence, and completely lacking in anything resembling a tragic view of life.” There was no sin, no evil, no darkness, only, as one mind curer said, “the sunlight of health.”

These movements held that salvation would occur in this life and not in the afterlife. Mind cure dismissed the ideas of sin and guilt. God became a divine force, a healing power. Proponents argued that Americans should banish ideas of duty and self-denial. As one early twentieth-century advocate said,

If you want to get the most out of life, just make up your mind that you were made to be happy, that you are a happiness machine, as well as a work machine. Cut off the past, and do not touch the morrow until it comes, but extract every possibility from the present. Think positive, creative, happy thoughts, and your harvest of good things will be abundant. (Leach 1993:229)

These new religions made fashionable the idea that, in the world of goods, men and women could find a paradise free from pain and suffering; they could find, as one historian of religion put it, the “good” through “goods.”

Popular culture also promoted the mind-cure ideology. As examples, there were L. Frank Baum’s The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, which Leach characterized as “perhaps the best mind cure text ever written,” and the Billikens doll, a squat Buddha-like figure, sometimes male and sometimes female, that represented the “god of things as they ought to be.” Its success was without parallel in the toy trade and helped incite the doll craze in America. Billikens, it was said, would drive away petty annoyances and cares. One contemporary put it this way: “An atmosphere of gorged content pervades Billikens. No one can look at him [or her] and worry.”
The popularity of the Billikens doll signaled change in spiritual values: It was now permissible to seek self-fulfillment in this life and find elements of satisfaction in manufactured commodities. The world was a good place: There was no misery; poverty, injustice, and inequities were only in the mind. There was enough for everyone.

These changes were not unique to America. Many of the same changes occurred in other nations, most notably Great Britain, Germany, and France (Carrier 1995), and are occurring now all over the world. The consumer revolution of the early twentieth century was not the first of its kind either—it evolved with great intensity and rapidity in America.

Thus, by the 1930s, the “consumer” as a category of person had, as Lizabeth Cohen (2003) points out, replaced the “citizen,” adopting a spiritual and intellectual framework that glorified the continued consumption of commodities as personally fulfilling and economically desirable—a moral imperative that would end poverty and injustice.

The Reconfiguration of Time, Space, and Class

The creation of the consumer did not stop in 1930. Since that time, the institutions of our society, particularly those of corporate America, have become increasingly more adept at creating sandpaintings in which people inhabit worlds whose very nature requires the continuous consumption of goods. The need to consume has reordered our organization of time, reconstructed our living space, created new spaces for the encouragement of consumption, and altered the ways that we view one another.

Into the early nineteenth century in the United States, holiday celebrations—most religious, but some secular—marked each year. Washington’s Birthday, for example, was one of the most important (see, e.g., Schmidt 1995:47). But holidays were not generally times for gift giving and consumption. In fact, most people, particularly merchants and trades people, viewed holidays and festivities as impediments to work discipline, and they made an effort to reduce their number.

By the late nineteenth century, however, retailers began to recognize the commercial potential of holidays. In 1897, the trade journal Dry Goods Economist mocked those who viewed holidays as “an interruption of business” instead of an opportunity for “special sales and attractive displays.” The modern retailer, they said, knew that there was “never a holiday” that did not make for increased business. Thus, as Leigh Eric Schmidt observes, “holidays, rather than being impediments to disciplined economic advancement, were seen as critical for consumption and profit” (Schmidt 1995:37).

Valentine’s Day is a good example. Until the fourteenth century, St. Valentine was known largely for his “steadfastness in the face of torturous martyrdom.” English poet Geoffrey Chaucer is generally credited with laying the foundation for the pairing of St. Valentine with lovers when, in his Parliament of Fowls, he wrote that birds were said to choose their mates on St. Valentine’s Day (Schmidt 1995:40ff.). Thus, St. Valentine became the patron saint of lovers. On St. Valentine’s Day in Scotland, young women would try to divine their future mates, while among the elites it became a day for romantic poetry and gift giving, gloves being a popular item. By the 1840s and 1850s in the United States, the practice of exchanging cards became
Part I • The Society of Perpetual Growth

widespread. By the late nineteenth century, the meaning of the term *valentine* had changed. Instead of referring to a person’s sweetheart or betrothed, it came to refer to a commodity, a commercial product that could be consumed like any other. By the end of the nineteenth century, department stores were filling their windows with love missives, jewelry, and other suggestions for gifts. In 1910, a traveling salesman by the name of Joyce C. Hall began a postcard business specializing in Valentine missives that would evolve into Hallmark Cards. By the 1990s, Hallmark had 40 percent of the American greeting card business (Schmidt 1995:100). Of course, other holidays, such as Christmas, soon followed Valentine’s Day as occasions for mass consumption, and by the early 1920s, flowers for Mother’s Day became firmly fixed in the holiday firmament. Thus, our organization of time, our calendar of festivities, became redefined to promote consumption.

