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History 88 – Social History of Consumption – Timothy Burke  
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The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need, by Juliet B. Schorr, is simultaneously a documentary of a social movement and a blueprint for Schorr's ideal world. Schorr believes that the American people work too much, and she is convinced that they do so much because they spend too much. There is a grassroots movement of people who agree with her, called "voluntary downshifters". According to Schorr, these people "downshift" the intensity of their spending because they find they have too many material goods and not enough spiritual and communitarian goods. This change in behavior allows them to reduce their workload and free more time for developing personal relationships, as well as enjoying the goods that they already have. Schorr believes that the downshifters have the right idea, and that we should emulate them, but it is easy to see that her heart lies with an even more radical movement, the "voluntary simplicity" movement. For downshifters, material goods are in fact good, but when the tradeoff between working for those goods and other valuable pursuits in life becomes too great, downshifters want to regain a healthy balance. In contrast, for simple-livers material goods are to be shunned once they are beyond a bare minimum need for self-sufficiency. It is clear that Schorr aspires to be a simple-liver, and her utopia is a simple world, where goods are purely functional and communally owned, freeing one's time for non-tangible pursuits. Schorr closes her book with a plan for reaching her utopia, in the chapter called "Diderot's Lesson: Stopping the Upward Creep of Desire". The problem with mainstream society, according to her, is that we are tempted to upgrade everything we own when we upgrade one object. Similarly, when one person in a community upgrades, everyone else is tempted to upgrade. Her general solution is downshift all of society at once, and she suggests intriguing methods to accomplish this. Although some of her ideas have merit, the work fails to address a number of fundamental criticisms of her plan. Is specialization really such a bad idea? Is scientific progress so worthless that we must surrender it entirely? Doesn't downshifting itself create more tasks to keep the downshifter busy? What happens to dissenters who are not interested in her consumption-free utopia? Schorr makes no attempt to address such questions about her underlying assumptions.

Our current consumption-based capitalist society has major flaws and inefficiencies, which Schorr quite correctly points out. For example, it is illogical to buy things that you do not have time to use; especially if your hectic job and lifestyle ensures that you will never have time in the foreseeable future. Another inefficient practice is when individuals purchase products that they use so infrequently that they spend most of their time gathering dust. Schorr suggests that instead of every person on the block buying a lawnmower, the community should buy one huge industrial strength mower that everyone can sign up to use when they need it. We can see that this approach works extremely well with public libraries, since most people read a particular book only once or twice. Schorr simply suggests that we extend this paradigm to include products such as children's toys, since children only use many toys for a short time and then promptly grow out of them. However, her most valuable suggestion may be to educate our youth to practice "safe spending": "All schools should offer a basic course in money and spending."(p.157)

I certainly agree that we should be intelligent consumers, that we should make sure that we buy things that we really want, that we should plan out our spending patterns so that we don't accumulate massive amounts of debt. I do not agree, however, that we should be necessarily be non-consumers, which is the lifestyle that Schorr advocates.

First of all, it often makes sense to pay for services. Do-it-yourself is good for the mind and soul, but there are limits to how much you can realistically do yourself. Sometimes it's simply more efficient to pay someone else to do something that they are good at, instead of doing a slipshod job yourself, or taking the time to learn to do it well (since some skills may require years of practice to learn). It's called specialization. At one point in the book she complains that we slave away to get enough money to pay our gardener to do gardening for us, when we could gain much more enjoyment from doing gardening ourselves. Schorr is ignoring one of the basic benefits of specialization, however: the gardener, who does gardening all of the time and probably has been gardening for a while, will gain a great deal of experience and skill, and provide you with a better garden. If the point of a garden is to have fun gardening, then certainly hiring a gardener is counterproductive. If the point of having a garden is enjoy hanging out in a beautiful and green garden, however, it makes a great deal of sense to hire somebody who can create a more beautiful and green garden than you can. Although being a jack of all trades can be useful in some contexts, especially since you may be able to combine two or more skills to accomplish something in a unique way, nobody can be a master of all trades; there simply isn't enough time in a life.

Similarly, it often makes sense to buy products that extend your abilities and help you grow as a person. For instance, it seems silly and provincial to refuse electricity, and to ignore the internet. Although the Amish are nice people, their lives are static, there is no growth, no change. They've shut themselves off from experiencing many new and interesting ideas, and while that life seems pleasant enough, its constraints are too strict for the average American.

There are also many products that should be held individually rather than communally. For example, it does not make sense to have product libraries for products that acquire meaning for people. For an example of this truism, consider that people usually buy the books that they really love, personalize them, and take notes in them, instead of merely borrowing the book from the library. It would be possible to make a toy library, but most toys could not realistically be placed there. For instance, it would be ludicrous to check out a teddy bear. A child becomes attached to their teddy bear, and even when they've grown up and no longer sleep with the bear they would no doubt be very upset if you sold their bear or gave it to the salvation army... or gave it back to a toy library. Even if the toy library did get their bear back, would you really want to give your child an old, ratty bear that some other child slobbered on and chewed on? For the same reasons that we do not like promiscuous lovers, we would not be happy with promiscuous teddy bears. Admittedly, some toys are better when they come in a large collection, which many families can't afford. Some toys like this include legos and other building sets. It is also difficult to attach meaning and personality to a bunch of colored bricks, so the children won't be heartbroken if they are not allowed to keep the bricks, and they're allowed to visit the legos at the toy library (although particular creations may tend to leave the library permanently). Schorr is completely oblivious to the fact that, for many people, objects

