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PART II
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The Social Logic of Consumption

The Egalitarian Ideology of Well-Being

The whole of the discourse on needs is based on a naïve anthropology: that of the natural propensity to happiness. Happiness, written in letters of fire behind the least little advert for bath salts or the Canary Islands, is the absolute reference of the consumer society; it is the strict equivalent of salvation. But what is this happiness which haunts modern civilization with such ideological force?

Here again one has to revise all spontaneous conceptions. The ideological force of the notion of happiness does not originate in a natural propensity on the part of each individual to realize that happiness for himself. It derives, socio-historically, from the fact that the myth of happiness is the one which, in modern societies, takes up and comes to embody the myth of Equality. All the political and sociological virulence with which that myth has been charged since the industrial revolution and the revolutions of the nineteenth century has been transferred to Happiness. The fact that Happiness initially has that signification and that ideological function has important consequences for its content: to be the vehicle of the egalitarian myth, Happiness has to be measurable. It has to be a well-being measurable in terms of objects and signs; it has to be ‘comfort’, as Tocqueville put it, already noticing this trend of democratic societies towards ever more well-being as a reduction of the impact of social misfortune and an equalization of all destinies. Happiness as total or inner enjoyment – that happiness independent of the signs which could manifest it to others and to those around us, the happiness which has no need of evidence – is therefore excluded from the outset from the consumer ideal in which happiness is, first and foremost, the demand for equality (or distinction, of course) and must, accordingly, always signify with ‘regard’ to visible criteria. In this sense, Happiness is even further removed from any collective ‘feast’ or exaltation since, fuelled by an egalitarian exigency, it is based on individualistic principles, fortified by the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen which explicitly recognize the right to Happiness of everyone (of each individual).
The ‘Revolution of Well-Being’ is heir to, or executor of, the Bourgeois Revolution, or simply of any revolution which proclaims human equality as its principle without being able (or without wishing) fundamentally to bring it about. The democratic principle is then transferred from a real equality of capacities, of responsibilities, of social chances and of happiness (in the full sense of the term) to an equality before the Object and other manifest signs of social success and happiness. This is the democracy of social standing, the democracy of the TV, the car and the stereo, an apparently concrete but, in fact, equally formal democracy which, beyond contradictions and social inequalities, corresponds to the formal democracy enshrined in the Constitution. Both of these, the one serving as an alibi for the other, combine in a general democratic ideology which conceals the absence of democracy and the non-existence of equality.

In the mystique of equality, the notion of ‘needs’ is indissociable from that of well-being. Needs point to a reassuring universe of ends, and this naturalistic anthropology lays the ground for the promise of a universal equality. The implicit argument is as follows: all men are equal before need and before the principle of satisfaction, since all men are equal before the use-value of objects and goods (whereas they are unequal and divided before exchange-value). Need being indexed to use-value, we have here a relationship of objective utility or natural finality, in the face of which there is no longer any social or historical inequality. At the meat-and-drink level (use-value), there are no proletarians, no privileged individuals.

Thus the complementary myths of well-being and needs have a powerful ideological function of reducing, of eliminating the objective, social and historical, determinations of inequality. The whole political game of the welfare state and consumer society consists in surmounting their contradictions by increasing the volume of goods, with the prospect of an automatic equalization by quantity and a level of final equilibrium, which would be that of total well-being for all. Communist societies themselves speak in terms of equilibrium, of ‘natural’ individual or social needs, needs ‘harmonized’ and free of all social differentiation or class connotation. In this, they too drift from a political solution to a definitive solution by abundance, substituting the formal equality of goods for the social transparency of exchanges. Thus we also see the ‘Revolution of Well-Being’ taking over from the social and political revolution in the socialist countries.

