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William Leiss, *The Limits to Satisfaction: An Essay on the Problem of Needs and Commodities*. Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1976, pp. 160. \$4.50 paper, \$12.50 cloth.

Lives abandoned to the frenzy of our material paradise of purchase and consumption; lives obsessively given to the joyless quest for satisfaction in the midst of objects, fragments of an incomplete whole; such is the ritual of our affluent daily existence so benevolently ordained by fantastic gods and their new political priesthood, all guardians of the sacrosanct market place of desires and commodities. We must examine, interrogate, and judge the quality of our lives and the meaning of the growing materialistic orientation of our destiny. It is imperative that we pause before the gates of the citadel of our affluence and ponder whether we are indeed as blessed as we are told.

William Leiss, a thoughtful, prolific young social thinker does just this in his latest book, *The Limits to Satisfaction: An Essay on the Problem of Needs and Commodities*. The thesis of this attractively slim volume is complex. It deserves careful consideration. Its tentative theoretical character, so intended, and its modest aim — to initiate a new beginning, a reorientation of our thinking about human needs and commodities, could easily obscure its originality as well as the philosophical limitations of its perspective.

My intention here is to present what I take to be the fundamentals of his essay.

Leiss opens his case with the precision of statistical figures which capture the grotesque magnitude of our material consumption. Projections about future consumption hold no hope for moderation. It is in this context that the problem of needs and their satisfaction is raised. Leiss is absolutely correct in claiming that exclusive emphasis on the crucial question of resources, supply and devouring demand misplace the real but neglected problem of needs — their nature and the possibility of their satisfaction.

Leiss insists that the contemporary high-intensity market setting, a novelty to be contrasted to a more limited market economy, under close scrutiny reveals best the problematic character of needs-commodities relationship. It is this setting that Leiss seeks to isolate and dissect,

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acknowledging that this mode of inquiry does not suggest that such setting exists in a socio-political vacuum. Its isolation aims at greater analytical clarity. Leiss' thesis is informed by what might be called the strategy of the minimum normative presuppositions regarding the consumer's intentions, actions, desires and thought process. Leiss is adamant on this: the actual, everyday mode of satisfying needs is the key to our understanding of the character of human needs.

This almost pure empiricism permeates the whole study. Abstractions are rejected; theorizing which tends to ascend toward abstraction is shunned politely and with evident suspicion as to its futility. Perhaps it is not an accident that the essay is fashioned after the medical model of inquiry; the essay's three parts are titled examination, diagnosis, prognosis. Though Leiss is not advocating a *tabula rasa* attitude toward the concrete reality of consumerism, he does argue that no *a priori* articulation of a perspective on needs-commodities relationship could grasp reality adequately.

The high-intensity market setting, unlike its less complex predecessor, does not allow a direct relationship between the consumer's needs and the objects sought as means of satisfying those needs. The inherent quality and characteristics of commodities prevalent in less advanced economies is destroyed by the very intensity, fury and diversity of our market setting. More precisely, Leiss is arguing that the "craft knowledge" on the part of the consumer, in the past, furnished the ground upon which an organic experientially validated bond between needs and commodities as individualized, meaningful objects was present. This relational context rendered the choice of commodities purposive and knowledgeable. Commodities, though indispensable, were not regarded as endowed with the exclusive potential to satisfy human needs. Not all human needs were presumed to be under the sway of material objects. A material-symbolic symbiosis was maintained with respect to the needs-commodities nexus. Leiss, here, is not addressing himself to happier bygone days; he is defining a sociological context of pre-modernity against which he can contrast the current prevailing situation.

The market setting emphasized by Leiss, his indispensable empirical, non-suppositional unit, suggests an immense and crucial shift away, indeed against, the past organic, meaningfully confined scope of human concerns with commodities. Now, what Leiss so appropriately calls "craft knowledge" has been lost. The inability of reasonable, ordinary consumers to master the pertinent expert knowledge regarding the technological characteristics of commodities is obvious. Neither the ex-

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pertise is there nor is it wise or possible, in practical terms, to consume the necessary time to achieve it. Also such skill, once achieved, cannot serve a lasting function. The continuous revision of commodities demands a corresponding updating of our information about the properties of the new commodities. The obsolescence of yesterday's commodities renders, once again, the consumer ignorant. The consumer's re-education will be nullified by the next ingeniously new, improved products.

