

Democratic One-dimensionality and the Curse of Consumption

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My work is directed toward what I call the democratic curse of consumption. In this paper, I will paint a picture of democratic man[1] shaping his identity by learning to dominate external nature—*to consume*—at the cost of repressing his internal nature—*his individuality*. I want to go beyond the traditional reasoning that peoples' good consists solely in the quality of their subjective experiences. The great modern revolution of everyday life yet to happen is the awakening in the individual of the possibilities of an authentic and genuine life in the face of the great drift toward a standardized mass society. Consumerism and consumption, I will suggest, tend not to produce conditions that give our lives individual particularity, but tend to produce one-dimensionality.

The goal is that of producing the effect of unmasking. I want to illuminate rather than vindicate the perspective of a critical theorist on the curse of consumption in theoretical and historical terms. This paper should be read and scrutinized as an analysis of existing social relations—that is to say, as affording *an* insight into what makes up the structure and working of democracy in America. My logical conclusions are not, and cannot be, conclusive, for they remain tied to domination, as both its reflection and tool. Therefore, my truth is no less questionable than my evidence is irrefutable.

Tocqueville, Equality and Individualism: Preparing the Ground for One-dimensionality

Since Alexis de Tocqueville, most contemporary liberal theorists have not sufficiently analyzed the ideological relationship between markets and democracy. Where the issue has been raised, as in Barry Goldwater^[2] and Milton Friedman's^[3] defense of markets, it has typically been to assert that markets inhibit prejudice, censorship, and the arbitrary use of power. For thinkers steeped in the tradition of contemporary liberalism, the government is the chief and real inhibitor of the free development of individual human potentialities. To be an unencumbered individual, and to cultivate one's own garden to the fullest, means to do so with the minimum measure of government interference.

Contrary to this conception is the classical republican political theory made prominent by Tocqueville, expanded by John Dewey and Herbert Marcuse, and brought to the fray in contemporary America by Michael Sandel. I want to show that these republican thinkers see beyond the contemporary liberal conception to the real source of tyranny in a democracy. To the contemporary liberal thinkers, the enemy of freedom is governmental censorship and control. This focus on the concentration of power in the national government, and the resulting coercive state role in market exchanges, tends to overlook the non-political causes and economic factors that restrict freedom and put a heavy premium on individualism and centralization of power. I will use Tocqueville's observations in *Democracy in America* to lay the theoretical and historical grounds for my analysis of individualism, consumption and democratic one-dimensionality.

Broadly speaking and according to Tocqueville, democracy fosters liberty by rendering peoples "independent of one another," and granting to them power to "follow nobody's will but their own in their private affairs."^[4] On the other hand, equal social conditions, notes Tocqueville, nurture and form human passions in ways that are pernicious to liberty. That is, "as conditions become more equal among people, individuals seem of less and society of greater importance."^[5] Tocqueville proposes to us that democracy in America plays a dual role in terms of liberty. It both clears the way for individual freedom

and predisposes men to accept a strong central power “to look after them.”[\[6\]](#) Although equality may allow for “a general compassion for all the human race,”[\[7\]](#) it also drives human beings apart, and this is what Tocqueville observed. As he famously writes, each is “forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart.”[\[8\]](#)

Tocqueville gives far greater weight to the evils engendered by equality than to its virtues. The passion for equality seems to prepare the ground for one-dimensionality. As long as men in democracies put a premium upon equality rather than upon difference, they quickly become intolerant of the very freedom to be different. To be sure, in an equalitarian democracy, men are prone to be lost in the crowd and lose sight of their own freedom, and so become grossly indifferent to the free expressions of individual thought, taste and desire on the part of all others.[\[9\]](#) Although democracy and equality formally make it impossible for a few men to oppress the many, they make it equally impossible for any one man to be free from the oppression of society. Theoretically, Tocqueville and Herbert Marcuse were both aware that democracy could be “the most efficient system of domination” in that the democratic majority can become the greatest, most absolute tyranny of all.[\[10\]](#) Tocqueville saw that in a democracy, the strength of the *force majeure* is unlimited and all-pervasive, and the doctrines of equality and majority rule have substituted for the tyranny of the few over the many, the widely accepted—*indeed, gladly received*—tyranny of the many over the few, to ensure equality—albeit in servitude.

Tocqueville feared the rise of tyranny even in a democracy based on the consent of the governed, and he saw one potential cause of this tyranny in an unexpected place, the *unchecked* individualism which equality made possible. In the chapter *Of Individualism in Democracies*, he writes that democratic equality forces every person to strive for meaningful self-development by his own self. That is, given that democratic man is born equal, all social ties that may pull him up or down the social ladder—all aristocratic links—are cut, indeed, never existed in the first place in America. Hence democratic man thinks of himself in isolation and tends to think and act as an unencumbered individual.

Tocqueville warns that preoccupation with equality leads men to “give up thinking” and “let themselves glide with the stream of the crowd,”[\[11\]](#) because *individually* they are

powerless, and, "having grown like the rest...nothing stands out conspicuous but the great and imposing image of the people itself."[\[12\]](#) To be sure, "when all men are more or less equal...it is very difficult for any of them to walk faster and get out beyond the uniform crowd surrounding and hemming them in."[\[13\]](#) Like Marcuse's one-dimensional society, the "majority"[\[14\]](#) supplies the individual with consciousness and "so relieves him of the necessity of forming his own."[\[15\]](#) In 1830, this weak strain of one-dimensionality was already evident to Tocqueville. Democratic values, he thought, often encouraged conformity and cultural homogeneity. John Stuart Mill pays careful heed to this insight and develops his theory of liberty in 1859 recognizing that "society is itself the tyrant."[\[16\]](#) As such, it affects ways of thinking and acting more profoundly than the political ruling class. To ensure liberty, Mill argued, "there needs protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling, against the tendency of society to impose...its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them."[\[17\]](#) For "it is only the cultivation of individuality" that can produce "well-developed human beings."[\[18\]](#)