If this perspective on the ideology of well-being is correct (namely, that that ideology is a vehicle for the myth of formal equality ‘securalized’ in goods and signs), then it is clear that the eternal problem of whether consumer society promotes or hinders equality, whether it is a fully achieved democracy (or on the way to being so) or the opposite – merely restoring earlier inequalities and social structures – is a false problem. Whether or not one is able to prove that consumption possibilities are being equaled (income differentials being flattened out, social re-

distribution, the same fashion for everyone, along with the same TV programmes and holiday destinations), this means nothing, since posing the problem in terms of the equalization of consumption is already to substitute the pursuit of objects and signs (level of substitution) for the real problems and their logical and sociological analysis. All in all, analysing Affluence does not mean seeking its verification in the statistics, which can only be as mythic as the myth, but radically changing focus and approaching the myth of Affluence with a logic other than its own.

Analysis does, of course, require that we assess affluence in terms of figures, that we draw up the balance sheet of well-being. But the figures do not speak for themselves, and they never provide any counter-argument. Only interpretations speak, sometimes to one side of, sometimes against, the figures. Let us listen to what they have to say.

The most stubborn and unyielding of these is the idealist version:

- growth means affluence;
- affluence means democracy.

It being impossible to conclude that this state of total felicity is imminent (even at the statistical level), the myth becomes more ‘realistic’ and we have the ideal-reformist variant: the large-scale inequalities of the first phase of growth are diminishing, there is no ‘iron law’ any longer, incomes are becoming harmonized. The hypothesis of a smooth, continuous progress towards ever more equality is, of course, refuted by certain facts (the ‘Other America’: 20 per cent living in poverty, etc.). But these point to a temporary dysfunction, to teething troubles. Growth, while producing certain inegalitarian effects, implies an overall, long-term democratization. Thus, in Galbraith’s view, the problem of equality/inequality is no longer relevant. It was linked to the problem of wealth and poverty and the structures of the ‘affluent’ society have resolved the problem, despite an unequal redistribution. The ‘poor’ (the 20 per cent) are those who remain, for one reason or another, outside the industrial system, outside growth. The principle of growth itself remains inviolate; it is homogeneous and is tending to homogenize the entire social body.

The basic question which arises at this level is the question of this ‘poverty’. For the idealists of affluence, it is ‘residual’; it will be cleared up by additional growth. Yet it seems to carry on down the post-industrial generations and all efforts to eliminate it (particularly in the USA, with the ‘great society’) seem to run up against some mechanism of the system which seems to reproduce it functionally at each stage of development, like a kind of drag on growth, a kind of mechanism indispensable to the general wealth. Should we believe Galbraith when he imputes this inexplicable residual poverty to the dysfunctions of the system (the priority accorded to military and other wasteful expenditure, a lagging of public services behind private consumption, etc.) or should
The theory of consumption

we turn his argument around and conclude that growth, in its very dynamic, is based on this disequilibrium? Galbraith is very contradictory on this: all his analyses tend to demonstrate in a sense how its defects are functionally implicated in the system of growth, yet he recoils before the logical conclusions which would challenge the system itself and recasts everything in a liberal perspective.

Generally, the idealists do not go beyond this paradoxical affirmation: in spite of everything, and by a devilish inversion of its aims (which, as everyone knows, cannot but be beneficial), growth produces, reproduces and restores social inequality, privileges, disequilibria, etc. They will admit, for example, as Galbraith does in The Affluent Society, that, ultimately, it is an increase in production which takes over the redistributive role ("As there comes to be more and more... so there will, in the end be enough for everyone") — these principles, based on the physics of fluids, are never true in a social relations context, where, as we shall see below, things work in precisely the opposite way. Moreover, from these principles, Galbraith derives an argument for the underprivileged, to the effect that even those on the bottom rung of the ladder have more to gain from an accelerated growth of production than from any other form of redistribution. But this is all spurious: for, if growth grants everyone access to an income and a volume of goods which are higher in absolute terms, what is sociologically characteristic is the process of distortion which sets in at the very heart of growth. It is the rate of distortion which subtly structures growth and gives it its true meaning. It is so much easier to content oneself with the spectacular disappearance of a particular extreme form of penury or certain secondary inequalities, to assess affluence by statistics and general quantities, by absolute increases and gross national products, than to analyse it in terms of structures! Structurally, it is the rate of distortion which is significant. It is that rate which, at an international level, marks the growing distance between the underdeveloped countries and the overdeveloped nations, and also, within those nations, the lower incomes falling further behind the higher, failing industries losing ground to the high-technology sectors, rural areas losing out to urban, industrial areas, etc. Chronic inflation allows this relative pauperization to be masked, by revising all nominal values upwards, whereas the calculation of the relative functions and averages would show up instances of partial decline at the bottom of the scale, and, at any event, a structural distortion throughout. There is no point constantly arguing that this is temporary or conjunctural when one sees the whole logic of the system sustaining it and the system indeed depending upon it for the fulfilment of its aims. At best, we can say the system stabilizes around a certain rate of distortion or, in other words, stabilizes, whatever the absolute volume of wealth, at a point which includes a systematic inequality.