The need to create consumers also redefined our conception of space. Home ownership, for example, particularly of the product-greedy single-family home, cast people out from city centers into the sprawling suburbs, which necessitated new roads and more cars, and, in the end, virtually destroyed public transportation. Retailers and developers quickly realized the possibilities inherent in these new communities; people, they reasoned, had an endless desire to consume. “Our economy,” said Macy’s board chairman Jack Isidor Straus, “keeps on growing because our ability to consume is endless. The consumer goes on spending regardless of how many possessions he or she has. The luxuries of today are the necessities of tomorrow” (Cohen 2003:261). But it was also believed that suburbanites were growing reluctant to travel to urban centers to shop. The solution was to bring the market to the people, and retailers and developers relocated shopping areas from city centers to spacious shopping centers and malls. Consumers gave various reasons for shifting their shopping from downtown to shopping centers, but the most important issues seemed to involve convenience—easy accessibility (malls and shopping centers were always constructed adjacent to new highways), easy parking, improved store layouts, increased self-service, simplified credit with charge plates, and greater availability of products. Market researchers concluded that shoppers were attracted to the ease and “progressiveness” of mall shopping. Consumers seemed to share the developers’ sense that shopping centers were the modern way to consume (Cohen 2003:268).

The new ease of shopping, however, came with some costs. Shopping centers and malls were, unlike city centers, private spaces in which owners could control political activities. They were also easily accessible only to people with automobiles, thus removing from the suburban landscape those shoppers at the low end of the social ladder. In addition, they redefined the nature of social interaction; shopping malls. Bauman (1998:25)

are so constructed as to keep people moving, looking around, keep them diverted and entertained no end—but in no case looking too long—by any of the endless attractions; not to encourage them to stop, look at each other, think of, ponder, and debate something other than the objects on display—not to pass their time in a fashion devoid of commercial value…. Hence a territory stripped of public space provides little chance for norms being debated, for values to be confronted, to clash and to be negotiated.

In addition to defining the times and spaces in which we live and shop, marketers also redefined categories of people. In the early days of advertising, and up until the 1960s, manufacturers and retailers pitched their products and services to the mass market, continually stimulating demand by offering new products, changing styles, and so forth. But in the 1950s, a new theory of marketing gained acceptance; rather than marketing products and services to a vast, undifferentiated middle class, sellers would differentiate or segment the market, appealing to the desires and needs of each special group. A new field, psychographics, emerged that became so sophisticated that the chief executive of Spiegel Company would boast that armed to the teeth with information, the marketer was “the friend who knows them [consumers] as
well as—perhaps better than—they know themselves” (Cohen 2003:299). Target marketing singled out children and minorities for pointed appeals; marketers used “lifestyle branding”—selling products by attracting consumers to a particular way of life rather than the good itself. Advertisers segmented by class and income, and then by gender and then age. They categorized consumers with statistical precision and gave them labels such as “blue blood estates,” “shoguns and pickups,” and “[H]ispanic mix residents,” singling these groups out for direct marketing, telemarketing, and Internet shopping solicitation. “Rather than sell commodities in as much volume as possible to the masses,” says Lizabeth Cohen (2003:299), “modern-day marketers, equipped with advanced psychographic tactics, identify clusters of customers with distinctive ways of life and then set out to sell them idealized lifestyles constructed around commodities.” Today, of course, there are companies that scour the internet for personal information that enable advertisers to customize the ads that appear on people’s Facebook pages (Tynan 2010).

Magazines probably represent the clearest example of segmentation—note the shift from the dominant magazines of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s (Life, Look, Saturday Evening Post) and examine a typical magazine rack today. We might ask ourselves to what extent has the market segmentation created or exaggerated social and cultural divisions that might otherwise not exist, leaving people with less and less to share.

As Lizabeth Cohen (2003:318) points out, if any kind of segmentation epitomized the goals of marketers and advertisers, it was segmenting by age. First targeting teenagers and then children, they succeeded, with the help of governments, schools, and other institutions, in redefining childhood itself.

KINDERCULTURE IN AMERICA: THE CHILD AS CONSUMER

The Role of Children in Capitalism

Anthropology teaches us that, much like the rest of our culture, childhood is socially created—that is, childhood and the ways it is defined vary from society to society and from era to era. Childhood in nineteenth-century America was very different from what it is today. Prior to the nineteenth century, the major role of children in a capitalist economy was as workers (Lasch 1977:14ff.). There were few industries that did not employ children at some level, and there were few families whose children did not contribute economically through either farm or factory labor. In twentieth-century America, this began to change. Social movements that for decades worked to restrict child labor finally convinced state and federal legislatures to pass laws making child labor illegal. These developments signaled a transformation of children from workers to consumers. Although this may not have been the intent of the reformers, children were to contribute far more to the national economy as consumers than they ever did as laborers.

It wasn’t until the beginning of the twentieth century that retailers began to target children as a discrete group of consumers. As late as 1890, there was not a children’s market worth considering; children ate, wore, and played with what their parents made for them. Germany was by far the largest producer of children’s toys, and there were few, if any, factories in the United States producing children’s clothing. Nor was there any market for infants’ or children’s foods. Yet by 1915, the baby clothing industry was one of the largest in the United States, with seventy-five factories operating in New York State alone. Toy production increased by 1,300 percent between 1905 and 1920. One reason was the destruction of the German toy industry during World War I. Another was the development of new toys in the United States that became international sensations, such as the racist Alabama Coon Jigger, a laughing, prancing, mechanical black male. But, most importantly, retailers were beginning to appreciate the profits that could be made from children’s commodities.

Retailers also began to take note of psychologists’ discovery of the “natural desire” of “little people” for goods and toys, heeding the psychologists’ advice that “every attention shown the child binds the mother to the store,” or the observation that if they cultivated consumers “as
kids [they would] have them as customers for a lifetime.” Santa Claus became one of the major vehicles for selling toys; his commercialization hit its peak in the 1920s.

