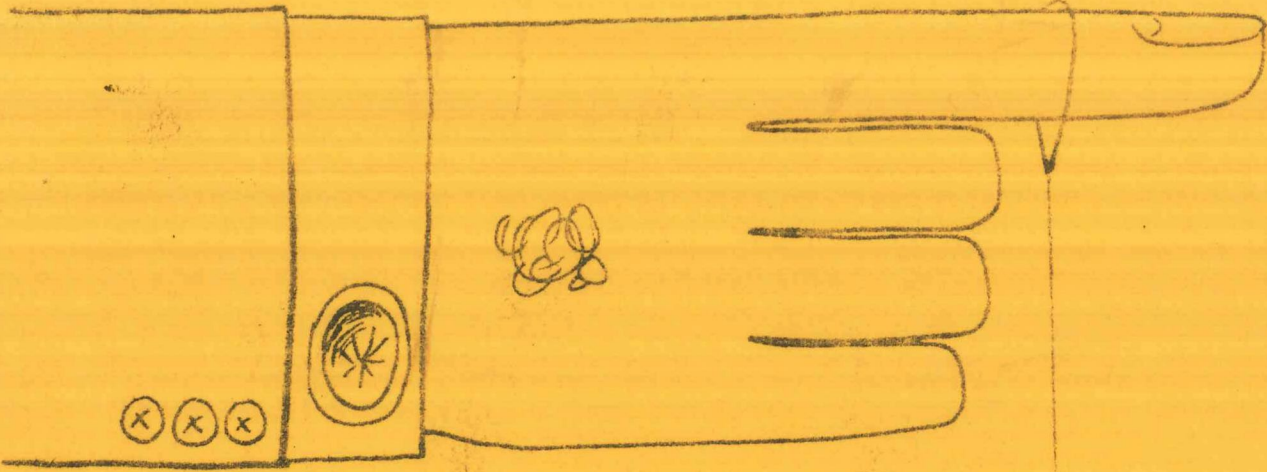


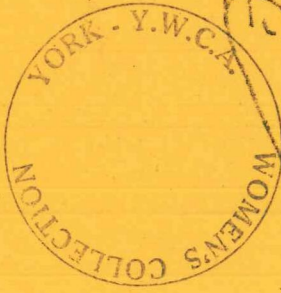
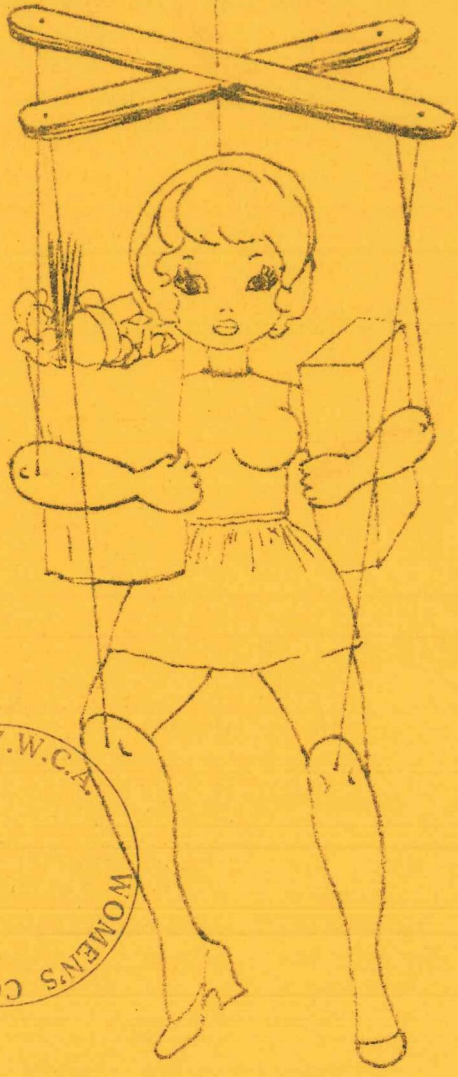
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CONSUMERISM and WOMEN

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CONSUMERISM AND WOMEN

by Ellen Willis

Perhaps the most widely accepted tenet of movement ideology, promulgated by many leftist thinkers, notably Marcuse, is the idea that we are psychically manipulated by the mass media to crave more and more consumer goods, thus powering an economy that depends on constantly expanding sales. It has been suggested that this theory is particularly applicable to women, for women do most of the actual buying, their consumption is often directly related to their oppression (e.g. makeup, soap flakes), and they are a special target of advertisers. According to this view the society defines women as consumers and the purpose of the prevailing media image of women as passive sexual objects is to sell products. It follows that the beneficiaries of this depreciation of women are not men but the corporate power structure.

The consumerism theory has not been subjected to much critical debate. In fact, it seems in recent years to have taken on the invulnerability of religious dogma. Yet further analysis demonstrates that this theory is fallacious and leads to crucial tactical errors. This paper is offered as a critique of consumerism based on four propositions:

1. It is not "psychic manipulation" that makes people buy; rather, their buying habits are by and large a rational self-interested response to their limited alternatives within the system.
2. The chief function of media stereotypes of women is not to sell goods but to reinforce the ideology and therefore the reality of male supremacy -- of the economic and sexual subordination of women to men, in the latter's objective interest.
3. Most of what the "consuming" women do is actually labour, specifically part of women's domestic and sexual obligations.
4. The consumerism theory has its roots in class, sex and race bias; its ready acceptance among radicals, including women, is a function of movement elitism.