The only way, in fact, to escape the idealist dead-end of this gloomy listing of dysfunctions is to admit that there is a systematic logic at work here. It is also the only way of getting beyond the false problematic of abundance and scarcity which, like votes of confidence in parliamentary circles, functions to stifle all discussion.

There is not in fact — and never has been — any ‘affluent society’, any more than there is an ‘indigent society’, since every society of whatever kind and whatever the volume of goods produced or available wealth is geared both to a structural excess and a structural penury. The excess may be the portion set aside for the gods or for sacrifice; it may be sumptuary expenditure, surplus value, economic profit or prestige budgets. It is, at any rate, that luxury levy which defines both the wealth of a society and its social structure, since it is always the prerogative of a privileged minority and its function is precisely to reproduce caste or class privilege. At the sociological level there is no equilibrium. Equilibrium is the ideal fantasy of economists which is contradicted, if not by the very logic of society as a condition, then at least by all known forms of social organization. Every society produces differentiation, social discrimination, and that structural organization is based on the use and distribution of wealth (among other things). The fact that a society enters upon a phase of growth, as our industrial society has done, changes nothing in this process. Quite the contrary, indeed, in a certain way the capitalist system (and the productivist system in general) has been the culmination of that functional unleveling, that disequilibrium, by rationalizing it and generalizing it in all respects. The spirals of growth are arrayed around the same structural axis. As soon as the fiction of GDP is abandoned as the criterion of affluence, we have to admit that growth neither takes us further from, nor brings us closer to, affluence. It is logically separated from it by the social structure which is, here, the determining instance. A certain kind of social relations and social contradictions, a certain kind of ‘inequality’, which used to perpetuate itself in the absence of economic progress, is today reproduced in and through growth.

This means that we must take another view of growth. We shall no longer say with the enthusiasts: ‘Growth produces affluence and therefore equality.’ Nor shall we take the extreme opposite view: ‘Growth produces inequality.’ Overturning the false problem of whether growth is egalitarian or inequitarian, we shall say that it is growth itself which is a function of inequality. It is the need of the inequitarian social order — the social structure of privilege — to maintain itself that produces and reproduces growth as its strategic element. To put it yet another way, the internal autonomy of (technological, economic) growth is weak and secondary by comparison with that determination by the social structure.

Growth society is, overall, the product of a compromise between egalitarian democratic principles, which for support within that society can draw on the myths of Affluence and Well-Being, and the fundamental imperative of maintaining an order of privilege and domination.
That society is not founded on technological progress. It is that mechanistic view which fuels the naïve illusion of future affluence. It is, rather, this contradictory dual determination which underpins the possibility of technological progress. It is this determination too which governs the emergence in our contemporary societies of certain egalitarian, democratic, ‘progressive’ processes. But it must be recognized that these only emerge there in "homoeopathic doses", drip-fed out by the system to ensure its survival. In this systematic process, equality itself is a (secondary and derived) function of inequality. As is growth. The tendency for incomes to be equalized, for example (for it is chiefly at this level that the egalitarian myth operates), is necessary to the internalization of growth processes—ancient internalization which, as we have seen, contributes tacitly to the reproduction of the social order, which is a structure of privilege and class power. All this points to the few symptoms of democratization as being "alibi" essential to the viability of the system.