Child psychologists and home economists also advised parents that children needed toys for exercise and toys to relax; children, they said, should have their own playrooms. These same experts lectured at department stores, advising parents of the educational values of toys. With this new emphasis on the child as consumer, by 1926, America had become the greatest producer of toys and playthings in the world. There were toys for the backyard, camping, the beach, and the “little private room which every child desperately needs to fulfill his or her individuality.” Play, said the experts, “is the child’s business; toys the material with which he works” (Leach 1993:328).

The federal government played a major role in redefining childhood. In 1929, Herbert Hoover sponsored a White House Conference on Child Health and Protection. The conference report, *The Home and the Child*, concluded that children were independent beings with particular concerns of their own. The child, the report said,

> is often an alien in his home when it comes to any consideration of his special needs in the furnishings and equipment of the home. He belongs nowhere. He must accommodate himself to an adult environment—chairs and tables are too big and too high for him; there is no suitable place for his books and his toys. He moves in a misfit world with nothing apportioned to his needs. Often this results in retarding his physical, mental, and social development. (White House 1931)

The report advised parents to give their children their own “furniture and eating equipment” suitable to each child’s age and size; it further advised parents to provide playrooms inside the house and to fill the backyard with “toys, velocipedes, sawhorses, wagons, wheelbarrows, slides, and places to keep pets.” The report noted that “Generally a sleeping room for each person is desirable.” As a child grows “older and becomes more social he wants games and toys that he can share with his friends.” When the family decides on “the purchase of a piece of furniture or a musical instrument” of common interest, it is important to consult the children. Take them shopping for their own “things and let them pick them out by themselves.”

Through such experiences personality develops…. [These] experiences have the advantage also of creating in the child a sense of personal as well as family pride in ownership, and eventually teaching him that his personality can be expressed through things. (White House 1931 [emphasis added]; see also Leach 1993:371–372)

Thus, in the span of some thirty years, the role of children in American life changed dramatically; they became, and remain, pillars of the consumer economy, with economic power rivaling that of adults. Children have become a main target of advertisers; as one marketing specialist told the *Wall Street Journal*, “even two-year-olds are concerned about their brand of clothes, and by the age of six are full-out consumers” (Durning 1992:120). Marketing researchers estimate that children ages two to fourteen directly influence $188 billion of parental spending, indirectly influence another $300 billion, and spend themselves some $25 billion. Teen spending alone jumped from $63 billion in 1994 to $94 billion in 1998, to some $175 billion by 2003, and to over $200 billion in 2007 (see Market Research Portal 2006; McNeal 1999; Zollo 1999). Children see about 40,000 ads a year on TV alone, not to mention those delivered to them on their cell phones, music devices, instant messaging, and video games, and spend almost as much time on media as they do sleeping. (see Rideout, Roberts, and Foehr 2010:1).

Advertisers and marketing specialists, including anthropologists and psychologists, devise all sorts of campaigns to appeal to children and are often criticized for the messages they communicate. But some advertising executives are quite candid in their objectives. As one said, “No one’s really worrying about what it’s teaching impressionable youth. Hey, I’m in the business
of convincing people to buy things they don’t need” (Business Week, August 11, 1997:35). Advertisers work on such things as the “nag factor,” explaining to clients that children’s nagging inspires about a third of a family’s trips to a fast-food restaurant, video store, or children’s clothing store (Ruskin 1999). Advertisers explicitly work on a child’s desire to be accepted and on their fear of being “losers.” As one ad agency president put it,

Kids are very sensitive to that. If you tell them to buy something, they are resistant. But if you tell them that they’ll be a dork if they don’t, you’ve got their attention. You open up emotional vulnerabilities, and it’s very easy to do with kids because they’re the most emotionally vulnerable. (Harris 1989)

As colleges and universities adapted to the need to persuade people to consume with new academic courses and programs, primary and secondary schools were adapting by providing marketers with access to children. Channel One is a marketing company that delivers ten minutes a day of TV news to some 8 million students in 12,000 schools, provided students also watch two minutes of advertising. “The biggest selling point to advertisers,” says Joel Babbit, former president of Channel One, lies in “forcing kids to watch two minutes of commercials.” As Babbit (Ruskin 1999) put it,

[T]he advertiser gets a group of kids who cannot go to the bathroom, who cannot change the station, who cannot listen to their mother yell in the background, who cannot be playing Nintendo, who cannot have their headsets on.

The Social Construction of Childhood

In the early part of the twentieth century, retail establishments, particularly the new department stores, took the lead in redefining the world of children. They produced their own radio programs for children and put on elaborate shows. Macy’s, which by the late 1920s had the largest toy department in the world, put on playlets for children in makeshift theaters or in store auditoriums. The most popular department store show was The Wizard of Oz; when the show was put on at Field’s in Chicago, the children wore green-tinted glasses to better appreciate the “Emerald City.”

In this era, the event that most symbolized the reconstruction of childhood was Christmas. Christmas became a time of toy giving in America in the 1840s. By the 1870s, this holiday was appropriated by retail establishments as a way to sell goods; people at that time had already begun to complain that Christmas was becoming overcommercialized (Carrier 1995:189). But it wasn’t until the early twentieth century that retail establishments turned Christmas into a spectacle that appealed to children especially. By the mid-1920s, nearly every city in America had its own “radio” Santa Claus. Gimbel’s in New York received thousands of letters addressed to Santa Claus; each was carefully answered by staff and signed “Santa,” with the name of each child carefully indexed for future use (Leach 1993:330). In 1924, Macy’s inaugurated its Thanksgiving Day parade, which ran from 145th Street to West 34th Street and culminated with the appearance of Santa Claus standing on Macy’s 34th Street marquee waving to the throngs below.

