

CHAPTER 7

Phagocene: Consuming the Planet

Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we've discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We've learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose.

—Jimmy Carter

On 15 July 1979, before a TV audience of 65 million, Jimmy Carter delivered a major anti-consumerist speech. If its immediate context was the second oil shock, its key idea was that the energy crisis could not be combated without a profound change in values. Americans were summoned to renounce consumerism and individualism, in a 'rebirth of the American spirit'.

If Carter's defeat by Ronald Reagan in 1970, who called for a restoration of US hegemony and the deregulation of polluting activities, showed the limits of this appeal, his speech does illustrate the influence, since unequalled, that criticism of the consumer society had acquired in the public sphere. During the 1960s and '70s, the themes of 'commodity fetishism' and 'cultural alienation' dear to the Frankfurt School invaded the periodical press. Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Jean Baudrillard's *The System of Objects* (1968), Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) and Marshall Sahlins's *Stone Age Economics* (1974) were all bestsellers. Daniel Bell, the theorist of post-industrial society, explained in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976) how the consumer society undermined the Protestant work ethic that had been the bedrock of

American capitalism. In 1979 Christopher Lasch published *The Culture of Narcissism*, in which he lambasted consumerist and hedonist subjectivity. This cultural critique of consumption was closely bound up with an environmental critique. In 1974, two years after the famous Club of Rome report on *The Limits to Growth*, the biologists Anne and Paul Ehrlich published a successful work, *The End of Affluence*, which predicted the coming exhaustion of mineral and agricultural resources.

If the 1960s and '70s saw the apogee of this criticism, it had already been substantial at the height of the Cold War, the very time when the expression 'consumer society' was coined. The 1950s were marked by David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), which denounced the rise of individualism and the consumer society. This was in fact one of the most popular sociological works of all time, selling 1.4 million copies. In 1958, with *The Affluent Society*, John Kenneth Galbraith showed the contradictions between private consumption and national prosperity: the exuberance of private consumption (artificially stimulated by advertising) limited public investment in education, health and transport. And in *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), Vance Packard denounced the cynicism of advertising and the immense material waste it produced.

If we go further back in time, in the early years of the century, authors such as Thorstein Veblen were alarmed by the development of advertising, marketing and conspicuous consumption. And in 1925, Stuart Chase published *The Tragedy of Waste*, a scathing pamphlet against planned obsolescence and the proliferation of poor-quality products that forced repeated purchase.¹

While noting these age-old criticisms, we must also note their inability to sway the historical trajectory. The consumer society is a perfect example of this: criticism of it is as old as the target itself, yet consumerism remains more than ever the motor of capitalism. Worse,

1 Daniel Horowitz, *The Morality of Spending: Attitudes toward the Consumer Society in America, 1875–1940*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985, and *The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939–1979*, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004.

history seems to have set out to confirm the majority of these analyses. The fall of the Berlin Wall has even been interpreted as the triumph of democracy *through* consumerism, the 'evil empire' succumbing to the empire of the commodity.

During the decades that followed, the rich countries stimulated their economies, despite wage stagnation, by an excess consumption made possible by the low price of oil, raw materials and Asian labour power. In the United States, household debt rose from 60 per cent of annual income in 1980 to 130 per cent in 2005. Housing expanded by 55 per cent in the same period, which was clearly not enough to cope with the tide of objects, as the 'self-storage' sector grew in the 2000s at the dizzying rate of 81 per cent per year. Before the crisis of 2008 a new profession appeared, that of 'home organizer', helping families to manage the overabundance of their possessions. And yet, during the same period, indicators of well-being deteriorated: both the 'happiness index' and more material measurements such as life expectancy stagnated, and healthy life expectancy actually began to decline.² Among the rich countries, the human development index (education, health, income) diverged from GDP, the former stagnating from the late 1970s while the latter, a wretched indication of real well-being, continued to rise.³

How can this incapacity to escape from consumerism be explained historically? How can we explain, despite certain heralds of 'reflexive modernity' (see chapters 4 and 8), our absolute lack of reflexivity? The issue for the historian of the Anthropocene is to understand the making of consumerism and its power.

2 André Cicoella, *Toxique planète. Le scandale invisible des maladies chroniques*, Paris: Seuil, 2013.

3 Clive Hamilton, *Requiem for a Species: Why We Resist the Truth about Climate Change*, London: Routledge, 2010, 66–77.

Is it desire that led us into the Anthropocene?