These few symptoms are, moreover, themselves superficial and suspect. Galbraith rejoices at the decline in importance of inequality as an economic (and, hence, social) problem—not that it has disappeared, as he says, but because wealth no longer brings with it the fundamental advantages (power, enjoyment, prestige, distinction) it once implied. The power of property-owners and stockholders is at an end; it is now experts and organized technicians who exercise power, if not indeed intellectuals and scientists! The conspicuous consumption of the great capitalists, the "Citizen Kanes", is over, and there are no great fortunes any more. Indeed, the rich feel almost duty-bound to underconsume. In short, without wishing to do so, Galbraith clearly shows that if there is equality (if poverty and wealth are no longer a problem), it is precisely because equality no longer has any real importance. Things have moved on; the criteria of value are now elsewhere. Social discrimination, power and so on—the things which remain the key factors—have been shifted away from income or wealth pure and simple. It is of little consequence, in these conditions, if all incomes are in the end equal; the system can even afford the luxury of making a great step in that direction, for the fundamental determination of 'inequality' is no longer to be found there. Knowledge, culture, the structures of responsibility and decision-making, and influence are all criteria which, though still largely associated with wealth and level of income, have to a great extent relegated these latter—together with external marks of status—in the order of the social determinants of value, in the hierarchy of criteria of 'power'.

Galbraith, for example, confuses the 'underconsumption' of the rich with the abolition of criteria of prestige based on money. Now, admittedly, the rich man who drives a 2CV no longer bedazzles. What he does is more subtle: he super-differentiates himself, super-distinguishes himself by his manner of consuming, by style. He maintains his privilege absolutely by moving from conspicuous to discreet (super-conspicuous) consumption, by moving from quantitative ostentation to distinction, from money to culture.

In fact, even this argument, which we might term the thesis of the 'tendency of the rate of economic privilege to fall', is not certain. For money always transmutes itself into hierarchical privilege, into a privilege of power and culture. We may accept that it is no longer decisive (has it ever been?). What Galbraith and the others fail to see is that the very fact that (economic) inequality is no longer a problem in itself constitutes a problem. Registering a little too hastily the abatement of the 'iron law' in the economic field, they then go no further, and fail to produce a broader theory of this 'iron law' or to see how it shifts from the field of incomes and 'consumption'—henceforth blessed by Affluence—to a much more general social field where, functioning more subtly, it makes itself all the more irreversible.

The Industrial System and Poverty

When one examines the problem of the industrial system objectively in its entirety, cutting through all the liturgy of growth and affluence, one sees that all the possible positions boil down to two fundamental options:

1. The Galbraith option (shared by so many others). This magical-idealist position consists in expelling from the system all the negative phenomena: dysfunctions, nuisances, poverty—on the grounds that these are admittedly deplorable but accidental, residual and eventually remediable. In this way, the enchanted orbit of growth is preserved.

2. The view that the system survives on disequilibrium and structural penury, that its logic is totally ambivalent, and that it is so not merely conjuncturally but structurally. The system only sustains itself by producing wealth and poverty, by producing as many dissatisfaction as satisfactions, as much nuisance as 'progress'. Its only logic is to survive and its strategy in this regard is to keep human society out of kilter, in perpetual deficit. We know the system has traditionally and powerfully drawn on the aid of war to survive and to revive. Today the mechanisms and functions of war have been integrated into the economic system and the mechanisms of daily life.

If one accepts this structural paradox of growth, from which the contradictions and paradoxes of affluence derive, then it is naïve and mystifying to confuse the logical processes of social underdevelopment with the poor, the 20 per cent of 'underprivileged', the individuals 'thrown on the scrapheap'. Those processes cannot be located in real persons, in real places, in real groups. By the same token, they cannot be eliminated by the billions of dollars which have been thrown at the lower classes, or by the massive redistribution programmes to 'dispel poverty' and provide equal life-chances (all this being got up as the 'new frontier'², a social
ideal to tug at the heart strings). We have to acknowledge at times that the 'great societists' themselves believe in all this, their bewilderment at the failure of their 'unrelenting, generous' efforts being only the more comical for that fact.