Thanksgiving also came to mark the beginning of the Christmas buying season, a time when Americans spend some 4 percent of their income on Christmas gifts and when department stores sell 40 percent of their yearly total of toys and 25 percent of their candy, cosmetics, toiletries, stationery, greeting cards, and books. (By the early 1990s, Americans were spending about $37 billion on Christmas gifts, a sum greater than the gross national product [GNP] of all but forty-five countries in the world [see Restad 1995:160]. By 2006, Americans were spending over $700 a person, a total of $457.4 billion, during the “winter holidays,” including Christmas [Roysdon 2006].) The government did its part in defining the Christmas buying season when
Fred Lazarus Jr., who was to become president of Ohio’s Federated Department Stores, persuaded President Franklin Roosevelt in 1939 to move Thanksgiving Day from November 30, its traditional date, to November 23 to add one more week to the Christmas buying season. Congress made that official in 1941 when it moved the Thanksgiving celebration from the last Thursday in November to the fourth Thursday. The government thus assured that it could fall no later than November 28, guaranteeing a minimum four-week shopping spree (Restad 1995:162).

Santa Claus represents one of the more elaborate ways in which the culture of capitalism shields its members, particularly children, from some of its less savory features. The story of Santa Claus represented a world in which consumer, capitalist, and laborer were idealized: Commodities (toys) were manufactured by happy elves working in Santa’s workshop (no factories at the North Pole, and certainly no Chinese assembly plants) and were distributed, free of charge, to good boys and girls by a corpulent, grandfatherly male in fur-trimmed clothes. It is perhaps ironic that when political cartoonist Thomas Nast created what has become the contemporary image of Santa Claus in 1862, he modeled Santa’s costume after the fur-trimmed clothes worn by the wealthy Astor family (Carrier 1995:189).

Nast also created Santa’s workshop, perhaps in nostalgic remembrance of prefactory production. Writers as early as the 1870s recognized the irony of this idealized version of Christmas and toy production. One magazine editorial in 1873, commenting on a picture of Santa’s elves working gaily in some magical workplace, turning out dolls, boats, tops, and toy soldiers, compared it with the reality of the poor, working six days a week in factories (Restad 1995:149). William Waits, in his book The Modern Christmas in America (1992), suggested that Santa’s major role was to “decontaminate” Christmas gifts, removing the stigma of factory industry (Waits 1992:25).

Others, of course, played a major role in transforming childhood, but we can do no better than to trace the trajectory of this transformation from its beginning in the stories of L. Frank Baum and his Emerald City to its logical culmination in Walt Disney World.
Chapter 1 • Constructing the Consumer

THE APPROPRIATION OF CHILDHOOD, PART I: BAUM’S EMERALD CITY

Pre-1900 children’s stories were very different from those common today. The most famous were the stories of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. The Grimm brothers took traditional European folktales, most of which contained fairly gruesome and bizarre plots (cannibalism, incest, murder, etc.), and rewrote them so that they could be used as tools for the socialization of children. Each rewritten tale contained a moral lesson. But, as with nineteenth-century religion, government, and economic institutions, these stories lacked the power to produce the necessary mind-cure impulse to consume. Consequently, there emerged new kinds of stories in which the world was cleansed of the darkness of the Grimm’s stories and presented as a happy place full of desirable things. The leader in this reconstruction of the child’s universe was Baum.

Baum came from a well-to-do New York state family and had moved with his wife, Maud Gage (whose mother, Matilda Joslyn Gage, was a prominent nineteenth-century feminist leader), in the late 1880s to Aberdeen, South Dakota, where he opened a large retail store (Baum’s Bazaar). In 1891, economic depression hit Aberdeen, and Baum went broke. He moved his family to Chicago, where he began to write the stories that would make him famous. In addition, he took a lively interest in the art of window display, becoming an advisor to some of the largest department stores in the city.

Baum had always loved the theater, and he combined that with his interest in business to make window displays into theatrical productions, showing off retail goods to their best advantage. The quality of the goods mattered little to Baum; how they looked, their “selling power,” was what mattered. He soon founded the National Association of Window Trimmers and developed a manual and later a journal, The Show Window, devoted to window displays. (The journal changed its title to Display World in the 1920s; it exists today as Visual Merchandising.) Baum’s general message was to “use the best art to arouse in the observer the cupidity and longing to possess the goods” (Leach 1993:60).

Baum’s personal philosophy was compatible with the various mind-cure movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. “People do not sin and should not feel guilt,” he wrote in 1890 in the Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer. “[T]he good things in life are given to be used.” The “rainy day” theory of saving was all right, according to Baum, as long as it wasn’t used as an excuse to deny oneself comforts. Who, he asked,

will be the gainer when Death calls him to the last account—the man who can say “I have lived!” or the man who can say “I have saved? … To gain all the meat from the nut of life is the essence of wisdom. Therefore, “eat, drink, and be merry—tomorrow you die.” (Leach 1993:247)

Baum’s books were filled with goods and mechanical inventions and landscapes of edible fruits, cakes, cookies, all intended to assure readers that the world was a good place. They were, said William Leach, affirmative, Americanized fairy tales. In fact, Baum’s explicit goal was to revolutionize children’s literature. In his introduction to the first edition of The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, Baum wrote,

The time has come for a series of newer “wonder tales” in which the stereotyped genie, dwarf and fairy are eliminated, together with all the horrible and blood-curdling incidents devised by their authors to point to a fearsome moral to each tale…. The Wonderful Wizard of Oz was written solely to please children of today. It aspires to being a modernized fairy tale, in which the wonderment and joy are retained and the heartaches and nightmares are left out. (Leach 1993:251)