From the 1980s on, an increasing number of historians showed that certain elements generally attributed to the 'consumer society' could be already observed in England and the Netherlands in the late eighteenth century. This thesis, initially controversial, aroused a rich bundle of research, which has upwardly reassessed the material density of 'advanced organic economies' in Western Europe.⁴ According to Neil McKendrick, English society of the eighteenth century displayed a powerful desire for the consumption of commodities (porcelain, textiles, watches, as well as colonial products such as sugar, tea, coffee and precious woods). A royal census of 1759 counted 141,700 shops in England and Wales, a density of 240 per 10,000 inhabitants (as against 45 per 10,000 at this time in France).⁵

At the source of this phenomenon was a less rigidly defined social status, which generated social emulation between the middle classes and the landed aristocracy. If the expression 'conspicuous consumption' was coined by Thorstein Veblen, the actual idea is very old, formulated among others by Adam Smith. Smith's anthropology naturalized the instinct of enrichment: individuals were moved by a powerful acquisitive passion that needed to be controlled and enlisted so that it acted in the sense of the common good.

These historians went on to show the causal link between this 'consumer revolution' and the industrial revolution. According to Jan de Vries, the latter was prepared by a long 'industrious revolution', from the late seventeenth century to the 1800s.⁶ This period was marked by a rise in production, but without a technological break or a gain in productivity. Growth was therefore basically realized by an

4 Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and John Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England*, London: Europa Publications, 1982.

5 Hoh-Cheung Mui and Lorna Holbrook Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping in Eighteenth-Century England*, London: Routledge, 1989, 36–7.

6 Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 3.

intensification of labour: the working year in England rose from 2,700 hours to 3,300, chiefly by the suppression of religious festivals. In parallel with this was a new involvement of women and children in productive activities oriented to the market.

How should we explain this acceptance of 'working more to earn more' in the eighteenth century? It is here that desire and the appearance of new and attractive goods come into play. For example, the spread of watches and clocks in Western Europe in the eighteenth century was rapid and general. In the Netherlands, while clocks had been extremely rare in inventories drawn up after the death of farmers in the late seventeenth century, fifty years later they were to be found in 86 per cent of such lists. In Paris, in 1700, only 13 per cent of servants possessed a watch, but this figure rose to 70 per cent by the 1780s. For Jan de Vries, the desire to consume becomes the *deus ex machina* of European economic dynamism. It is what reoriented productive activity from subsistence agriculture to the sphere of commodities and money.

If this thesis complements explanations in terms of production or environment (innovation, coal and the 'ghost acres' of the British Empire), it nonetheless has the defect of naturalizing the desire for consumption. It neglects several indications that attest, contrary to this, the difficulty of inculcating in artisans or new arrivals from the countryside a labour discipline involving whole days and weeks of work. For example, 'Saint Monday' (i.e., absenteeism) was considered a privilege well into the nineteenth century by well-paid artisans who opted in favour of leisure.⁷

Under the law of pre-revolutionary France, artisans were subject to a contract of hire by the job. They committed themselves to the entrepreneur or commissioner to supply a product at a given date but remained responsible for the methods and rhythms of labour. This freedom legally distinguished them from servants.⁸ The rhythm of

labour under the *ancien régime*, whether agricultural or handicraft, was characterized by a great irregularity: intense periods were followed by those of relative idleness. Many contemporary authors suggested that the motivation to work *declined* with a rise in wages. This rational behaviour attests to the hold of a culture of sufficiency.⁹

The infrastructures of the consumer society

A different historiography, whose roots go back to the critique of the consumer society in the 1970s, has shown the importance of the material and institutional arrangements that forged the first mass-consumption society, particularly in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁰

This period was marked by large-scale social conflicts, followed by major strike waves after the First World War. The issue was not just the level of wages but the wage relation itself, as a principle and for the subordination of the worker that it involved. At the start of the twentieth century, entrepreneurs complained of workers' absenteeism. Even during the First World War, skilled workers in munitions factories refused to abandon the custom of 'Saint Monday'.

This period also saw major increases in productivity, bound up with the introduction of electricity and Taylorist methods in factories. In the United States, the power of industrial machines quadrupled between 1899 and 1927.

Finally, this was the period in which economic globalization was completed: radio, refrigerated ships, and railways followed the telegraph to link up a unified world market for the first time. This phenomenon, closely bound up with the consumer society, had particularly deleterious consequences for the environment of tropical countries. Between 1870 and 1920, American consumption of tropical products (coffee, sugar, bananas, rubber) grew steeply: that of sugar

⁷ Edward P. Thompson, 'Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism,' *Past and Present*, 38:1, 1967: 56–97.