Among the many vital balances Tocqueville saw in American democracy, the tension between individualism and majoritarianism is most relevant here. His analysis of how both the tendencies toward excessive individualism and the tyranny of the majority were kept in check illuminates the problem of individual consciousness and society. Tocqueville describes the essential link between liberty and democracy in his description of the New England Township:

Local institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they put it within the people's reach; they teach people to appreciate its peaceful enjoyment and accustom them to make use of it. Without local institutions a nation may give itself a free government, but it has not got the spirit of liberty.[\[19\]](#)

In the end, for Tocqueville, what kept pernicious individualism in check in 19th century America was political liberty encapsulated in local institutions, which brought men constantly into personal contact, forging a public identity that would "remedy against the evils which equality may cause."[\[20\]](#) However, as industrialization took off in the 20th

century, personal communication and public identity were increasing destroyed and supplanted by the commodity form, and the Tocquevillian checks on individualism quickly degenerated.

John Dewey and the Era of Advanced Industrial America

Among John Dewey's important contributions to American political thought, it is his critique of liberal individualism that is most relevant here. He argued that rugged Jacksonian individualism amidst advanced industrial conditions and corporate capital were incompatible with democracy and self-government. Democratic institutions could no longer guarantee (if they ever could!) the development of genuine individuality or individuals capable of self-government.[\[21\]](#) What Dewey wrestled with in much of his early 20th century political writing was the increasingly undemocratic society unfolding as fast as the Industrial Revolution was progressing. Liberalism was losing its emancipatory character and was increasingly unable to provide the tools to achieve individuality and freedom.

Democracy was born in revolt against established forms of government and henceforth men have always wanted to reduce government to a minimum.[\[22\]](#) Thus individualism was born—the doctrine of independence of any and all associations.[\[23\]](#) To be sure, the American tradition has, from the very beginning, connected the idea of freedom with the individual, and thus the idea of individualism.[\[24\]](#) American democracy quickly became the protector of individual rights, or more specifically, Lockean Natural Rights of life, liberty and property.[\[25\]](#) The economic theory of laissez-faire capitalism was easily fused with the doctrine of Natural Rights and individualism, for capitalism is a social system based on the recognition of individual rights, where free and independent people act and interact voluntarily, by individual choice and free trade.[\[26\]](#) The real meaning of Locke's rationalist natural law, in the words of Jürgen Habermas, then, is that the political system "is justified in terms of the legitimate relations of production...[where] the institutional framework of society is only mediately political and immediately

economic.”[\[27\]](#)

By accepting the corporate and industrial world in which we live, and by interacting with it, we create ourselves, our individuality, in the corporate world.[\[28\]](#) Material commodities are invitations to individual taste and choice, and occasions for individual growth.[\[29\]](#) But this already presupposes a will to use commodities as instruments for achieving preferred possibilities, which Dewey observed, was not happening in America. Competitive industry was supposed to create a society of free individuals, abundance and security. Production and distribution of commodities—a systemic process oriented toward profit and growth—should be means to achieve the possibility of the higher life, which is the life of men in their distinctively human relations.[\[30\]](#) Dewey refers to this as the life of “freed intelligence,” which is comparable to the Habermasian notion of free and undistorted communication and debate.[\[31\]](#)

The idea that what is good for people is their getting what they want, whatever it is, and the related proposition that what should enter into the political (and moral) calculus is not what other people think is good for us, but what we want or believe is good for us, accord well with the ethos of a contemporary liberalism. Marcuse might call this the sensibility of individualism. However, we tend to forget what the principles of freedom, equality and individuality mean under democratic political conditions. Dewey writes that “the cause of democratic *freedom* is the cause of the *fullest possible realization of human potentialities*,”[\[32\]](#) and on equality:

The true meaning of equality is the form of society in which every man has a chance and knows that he has it—and we may add, a chance to which no possible limits can be put, a chance which is truly infinite, *the chance to become a person*. Equality, in short, is the ideal of humanity; an ideal in the consciousness of which democracy lives and moves.[\[33\]](#)

On individuality:

Democracy denotes faith in individuality, in uniquely distinctive qualities in each normal human being; faith in corresponding unique modes of activity that create new ends, with willing acceptance of the modifications of the established order entailed by *the release of individualized capacities*.[\[34\]](#)

What these quotations have in common is the value of human potentialities and the need (for democracy) to provide (objective) conditions that will enable these potentialities to become actualities. Theoretically, this has been the *raison d'être* for democracy in America. Historically, however, democracy and industry are actually arresting human potentialities.

"The outstanding fact of modern life," Dewey writes, "is the invasion of the community by the new and relatively impersonal and mechanical modes of combined human behavior."^[35] This means two fundamental and seemingly paradoxical observations. One is that industrial capitalism both closes off some human potentialities and liberates other (previously dormant) human potentialities by virtue of the natural energies made available for production and consumption. The other is that enormous capital organization has caused the destruction of the ties that form local communities by substituting impersonal bonds for personal unions.^[36] Dewey observes that industrial capitalism cuts men off from their community.^[37] He cannot stress enough the pernicious effect of industry on the fullness of human communication and human existence.^[38]

This implication of industry is a problem, because for Dewey, democracy is a *personal* way of life,^[39] and "the ability of individuals to develop genuine individuality is intimately connected with the social conditions under which they associate with one another."^[40] "The heart and final guarantee of democracy," he writes, is free, personal discussion of the news of the day "in free gatherings of neighbors" and "friends in living rooms of houses and apartments."^[41] By accepting democracy, for better or for worse, we have vested our human existence in the notion "that self-governing institutions are the means by which human nature can secure its fullest realization in the greatest number of persons."^[42] Dewey's *personal* form of democracy is not merely a form that is preferable to other forms of democracy, but rather it is the only true form of democracy. Let me be clear, to utter the word "democracy" is to always signify the possession of certain personal attitudes, character traits, and a way of individual life that expresses and

projects our democratic institutions. In other words, the problem for the public is to perfect the process of free inquiry and discussion to create virtuous citizens that are to constitute the great self-governing community.