The story of The Wizard of Oz can be interpreted as a tribute to our ability to create illusions and magic, to make people believe in spite of themselves. In Baum’s stories, the Wizard is exposed as a charlatan, a “common man” with no special powers; but he is powerful because he can make
others do what he wants, make them believe in the unbelievable. He is a confidence man. People adored him even as he escaped from Oz in a balloon and was remembered as the man who “built for us this beautiful Emerald City.” Baum, said William Leach, created a benign trickster, consumer society’s version of the capitalist. *The Wizard of Oz* represented a new spiritual–ethical climate that modeled itself on a version of the child’s world in which dreams of self-fulfillment through consumption were legitimized and any negative consequences of consumption were banished. In brief, Baum’s work represented but one of the sandpaintings of capitalism, one that appropriates childhood to represent a world in which the purpose of life is to consume.

Yet, as sophisticated as Baum was in creating an ethos that encouraged people to buy, the master of the art was to be Walt Disney.

**THE APPROPRIATION OF CHILDHOOD, PART II: WALT DISNEY AND THE CREATION OF DISNEY WORLD** It is difficult to say when the child’s universe, created to turn children into consumers, began to be used to entice adults. Perhaps the glorification of “youth” in advertising and the upward extension of childhood to include the teens were manifestations of this phenomenon. Regardless, the appropriation of childhood as a vehicle to encourage consumption at all ages and rationalize capitalism culminated in the creation of Walt Disney World. Disney and other major American corporations have created what Shirley Steinberg and Joseph Kincheloe (see Kincheloe 1997) call *kinderculture*, the promotion of an ethos of pleasure for the purpose of enticing adults as well as children to consume.

Walt Disney World is the ultimate sandpainting of the culture of capitalism. Instead of a single sandpainter using bits of colored sand and grain to create a picture barely large enough to contain a single person, a corporation has used millions of tons of concrete, wood, plastic, and glass to create the “home of childhood,” a miniature universe that promotes innocence and trust, that allows people to leave the “real world” behind, and that encourages (in fact, insists) that participants put themselves in the hands of Disney. However, as Stephen Fjellman (1992:13) warned, these hands bear watching, for in their shaping of things lies danger. It is not just that our movements are constrained with the promise, usually fulfilled, of rewards. What is important is that our thoughts are constrained. They are channeled not only in the interests of Disney itself, but also in the interests of the large corporations with which Disney has allied itself, the system of power they maintain, and the world of commodities that is their life’s blood.

If we look beyond the pleasantries, said Fjellman, we find that the environment is totally controlled and that there is a degree of discipline at work in this model world that rivals the discipline of a fascist state. And the control is real. In creating Walt Disney World, the Disney Corporation secretly bought forty square miles of Central Florida real estate (twice the size of Manhattan) and was granted almost feudal powers over the land by the state. Disney World has its own government, it sets the rules, and it controls the message. But what is the message of the Disney World sandpainting? To answer this question, let’s examine two aspects of Disney World: its depiction of American history and its representation of progress and the future.

*History, or distory,* as Mike Wallace (1985) called it, is everywhere at Walt Disney World, appropriated, like childhood, in the service of the Disney message. The history, of course, is highly idealized. At Disney World, historical figures such as Thomas Edison, Davy Crockett, Benjamin Franklin, and Mark Twain are used as spokespersons for Disney, lending their authority to the Disney message. Fragments of Abraham Lincoln’s speeches, most often taken out of context, are read to us by robots; and Leonardo Da Vinci, the Disney model of the prophetic visionary, is everywhere. At Disney World, there is a conscious attempt to present the history of capitalism without the warts. Disney World designers are quite forthright and unapologetic about their intent. As one Disney spokesperson explained, “We are not telling history like it really was but as it should have been” (Fjellman 1992:31). Another Disney
“imagineer,” as the designers are called, explains “Disney realism” as a “sort of utopian nature, where we program out all the negative, unwanted elements and program in the positive elements” (Wallace 1985:35).

The center of Disney World (and the original Disneyland in California) is Main Street, a highly idealized, turn-of-the-century remodeling of life as it should have been, a consumer’s paradise, scaled down to five-eighths of actual size. The street or square is filled with shops and taverns; people are defined by what they sell. Main Street cultivates a nostalgia for an imagined past without classes, crime, or conflict—a time of continuous consumption, “a supermarket of fun.”

On one level, Disney World is an extension of the shop windows designed by L. Frank Baum in the 1890s; on another it serves as an explicit model for the modern shopping mall. Urban planner James Rouse based a number of his town designs and historical shopping malls (Faneuil Hall in Boston, Harborplace in Baltimore, and South Street Seaport in New York) on Disney’s Main Street (Wallace 1985:42; see also Kowinski 1985).

At the Hall of Presidents, Disney takes viewers through U.S. history in twenty-nine minutes flat. Disney does recognize, in a fashion, that U.S. history was not all that perfect. After all, the average adult visitor to Disney World is a well-educated professional who could not have been ignorant of the historical injustices in the United States’ past. Consequently, Disney World provides Frederick Douglass to speak to the oppression of blacks, Chief Joseph represents indigenous peoples, Susan B. Anthony speaks about the concerns of women, and John Muir serves to remind visitors that progress often came at the expense of the environment. However, each is a highly sanitized symbol of opposition to racism, sexism, and environmental devastation. In “distory,” these figures do not remind us of persistent problems in the social fabric; rather they are presented as opportunities to overcome barriers. This is also bad, if not outright false, history.

