

The essays in this section look at consumption, as well as our relationship to consumer products, debt, retail stores, and labor. In "Overselling Capitalism With Consumerism," Barber argues that consumerism ultimately perverts capitalism as producers in search of buyers must "dumb down consumerism" and "invent new needs." Writer Sylvia Kim looks at consumption literally in "The End of Spam Shame: On Class, Colonialism, and Canned Meat." For Kim, Spam—a product "synonymous" with "trashiness in American pop culture"—carries a heavy load of symbolism for America's enduring international presence. In "Toys," Roland Barthes shows how children's toys burst with significance, ideological and otherwise, when they are given a close reading. Virginia Postrel's "In Praise of Chain Stores" provides a bracing defense of retail chain stores, as the writer responds to snobby "cosmopolites" whose misguided "contempt for chains represents a brand-obsessed view of place." Novelist Margaret Atwood ("Debtor's Prism") sees debt through the literary prism of story arc and metaphor, touching on the enduring tales of Dickens's Scrooge and Marlowe's Faust in the process. In the paired essays, Barbara Ehrenreich and Eric Schlosser examine the world of work in two icons of mass consumer culture: Wal-Mart and fast-food restaurants, respectively.

BENJAMIN BARBER

Overselling Capitalism with Consumerism

Born in New York City in 1939, political theorist Benjamin Barber earned a Ph.D. in government at Harvard University. He has taught at the University of Maryland, Rutgers University, Princeton University, and several other colleges. Currently, he is a Distinguished Senior Fellow at Dēmos, a policy and research center, as well as president of Civ-World, the international program at Dēmos that encourages more democratic systems of government. Barber's work focuses on democracy, citizenship, civil society, education, and globalism. His books include Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism are Reshaping the World (1995) and Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole (2007). He writes for the Huffington Post, the Nation, the Atlantic Monthly, and other publications.

In this Los Angeles Times opinion column (April 15, 2007), Barber considers the economic problems of the last several years in the context of consumerism and the decline of an "ethos of hard work and deferred gratification." Why does this development threaten democracy as well as the economy?

The crisis in subprime mortgages betrays a deeper predicament facing consumer capitalism triumphant: The "Protestant ethos" of hard work and deferred gratification has been replaced by an infantilist ethos of easy credit and impulsive consumption that puts democracy and the market system at risk.

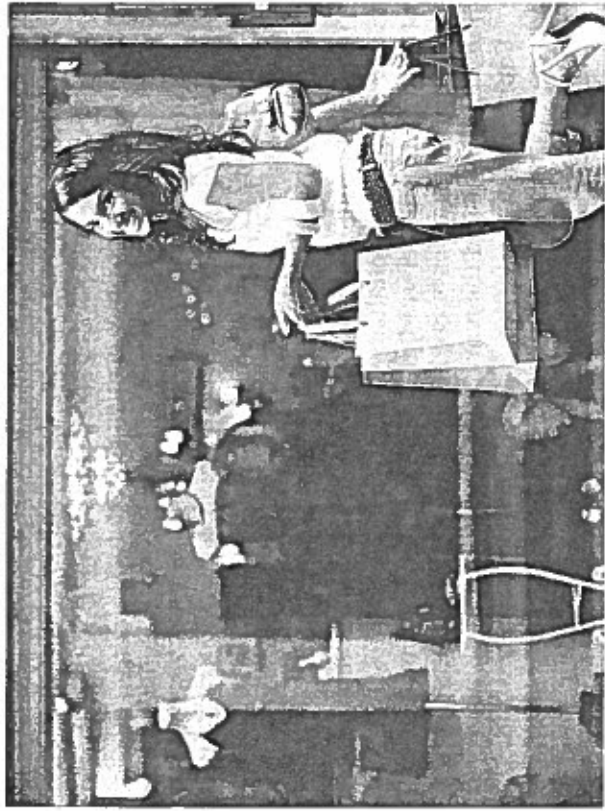
Capitalism's core virtue is that it marries altruism and self-interest. In producing goods and services that answer real consumer needs, it secures a profit for producers. Doing good for others turns out to entail doing well for yourself.