⁸ Michael Sonenscher, *Work and Wages: Natural Law, Politics and the Eighteenth-Century French Trades*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 69–72.

⁹ Gary Cross, *Time and Money: The Making of Consumer Culture*, London: Routledge, 1993, 16–20.

¹⁰ Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976.

rose from an annual 17 kilograms to 42 kilograms per person, that of coffee by a multiple of seven.¹¹ In the countries of Central America, subsistence agriculture was pressed back onto the mountain slopes by the latifundia and big estates of the United Fruit Company, causing a disastrous erosion of the soil and accompanying social tensions.¹²

As a result of globalization, commodities also became far more abstract, cut off from their connections with producer and territory. For example, in the great silos that arose in Chicago in the 1860s, wheat could no longer be related to a particular farm. This abstraction made nature far more suited for circulation in the networks of world capitalism. The grain stored in Chicago could be bought in London without concern for its quality. It could even be bought before being produced, as along with the silos came the invention of futures markets for food crops.¹³

Mass consumption was a strategic adaptation of American capitalism to these various mutations. The explicit and paramount aim of politicians, industrialists and advertisers alike was to create markets able to absorb the new productive capacities of Taylorist factories. In the words of Herbert Hoover, 'High wages are the very essence of mass production.'¹⁴ As well as spending power, various innovations also contributed to the creation of mass markets.

First of all, trademarks became general. In the early 1900s, the majority of common consumer goods were not branded: the grocer sold wine from the barrel, sugar from the sack and so on. The choice of mass production was a risky one: it was necessary to be sure that the costly machines it required would be profitable. Entrepreneurs therefore needed commercial outlets that were stable and independent of

11 Jon Soluri, *Banana Cultures: Agriculture, Consumption and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005, 219.

12 Richard Tucker, *Insatiable Appetite: The United States and the Ecological Degradation of the Tropical World*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. On Guatemala, see Beatriz Manz, *Paradise in Ashes*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

13 William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, New York: Norton, 1991, 97–147.

14 Herbert Hoover in 1923, quoted by Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness*, 28.

intermediaries. Trademarks precisely made it possible to bypass the wholesaler and create a direct relationship with the consumer. And the consumer in turn now demanded a particular brand, imposing stock requirements on the retailer. For producers, the trademark, by stabilizing demand, reduced the impact of economic fluctuations. Protection of trademarks was established in 1890 when the US Supreme Court granted a property of unlimited duration. This decision aroused fierce controversy, as it went against the fourteen-year protection that was given by patent law.¹⁵

The turn of the century was also marked in the United States by a revolution in the distribution chain. Barter and bargaining were marginalized and credit sale formalized with the transition from the traditional slate to consumer credit. Mail order was also invented, along with grocery chains, followed soon by the self-service supermarket – inaugurated by the Piggly Wiggly chain during the First World War as a response to staff shortage.¹⁶

Finally, there was a change in the nature of advertising. From a marginal activity more like the present-day classifieds, it became an essential engine of the consumer society. In the 1920s, the advertising sector of the US economy grew from \$58 million to \$200 million.¹⁷ Madison Avenue in New York City became its centre. More generally, the transition was from advertising a particular product to glorifying consumption as a lifestyle and marker of social normality. Advertisers made the essential discovery that the precondition of being able to sell is to question the perception that consumers have of themselves. In the 1920s, *Printers' Ink*, the advertising trade journal, explained that Americans 'had to be made aware of such things as enlarged nose pores or bad breath'. 'Advertising helps to keep the masses dissatisfied with their mode of life, discontented with ugly things around them. Satisfied customers are not as profitable as discontented ones.'¹⁸ Psychologists,

15 Susan Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market*, Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989, 29–57.

16 *Ibid.*, 58–88.

17 Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness*, 32.

18 Quoted *ibid.*, 39.

psychoanalysts, sociologists and behaviourists invaded this rich new market.