If poverty and nuisance cannot be eliminated, this is because they are anywhere but in the poor neighbourhoods. They are not in the slums or shanty-towns, but in the socio-economic structure. Yet this is precisely what has to be concealed, what must not be said, and indeed billions of dollars are spent on hiding the fact (in the same way, heavy medical and pharmaceutical expenditure may be necessary to avoid admitting that a problem is not what it appears to be, and may, for example, be psychological in nature – the well-known process of 'denial'). A society, like an individual, may ruin itself in this way, trying to escape analysis. Now it is true here that analysis would be lethal for the system itself. So the sacrifice of useless millions in the struggle against what is merely the visible phantom of poverty is not too high a price to pay if it means that the myth of growth is preserved. We have to go even further and acknowledge that this real poverty is a myth – and one in which the myth of growth glories, pretending to battle fiercely against it and yet keeping it alive all the same as its secret goals require.

Having said this, we should not believe that it is because they are deliberately bloodthirsty and odious that the industrial or capitalist systems continually regenerate poverty or identify with the arms race. Moralistic analysis (which neither liberals nor Marxists escape) is always a mistake. If the system could find an equilibrium or survive on foundations other than unemployment, underdevelopment and military expenditure, it would do so. And on occasion it does. When it can safely maintain its power by way of beneficial social effects, by way of 'affluence', it does not fail to do so. It is not opposed on principle to the social 'spin-offs' of progress. It takes both nuclear power and the wellbeing of citizens as its objective, simultaneously and without distinction: the point is that, in its eyes, the two are ultimately equal as contents and its final goal lies elsewhere.

The simple fact is that, at the strategic level, it turns out that military expenditures (for example) are more reliable, easier to monitor and more effective in achieving the survival and goals of the system as a whole than education – as is also the case with motor cars rather than hospitals, colour televisions rather than playgrounds, etc. But that negative discrimination does not apply to public services as such. Things are much more serious than this: the system knows only the conditions of its survival, it knows nothing of social and individual contents. That should forewarn us against a number of (typically social-reformist) illusions: the illusions which involve a belief that one can change the system by modifying its contents (transferring military expenditures to education etc.). Moreover, the paradox is that all these social demands are, slowly but surely, taken up and realized by the system itself, thus slipping through the fingers of those who turn them into a political platform. Consumption, information, communication, culture, affluence – all these things are today set in place, discovered and organized by the system itself, as new productive forces, for its greater glory. It too is changing over (relatively) from a violent to a non-violent structure: it is substituting affluence and consumption for exploitation and war. But it will win no affection for this, since it is not actually changing, but merely obeying its own laws.

The New Segregations

Not only affluence, but nuisance too has been taken up into the social logic. The ascendency of the urban and industrial milieu is producing new examples of shortage: shortages of space and time, fresh air, greenery, water, silence. Certain goods, which were once free and abundantly available, are becoming luxuries accessible only to the privileged, while manufactured goods or services are offered on a mass scale.

The relative homogenization at the level of essential goods is thus being accompanied by a 'slippage' of values and a new hierarchy of utilities. The distortion and inequality are not reduced; they are transferred elsewhere. Everyday consumer objects are becoming less and less expressive of social rank. And incomes themselves, in so far as the great disparities are being reduced, are losing their value as a distinctive criterion. It is even possible that consumption (taken in the sense of expenditure, of the purchase and possession of visible objects) will gradually concede to other criteria and other types of behaviour the pre-eminent role it currently plays in the variable geometry of status. Ultimately, it will become the prerogative of everyone when it no longer has any meaning.

We are already seeing the social hierarchy being registered in more subtle criteria: type of work and responsibility, level of education and culture (the way of consuming everyday goods may itself be a kind of 'scarce commodity'), participation in decision-making. Knowledge and power are, or are becoming to go, the two great scarce commodities of our affluent societies.