have meaning beyond their usefulness as tools. For her, products should be purely functional, and interchangeable. In order to be placed in a library, a product must lack a personality, and the types of products that fit this category best are mass-produced, soulless products. Even though they are mass-produced, however, we often make them human by building up experiences around them, much like the objects sold in John Freyer's All My Life For Sale. Freyer was certainly anti-consumption to some extent, since he sold all of his worldly possessions despite their stories and personalities. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Freyer would have been happy with soulless, interchangeable objects that he can gleefully cast out of his life. Leaving his objects behind was sort of like leaving his home town for Freyer: it was sad in some ways, but necessary if he was to have new experiences, and continue to grow as a person, instead of being bogged down in the luggage of his past. He did not hate his objects; he missed them, like old friends. Freyer had an unusual talent for attaching meaning to his objects, but we all engage in our possessions to some extent. It seems that Schorr is against this practice, and that she wants objects to be meaningful only as functional tools. I cannot say that I would be happy with such a worldview.

Additionally, there are problems with Schorr's assumption that downshifting will provide you with more time to do the things that you love. Downshifting itself may take a great deal of time, depending on what products and services you tended to purchase before your downshift. For instance, if you used to frequent restaurants, you must now take the time to learn to cook, buy all the ingredients, prepare for cooking, and clean up afterwards. This *will* take more time than a trip to the local restaurant if you want to eat something healthier and more complicated than a TV dinner.

Schorr also has problems because her environmentalist philosophy sometimes conflicts with her anti-work philosophy. Schorr maintains that working is bad, and in order to work less, we should spend less. However, she also wants us to purchase environmentally friendly things such as organic produce, which cost more than junk food or produce grown with pesticides. As some people in our class remarked, organic food would be one of the first things to go if they were on a budget. Also, it is possible to convince somebody that they should be a downshifter without proving that they should be ecologically conscious. The two arguments are not related. Schorr spends most of her book trying to prove that downshifting is a good idea, and only a page or two here and there trying to prove that we should be environmentally friendly, so it would be no surprise if only the first argument were convincing. Unfortunately, her environmental concerns are an important part of her agenda, creating a severe weakness in her plans.

Finally, I have serious issues with Schorr's plan to prevent "keeping up with the Joneses" syndrome by enacting pervasive sin taxes. Schorr justifies her sin tax plan by stating that luxury taxes and insurance premiums already exist, therefore one cannot argue that they are "un-American" or evil. This argument is flawed because the fact that they exist does not necessarily mean that they are good, and it certainly does not mean that more would be better. In fact, one would be inclined to believe that if this country were really a democracy, then the current level of luxury taxes is right where the people want it, and any move to increase them would lead to unhappy voters. The problem is that her plan is forcing other people to fall into line with her morals. Voluntary simplicity is well and good, but creating involuntary simplicity does not necessarily make the participants happy, as she has noted in this book. When people lose their jobs, sometimes it turns out to be

good for them, but most people are violently unhappy. Her example of taxes on SUV's punishes those who need to use them off-road as well as the preppy soccer moms who drive them uselessly around the suburbs. How can you determine when an act of consumption is a sinful luxury and when it is not? Legislating morality is generally a bad idea, if we believe in the rights of minorities. Even worse, perhaps, Schorr's morality is a product of her aesthetic: simplicity is beautiful, therefore people should live simple lives. This leaves no room for those who love the complex, and find it stimulating and refreshing. There are many who do not find the complex tiring, but engaging, such as those who revel in fractals or cryptography, or the challenge of running a competitive business. Legislating morality is bad enough, but legislating aesthetics screams of injustice. Telling somebody that their aesthetic tastes are immoral is like saying that they laugh wrong. Although the Amish and the Shakers are and were good people, any attempt to make everyone conform to their standards would be a practical and ethical disaster. Worse yet are the implications of her argument taken to its logical conclusion. Archeological and anthropological studies have shown that hunter-gathering societies had a higher standard of living: they were happier and healthier than we are, and they worked far fewer hours of the day. And their lives were blindingly simple. All that people had were interpersonal relationships, and their relationship with Mother Earth and her plants and animals. People had a very small ecological footprint, and lived in harmony with nature. If we were to carry Schorr's arguments to their logical conclusion, then a hunter-gatherer society would be her utopia. Unfortunately, as we know from history, agriculture and the hectic lifestyle it engendered was necessary to support a larger population. In order to reduce our workload to the idyllic pre-agricultural state, we would have to reduce the world population drastically, perhaps by several powers of ten. How exactly would Schorr propose to do that? How would she justify the cost?

Schorr's arguments are logically flawed, and ignore important details about the way that people use products and attach meaning to their possessions. The downshifter's approach makes sense to a point: balance in life is good. I consider myself to be moderately downshifted. Unfortunately, Schorr does not seem to like downshifters as much as simple-livers; perhaps this is because downshifting is an ideological compromise, between the creed of greed and the Shaker aesthetic. Schorr's ideology is clear and morally based; she is convinced that simple living is the only way to be yourself instead of the things you own. I beg to differ.