For example, Disney appropriates for its version of indigenous people in American history the story of Chief Joseph and the Nez Percé. In 1877, the U.S. government, largely at the insistence of settlers who wanted the land, unilaterally revised previous treaty commitments and attempted to resettle all Nez Percé in the Walla Walla Valley of Washington on smaller reservations. One group, led by Chief Joseph and the war chief Looking Glass, refused and, after some young warriors killed a trader accused of selling bad whiskey to the Indians, fled the area, heading east into Idaho, Wyoming, and Montana in an attempt to reach Canada. They were pursued by the command of General Oliver O. Howard, whom Joseph’s band defeated in battle after battle or consistently outmaneuvered. The campaign, one of the most bloody and heroic of the Indian wars, ended when Joseph and the remnants of his band were finally surrounded by one of the three army commands that had set out to intercept them. In blizzard conditions on October 5, 1877, only forty miles from the Canadian border, Joseph met with the army’s commanders to surrender. His surrender speech, among the most famous speeches in American history, was written down by an army lieutenant. At Walt Disney World, Chief Joseph, in robot form, once again delivers his speech; the Disney version is as follows (Fjellman 1992:104):

_Enough, enough of your words._
_Let your new dawn lead to the final sunset on my people’s suffering._
_When I think of our condition, my heart is sick._
_I see men of my own race treated as outlaws, or shot down like animals._
_I pray that all of us may be brothers, with one country around us, and one government for all._
_From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever._

However, except for the famous final line, that was not what Joseph said. Here is the original speech as recorded that day in 1877 (Beal 1963:229):

_Tell General Howard I know his heart. What he told me before I have in my heart._
_I am tired of fighting. Our chiefs are killed. Looking Glass is dead. The old men are_
all killed. It is the young men who say yes or no. He who led the young men is dead. It is cold and we have no blankets. The little children are freezing to death. My people some of them have run away to the hills and have no blankets, no food; no one knows where they are, perhaps freezing to death. I want time to look for my children and see how many of them I can find. Maybe I will find them among the dead. Hear me my chiefs, I am tired; my heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands, I will fight no more forever.

There is a significant difference between the Disney version and the one recorded on the battlefield. Instead of freezing children, the death of the elderly, and a military campaign that ended only after the deaths of hundreds of American soldiers and Nez Percé warriors, Joseph’s surrender speech has been turned by Disney into a testimonial to brotherhood and the nation-state.

In telling history “as it should have been,” Disney paints a picture of an American past of which people can be proud, while subtly justifying whatever excesses may have been committed. As in the land of Oz, everything has happened for the better.

Epcot (Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow) is a more adult attraction than Fantasyland or some of the other venues of Disney World. Epcot was Walt Disney’s pet project at the time of his death in December 1966. It was to be a utopian city of 20,000-plus residents that would attract urban planners and experimenters from all over the world. But Walt Disney died, and corporate Disney turned the project into a gigantic, corporate advertisement, using the 1939 World’s Fair in New York as its guide and having pavilions depict the corporate version of the history of progress. Thus, at Epcot, Exxon presents the history of energy, while AT&T does communications. Transportation is presented by General Motors, the land by Kraft, the home by General Electric, and imagination by Kodak. Perhaps even more interesting, at the heart of each corporate pavilion is a ride, a setting much like a sandpainting, in which seated passengers travel through tunnels that open to huge dioramas filled with robots, videos, holograms, and other technological marvels.

Throughout the Epcot pavilions there is this message: Technology equals progress, and progress is natural—and perhaps even American. There have been some problems along the way, the corporate exhibits tell us. “We” have made mistakes—but “we” (corporations) are working to solve those problems. “We” polluted the air, “we” abused the environment. Thus, the imagineers admit that there were problems in the past but reject corporate responsibility for them, putting the corporations at the forefront of the ecology movement. History is defined for us as “a record of the invention of commodities which allow man to master his environment” (Wallace 1985:44). Progress is defined as the availability of emancipatory consumer goods. The World of Tomorrow promotes capitalist development as inevitable, spreading the message that history was made by inventors and businesspeople and that the corporations are the legatees of this past. It tells us, as Mike Wallace (1985:47) observed, that “citizens can sit back and consume.”

But who is Disney World for? It is supposed to be for children, but it really represents the appropriation of childhood to encourage the consumption of commodities and, more importantly, once again to shield the consumer from the negative side of corporate capitalism. Walt Disney World is now the single biggest tourist attraction in the entire world. Approximately one-tenth of the population of the United States travels there each year. But it is not a universal attraction. By and large, it attracts people of relatively high incomes, 75 percent of whom are professionals or managers. Only 3 percent are black and 2 percent Hispanic. Seventy-one percent are from outside Florida. As Wallace (1985:53) said,

A process of class self-affirmation seems to be at work. Certainly, Disney World seems intent on providing reassurance to this class, on presenting it with its own pedigree. EPCOT’s seventies-style liberal corporatism seems tailor-made for
professionals and technocrats. It’s calibrated to their concerns—nothing on labor, heavy on ecology, clean, well-managed, emphasis on individual solutions, good restaurants—and it provides just the right kind of past for their hippier sensibilities. Perhaps, therefore, professionals and managers (many of whom, after all, function as subalterns of capital) flock there because it ratifies their world. Perhaps they don’t want to know about reality—past or present—and prefer comforting and plausible stereotypes. [emphasis added]

Or as O’Toole Fintan (1998:21) put it,

Places like Disney World grapple with the problem of an audience that already knows about the exploitation and violence that its way of life requires for maintenance, but that needs, for its own well-being, to maintain a civilized distance from that knowledge.