Capitalism's success, however, has meant that core wants in

the developed world are now mostly met and that too many goods are chasing too few needs. Yet capitalism requires us to "need" all that it produces in order to survive. So it busies itself manufacturing needs for the wealthy while ignoring the wants of the truly needy. Global inequality means that while the wealthy have too few needs, the needy have too little wealth.

Capitalism is stymied, courting long-term disaster. We still work hard, but only so that we can pay and play. In order to turn reluctant consumers with few satisfied core needs into permanent shoppers, producers must dumb down consumers, shape their wants, take over their life worlds, encourage impulse buying, cultivate shopoholism and invent new needs.

At the same time, they empower kids as shoppers by legitimizing their unformed tastes and mercurial wants and detaching them from their gatekeeper mothers and fathers and teachers and pastors. The kids include toddlers who recognize brand logos before they can talk and commodity-minded baby Einsteins who learn to shop before they can walk.



Does the overextended American consumer have a leg left to stand on?

Consumerism needs this infantilist ethos because it favors laxity and leisure over discipline and denial, values childish impetuosity and juvenile narcissism over adult order and enlightened self-interest, and prefers consumption-directed play to spontaneous recreation. The ethos feeds a private-market logic ("What I want is what society needs!") and combats the public logic fashioned by democracy ("What society needs is what I want to want!").

This is capitalism's all-too-logical way of solving the problem of too many goods chasing too few needs. It makes consuming ubiquitous and omnipresent, turning shopping into an addiction facilitated by easy credit.

Compare any traditional town square with a modern suburban mall. In the square, you'll find a school, town hall, library, general store, park, movie house, church, art gallery and homes—a true neighborhood exhibiting our human diversity as beings who do more than simply consume. But our new town malls are all shopping, all the time.

When we see politics permeate every sector of life, we call it totalitarianism. When religion rules all, we call it theocracy. But when commerce dominates everything, we call it liberty. Can we redirect capitalism to its proper end: the satisfaction of real human needs? Well, why not?

The world teems with elemental wants and is peopled by billions who are needy. They do not need iPods, but they do need potable water, not colas but inexpensive medicines, not MTV but their ABCs. They need mortgages they can afford, not funny-money easy credit.

To serve such needs, however, capitalism must once again learn to defer profits and empower the needy as customers. Entrepreneurs wanted! With micro-credit, villagers can construct hand pumps and water filters from the clay under their feet.

Pharmaceutical companies ought to be thinking about how to sell inexpensive retro-virals to Africans with HIV instead of pushing Botox to the "forever young" customers they are trying to manufacture here.

And parents can refuse to relinquish their gatekeeping roles and let marketers know they won't allow their kids to be targeted anymore.

To do this, we will require the assistance of democratic institutions and an adult ethos. Public citizens must be restored to their

proper place as masters of their private choices. To sustain itself, capitalism once again will have to respond to real needs instead of trying to fabricate synthetic ones—or risk consuming itself.

For Discussion and Writing

1. According to Barber, what is the deep predicament that faces consumer capitalism?
2. The author refers to capitalism's "core virtue" (par. 2), and proposes that capitalism be redirected to its "proper end." How do you respond to these—and other—characterizations of our economic system in the essay? Do you agree with Barber's assumptions about the nature and function of capitalism?
3. **connections** Barber writes about an "infantilist ethos" as it applies to consumerism (par. 6). Writing about television and entertainment, George F. Will refers to our "increasingly infantilized society" (par. 4) in "Reality Television: Oxymoron" (p. 289). How do their arguments overlap? Where do the writers differ?
4. Barber proposes an opposition between an "infantilist ethos" and an "adult ethos." How would you compare and contrast them? Use specific examples from your own life, society, and culture to illustrate the distinction.

SYLVIE KIM

The End of Spam Shame: On Class, Colonialism, and Canned Meat

Sylvie Kim is a blog editor and columnist for *Hyphen*, an Asian American magazine that covers politics, culture, and the arts. Previously she served as the magazine's film editor. In "The End of Spam Shame," which originally appeared on Hyphen's blog, Kim writes about her affection for Spam, a precooked canned meat product made from pork and ham. Long a subject of jokes and an object of derision, Spam is entrenched in popular culture—from the 2004 musical comedy *Spam!ot* to the use of the term to denote unwanted e-mail messages. But Kim sees the canned meat as more than just a food or an easy punchline. She ties Spam to immigration, assimilation, and the history of the American military's global presence. As you read, consider Kim's style, tone, and attitude toward her subject. How serious is she?