With the development of advertising, the classic concept of the market was turned completely on its head. From the abstract market of the economists, the meeting point between rational individuals seeking to satisfy needs that preceded their entry onto the market, there was now the concrete market of advertisers, a market that could be created from scratch, where needs were malleable and buyers irrational.¹⁹

Disciplinary hedonism

In 1893, the economist George Gunton explained that new products were indispensable for attaching workers to their job: 'such a conscious need for an object that its absence will cause sufficient pain to induce the effort and sacrifice necessary to its attainment.'²⁰ With the production of deep and stable markets, the second goal of mass consumption, completely explicit, was to discipline the workers. Henry Ford introduced a daily wage of \$5, double that of his competitors, partly so that his workers could buy the cars that they made, but above all to reduce staff turnover. The repugnance of workers for Taylorist methods and assembly-line work was such that Ford had to recruit 963 men in order to add 100 workers to its labour force.²¹

Consumer credit also played a key role in this disciplinary hedonism. Until the 1920s, credit remained informal (the slate) or underground (loan sharks and other 'leeches'). Banks only financed businesses and property acquisitions. New credit techniques such as hire purchase or instalment plan universalized the slogan 'buy now, pay later'. Companies producing consumer goods, such as Ford, General Motors and General Electric, became major suppliers of

¹⁹ Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America*, New York: Basic Books, 1994, 196–233.

²⁰ George Gunton, *Principles of Social Economics* (1893), quoted by Cross, *Time and Money*, 25.

²¹ Matthew B. Crawford, *The Case for Working with Your Hands: Or Why Office Work Is Bad for Us and Fixing Things Feel Good*, London: Viking, 2009, 41–2.

credit. During crisis periods, when investment flagged, banks were also interested in this lucrative market. The development of mass consumption in the United States took place on credit. In 1926, for example, half of American households already owned a car, but two-thirds of these cars had been bought on credit.²² This was a characteristically American trait: neither Britain nor France, the two European countries most motorized at this time, had more than one car for twenty inhabitants at the end of the 1930s. When consumer credit was first introduced in Britain, it failed to take off.²³

The 'consumer society' thus refers to a new relationship with objects and the environment, and a new form of social control that makes this relationship desirable. Disciplinary hedonism played (and continues to play) a fundamental role in the acceptance of mass production and its disastrous environmental consequences. It required a transformation of values: repairing, economizing and saving were presented as outdated habits harmful to the national economy, while repeated and ostentatious consumption, fashion and obsolescence became respectable objectives. The rise in wages and above all the introduction of consumer credit were the pillars of a new form of social control, at the heart of the famous Fordist model. In exchange for consumption, individuals had to accept an increased routinization of work and the dependency arising from credit.

From recycling to planned obsolescence

Mass consumption eclipsed the practices of recycling that were absolutely fundamental in the nineteenth century, deeply affecting the cycles of materials.

In France in the 1860s, *chiffonage*, the collection of discarded objects and material, occupied more than 100,000 people. Virtually everything was suitable for recovery: rags for paper and bone used for tablets and

²² Lendol Calder, *Financing the American Dream: A Cultural History of Consumer Credit*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, 19.

²³ Victoria De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005, 90.

buttons, animal charcoal, phosphorous, sal-ammoniac and gelatin. Until the late nineteenth century, human and animal excrement was systematically collected for agriculture.²⁴ Recycling was integrated into the distribution circuits. In the United States, commercial travelers also acted as recyclers, offering distributors new goods in exchange for worn-out ones, bits of metal, glass or rags, and thus stimulating a general collecting effort.²⁵

Good housekeeping minimized the production of waste. Several handbooks with evocative titles such as *The Frugal Housewife* or *The Family Save All: A System of Secondary Cookery* taught the recycling of waste. It was commonplace, for example, to save cooking fat for the production of soap. The massive presence of animals in the city also limited the volume of organic waste, much of which was fed to domestic animals. In New York in the mid nineteenth century, 10,000 scavenging pigs provided sustenance for the poor and aroused the complaints of the middle class. 'Be careful of the pigs if you visit New York', Charles Dickens warned in 1842.²⁶ Until late in the century, small pigsties and domestic chicken coops were very common in towns.

Several factors explain the general crisis of the recycling economy in the late nineteenth century. First of all, urban transformation: the expansion of cities, followed by the general provision of running water and flush toilets, complicated the collection of human excrement and its application to agriculture. Then there were technological factors: the manufacture of paper from wood pulp, for example, made rags useless. In the same way, the use of artificial nitrate fertilizer from the mid twentieth century ended the agricultural function of excrement and urban mud. More generally, increases in productivity made recycling economically less profitable than manufacture.

The culture of objects also changed. In the 1920s, Christine Frederick, a specialist in household management who was extremely

24 Sabine Barles, *L'Invention des déchets urbains. France 1790-1970*, Paris: Champ Vallon, 2007.

25 Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000, 70-80.