Walt Disney World is only one manifestation of the tendency or necessity in capitalism to mask the unpleasant side effects of capitalist production and consumption. People may choose to do something that is harmful to others, but they do so according to a cultural logic that makes it the “right” choice. Our culture makes choosing even easier by masking the sometimes-devastating consequences of our choices. Thus, the process of insulating the consumer from truths that might reduce consumption is built into the culture of capitalism; this denial determines in many ways how we view the world. Put another way, the world as seen from the consumer’s point of view is very different from the world as seen from the perspective of worker, capitalist, or people of other cultures around the world. One of the tasks of this book is to try to help the reader appreciate these other points of view.

**EXPORTING THE CONSUMER**

The construction of the consumer in the Western industrial countries took a century to accomplish. In the rest of the world it is taking less than a decade. According to recent studies, some 1.7 billion people, 27 percent of the world’s population, can be counted as members of the consumer society—270 million in the United States and Canada, some 350 million in Western Europe, and 120 million in Japan. The rest live in developing countries—240 million in China, and 120 million in India alone. In 2006, China became the world’s number two automobile market and in 2011 a total of 14.5 million sedans, sport utility vehicles, and multipurpose vehicles were shipped to dealers.

The Chinese government fully supports this development (as it bulldozes ancient city centers to construct broad avenues to accommodate the automobile) and is planning a countrywide highway network. If growth continues at that pace, by 2015 China will have more automobiles on the road than the United States (Gallagher 2006; Halweil and Mastny 2004:xvii, 3).

Capitalism, writes William Leach (1993:388), “had achieved a new level of strength and world influence, especially in the wake of the collapse of communism.” It also, he concluded, appears to have a nearly unchallenged hold over every aspect of American life, from politics to culture, so much so that the United States looks like a fashion bazaar to much of the rest of the world. For some Americans the continued power of consumerism has led to further degradation of what it means to be an American or of what America is all about. For others, this evolution has only enhanced the country’s appeal, making it appear more than ever an Emerald City, a feast, a department store to which everyone is invited and entitled. Just as cities in the United States once operated as generators of consumer desire for internal markets, today America functions similarly on a global scale.
The phenomenon by which people around the world want to emulate consumer capitalism represents what Joseph Nye (2003) calls “soft power.” We see this power in Hollywood, which dominates the cultural industries. Countries such as India and Hong Kong try to emulate Hollywood’s style while modeling for their audiences’ lifestyles and values that they seek to acquire. Information industries around the world are dominated by Anglo-American news. People know what happens in the world because they get the news from AP or Reuters, CNN or NBC (Sisci 2002). We also see this power in the increasing popularity of American sports figures around the world: Michael Jordan, LeBron James, and Tiger Woods are often more familiar names to residents of China or Indonesia than are the countries’ leaders (see, e.g., LaFeber 1999).

The rapidity of this global consumer transformation is most evident in India and China, the two most populous countries in the world, with more than one-third of the total global population. Take the case of Rajesh Julka, a thirty-four-year-old resident of the Indian city of Kolkata. In 1996, Julka couldn’t afford to replace his ten-year-old television. His father had just retired, and his mother was trying to run a beauty parlor from one of the rooms in their congested ground-floor apartment. Julka was unemployed and trying to establish a sari-making operation. But by 2003, within the span of seven years, he had turned into what Indrajit Basu (2003) calls an “Indian yuppie.” He married, had a child, and has since acquired a $100,000 condominium while replacing his cell phone every three months. He bought three new cars during the past four years and recently bought a $2,500 notebook PC during his July holiday to Singapore. “I can’t resist buying newer models of electronic goodies,” he says. He now also owns three televisions.

Rajesh Julka represents a burgeoning consumer-conscious Indian middle class that has grown to some 445 million people, larger than the entire population of the United States. This middle class is developing new spending patterns; from 1999 to 2002, they spent 4 percent less of their income on groceries and almost 5 percent more on eating out and taking vacations. Spending on personal care went up 2.5 percent during the same period, whereas saving and investing went down almost 7 percent. And because more than 45 percent of India’s population is under nineteen years of age, consumption levels are likely to increase at a far faster rate than in industrial countries. In 2011 consumer spending in India reached almost $1 trillion and is expected to increase to $3.6 trillion by 2020, and India’s share of global consumption will more than double to 5.8 percent (Bidwai 2003; FirstPost 2011).

And the most prominent symbols of consumer culture are the glitzy, air-conditioned, chrome-and-glass malls, replete with boutiques, restaurants, discos, bars, and theaters that are appearing in India. In addition to the twenty already existing, some 240 megamalls are under construction, forty-three of them in one of the wealthy suburbs of Delhi (Bidwai 2003).

The strategies that created the consumer in the United States were used to equal effect in India. Harold Wilhite (2008:148) notes that in Trivandrum, the capital of the Indian state of Kerala, almost every home is equipped with three things: a mixmaster (mixie), a designated place for prayer, and a television. Since 1995, when cable television became available in Trivandrum, everyone has taken to watching the evening soap operas. TV has replaced cinema as the most popular entertainment, and women, he notes, watch on average about four hours a day. In India
in 2009, the court granted a woman a divorce on the grounds that her husband refused to let her watch her favorite soap opera (BBC 2009). And television, as it did in the United States, vastly increased the amount of advertising people watched.