But these abstract criteria do not prevent us, even today, from reading a growing discrimination in other concrete signs. Segregation by place of residence is not new, but, being increasingly linked to a consciously induced shortage and chronic speculation, it is tending to become decisive, in terms of both geographical segregation (town centres and outskirts, residential zones, rich ghettos, dormitory suburbs, etc.) and habitable space (the inside and outside of the dwelling, the addition of a 'second home', etc.). Objects are less important today than space and the social marking of space. Habitat thus perhaps has an opposite function to that of other consumables. The latter have a homogenizing function, the former a differentiating function in terms of space and location.
Nature, space, clean air, silence – it is the incidence of the pursuit of these scarce commodities and their high price which we read in the differential indices of expenditure between two categories at opposite ends of the social spectrum. The difference in expenditure between workers and senior managers on essential goods is 100:135, but it is 100:245 on household equipment, 100:305 on transport and 100:390 on leisure. One should not see these figures as showing a quantitative graduation within a homogeneous space of consumption, but see, through them, the social discrimination attaching to the quality of goods sought after.

There is much talk of the right to health, to space, to beauty, to holidays, to knowledge and to culture. And, as these new rights emerge, so ministries emerge with them, such as the Ministries of Health, or of Leisure. And why not add Beauty and Clean Air? This whole phenomenon, which seems to express a general individual and collective advance, rewarded in the end with embodiment in institutions, is ambiguous in its meaning and one might, as it were, see it as representing quite the opposite: there is no right to space until there no longer is space for everyone, and until space and silence are the privilege of some at the expense of others. Just as there was no ‘right to property’ until there was no longer land for everyone and there was no right to work until work became, within the framework of the division of labour, an exchangeable commodity, i.e. one which no longer belonged specifically to individuals. We might ask whether the ‘right to leisure’ does not, similarly, mean that leisure too has reached the stage of technical and social division which did work before and has thus, in fact, come to an end.

The appearance of these new social rights, brandished as slogans and emblazoned on the democratic banner of the affluent society, is in fact symptomatic, therefore, of the elements concerned acquiring the status of distinctive signs and class (or caste) privileges. The ‘right to clean air’ signifies the loss of clean air as a natural good, its transition to commodity status and its unequalitarian social redistribution. One should not mistake for objective social progress (something being entered as a right in the tables of the law) what is simply the advance of the capitalist system – i.e. the progressive transformation of all concrete and natural values into productive forms, i.e. into sources

1. of economic profit;
2. of social privilege.

A Class Institution

Consumption no more homogenizes the social body than the educational system homogenizes cultural opportunities. It even highlights the disparities within it. One is tempted to regard consumption and the growing participation in the same goods and the same products, both material and cultural, as a corrective to social disparities, social hierarchy and the ever increasing level of discrimination where power and responsibilities are concerned. In fact, the ideology of consumption, like that of education (i.e. the representation one has of a total equality before the electric razor or the car, like the representation one has of a total equality before writing and reading), does indeed play this role. Everyone today can read and write; everyone has (or will have) the same washing machine and buys the same paperbacks. But this equality is entirely formal: though bearing on what is most concrete, it is in fact abstract. And it is, by contrast, on this homogeneous abstract base, on this foundation of the abstract democracy of spelling or the TV set, that the real system of discrimination is able to operate – and to operate all the more effectively.

In actual fact, it is not even true that consumer products, the signs of this social institution, establish this primary democratic platform: for, in themselves, and taken individually (the car, the razor, etc.), they have no meanings: it is their constellation, their configuration, the relation to these objects and their overall social 'perspective' which alone have a meaning. And that meaning is always a distinctive one. They themselves, in their materiality as signs (their subtle differences), reflect that structural determination. Like education, they obey the same social logic as other institutions, even in the inverted image they give of that logic.