This process, in what Leiss calls the jungle of commodities, forces the consumer to surrender to the rhetoric of advertising as a guide to his commodity choices. The structure of the high-intensity market setting — plethora and flux of commodities, absence of craft knowledge, convenience and time considerations, reliance on advertisements — tends to fragment and destabilize the bond between needs and commodities. This results, according to Leiss, in the consumer's psycho-mental confusion. The coherence of human personality is undermined. Commodities are divested of their actual attributes. The consumer relates primarily to collections of characteristics rather than to the goods which possess those characteristics. Leiss utilizes intelligently Kelvin Lancaster's insight about commodities as "characteristics" relations.

The ultimate cultural consequence of all these non-coherent interconnections is that "the high-consumption ideal tends to orient all aspects of an individual's striving for personal satisfaction toward the realm of commodities". (p. 50). This exclusive orientation of needs toward commodities, fetishism, is, inevitably, the source of our inability to find satisfaction. The dualism of commodities, material-symbolic, and the ambiguous character of needing which is associated with it get totally deranged in the grand scale of our market setting.

It is precisely in this context that Leiss claims, equipped with the description-analysis I have summarized here, the imperative necessity of a more rational perspective on needs, consumption, commodities and resources.

Our obsessive consumption should be restricted not because of inherent limits to growth but primarily because it is self-defeating. Quality must be restored where quantity with blind ferocity has levelled everything. Leiss draws out very well the practical consequences of quantitative thinking about needs especially with reference to social policy in general and the welfare state in particular. Furthermore, and this might be Leiss' most original contribution, the restoration of a sensible set of needs and modes of satisfaction warrants the transvaluation of our basic attitude toward nature. A new ecological balance, rejecting

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the old anthropocentric perspective, is indispensable. Leiss argues his case here cogently, persuasively and free from any bucolic romanticism. The plea for a new awareness of the environmental impact of our needs, calls for a creative, dynamic perspective regarding both human needs and the needs of non-human nature under the auspices of which the establishment of the conserver society or the steady state would be perceived as a positive event and not as our surrender to brute necessity.

Leiss is excellent on the ecological context of needs. Those are the best sections of his essay and the most challenging.

Leiss argues his whole thesis with conviction, multidisciplinary knowledge and a penetrating single-mindedness. However, notwithstanding Leiss' diligent argumentation and methodical, coherent reasoning, I find the study marred by the refusal to grant to needs an explicitly ontological status, the only normative criterion upon which to evaluate any empirical setting. With the exception of the ecological sections, I remain unpersuaded both by Leiss' assertion that confusion does aptly characterize the mental state of the consumer, and by his rejection of false needs as an inadequate conceptualization. Leiss examines and rejects various theoretical perspectives on needs (biological-cultural, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, behaviourist, critical — such as Fromm's, Marcuse's). Leiss' own theoretical position, though not entirely agnostic, has affinities with the critical perspective and with Marx's theory of society but it is meant to stand on its own; it is a "negative critical perspective".

To begin with Leiss alludes sporadically to capitalism and multinational corporations indicating that specific and unacceptable conditions are not accidental but the products of intentional decisions. The detailed empirical analysis of the high-intensity market setting tends to show not confusion but manipulation and domination. The rhetoric of advertising and the pseudo-happiness attached to the status of certain commodities suggests to me the intentional reorientation of the human desires. The setting Leiss examines is the labyrinth of commodities prefabricated so as to facilitate the gradual fragmentation of the human personality as the pre-condition of the market domination. The constant revision of commodities is not the result of pure advance in science or technology; it is a conscious policy. There is a direct, complex and profound conflict between the production of commodities in our society and the human interests of the consumer. What actually takes place is the gradual elimination of the human element. Leiss' confused consumer is the dominated individual.