26 *Ibid.*, 30.

famous at the time, popularized the idea of 'convenience' as the domestic equivalent of industrial efficiency. The meaning of 'waste' changed from rejected matter to lost time.²⁷ Electrical household devices were marketed under the banner of household efficiency and the emancipation of women. In the 1930s, half of American households possessed a washing machine and a vacuum cleaner.²⁸ Likewise, ready-made meals became popular in the 1920s for the American middle classes.

A throw-away culture was also developed under the banner of health. Kimberly-Clark supplied the US Army with bandages during the First World War. In 1918, it found itself with surplus stocks of cellucotton, and Kotex, the first disposable menstrual pad, was invented in order to use this material. Industrial packaging was similarly popularized on health grounds.²⁹

Finally, psychological obsolescence became an essential tool in the struggle against overproduction.³⁰ It was first developed in the automobile sector. In 1923, when half of US households already had a car and the Ford Model T dominated a saturated market, General Motors introduced an annual change of model. Obsolescence was bound up with the growing role of industrial laboratories: the electric starter, invented in 1913, showed the ability of R&D to make certain goods obsolete overnight. In 1932, Ford followed this practice, which rapidly became general for all household durables. And when innovation failed to keep pace, which was indeed the general case, the futurist industrial design of the 1950s maintained the illusion of permanent technical progress.³¹

27 *Ibid.*, 181-7.

28 Sue Bowden and Avner Offer, 'Household Appliances and the Use of Time: The United States and Britain since the 1920s', *Economic History Review*, 47:4, 1994: 725-48.

29 Strasser, *Waste and Want*, 169-81; Giles Slade, *Made to Break: Technology and Obsolescence in America*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, 9-27.

30 Bernard London, *Ending the Depression Through Planned Obsolescence*, New York, 1932.

31 Slade, *Made to Break*, 29-55.

Time rather than money

Consumerism is not simply an economic order. It also defines a temporal order organized around work. Its triumph eclipsed powerful social movements for a drastic reduction in working hours. These alternative voices scarcely had a chance, trapped between crisis and war.

The trade-off between consumption and leisure was fiercely debated during the whole first half of the twentieth century. Alfred Marshall, the most influential economist of his generation, had already explained in 'The Future of the Working Classes' (1873) that productivity gains would increasingly have to be allocated to leisure, given that material needs were not infinitely extendable. He proposed a working day of six hours, and even four hours for unpleasant work.³² The eight-hour day was the common demand of all European and American trade unions. For the generation of 1910–30, the spectacular increase in productivity had necessarily to lead to a massive reduction in working time. Leisure, rather than consumption, was seen by economists and intellectuals (such as John Maynard Keynes and Bertrand Russell in England, Charles Gide and Gabriel Tarde in France) as the variable that would bring about economic equilibrium and win the struggle against overproduction and unemployment.

The First World War and the massive application of Taylorist methods visibly showed the productivity gains being made in the factories. At the end of the war, the British industrialist Lord Leverhulme (founder of Lever Brothers, eventually Unilever) argued for a six-hour day. In the 1920s, the European left supported the scientific organization of work, as this would make possible an increase in free time. The unions recycled the traditional pride of the worker in his trade into a collective affirmation of mass production and productivity.³³ Free time was an important political issue both in the democracies and under the fascist regimes, with the expectation that it would become the centre of social life. Holiday

32 Cross, *Time and Money*, 22–4.

33 *Ibid.*, 37.

camp, discussion groups and the practice of sports were encouraged by government. In France, Léo Lagrange symbolized these concerns.³⁴

In an initial period, the crisis of the 1930s reinforced this movement for a reduction in working hours. In Europe, trade unions demanded the forty-hour week, which was voted into law in France in 1936. In 1932, the American Federation of Labor called for a thirty-hour week with reduction of wages. A law imposing a thirty-hour week was even adopted by the US Senate in April 1933 but rejected by the House of Representatives.³⁵ The world crisis seemed to have discredited the hymn to consumption of the 1920s.

The triumph of consumerism

How is the resurgence of this powerful current to be explained? For economists trained in marginalist theory, the traditional distinction between natural and artificial needs disappeared in favour of a subjective theory of utility. Paradoxically, the economic crisis led to the idea of growth being naturalized. Previously, growth was bound up with a process of material expansion: it was a question of increasing production of a particular material, opening up new resources or territories for the economy. With the overproduction crisis of the 1930s, growth came to be thought of no longer in material terms but rather as an intensification of the totality of monetary relations. The abandoning of the gold standard in the 1930s (i.e., the end of the idea that bank-notes represented gold) and the invention of GDP for national accounting completed the dematerialization of economic thinking, so that the economy could now be conceived as growing indefinitely without coming up against physical limits.³⁶

34 Léo Lagrange (1900–40) was France's first minister for sport and leisure, in the Popular Front government of 1936, and particularly associated with the introduction of paid holidays.