I am quite familiar with processed meats. There's no punch line to that opener; I'm just being honest about what I know. And apparently, I'm not alone. A recent Hyphen Facebook post linking to the Multi-American blog's celebration of SPAM musubi brought all sorts of "likes" and "comments" to the virtual yard, signifying how ingrained the canned meat is to many Asian American lives and bellies.

My childhood was chock-full of nitrates, sodium, and an amalgam of four-legged animals chopped and cured into uniform cuts of salty goodness that was inexpensive, easy to heat, and lasted for damn near forever—key to a family of five with immigrant parents who were struggling financially. Sliced hot dogs were thrown into kim bap and a delightful dish (whose name escaped me) which features potatoes, onions, soy sauce and sesame oil. Vienna sausages weren't my favorite, but they would do in a pinch despite their uncanny resemblance to amputated fingers. And then . . .

military conflicts and other upheavals that shape much of the 21st century."

As for me, I gradually cast off the onerous chains of Spam shame throughout my early twenties. My tipping point came when I moved to the San Francisco bay area, one the largest concentrations of APAs in the country and where Spam musubi is rolled and devoured freely. Histrionics aside, food is a form of identity and to have that identity stifled in the name of racial, cultural or class assimilation is pure bollocks. To paraphrase Dave Chappelle's classic stand-up bit on the racialized love connection between African Americans and fried chicken (a stereotype also fraught with history, born out of American slavery): "If you don't like Spam, then there's something wrong with you."

For Discussion and Writing

1. Kim writes: "You could say that my yen for Spam was inherited" (par. 8). What does she mean by this?
2. The writer includes excerpts from a Hormel Foods press release about Spam. Why does she do this? How does her interpretation of the press release support her argument?
3. **connections** Kim writes about an object of snobbery: a "vulgar" food product that is synonymous with "trashiness" and an "affront to the very idea of real or whole food" (pars. 5, 11). In "In Praise of Chain Stores" (p. 30), Virginia Postrel also defends often-maligned chain stores from the attacks of snobby, "bored cosmopolites" (par. 10). How are there arguments similar? How are they different? What role does irony play in each of the essays?
4. In the essay, Kim refers to her "family's culinary culture" (par. 9). Did you grow up with a family culinary culture of any kind? Kim has an attachment to Spam that is both personal and cultural. What food or foods hold a similar place in your life?

ROLAND BARTHES

Toys

Roland Barthes (1915–1980) was a literary theorist and semiotician born in the Normandy region of France. As a critic and essayist, his interests ranged from anthropology, existentialism, and Marxism to fashion and mass culture. While he deployed a variety of critical approaches, Barthes is probably best known for his interest in semiotics, a branch of linguistics that analyzes signs and symbols as elements of communication. Barthes used semiotics to analyze popular culture—perhaps most famously in *Mythologies* (1957), a book that includes "Toys." By scrutinizing phenomena like toys, cars, and professional wrestling, Barthes revealed their hidden meanings. He also uncovered the unexamined assumptions, values, and myths of the society that consumes such products. The essays in *Mythologies* originally appeared in the literary magazine *Les Lettres Nouvelles* between 1954 and 1956. Barthes's other works include *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), *S/Z: An Essay* (1970), and *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973).

While Barthes's style is witty and playful, he has a serious purpose in *Mythologies*: "I resented seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of what goes without saying, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there." As you read "Toys," notice how Barthes uncovers this meaningful "what-goes-without-saying" through keen observation and vivid description.

French toys: one could not find a better illustration of the fact that the adult Frenchman sees the child as another self. All the toys one commonly sees are essentially a microcosm of the adult world; they are all reduced copies of human objects, as if in the eyes of the public the child was, all told, nothing but a smaller man, a homunculus to whom must be supplied objects of his own size.



"However, faced with this world of faithful and complicated objects, the child can only identify himself as owner, as user, never as creator; he does not invent the world, he uses it. . . ."