What does this mean? In the essay *The Need For A New Party*, Dewey discusses the clash of property interests and human interests. This is the fundamental variance between industrial capitalism and democracy. The identification of democracy with economic individualism as the essence of free action has done harm to the reality of democracy.[\[43\]](#) Conditions that brought about the Industrial Revolution were appropriate at the time, but in 1927, they were no longer performing the functions necessary to emancipate individual potentialities.[\[44\]](#)

By the early twentieth century, the citizen as consumer was a growing political presence. Industrialization ushered in “a new era of human relationships” based upon massive organizations and complicated interactions.[\[45\]](#) Associated life in (advanced) industrial society is that of “extensive invisible bonds,” and organizations, those “great impersonal concerns,” (bureaucracy) where there is no space for individual freedom, autonomy or individuality; nor is this organization conducive to the development of a fraternally associated public.[\[46\]](#) Advanced industrial society is doing harm to the reality of democracy because of the impersonalization and mechanization of associated life—of community. It destroys the very conditions necessary for human existence and individual particularity. Individualism puts a premium on free, individual life experience at the expense of associated life. Thus, when the individualistic premise is carried out to its conclusion, the result is the disintegration of society. Economic individualism restrains individuality and individual actuality insofar as what the democratic individual actually *is* “depends upon the nature and movement of associated life”[\[47\]](#) which are increasingly determined by mechanical forces and vast impersonal organizations. Dewey wants to say that the relationship between industrial capitalism and democracy *should be* the subordination of all industrial relations to human relations—subordinate to the law of personality. In other words, industrial organization should be made a social function, toward the end of the individualistic ideal of the 18th century: cosmopolitanism.[\[48\]](#) Dewey was concerned with the sort of citizens the economic arrangements of the day

were likely to produce. He felt that democratic man was losing control of the forces that govern his life: "We are at the mercy of events acting upon us in unexpected, abrupt, and violent ways."[\[49\]](#)

One can now discern the historical line I have been drawing from 19th century individualism stemming primarily from equality and the unmediated effects of early American democracy, to the early 20th century political economy of consumption ushered in by the Industrial Revolution. Next, I will bring that line into the present state of one-dimensional domination, domination not by a conspicuous "majority," but by an inconspicuous "minority." In Dewey's words, "the new forms of combined action due to the modern economic régime control present politics, much as dynastic interests controlled those of two centuries ago. They affect thinking and desire more than did the interests which formerly moved the state."[\[50\]](#)

Dewey identifies consumerism (the new forms of combined action), false needs (desire) and ideology (thinking) as the chief evils of advanced industrial capitalism, and which I will henceforth call "the curse of consumption." It turns out that these are remarkably—and awesomely—similar to Marcuse's discoveries in *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Indeed, we know that John Dewey influenced Marcuse's work, for he comments on Dewey's discussion of classical and modern thought in that book.[\[51\]](#)

In *One-dimensional Man*, Marcuse attacks the affluent, modern American society as an unmitigated irrational evil. It is an unacceptable system because it not only corrupts the working classes into accepting capitalism, but it also distorts the will of men by introjecting false desires. Marcuse concluded that democracy, understood as accepting the rule of the majority, is an unacceptable system while the majority remains mentally enslaved. I want to show henceforth that as 21st century democratic man exercises his democratic liberty to follow his particular will to the utmost degree, the avenues of consumption he chooses end up negating that which he strives to realize: freedom, free time, happiness, shorter working days, genuine life and individuality.

Consumerism, False Needs and Ideology: The Curse of Consumption

The combined effect of science and technology encapsulated in the process of industrialization has emancipated more productive energies in a hundred years than stands to the credit of prior human history in its entirety. Our basic needs are supplied with an efficiency new to history. With industrialization, the machine became the model of the intelligible and the miracle that is to transport man into the kingdom of happiness and freedom. However, it is clear today that the conquest of natural energies has not accrued to the betterment of democratic man to the degree its proponents have championed.[\[52\]](#)

Contemporary liberal discourse introduces the economy not only as a set of private institutions, but as a sphere of social life within which choosing rather than learning occurs. This is the source of the commonsense notion of the economy as a site that produces *things* according to the preferences of its participants.[\[53\]](#) Instead of asking how to elevate or improve people's preferences, it asks how best to satisfy them. However, the economy produces people; and democratic man develops his needs, powers, capacities, consciousness and personal attributes partly, arguably primarily, through the way he goes about transforming and appropriating his natural environment.[\[54\]](#) These appropriations are more or less in the form of commodities and gadgets.

The system of commercial exchange has come to preside over all of democratic man's relations with fellow citizens. Every aspect of public and private life is dominated by the quantitative. As proof of this charge, think of the simplest pleasure, like a walk along the river, which is typically measured in terms of distance on the clock. The individual-who's-got-his-money's-worth and who exists by that standard, I argue, is no individual at all. Material well being is only a great good, Theodore Roosevelt reminds us, "as a means for the upbuilding upon it of a high and fine type of character, private and public."[\[55\]](#) That is to say that democratic man, insofar as he aspires toward some measure of human perfectibility, cannot disentangle himself from the necessity of cultivating the nobler, civic ends of his soul. The growth of productive forces, Dewey and Jürgen Habermas stress, "is not the same as the intention of the 'good life'. It can at best serve it."[\[56\]](#)

Consumerism

Consumerism, according to Dewey, is the notion cultivated by the economic ruling class that creative capacities of individuals can be evoked and developed only in a struggle for material possessions.[\[57\]](#) We can see this flourishing today, as consumers buy encyclopedic displays of elaborately enshrined gadgets to create the diversified experience they ultimately seek. Indeed, all societies pursue experience, not mere survival. Industrial gadgets, however, yield a wavering stream of satisfaction, and yesterday's delightful purchase may be dumped in today's trashcan. Nonetheless, consumers keep searching: "The reality principle may block enjoyment of some purchases, but the pleasure principle makes consumers persist, cheerfully or desperately."[\[58\]](#) Put succinctly, American consumers are constantly "in pursuit of happiness" to use Locke's phrase, consuming as though they only have one life to live. In American society, this may be the only shared characteristic of consumption choices.