First of all, there is nothing inherently wrong with consumption. Shopping and consuming are enjoyable human activities and the marketplace has been a centre of social life for thousands of years. The profit system is oppressive not because relatively trivial luxuries are available, but because basic necessities are not. The locus of oppression resides in the *production* function: people have no control over what commodities are produced (or services performed), in what amounts, under what conditions, or how they are distributed. Corporations make these decisions solely for their own profit. It is more profitable to produce luxuries for the affluent (or for that matter for the poor, on exploitative installment plans) than to produce and make available food, housing, medical care, education, recreational and cultural facilities according to the needs and desires of the people. We can accept the goods offered to us or reject them, but we cannot determine their quality or change the system's

priorities. In a truly humane society, in which all the people have personal autonomy, control over the means of production, and equal access to goods and services, consumption will be all the more enjoyable because we will not have to endure shoddy goods sold at exploitative prices by means of dishonest advertising.

As it is, the profusion of commodities is a genuine and powerful compensation for oppression. It is a bribe, but like all bribes it offers concrete benefits -- in the average American's case, a degree of physical comfort, unparalleled in history. Under present conditions, people are preoccupied with consumer goods not because they are brainwashed but because buying is the one pleasurable activity not only permitted but actively encouraged by the power structure. The pleasure of eating an ice-cream cone may be minor compared to the pleasure of meaningful, autonomous work, but the former is easily available and the latter is not. A poor family would undoubtedly rather have a decent apartment than a new TV, but since they are unlikely to get the apartment, what is to be gained by not getting the TV?

Radicals who in general are healthily skeptical of facile Freudian explanations have been quick to embrace a theory of media manipulation based squarely on Freud, as popularized by market researchers and journalists like Vance Packard (Marcuse acknowledges Packard's influence in One Dimensional Man). In essence, this theory holds that ads are designed to create unconscious associations between merchandise and deep-seated fears, sexual desires and needs for identity and self-esteem induce people to buy products in search of gratifications no product can provide. Furthermore, the corporations, through the media, deliberately create fears and desires that their products can claim to fulfill. The implication is that we are not simply taken in by lies and exaggerations -- as, say, by the suggestion that a certain perfume will make us sexually irresistible -- but are psychically incapable of learning from experience and will continue to buy no matter how often we are disappointed, and that, in any case, our "need" to be sexually irresistible is programmed into us to keep us buying perfume. This hypothesis of psychic distortion is based on the erroneous assumption that mental health and anti-materialism are synonymous.

Although they have to cope with the gypery inherent in the profit system, people for the most part buy goods for practical, self-interested reasons. A washing machine does make a housewife's work easier (in the absence of socialization of housework); Excedrin does make a headache go away; a car does provide transportation. If one is duped into buying a product because of misleading advertising, the process is called exploitation; it has nothing to do with brainwashing. Advertising is a how-to manual on the consumer economy, constantly reminding us of what is available and encouraging us to indulge ourselves. It works (that is, stimulates sales) *because* buying is the only game in town, not vice versa. Advertising does appeal to morbid fears (e.g. of body odours) and false hopes (irresistibility) and shoppers faced with indistinguishable brands of a product may choose on the basis of an ad (what method is better -- eeny, meeny, miny mo?) but this is just the old game of caveat emptor. It thrives on naivete and people learn to resist it through experience.

The worst suckers for ads are children. Other vulnerable groups are older people, who had no previous experience, individual or historical, to guide them when the consumer cornucopia suddenly developed after World War II, and poor people, who do not have enough money to learn through years of trial, error and disillusionment to be shrewd consumers.

The constant refinement of advertising claims, visual effects and so on show that experience desensitizes. No one really believes that smoking Brand X cigarettes will make you sexy. (The function of sex in an ad is probably the obvious one -- to lure people into paying closer attention to the ad -- rather than to make them 'identify' their lust with a product. The chief effect of the heavy sexual emphasis in advertising has been to stimulate a national preoccupation with sex, showing that you can't identify away a basic human drive as easily as all that). Madison Avenue has increasingly de-emphasized "motivational" techniques in favour of aesthetic ones -- TV commercials in particular have become incredibly inventive visually -- and even made a joke out of the old motivational ploys (the phallic Virginia Slims ad, for instance, is blatantly campy). We can conclude from this that either the depth psychology approach never worked in the first place, or that it has stopped working as consumers have gotten more sophisticated.