35 *Ibid.*, 82–4.

36 Timothy Mitchell, 'Fixing the Economy', *Cultural Studies*, 12:1, 1998: 82–101.



Figure 12: *The post-war world as technological consumerist paradise, General Electric advertisement, 1943*

In the United States, the economists of the New Deal acted on the assumption that the crisis had been caused not by a lack of demand, but rather by a weakness of purchasing power. Franklin D. Roosevelt accordingly made Keynesian revival and an increase in purchasing power the linchpin of his policy of public works.

The war brought the Keynesian boost that the New Deal had lacked. The start of the war, for Americans, coincided with a period of intense consumption: car sales leapt by 55 per cent in the first half of 1941, sales of refrigerators by 164 per cent.³⁷ The war massively

³⁷ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, London: Vintage, 2004, 63.

enriched Americans, their purchasing power rising by 60 per cent between 1939 and 1944. It is true that official propaganda called for recycling and saving, but simply to consume more later on. The purchase of well-remunerated war loans made it possible to benefit from technological advances. A propaganda campaign titled 'Why we are fighting' promised post-war abundance. Advertising presented the world to come as a technological paradise. As the manufacturer of Sparton radios explained: 'Home will be truly a House of Wonders in this after-Victory world. Science already knows how to make it comfortable beyond our dreams. Invention will fill it with conveniences we have never known.'³⁸ It was during the Second World War, in fact, that the dream of the 'American way of life' based on the family home in the suburbs was constructed, along with its panoply of electrical equipment.

In the aftermath of the war, the United States experienced once again a major strike wave. In the words of Charles E. Wilson, president of General Electric and adviser to President Eisenhower, the problems of the United States could be summed up in a few words: 'Russia abroad, labour at home.'³⁹ The employment law of 1946 and the Taft-Hartley Act on industrial relations established a new order often referred to as Cold War Keynesianism. The employment law stipulated that the government had to promote full employment and maximize production and purchasing power. The Taft-Hartley Act restricted the right to strike. Trade unions abandoned a reduction in working time in exchange for an increase in consumption. From now on, their main demand was for an indexing of wages in relation to prices. In exchange, capitalists obtained the social stability they needed for their investments. They also accepted state intervention into the economy, on condition that this guaranteed their opportunities of profit. Hence the option for military expenditure to fill order books, for highways rather than public transport, for the single-family home rather than public

³⁸ Donald Albrecht (ed.), *World War II and the American Dream: How Wartime Building Changed a Nation*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995, 27.

³⁹ Quoted by David Noble, *Forces of Production: A Social History of Industrial Automation* (1984), New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2011, 3.

housing, loans to veterans (the G.I. Bill) and private pensions rather than the financing of public education and universal health coverage.

In Europe as well as the United States, the post-war decades were marked by a very sharp rise in GDP, which quadrupled in thirty years. Median and average incomes tripled. In the United States, consumption increased still more rapidly, thanks to the credit explosion. The guaranteed loans for veterans and the appearance of credit cards massively expanded household debt. By 1957, two-thirds of Americans were in debt.

A good part of this economic dynamism was based on the expansion of suburbs and motorization. The return of 14 million G.I.s and the 'baby boom' intensified the housing crisis. To stimulate supply, the housing developer William Levitt proposed applying to the construction sector the production methods of the arms industries: mass production to negotiate prices with suppliers, the division of tasks (twenty-six in the building of a house), specialization of labour, massive use of prefabrication, vertical integration and a simplification of construction with everything being electrical (see Chapter 5). Before the war, between 200,000 and 300,000 houses per year were built in the United States; in 1949, the figure was 1 million. Levitt became a national hero.

Suburbanization encouraged the purchase of consumer durables: refrigerators, cookers, washing machines and televisions, particularly since these items were often integrated into the house itself. In 1965, in the United States, car production reached a historic peak of 11.1 million per year. One job in six was bound up with automobile construction.

To stimulate demand, the state guaranteed housing loans. Thirty-year mortgages brought the suburban dream within reach for less than \$60 per month, or the equivalent of three days' wages. Suddenly, for millions of Americans, buying in the suburbs became less expensive than renting in town. The move to the suburbs was accompanied by public investment in roads. During the 1950s, 80 per cent of new homes in the US were built in the suburbs, which gained an extra 30 million inhabitants between 1947 and 1953. Suburbanites overtook city dwellers and country folk together by 1960. By that time, half of

the economically active population lived in the suburbs, and three-quarters of those under forty.