Consumption, however, typically provides consumers with a mere ticket of admission to future experience. The problem is that consumption shuts itself up to a sort of fatalism and witnesses with a stoical countenance the fruitless efforts of democratic man to realize a rational and total human existence. He desires, he pursues, he obtains, he is satiated—but not for long; he desires something else, and begins the pursuit anew. The process whereby "former luxuries become basic needs" perpetuates the system of production and consumption, a system where want increases in and with abundance, and improvements, which increase the productive power of labor and capital, increase the reward of neither.

[\[59\]](#)

The Curse of Consumption

The curse of consumption is that in consuming to break free from the masses and individuate himself, democratic man cannot prevent all others from doing the same. Like the person who decides to stand up in a theater to get a better view, the end of his action is defeated once all other persons have stood up to get a better view. Today this is known as the "keeping up with the Joneses effect." Individuals, by pursuing their own interest through the purchase of gadgets which are ultra-fashionable and technologically

innovative often cause themselves collective stress and strain, as if their actions tightened an invisible ratchet that made life collectively worse. Like everyone standing up in the theater, they find themselves no better off than before and no different than anyone else. "It is repressive," observes Marcuse, "precisely to the degree to which it promotes the satisfaction of needs which require continuing the rat race of catching up with one's peers and with planned obsolescence, enjoying freedom from using the brain, working with and for the means of destruction."[\[60\]](#) Work to survive, survive by consuming, survive to consume, the hellish cycle never ends. If we accept that what we buy is deeply implicated in the structures of social inequality and domination, then the idea that boundless consumption promotes the general welfare or human perfection collapses.

In the Republic of Consumption, the consumer-citizen is king. In America there is, ostensibly, equality before consumption and freedom through consumption. Democracy, along with industry, has finally destroyed the barriers of blood, lineage and race. This *should be* a cause for celebration. However, consumption, by its logic of *things*, forbids all qualitative difference and recognizes only differences of quantity between values and between men. To be poor nowadays merely means possessing a large number of poor objects. Only quantity and pace matter. From now on the ability to consume, faster and faster, greater quantities of cars, alcohol, houses, computers and lovers, will show how far up democratic man is on the hierarchical social ladder, will show how different he is from his neighbors and the masses. From the superiority of blood to the power of money, from the superiority of money to the power of gadgets, democracy has produced a civilization of stereotyped and vulgar detail: A nice nest for Marcuse's one-dimensional man.

Why he buys

Democratic man's entire culture has internalized consumerism to such a degree that individuals lack the psychological wherewithal to create enjoyment for themselves. This seems to arise from our one-dimensional idea about ourselves. We believe that we can be satisfied in materialistic and physical ways. It follows that the more democratic man can consume, the happier he will be; the more America can produce, the better place it will be in which to live. It has become axiomatic to democratic man that progress and

development consists in multiplying material possessions and increasing physical comforts. It is this idea of productivity as a way of life that

expresses perhaps more than any other the existential attitude in industrial civilization; it permeates the philosophical definition of the subject in terms of ever transcending ego. Man is evaluated according to his ability to make, augment, and improve socially useful things.[\[61\]](#)

The society of democratic man is characterized by the values of efficiency, economic rationality and productivity, at the expense of the wider goals of the community. In this light, then, we can say that:

Freud's definition of Eros as striving to "form living substance into ever greater unities, so that life may be prolonged and brought to higher development" takes on added significance. The biological drive becomes a cultural drive. The pleasure principle reveals its own dialectic. The erotic aim of sustaining the entire body as subject-object of pleasure calls for the continual refinement of the organism, the intensification of its receptivity, the growth of its sensuousness. The aim generates its own projects of realization: *the abolition of toil, the amelioration of the environment, the conquest of disease and decay, the creation of luxury.* All these activities flow directly from the pleasure principle^[.][\[62\]](#)

As we have seen from Dewey, advanced industrial society's projects of realization condition democratic man to strive for meaningful existence in the market. In such a situation, purchasing power is a license to purchase power, pleasure and status. The old Marxist proletariat sold its labor power to survive; what little leisure time it had was passed pleasantly enough in conversations, arguments, drinking, making love, rioting, celebrating and other sorts of merrymaking. Democratic man, however, sells his labor power to consume. When he is not engaged in repetitive, stupefying work or rapaciously striving to climb the labor hierarchy, he is being persuaded to buy himself objects to distinguish himself in society and to effect happiness. Only when the economy of consumption disappears will democratic man gain sight of the necessary conditions for the reclaiming of his freedom to engage in healthy, critical self-reflection and self-interest toward the long-term aspiration of individuation by means of the non-repressive mastery of nature. An end to this state of one-dimensionality would mean an end to the tumultuous life progression of getting-on, and the beginning of the dawn of the art of living.

Ideology of Consumption

One-dimensional Man focuses on ideologies shaping social realities, entire societies and the men and women composing them. Industry, infatuated with progress, comfort, profit and well being, has enough weapons to convince everyone of its will to put a scientific

end to the evil of suffering. While it was placing happiness and freedom on the order of the day, the Industrial Revolution was inventing the ideology of happiness and freedom. The ideology of modern economics suggests that material progress has yielded enhanced satisfaction and well being; and “much of our confidence comes from the assumption that our lives are easier, freer and better than those of earlier generations or other cultures.”^[63] This ideology is particularly powerful because it is embodied in specific institutions and long-standing patterns of interaction. As such, they are more than ideas or ideals, and they affect not only our relation to reality, but reality itself.