Television may be one of the most important contributors to the export of consumption to countries in the periphery. In the United States, Juliet Schor’s (1999) research found that for every hour of television people watched, they spent an additional $200. While it is difficult to measure the effect that television watching has in India, Wilhite notes that the principal sponsor of one soap opera saw its sales rise 300 percent in the two years the series was shown. And, says Wilhite, people watch and enjoy advertisements, citing them as reasons for buying products. As in the United States, television in India has targeted children, who claim to want 75 percent of what they see advertised on television.

What is happening in India is also happening to the most populous country in the world, China. China has averaged GDP growth from 8 percent to 10 percent for more than a decade. GDP for 2011 was US$7.2 trillion, slightly less than half of the United States’ $15 trillion economy. And growth and consumer spending continue to soar. Retail sales in 2008 totaled $1.59 trillion, almost 22 percent higher than the previous year, but have been declining slightly because of the global recession.

The same tools that functioned to construct the consumer in the United States are at work in China. In 2010, $120 billion was spent on advertising in China, up from $57 billion in 2006, and $11 billion in 2002 (Ng 2010). Chinese are becoming homeowners, as Americans did in the 1950s. Housing reforms turned over vast amounts of state-owned housing to the people who lived in them at discounts of up to 80 percent. Other laws ensured private property ownership. Home ownership is transforming asset-poor renters into homeowners and driving the purchases of refrigerators, stoves, air conditioners, and cars.

As in the United States, the Chinese consumer is being leveraged through mortgages, auto loans, credit cards, and consumer finance. Credit cards are in their absolute infancy. In 2003, about a million credit cards had been issued—one for every 1,300 people; in 2008, there were 140 million to 150 million credit cards and the rate was increasing at over 97 percent a year. Mortgages were made available only in 2000, auto loans in 2001. Auto ownership, fueled by credit, exploded upward: China had only two cars per 1,000 people in 1997; by 2010 it has reached forty cars per 1,000 persons (compared to 765 per 1,000 in the United States). And perhaps there is no better evidence of the spread of consumerism in China than the mushrooming of fast-food restaurants. There are almost 500 McDonald’s in China, and the company plans on doubling that number over the next few years. New restaurants will even have drive-throughs to accommodate the rapid growth of cars in China. The restaurants have become so ubiquitous in Asia that when Chinese, Korean, Japanese, or Taiwanese kids visit America and spot a McDonald’s they exclaim that “They have our kind of food here!” (Watson 2000:131).

In the cases of both China and India, one factor in the rising wave of consumption is the same baby boomers (people born at the end of World War II) who fueled consumption in the United States, except that in the case of Asia there are 1 billion of them. In addition, just as children began to move from their parents’ homes after 1950 in the United States, they are leaving their parents in Asia. These new households require refrigerators and stoves, pots and pans, and toasters and stereos (Berthelsen 2003; Wilhite 2008).

The responses to these trends are the same as they were in the United States; emerging economies have encouraged the growth of consumer spending and the spread of supermarkets, chain stores, and malls. Wal-Mart and the French Carrefour chain now have nearly fifty stores
in China, a phenomenon that is already beginning to wreak havoc on mom-and-pop operations across Asia. Thailand has begun to experience protests against big-box operators such as Wal-Mart, similar to the protests the United States experienced for a decade (Berthelsen 2003).

CONCLUSION

A couple of days after al Qaeda operatives crashed two planes into the World Trade Center and another into the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, U.S. congressional members met to plan a message to the stunned public. “We’ve got to give people confidence to go back out and go to work, buy things, go back to the stores—get ready for Thanksgiving, get ready for Christmas,” said one member of Congress, echoing the message of the president. “Get out,” he said, “and be active, participate in our society” (CNN 2001). The fact that after one of the most shocking events in U.S. history, government officials were urging citizens, above all, to shop and work is ample testimony of the significance of consumption in the effective working of our economy, and, indeed, for our whole society. It is to the consumer that government and business look to supply the impetus for the continued expansion of the economy and the accumulation of capital.

We mentioned earlier that consumption on the scale evident in capitalist culture is unprecedented and is not natural—that is, there is no innate desire in human beings to acquire an ever-greater quantity of stuff. In truth, not everyone agrees with this assumption. Scholars such as James B. Twitchell (2002, 2004) argue that human beings, throughout history, have sought material luxury and that although overconsumption does indeed have its dark side, it has its light side as well—“getting and spending,” as he puts it (2004:17), “have been the most passionate, and often the most imaginative, endeavors of modern life.” By emulating the consumption-driven lifestyle of capitalist culture, he says, people around the world are being drawn closer together.

Twitchell’s defense of luxury is well argued and, insofar as luxury is attainable by all, perhaps something to be considered. But that is a problem: Can the level of wealth enjoyed by members of capitalist culture (remembering that it is twenty-five times greater, on average, than that enjoyed by citizens of two centuries ago) be attained by all but a very few? And if it can be attained, what is the cost of everything else that we must sacrifice? Francesco Sisci (2002) expresses the dilemma well:

The American victory in the soft war creates the desire of the citizens of the world to become American, with its values, wealth and security umbrella. However, it is impossible for America to grant the American dream to all people who dream it, either in the U.S. or abroad. The danger of creating a desire that cannot be satisfied—whether desire for a certain product or a certain civilization—is the backlash that will follow: waves of protest and dissatisfaction that will translate into a wish to return to one’s own history.