Consumption, like the education system, is a class institution: not only is there inequality before objects in the economic sense (the purchase, choice and use of objects are governed by purchasing power and by educational level, which is itself dependent upon class background, etc.) – in short, not everyone has the same objects, just as not everyone has the same educational chances – but, more deeply, there is radical discrimination in the sense that only some people achieve mastery of an autonomous, rational logic of the elements of the environment (functional use, aesthetic organization, cultural accomplishment). Such people do not really deal with objects and do not, strictly speaking, 'consume', whilst the others are condemned to a magical economy, to the valorization of objects as such, and of all other things as objects (ideas, leisure, knowledge, culture): this fetishistic logic is, strictly, the ideology of consumption.

Similarly, for those who do not have the key to them – that is to say, the code which admits one to their legitimate, rational and effective use – knowledge and culture are merely the occasion of a sharper, subtler cultural segmentation, since knowledge and culture merely appear in their eyes, and in the use they make of them, as a supplementary mana, a reserve of magic power, instead of being the opposite: a learning process and an objective training.
A Salvational Dimension

By their number, redundancy, superfluity and formal extravagance, by the play of fashion and all that exceeds pure and simple function in them, objects merely simulate the social essence — status — that grace of predestination which is only ever bestowed by birth to a few and which the majority, having opposite destinies, can never attain. This hereditary legitimacy (whether of blood or of culture) is at the very heart of the concept of status, the key concept in the whole dynamics of social mobility. Underlying all aspirations, there is this ideal end of a status by birth, a status of grace and excellence. And status also haunts the environment of objects. It is status which arouses this frenzy, this berserk woman of knick-knacks, gadgets, fetishes, all of which seek to mark out a value for all eternity and prove salvation by works, since salvation by grace is unattainable. Hence the very particular prestige of the ancient object, which is a sign of heredity, of innate value, of irreversible grace.

It is a class logic which imposes salvation by objects. That is a salvation by works, which, in its ‘democratic’ nature, stands opposed to the aristocratic principle of salvation by grace and election. Now, in the universal consensus, salvation by grace always wins out over salvation by works. This is to some degree what we see among the lower and middle classes, where ‘proving oneself by objects’ — salvation by consumption — in its endless process of moral demonstration, battles despairingly to attain a status of personal grace, of god-givenness and predestination. That remains, nonetheless, the preserve of the upper classes, who prove their excellence elsewhere, in the display of their culture and the exercise of their power.

Differentiation and Growth Society

All this leads us, then, beyond the Metaphysics of Needs and Affluence, to a genuine analysis of the social logic of consumption. That logic is by no means that of the individual appropriation of the use-value of goods and services — a logic of unequal abundance, some having rightful access to the miracle, others merely to the by-products of the miracle. It is a logic not of satisfaction, but of the production and manipulation of social signifiers. The process of consumption may be analysed within this perspective from two basic angles:

1. As a process of signification and communication, based on a code into which consumption practices fit and from which they derive their meaning. Consumption here is a system of exchange, and the equivalent of a language. Structural analysis is the appropriate approach at this level. We shall come back to this below.

2. As a process of classification and social differentiation in which sign/objects are ordered not now merely as significant differences in a code but as status values in a hierarchy. Here consumption can be submitted to a strategic analysis which determines its specific importance in the distribution of status values (overlapping with other social signifiers: knowledge, power, culture, etc.).

The principle of analysis remains as follows: you never consume the object in itself (in its use-value); you are always manipulating objects (in the broadest sense) as signs which distinguish you either by affiliating you to your own group taken as an ideal reference or by marking you off from your group by reference to a group of higher status.

Yet, this process of status differentiation, which is a fundamental social process by which everyone takes their place within society, has a lived aspect and a structural aspect, the one conscious, the other unconscious, the one ethical (the morality of social standing, of status rivalry, of the ladder of prestige), the other structural. One is permanently governed by a code whose rules and meaning-constraints — like those of language — are, for the most part, beyond the grasp of individuals.