Under democratic social conditions, wealth alone does not confer power or individual particularity. Under the purview of consumable goods, the significance of money passes to objects with more handsome exchange- and use-value. Consumer goods become wrapped in ideology; they are the true signs of power. The ideology of consumption becomes the consumption of ideology. Democratic man buys a bottle of vodka and gets as a gift the lie and magic that accompanies it, whereas Totalitarian man buys ideology and gets as a gift a bottle of vodka. The ideology itself draws its essence from quantity: an idea reproduced again and again in time. It tends to lose its content and become more and more pure quantity. Theoretically, Totalitarian and Democratic regimes are taking a common path toward one-dimensionality, the former thanks to their advanced economy of production, the latter thanks to their economy of consumption. In this one-dimensional social structure, mere survival through consumption is both necessary and sufficient.

De-individuation and un-freedom

In this condition, one thing has disappeared: the project of total life, a will to live totally:—human fullness. The commodity dehumanizes human life. Democratic man becomes the image of the commodity. Whatever he possesses possesses him in return. In its process of commodification, industry subjects democratic man to society, to social ordinariness—it generalizes him. He must grasp for some individuality against the absolute power and logic of advanced industrial society:

[W]hen at length the time arrived when nothing in the individual's immediate and real environing world was any longer made, shaped or fashioned by that individual for his own purposes; when everything that came, came merely as the gratification of momentary need, to be used up and cast aside; when the very dwelling-place was machine-made, when the environment had become despiritualised, when the day's work grew sufficient to itself and ceased to be built up into a constituent of the worker's life—then man was, as it were, bereft of this world. Cast adrift in this way, lacking all sense of historical continuity with past or future, man cannot remain man. The universalization of the life-order threatens to reduce the life of the real man in a real world to mere functioning.[\[64\]](#)

In manufactured gadgets turned out in large quantities, no attempt is made to achieve a unique and precious quality, to produce something whose individuality makes it transcend conformity. Being mere gadgets obtainable at a moment's notice in exchange for money, they lack the personality of that which is produced by personal effort. Hence we speak of democratic man's one-dimensional state.

Liberty has been proclaimed, but has been found impossible to realize for democratic man. The logic of advanced capitalism, to put it uncharitably, does not make its people freer. In *Philosophies of Freedom*, Dewey emphasizes that real freedom must be actualized through interaction with objective conditions.[\[65\]](#) Dewey and Marcuse both argue that real freedom is something that comes to be. In the words of Dewey, "We are free not because of what we statistically are, but insofar as we are becoming different from what we have been."[\[66\]](#) In other words, freedom is the capacity to become different, to negate the given existence and go beyond—to not adapt to the order of things.

But in advanced industrial America, social conditions merely allow for "outward freedom," which is freedom of choice and market activity, but this choice is limited to what is given, what is "out there."[\[67\]](#) The market can only offer market freedom, that is, a choice between pre-fabricated alternatives. The conditions of what Marcuse calls "inner freedom"—human freedom—are destroyed and lost by industry and the curse of consumption. Advanced industrial society offers no conditions for the individual in which he "may become and remain 'himself'."[\[68\]](#)

Democratic man, through consumption, does not exercise his freedom: "free choice among a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom if these goods and

services sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear—that is, if they sustain alienation.”^[69] Liberty is reduced and diluted in the degree to which it lowers itself to the plane of consumption. Advanced industrial society is a one-dimensional world-concept: “it fails to see that man belongs to two planes of being. This means that there is not only such a thing as freedom in society, but freedom from society as well, a freedom which is based on something quite other than society.”^[70] The curse of consumption denies democratic man individuality and independence of his life on the plane of human existence. No freedom is granted to the plane of human personality and potentiality, while for the material, full liberty is offered. Without “freedom from the rule of merchandise over man,” Marcuse writes, no freedom is possible.^[71]

The most appropriate measure of freedom is not how much freer we are now compared to some time in the past—not how many different things we can buy—but a critical measure of freedom is what could be and what has gotten in the way of realizing what could be. For Marcuse, the consumer economy has gotten in the way of freedom and has become a conservative force. To quote Marcuse at length:

The so-called consumer economy and the politics of corporate capitalism have created a second nature of man which ties him libidinally and aggressively to the commodity form. The need for possessing, consuming, handling, and constantly renewing the gadgets, devices, instruments, engines, offered to and imposed upon the people, for using these wares even at the danger of one’s own destruction, has become a “biological” need in the sense just defined. The second nature of man thus militates against any change that would disrupt and perhaps even abolish this dependency of man on a market ever more densely filled with merchandise—abolish his existence as a consumer consuming himself in buying and selling. The needs generated by this system are thus eminently stabilizing, conservative needs: the counterrevolution anchored in the instinctual structure.^[72]

Democratic man, in these lines, is made dependent upon the commodity form. The coercive restraint of immediate necessity lays its harsh hand upon the mass of men. In the end, men do what they can do; they consume the passivity and empty time that the “necessity” of production “offers” them. The masses are fed and housed, and in their eyes their reduction to mere objects of the apparatus and of the administered life, which performs every sector of modern existence, represents objective necessity, against which they believe there is nothing they can do. So long as anything stands in the way of the realization of oneself, then, freedom will not exist, and democratic man will exist in a state of unfreedom. In short: “Society still is organized in such a way that procuring the

necessities of life constitutes the full-time and life-long occupation of specific social classes, which are *therefore* unfree and prevented from human existence.”[\[73\]](#)

Free time and happiness

Consumerism has not resulted in more free time. Most Americans are working more now than they ever worked in the last 30 to 40 years.[\[74\]](#) They have shorter vacations—two weeks compared to one month in Europe. The National Sleep Foundation published a study, reporting that:

Americans are suffering from a serious sleep deficit while also cutting back on leisure activities and sex as they spend more time at work....Work was the only activity to which more people said they devoted longer hours than they did five years ago. About four in ten people said they worked at least a 50-hour week. More interviewees said they had less sex now than in 1996.