State-supported suburbanization redefined the political and social world of the worker: it dissolved the ethnic and social solidarities that had been the support of working-class solidarity, and in combination with television it domesticated and privatized leisure, which shifted from the urban public space to the suburban living room. The share of household income spent on cinema and public entertainment fell by an annual 2 per cent between 1947 and 1955.⁴⁰

Cold War Keynesianism gave consumerism a moral and political meaning, linking it with national prosperity and civic virtue, as well as with competition with the USSR and the defence of freedom. Mass consumption was presented as an alternative to Communism: the United States would beat the Soviet Union at its own game by effacing the traditional barriers of class society. In 1951, the sociologist David Riesman published 'The Nylon War', a satirical essay in which a US colonel decides to bombard the Soviet Union with nylon hose, cigarettes and watches with the aim of convincing Russians to embrace capitalism. Unfortunately, the Soviet government responds with its own 'aggressive generosity' in the form of caviar, fur coats and copies of Stalin's speeches. The pertinence of the essay was confirmed a few years later with the famous 'kitchen debate' between Nixon and Khrushchev at the US exhibition in Moscow on 29 July 1959.

In Europe, the Nazi and fascist regimes sought to forge a consumerist culture in the service of political stabilization.⁴¹ The Nazis demonstrated a certain ambivalence towards the consumer society: on the one hand, this appeared as an American invention, decadent and Jewish; on the other, they recognized the role it could play in winning the support of the middle and working classes. The solution was to promote an Aryan consumer society that preserved certain elements

40 Lynn Spiegel, 'Installing the Television Set: Popular Discourses on Television and Domestic Space, 1948-1955', *Camera Obscura*, 16:1, 1998.

41 S. Jonathan Wiesen, *Creating the Nazi Marketplace: Commerce and Consumption in the Third Reich*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010; Victoria De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent: Mass Organisation of Leisure in Fascist Italy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

of its American exemplar (the 'Fordism' that Hitler greatly admired) while differentiating itself from this by the state organization of the market, the promotion of healthy products, and the despoliation of non-Aryans. To this end, the Nazi regime drew up a list of 146 products designated as 'people's products' (*Volksempfänger* – radio, *Volkswohnung* – apartment, *Volkswagen*, etc.), production of which was to be rationalized. According to the German historian Götz Aly, the abundance of consumer goods was more decisive than ideology in winning popular support for the regime; tracing the Nazi origins of the 'German miracle', he shows that the pillage of occupied countries and the plunder of Jewish goods made it possible to establish the consumer society, welfare state and social market economy that post-war West Germany inherited.⁴²

In Western Europe, productivism and the consumer society similarly took root as the cement of a social compromise promoted by the Marshall Plan.⁴³ In 1944, the general secretary of the French Communist Party, Maurice Thorez, declared to the miners of Waziers: 'Produce, that is today the highest form of class duty.'⁴⁴

After the war, American films launched a semi-official propaganda campaign for the 'American way of life'. Modern domestic life and the world of abundance were presented as self-evident, and the natural stage for romantic or criminal plots.⁴⁵ The pioneering writings of Henri Lefebvre and Roland Barthes (*Mythologies*, 1957), then George Perec's acrid novel *Things* (1965), mapped the entry of French society into a consumerist culture with its own icons and temples: the Salon de l'automobile and the 'Arts of Housekeeping' show, the 'motor' ever-present in New Wave films, the talk of the emancipation of women

42 Götz Aly, *Hitler's Beneficiaries: Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State*, New York: Henry Holt, 2005.

43 De Grazia, *The Culture of Consent*. On the Americanization of French society and the reactions it aroused, see Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

44 Marc Lazar, 'Damné de la terre et homme de marbre. L'ouvrier dans l'imaginaire du PCF du milieu des années trente à la fin des années cinquante', *Annales*, 1990, 45:5, 1071–96.

45 Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996, 38.

by consumer durables, the hypermarkets that sprang up in the 1960s.⁴⁶ As in all industrialized countries, the consumerism that fuelled strong economic growth was made possible by drawing on the planet's finite natural resources and by unequal exchange with the countries that produced raw materials, the terms of trade shifting against these by 20 per cent between 1950 and 1972. As far as oil was concerned, this shift came to an end with the 'oil shock' of 1973, but for renewable and mining materials it continued until the 1990s.⁴⁷

The Anthropocene body

The entry into consumerist society that was the foundation of the 'Great Acceleration' not only degraded environments; it also deeply affected the bodies and physiology of consumers.