Leiss' impatience with abstraction leads him to unnecessary empirical constrictions. Ontology cannot be determined *a priori* in an artificial,

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lifeless fashion in the silence of our study. But the sound and the fury of the market place cannot yield the true vision of ontology unaided. Since ontology is nowhere outside historical time and since historical practice does not exhaust ontology, it behooves us to examine more carefully what is in front of our eyes. And yet we must be able to see beyond for otherwise our ontological utterances would be nothing more than precise descriptions of specific historical moments without prescriptive validity. History offers no exterior archimedean point. Ontology demands a transhistorical vantage point. This point exists in the normative realm of philosophical critique and finds its articulation in the poetic visions and metaphors of the "educated imagination" (N. Frye's elegant term). Ontological presuppositions should not be frozen, fixed conceptualizations rigidly denying all human experience. Delusions and illusions should not be confused with imaginative transcendence.

The consumer's modern fate must be examined, interpreted and evaluated under the aegis of an incomplete ontology. It must be so for it belongs to the future and only a partial vision of it is permitted to those so immersed in the damaged life. Our normative, imaginative pronouncements do not allow a systematic, exhaustive definition of our telos. They do give the human orientation to our life. It is from such orientation that we can reasonably utter our indictment of historical reality as opposed to a human reality in history.

What our eyes encounter is an empirical actuality; but not necessarily what ought or could be. The determination of the distance between the *is* and the *ought* mediated by what *can be* is simultaneously a simple and an abysmal task.

The term false needs refers to a political denial of a potentially other and humanly appropriate quality of life. It refers to a negative transformation of human values and aspirations. False does not mean it does not exist. It exists as a betrayal of the human essence.

Leiss might be right when he suggests that those who subscribe to the notion of false needs complacently rest on their insights as if all our problems have been solved. Indeed asserting the existence of false needs could only be a beginning. An indispensable beginning. The validity of Leiss' dissatisfaction is lost in the excess of his reaction.

My disagreement with Leiss on the ontological prerequisites and the fact of false needs, though fundamental, does not permit me to simply reject or ignore his thesis. It forces me to take it as a challenge. Here I had to confine myself to preliminaries. More must be said about the imagination and the truth of the world. For it is central to my position that such truth is told neither by the episodes of history alone nor by the

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mere intensity and logic of our mental activity. The dialectical interpretation, creative transvaluation and humanization of the meaning of our voyage lies beyond any particular method but within the boundaries of dialectical discovery and poetic articulation. Imaginative, comprehensive images of humanity should not be viewed as arbitrary gestures equally valid and therefore, equally futile. It is here that the question of ontology commences rather than terminates. Marx had his images and spoke of freedom. Durkheim had his and spoke of moral authority and discipline. What of humanity, of the quality of life? We cannot begin with a closed, fixed, preconceptualized notion. We cannot begin with the way things are for no particular can give birth to the catholicity of quality. Only from a qualitative perspective can I say that the Labyrinth of commodities is inhabited by a monstrously defaced humanity in quest of the satisfaction of denied, lost desires. To utter this is not to validate it. But it is the only beginning. This is how adventures start: with the eyes open and with a dream. That fools and the educated imagination speak in dreams is not adequate ground to renounce the voice of the imagination. After all wisdom is the ability to discern quality, even in dreams. Fools, in defence of their dreams, would be the first to dispute this.

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Sandor Halebsky, *Mass Society and Political Conflict: Toward a Reconstruction of Theory*. New York and London: Cambridge University Press, 1976, pp. ix, 309. \$19.95 cloth, \$6.95 paper.

Mass Society and Political Conflict by Sandor Halebsky, a sociologist from Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, is another of a by now considerable list of scholarly efforts which have been dedicated to criticism of mass political theory, particularly as that theory is exhibited in William Kornhauser's *The Politics of Mass Society* (1959). It begins with an analysis of the viewpoints of a variety of contributors to mass political theory from Tocqueville and Max Weber to Riesman and Nisbet. One sees here the emphasis upon the presumed rationalization and depersonalization of the social situation as a background for mass behaviour and the absence in its participants of any intimate relationship to class or other intermediate group forms. One is made aware as