[\[75\]](#)

Everything that makes democratic man into a consumer adapts him to the order of things —makes him old. Time-which-slips-away is what fills the void created by the absence of the self. The harder he runs after time, the faster time goes: this seems to be the *evident* law of consumption. The loss of free time does not de-legitimize the system of domination; on the contrary, “it refers to the constantly increasing productivity and domination of nature which keeps individuals...living in increasing comfort.”[\[76\]](#)

Advanced industrial society has not produced more happiness. After 1900, real consumption rose at extraordinary rates. Yet surveys of happiness reveal that this development has not increased happiness, “For the percentage of Americans who report themselves “very happy” was no greater in 1970 than in 1946.”[\[77\]](#) The irresistible conclusion, according to Lebergott, is that: “Our economic welfare is forever rising, but we are no happier as a result.”[\[78\]](#) Furthermore, any excitement that could still be found in the pursuit of pleasure is fast disintegrating into a succession of mechanical gestures, and democratic man hopes in vain that their rhythm will speed up enough to reach even the ghost of an orgasm. The consumer cannot and must not attain satisfaction: the logic of the consumable object demands the creation of fresh, false needs, yet the accumulation

of such false needs exacerbates the malaise of people confined with increasing difficulty solely to the status of consumers.

Alienation, false needs and voluntary servitude

Industrial capitalism accelerated the quantification of exchange. The game of exchange became a matter of calculation. Therefore, alienation and sacrifice came to be quantified, rationalized, measured out and quoted on the stock exchange. Rigorously quantified, exchange poisons all of democratic man's relationships, his feelings, and his thoughts. Where exchange is dominant, only things are left: a world of robotized-people plugged into the organizational charts of the machine age. If pure exchange ever comes to regulate the modes of existence of the robot-citizens of advanced industrial America, sacrifice and alienation will cease to exist. Objects need no justification to make them obedient. Advanced capitalism makes democratic man consume according to an agenda whose hyper-rationality of exchange will abolish sacrifice:— and man.

"The market," Marcuse observes, "has always been one of exploitation and thereby of domination, insuring the class structure of society."[\[79\]](#) On the plane of consumption, it is not the goods that are inherently alienating, but the conditioning that leads their buyers to choose them and the ideology in which they are wrapped. The tool in the conditioning of choice in consumption moves man the producer and man the consumer to the illusion of action in a real passivity and transforms him into an essentially dependent thing:—a slave. This conditioning separates the individual from his self, his desires, his dreams and his will to live; and he comes to believe in the myth that he cannot do without certain gadgets, or the power that governs them.

Not the automobile is repressive, not the television set is repressive, not the household gadgets are repressive, but...the gadgets which, produced in accordance with the requirements of profitable exchange, have become part and parcel of the people's own existence, own "actualization." Thus they have to buy part and parcel of their own existence on the market; this existence is the realization of capital. The naked class interest builds the unsafe and obsolescent automobiles, and through them promotes

destructive energy; the class interest employs the mass media for the advertising of violence and stupidity, for the creation of captive audiences. In doing so, the masters only obey the demand of the public, of the masses; the famous law of supply and demand establishes the harmony between the rules and the ruled. This harmony is indeed preestablished to the degree to which the masters have created the public which asks for their wares, and asks for them more insistently if it can release, in and through the wares, its frustration and the aggressiveness resulting from this frustration.... Organized capitalism has sublimated and turned to socially productive use frustration and primary aggressiveness on an unprecedented scale—unprecedented not in terms of the quantity of violence but rather in terms of its capacity to produce long-range contentment and satisfaction, to reproduce the “voluntary servitude.”[\[80\]](#)

The power of the system is not a total power, but a totalitarian power; it does not control by constraint, but by suggestion. By transforming natural alienation into social alienation, the movement of history teaches democratic man freedom in servitude. Democratic man escaped the brutish exposure to hunger and discomfort only to fall into the trap of exploitation and social alienation. Now he is exploited, but in a useful manner.

Advanced industrial society propels itself primarily through the media and its advertising and through the fostering of endless economic expansion and consumption. Since the emphasis is on consumption, the system must manufacture consumer demand to sustain itself. Institutions prod democratic man to get ahead economically, that is, to consume more and faster. Capitalist enterprises have created a culture of consumption that is necessary to their success, but that enslaves democratic man to a set of artificial needs. These needs are “false” in the sense that they are introjected into his psyche by “particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice.”[\[81\]](#) They are false because, in reality, the result is “euphoria in unhappiness,” which serves exploitation by fostering the need to consume unnecessary gadgets.[\[82\]](#) With the rate at which economic imperatives are buying up feelings, desires and needs, and falsifying them, democratic man will soon be left with nothing but the memory of having once been alive.

When the circle was widened and society made uniform, instead of freedom being extended to all, it is unfreedom that becomes universal—all are equally subject to the state or to society. Oppression is subordinated to exploitation, that is to say, as democratic man being controlled by things.

Industrialization objectifies the spirits of men. Automatically, the economic apparatus, even before total planning, equips commodities with the values *which decide human behavior*. Since, with the end of free exchange, commodities lost all their economic qualities except for fetishism, the latter has extended its arithmetic influence over all aspects of social life. Through the countless agencies of mass production the conventionalized modes of behavior are impressed on the individual as the only natural, respectable, and rational ones.[\[83\]](#)

Democratic man has become tied to society to such a large measure that the new needs created by society become a means of social control, rather than a source of contestation and democratic debate.