The argument that the corporations create new psychological needs in order to sell their wares is similarly flimsy. There is no evidence that propaganda can in itself create a desire, as opposed to bringing to consciousness a latent desire by suggesting that the means of satisfying it are available. The idea is superstitious: it implies that the oppressor is diabolically intelligent (he has learned to control human souls) and that the media have magic powers. It also mistakes effects for causes and drastically oversimplifies the relation between ideology and material conditions. We have not been taught to dislike our smell in order to sell deoderants; deoderants sell because there are social consequences for smelling. And the negative attitude about our bodies that has made it feasible to invent and market deodorants is deeply rooted in our anti-sexual culture, which in turn has been shaped by *exploitative modes of production and class antagonism between men and women.*

The confusion between cause and effect is particularly apparent in the consumerist analysis of women's oppression. Women are not manipulated by the media into being domestic servants and mindless sexual decorations, the better to sell soap and hair spray. Rather the image reflects women as men in a sexist society force them to behave. Male supremacy is the oldest and most basic form of class exploitation (cf. Engels, Origin of the Family); it was not invented by a smart ad man. The real evil of the media image of women is that it supports the sexist status quo. In a sense the fashion, cosmetics, and "feminine hygiene" ads are aimed more at men than at women. They encourage men to expect women to sport all the latest trappings of sexual slavery -- expectations women must then fulfill if they are to survive. That advertisers exploit women's subordination rather than cause it can be clearly seen now that *male* fashions and toiletries have become big business. In contrast to ads for women's products, whose appeal is "use this and he will want you" (or "if you don't use this, he won't want you"), ads for

the male counterparts urge, "you too can enjoy perfume and bright colored clothes; don't worry, it doesn't make you feminine". Although advertisers are careful to emphasize how *virile* these products are (giving them names like "Brut", showing the man who uses them hunting or flirting with admiring women -- who, incidentally, remain decorative objects when the sell is aimed directly at men) it is never claimed that the product is *essential* to masculinity (as makeup is essential to femininity), only *compatible* with it. To convince a man to buy, an ad must appeal to his desire for autonomy and freedom from conventional restrictions; to convince a woman, an ad must appeal to her need to please the male oppressor.

For women, buying and wearing clothes and beauty aids is not so much consumption as work. One of a woman's jobs is to be an attractive sexual object, and clothes and makeup are tools of the trade. The chief consumer in this instance is really the man, who consumes woman-as-sexual-commodity. Similarly buying food and household furnishings is a domestic task; it is the wife's chore to pick out the commodities that will be consumed by the whole family. And appliances and cleaning materials are tools that facilitate her domestic function. When a woman spends a lot of money and time decorating her home or herself, or hunting down the latest in vacuum cleaners, it is not idle self-indulgence (let alone the result of psychic manipulation) but a healthy attempt to find outlets for her creative energies within her circumscribed role.

There is a persistent myth that a wife has control over her husband's money because she gets to spend it. Actually, she does not have much more financial autonomy than the employee of a corporation who is delegated to buy office furniture or supplies. The husband, especially if he is rich, may allow his wife wide latitude in spending -- he may reason that since she has to work in the home she is entitled to furnish it to her taste, or he may simply not want to bother with domestic details -- but he retains the ultimate veto power. If he doesn't like the way his wife handles his money, she will hear about it. In most households, particularly in the working class, a wife cannot make significant expenditures, either personal or in her role as object-servant, without consulting her husband. And more often than not, according to statistics, it is the husband who makes the final decisions about furniture and appliances as well as other major expenditures like houses, cars and vacations.

Consumersim is the outgrowth of an aristocratic, European-oriented anti-materialism based on upper-class resentment against the rise of the vulgar bourgeois. Radical intellectuals have been attracted to this essentially reactionary position (Herbert Marcuse's view of mass culture is strikingly similar to that of conservative theorists like Ernest Van Den Haag) because it appeals to both their dislike of capitalism and their feeling of superiority to the working class. This elitism is evident in radicals' conviction that they have seen through the system, while the average working slob is brainwashed by the media. (Oddly, no one claims that the ruling class is oppressed by commodities; it seems that rich people consume out of free choice.) Ultimately this point of view leads to a sterile emphasis on individual solutions -- if only the benighted would reject their "plastic" existence and move to the East

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Village tenements -- and the conclusion that people are oppressed because they are stupid or sick. The obnoxiousness of this attitude is compounded by the fact that radicals can only maintain their dropout existence so long as plenty of brainwashed workers keep the economy going.

Consumerism as applied to women is blatantly sexist. The pervasive image of the empty-headed female consumer constantly trying her husband's patience with her extravagant purchases contributes to the myth of male superiority: we are incapable of spending money rationally; all we need to make us happy is a new hat now and then. (There is an analogous racial stereotype -- the black with his Cadillac and loud shirts.) The consumer line allows movement men to avoid recognizing that they exploit women by attributing women's oppression solely to capitalism. It fits neatly into already existing radical theory and concerns, saving the movement the trouble of tackling the real problems of women's liberation. And it retards the struggle against male supremacy by dividing women. Just as in the male movement, consumerism encourages radical women to patronize and put down other women for trying to survive as best they can, and maintains individualist illusions.

If we are to build a mass movement we must recognize that no personal decision, like rejecting consumption, can alleviate our oppression. We must stop arguing about whose life style is better (and secretly believing ours is). The task of the women's liberation movement is to collectively combat male domination in the home, in bed, and on the job. When we create a political alternative to sexism, the consumer problem, if it is a problem, will take care of itself.