Invented forms are very rare: a few sets of blocks, which appeal to the spirit of do-it-yourself, are the only ones which offer dynamic forms. As for the others, French toys *always mean something*, and this something is always entirely socialized, constituted by the myths or the techniques of modern adult life: the Army, Broadcasting, the Post Office, Medicine (miniature instrument-cases, operating theatres for dolls), School, Hair-Styling (driers for permanent-waving), the Air Force (Parachutists), Transport (trains, Citroëns, Vedettes, Vespas, petrol-stations), Science (Martian toys).

The fact that French toys *literally* prefigure the world of adult functions obviously cannot but prepare the child to accept them all, by constituting for him, even before he can think about it, the alibi of a Nature which has at all times created soldiers, postmen and Vespas. Toys here reveal the list of all the things the adult does not find unusual: war, bureaucracy, ugliness, Martians, etc. It is not so much, in fact, the imitation which is the sign of an abdication, as its literalness: French toys are like a Jivaro head, in which one recognizes, shrunken to the size of an apple, the wrinkles and hair of an adult. There exist, for instance, dolls which urinate; they have an oesophagus, one gives them a bottle, they wet their nappies; soon, no doubt, milk will turn to water in their stomachs. This is meant to prepare the little girl for the causality of house-keeping, to "condition" her to her future role as mother. However, faced with this world of faithful and complicated objects, the child can only identify himself as owner, as user, never as creator; he does not invent the world, he uses it: there are, prepared for him, actions without adventure, without wonder, without joy. He is turned into a little stay-at-home householder who does not even have to invent the mainsprings of adult causality; they are supplied to him ready-made: he has only to help himself, he is never allowed to discover anything from start to finish. The merest set of blocks, provided it is not too refined, implies a very different learning of the world: then, the child does not in any way create meaningful objects, it matters little to him whether they have an adult name; the actions he performs are not those of a user but those of a demiurge. He creates forms which walk, which roll, he creates life, not property: objects now act by themselves, they are no longer an inert and complicated material in the palm of his hand. But such toys are rather rare: French toys

are usually based on imitation, they are meant to produce children who are users, not creators.

The bourgeois status of toys can be recognized not only in their forms, which are all functional, but also in their substances. Current toys are made of a graceless material, the product of chemistry, not of nature. Many are now moulded from complicated mixtures; the plastic material of which they are made has an appearance at once gross and hygienic, it destroys all the pleasure, the sweetness, the humanity of touch. A sign which fills one with consternation is the gradual disappearance of wood, in spite of its being an ideal material because of its firmness and its softness, and the natural warmth of its touch. Wood removes, from all the forms which it supports, the wounding quality of angles which are too sharp, the chemical coldness of metal. When the child handles it and knocks it, it neither vibrates nor grates, it has a sound at once muffled and sharp. It is a familiar and poetic substance, which does not sever the child from close contact with the tree, the table, the floor. Wood does not wound or break down; it does not shatter, it wears out, it can last a long time, live with the child, alter little by little the relations between the object and the hand. If it dies, it is in dwindling, not in swelling out like those mechanical toys which disappear behind the hernia of a broken spring. Wood makes essential objects, objects for all time. Yet there hardly remain any of these wooden toys from the Vosges, these fretwork farms with their animals, which were only possible, it is true, in the days of the craftsman. Henceforth, toys are chemical in substance and colour; their very material introduces one to a coenaesthesia of use, not pleasure. These toys die in fact very quickly, and once dead, they have no posthumous life for the child.

For Discussion and Writing

1. Why does Barthes prefer wooden toys to toys made from plastic or metal?
2. According to Barthes, toys "*literally* prefigure the world of adult functions" (par. 3) and therefore "cannot but prepare the child to accept them all, by constituting for him, even before he can think about it, the alibi of a Nature . . ." (par. 3). What does he mean by the "alibi of a Nature"? Does he prove his claim persuasively throughout the essay? Why or why not?

3. **connections** In "Why Video Games Are Works of Art" (p. 396), Kyle Chayka argues that video games provide deep, meaningful aesthetic experiences. How might you view video games using Barthes's framework? Do video games "socialize or "condition" players to accept certain "myths" or a certain view of the world? Are video game players like "owners" and "users," or are they more like "creators"?
4. Barthes writes that "French toys *always mean something*" (par. 2). Choose a toy, product, or common object and interpret its meaning as Barthes does in his essay. Focus on its function, material, and formal details: What do they suggest about its user's relationship to the world? How does the object reflect social values? What does the object "mean"?