A community that is not built on the demands of individuals and their dialectic can only reinforce the oppressive exploitation of power. The system does not merely dominate, it exploits. It does not need to master, it prefers to *use*. The principle of productivity has simply replaced the principle of feudal authority. Democratic man exists in a state of servitude: “servitude means the enduring and constant binding of the praxis of the whole of human existence to material production and reproduction, in the service and under the direction of another existence...and its needs.”[\[84\]](#) Now social control is exercised by the few who have economic power, at the expense of the liberties of the many. “By subjecting the whole of life to the demands of its maintenance, the dictatorial minority guarantees, together with its own security, the persistence of the whole.”[\[85\]](#) To put it in Foucauldian terms: “Mechanisms of power which instead of proceeding by deduction, are integrated into the productive efficiency of the apparatus from within, into the growth of this efficiency and into the use of what it produces.”[\[86\]](#) The technological rationality of science, which gives exploitation, domination and one-dimensionality its respectable face, conditions democratic man to think that he is the subject, not the object

of the economic apparatus. However, democratic man exists in a pure form of servitude, “as an instrument, as a thing.”[\[87\]](#) Put simply, the productive apparatus tends to become totalitarian, and consumption becomes the process of individuation in reverse. It is in this sense that we must understand the process of free objectification—as opposed to reification—whereby for democratic man “all *objects* become for him the *objectification of himself*, become objects which confirm and realize his individuality, become *his* objects: that is, man *himself* becomes the object.”[\[88\]](#) To be sure, “the people recognize themselves in their commodities.”[\[89\]](#)

Democratic man experiences domination as institutional conditions that inhibit or prevent him from participating in determining his actions or the conditions of his actions. He lives within structures of domination since other persons can determine without reciprocation the conditions of his actions. In the words of Jeremy J. Shapiro:

Under the impact of science and technology, the political character of the exchange relation was transformed. It served the function of domination by relating men to each other as things and as means, by removing social processes operating through the exchange relation from the sphere of decision, control, and subjectivity, and by creating a network through which patterns of domination could be spread throughout society, a system of self-regulating signs, object, and individuals.[\[90\]](#)

Democracy v. Industry

All things considered, it is no wonder democratic man, in consuming to give his life individual particularity, independence, happiness, meaning and the general development of his human capacities to the utmost degree, can never reach any of these ends or achieve satisfaction, for the means—*his* means—are ill-equipped to produce anything but fickle welfare. Between advanced capitalism and democracy there is an indissoluble tension; in them two opposed principles of societal integration compete for primacy; and advanced capitalism is winning.

There will always be this tension between individualism and consumption on the one hand, and profit and production on the other. For the producer, profit is progress and consumer welfare is the primary concern, the development of human potentialities and

civic functions of humans, is secondary, and more or less manifests itself in superficial PR projects, donations and drives that put a respectable face on abominable practices of waste and destruction. Democratic man creates himself, to a large measure, through consumption. His ends are limited by the means available. And the means available, supplied by producers, do not accord to his ends. Producers do not want the responsibility of creating autonomous people capable of independent thinking and self-government, because their goal is to satisfy and build the passive consumer ready to accept what is immediately before him. Democratic man adapts himself to a world "which does not seem to demand the denial of his innermost needs—a world which is not essentially hostile."[\[91\]](#) He is thus "being preconditioned for the spontaneous acceptance of what is offered."[\[92\]](#) To be sure, advanced industrial capitalism can only be maintained by turning man into a consumer, by identifying him with the largest possible number of consumable values.[\[93\]](#) Democratic man himself must become the most valued of consumer goods.

Conclusion

Consumption is the drug of modern American society. Through consumption, all things appear possible. The golden age seems to be only a stone's throw away: rising standards of living, a choice of entertainment, culture for all, the comfort of your dreams. Largely because of these comforts, one-dimensional man is not open for a struggle for a new society, for his world in which all things seem possible can still harbor the illusion of being a world of many dimensions. For him, the everyday reality of consuming experience is not of being controlled, but of being in control.

A wealth of consumer goods, as we have seen, tends to impoverish genuine life. It replaces authentic life with things and makes it impossible, even with the best will in the world, to become attached to these things, precisely because, if not planned to be obsolete, they have to be consumed, i.e., destroyed. The result is an absence of life which is ever more frustrating, a self-devouring dissatisfaction. We must bear in mind all the time, that however much we may desire material improvements for the individual, that the United States is a democracy, and that we must have, above all things, humans

capable of independent thinking and self-government. It is the development of liberty, human potentialities and human particularities to which any industrial society should be directed. However, consumerism, as we have seen, tends toward repression, not emancipation, unfreedom, not freedom, one-dimensionality, not self-government.

Democracy in America turns out to be a society of exploited exploiters where some slaves are more equal than others. In 29 years, democratic man will have lived two centuries of what Tocqueville calls democratic man's passion for equality in servitude.[\[94\]](#) At all levels of society, computer-type technological rationality is winning out. If we fail to put gadgets in their proper place, as aids to human beings with expert intuition, then we shall end up being possessed by our possessions, turning in upon ourselves, shriveling up, living trivial lives and dying for details as our universe of technology expands comfort.

I would like to conclude on a note of optimism, for John Dewey saw as much room for optimism as for pessimism. Dewey's political theory is certainly oriented toward the development of consciousness and the promotion of active political involvement, indeed, he conceived of his vocation and responsibility to lie with Marx's unforgettable eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: that the point is not merely to interpret but to change the world.

[\[95\]](#) Both Dewey and Marcuse saw "the specter of a revolution which subordinates the development of productive forces and higher standards of living to the requirements of creating solidarity for the human species."[\[96\]](#) Both believed that the consumption of goods carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction and the conditions of its own transcendence. There is cause for optimism, precisely because "uniformity and standardization may provide an underlying basis for differentiation and liberation of individual potentialities."[\[97\]](#) That is, we may have reached the rock bottom from which everything can start *de novo*.

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[1] I use the androcentric terms he/his/man/men only to be consistent with the lexicon of those authors I quote, with no intention of excluding women.

[2] Barry Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1990).

[3] Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

[4] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence, ed., J. P. Mayer (New York: HarperCollins, 2000 [1966]), p. 667.