In 1947, the Rockefeller Foundation sent a team of researchers to study European nutrition. The people of Crete, despite being relatively tall, were described as suffering from deficiencies on account of a consumption of meat and dairy products that was insufficient by American standards.⁴⁸ This study formed part of a broad movement of imposing on Europe after 1945, and on the whole world in recent decades, a new dietary model high in meat and sugar and dominated by industrial foodstuffs. This model, actively constructed by the major agricultural and food corporations,⁴⁹ has gone hand in hand with a degradation of the planet's ecosystems: overfishing, specialization and monoculture that undermine biodiversity, pollution by fertilizers and pesticides, the shrinking of tropical forests in favour of

46 Claire Leymonerie, 'Le Salon des arts ménagers dans les années 1950. Théâtre d'une conversion à la consommation de masse', *Vingtième siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 91, 2006: 43–56.

47 Paul Bairoch, *Mythes et paradoxes de l'histoire économique*, Paris: La Découverte, 1999, 161.

48 Martin Bruegel, 'Alimentary Identities, Nutritional Advice, and the Uses of History', *Food and History*, 2:2, 2004: 105–16.

49 Roger Horowitz, *Putting Meat on the American Table: Taste, Technology, Transformation*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006; William Boyd, 'Making Meat: Science, Technology, and American Poultry Production', *Technology and Culture*, 42:4, 2001: 631–64.

stock-raising, soya and palm oil, with enormous emissions of greenhouse gases.

Its corollary, too, is a sharp rise in chronic diseases such as cancer, obesity and cardiovascular illness. Ever-earlier puberty in poor American families and the rise in child cancer incidence in Europe (up 35 per cent in thirty years) are a regular cause of concern. But the problem is global. Chronic diseases have become the prime cause of mortality worldwide (63 per cent of the 57 million deaths in 2008), much higher than infectious diseases (27 per cent) and amounting to a real time bomb, especially in India and China.⁵⁰ The number of people in the world suffering from overweight and obesity rose from 857 million in 1980 to 2.1 billion in 2013.⁵¹ And now nutritionists explain to us the virtues of the Cretan diet.

The Anthropocene body is also one damaged by thousands of toxic substances. In 2004, when the European Union's Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH) Regulation was being debated, the World Wildlife Fund published blood tests for thirty-seven European parliamentarians showing the presence of an average forty-one persistent and accumulative organic poisons. The malleability of regulations, and particularly the notion of thresholds, has authorized the proliferation of substances produced by synthetic chemistry since the Second World War. In the late 1940s, toxicologists warned governments that even at the lowest doses certain of these molecules increased the risk of cancer, and a consensus formed to ban such substances from foods. In 1958, in the United States, the Delaney Clause prohibited the presence of pesticide residues in foodstuffs. But in the 1970s, regulatory bodies turned to deploying a cost/benefit analysis that allowed risk to be accepted in view of economic importance, along with the definition of thresholds. New international norms such as 'daily acceptable dose' for foodstuffs or 'maximum

50 Cicolella, *Toxique planète*. See also Julie Guthman, *Weighing In: Obesity, Food Justice, and the Limits of Capitalism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.

51 Marie Ng et al., 'Global, Regional, and National Prevalence of Overweight and Obesity in Children and Adults During 1980–2013: A Systematic Analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2013', *The Lancet*, 384:9945, 2014, 766–81.

authorized concentration' for air quality made a subtle deception: given the non-existence of a threshold effect, they confirmed the de facto agreement to an acceptable rate of cancer for economic reasons.⁵²

Finally, the Anthropocene body is shaped by the automobile and the suburb. American town-planners and doctors have recently shown the correlation between motorization, urban sprawl and the prevalence of diseases such as diabetes and obesity. Between 1963 and 2003 in the United States, distances travelled by motorcar doubled, while obesity now affects 65 per cent of adults, leading to a rise in cardiovascular diseases.⁵³

52 Soraya Boudia and Nathalie Jas (eds), *Toxicants, Health and Regulation since 1945*, London: Pickering and Chatto, 2013.

53 Laura E. Jackson, 'The Relationship of Urban Design to Human Health and Condition', *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 64:4, 2003, 191–200; Wesley E. Marshall, Daniel P. Piatkowski and Norman W. Garrick, 'Community Design, Street Networks, and Public Health', *Journal of Transport and Health*, 1:4, 2014, 326–340.