[5] Ibid., p. 669.

[6] Ibid., p. 671.

[7] Ibid., p. 564.

[8] Ibid., p. 508.

[9] Ibid., p. 673.

[10] Herbert Marcuse, *One-dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 52.

[11] Tocqueville, p. 436, 520.

[12] Ibid., p. 669.

[13] Ibid., p. 537.

[14] Majority is in scare-quotes because it is not really a majority that supplies consciousness; social repression exhibits the masks of repression by a collective.

[15] Tocqueville, p. 435.

[16] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. Elizabeth Rapaport (Indiana: Hacket Publishing, 1978), p. 4.

[17] Ibid., p. 4.

[18] Ibid., p. 61.

[19] Tocqueville, p. 63.

[20] Ibid., p. 513.

[21] John Dewey, “I Believe,” in *The Political Writings*, ed. Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1993), p. 234.

[22] Dewey, “The Democratic State,” p. 174.

[23] Ibid., p. 175.

[24] Dewey, “Culture and Human Nature,” p. 210.

[25] Dewey, “The Democratic State,” p. 175.

[26] Ibid., p. 177.

[27] Jürgen Habermas, *Towards A Rational Society*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), p. 97.

[28] Dewey, “Individuality in Our Day,” p. 88.

[29] Ibid., p. 83.

[30] Dewey, “The Ethics of Democracy,” p. 64.

[31] Habermas. pp. 118-119.

[32] Dewey, “Democracy and Human Nature,” p. 229, my emphasis.

[33] Dewey, “The Ethics of Democracy,” p. 63, my emphasis.

[34] Dewey, “Individuality, Equality and Superiority,” p. 77, my emphasis.

[35] Dewey, “The Democratic State,” p. 180.

[36] Dewey, “The Problem of Method,” p. 190.

[37] Ibid., p. 191.

[38] Dewey, “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us,” p. 243.

[39] Ibid., p. 241.

[40] Dewey, “I Believe,” p. 234.

[41] Dewey, “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us,” p. 243, my emphasis.

[42] Dewey, “Democracy and Human Nature,” p. 229.

[43] Dewey, “The Basic Values and Loyalties of Democracy,” p. 209.

[44] Dewey, “The Democratic State,” p. 183, and “Democracy and Human Nature,” p. 225-226.

[45] Ibid., p. 182.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Dewey, “I Believe,” p. 234.

[48] Dewey, “The Ethics of Democracy,” p. 64.

[49] Dewey, “Culture and Human Nature,” p. 217.

[50] Dewey, “The Democratic State,” p. 182.

[51] Marcuse, *One-dimensional Man*, p. 167.

[52] Dewey, “Renaissance Liberalism,” pp. 144-146.

[53] In the words of Michael Sandel: “...a political economy premised on consumer welfare takes people’s preferences as they come; it abandons the formative ambition of the republican tradition and seeks economic arrangements that enable people to satisfy their preferences as fully and fairly as possible.” (*Democracy’s Discontent* Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 242.)

[54] Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, selection from *Democracy & Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), p. 131-45, in *Democracy*, ed., Philip Green (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993), p. 168.

[55] Theodore Roosevelt’s “Speech at Syracuse,” quoted in Sandel, p. 219.

[56] Habermas, p. 199.

[57] Dewey, “Renaissance Liberalism,” p. 150.

[58] Stanley Lebergott, *Pursuing Happiness* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 3.

[59] Herbert Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 50.

[60] Marcuse, *One-dimensional Man*, p. 241.

[61] Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 118.

[62] Ibid., p. 150, my emphasis.

[63] Lebergott, p. 62.

[64] Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age*, trans. Eden and Cedar Paul (London: Lowe & Brydone Ltd., 1959 [1931]), p. 45.

[65] Dewey, “Philosophies of Freedom,” p. 141.

[66] Ibid., p. 136.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Marcuse, *One-dimensional Man*, p. 10.

[69] Ibid., p. 7-8.

[70] Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Fate of Man in the Modern World* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1935), p. 48.

[71] Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation*, p. 91.

[72] Ibid., p. 11.

[73] Marcuse, *One-dimensional Man*, p. 128, emphasis in original.

[74] “In fact, leisure time has dramatically eroded in recent decades, down to about 16.5 hours a week, report the editors of the Harvard Health Letter....a lot of us are working more—about a month more per year than was the norm in the 1960s.” Mark Harris, “The Game of Life,” *Utne Reader*, March/April 2001, p. 61.

[75] Claire Soares, “U.S. Suffers 'Epidemic of Sleepiness,' Study Shows,” *Reuters*, 3/27/01.

[76] Habermas, p. 83.

[77] Lebergott, pp. 13-14.

[78] Ibid., p. 14.

[79] Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation*, p. 11.

[80] Ibid., pp. 12-13.

[81] Ibid., p. 5.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, “The Concept of Enlightenment,” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), p. 28, my emphasis.

[84] Herbert Marcuse, “The Foundation of Historical Materialism,” in *Studies in Critical Philosophy*, trans. Joris de Breis (London: New Left Books, 1972), pp. 39-40, 167.

[85] Horkheimer and Adorno, p. 31.

[86] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995 [1977]), p. 219.

[87] Marcuse, *One-dimensional Man*, p. 33.

[88] Marcuse, “The Foundation of Historical Materialism,” pp. 25-26, 155, and Karl Marx, “*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1978), p. 88, emphasis in original.

[89] Marcuse, *One-dimensional Man*, p. 9.

[90] Jeremy J. Shapiro, “One-Dimensionality: The Universal Semiotic of Technological Experience,” in *Critical Interruptions*, ed. Paul Breines (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), p. 152.

[91] Marcuse, *One-dimensional Man*, p. 74.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation*, p. 7.

[94] Tocqueville, p. 506.

[95] Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd edition (W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), p. 145.

[96] Ibid., p. ix.

[97] Dewey, “The Problem of Method,” p. 190.