The consumer experiences his distinctive behaviours as freedom, as aspiration, as choice. His experience is not one of being forced to be different, of obeying a code. To differentiate oneself is always, by the same token, to bring into play the total order of differences, which is, from the first, the product of the total society and inevitably exceeds the scope of the individual. In the very act of scoring his points in the order of differences, each individual maintains that order, and therefore condemns himself only ever to occupy a relative position within it. Each individual experiences his differential social gains as absolute gains; he does not experience the structural constraint which means that positions change, but the order of differences remains.

Yet it is this constraint of relativity which is crucial, in so far as it is with reference to this that the differential occupation of positions will never end. It alone can account for the fundamental character of consumption, its unlimited character, a dimension which cannot be explained by any theory of needs and satisfaction, since, if the calculation were made in terms of a calorific or energy balance sheet or of use-values, a saturation point would very soon be reached. But we very clearly see the opposite happening: an acceleration of the rate of consumption, increased pressure on demand, which means that the gap between a giant-scale productivity and an even more frantic propensity to consume is, in fact, growing wider (meanwhile, affluence, understood as the harmonious matching of the two, recedes indefinitely). This can only be explained if we radically abandon the individual logic of satisfaction and accord the social logic of differentiation the decisive importance it deserves. And if we distinguish that logic of difference from mere conscious determinations of prestige, since these latter are still satisfactions, the consumption of positive differences, whereas the sign or mark of distinction is always both a positive and a negative difference — this is why it refers on
The theory of consumption

indefinitely to other signs and impels the consumer on to definitive dissatisfaction. 4

The alarm of economists and other idealist theorists of well-being at the clear inability of the consumption system to stabilize—at its uncontrolled, runaway character—is always very instructive. It is characteristic of their way of seeing things in terms of increases in goods and incomes—and never in terms of relation and differentiation by signs. Thus Gervasi writes: ‘Growth is accompanied by the constant introduction of new products as the rise in incomes expands the scope for consumption.’ The rising trend of incomes brings not only a wave of new products, but also a proliferation of different qualities for the same product. (Why? What is the logical relation?) ‘The rise in incomes leads to a progressive improvement in quality.’ We have here again the same implicit thesis: ‘The more you earn, the more you want, and better’, this being true of everyone individually, without distinction, each person seeking a rational optimum of well-being.

Very generally, moreover, the field of consumption is a homogeneous one for them (with, at most, some disparities of income or ‘cultural’ disparities in it, which fans out statistically around an average type: the ‘consumer’. This is a view induced by the conception of American society as an immense middle class—and European sociology has now, largely, fallen in with that view. In fact, the field of consumption is a structural social field, where not only goods, but needs themselves, like the various cultural characteristics, pass from a key group, a leading elite, to the other social categories as these ‘rise’ relatively on the social ladder. There is no ‘mass of consumers’ and no need emerges spontaneously from the grassroots consumer: needs have no chance of appearing in the ‘standard package’ of needs if they have not already been part of the ‘select package’. The path of needs, like the path of objects and goods, is thus first socially selective: needs and satisfactions trickle down in accordance with an absolute principle, a kind of social categorical imperative which is the maintenance of distance and of differentiation by signs. It is this law which conditions all introduction of new objects as distinctive social material. It is this law of the ‘top-down’ replenishment of distinctive material which runs through the whole world of consumption, not the rise in incomes, which runs in the opposite direction (from the bottom up, towards total homogeneity).

No product has any chance of being mass-produced, no need has any chance of being satisfied on a mass scale unless it has already ceased to form part of the higher model and has been replaced by some other distinctive good or need—such that the distance is preserved. Popularization occurs only as a function of selective innovation at the top. And that process occurs, of course, as a function of the ‘falling rate of distinction’ of objects and goods in a growth society. Here again some preconceptions are in need of revision: popularization has its own mechanics (the mass media, etc.), but it has no logic of its own regarding content. It is within the upper echelons of society, as a reaction against the loss of earlier distinctive markers, that innovation takes place, in order to restore social distance. As a result, the needs of the middle and lower classes are always, like objects, subject to a certain backwardness; they lag temporally and culturally behind the needs of the upper classes. This is a not insignificant form of segregation in so-called democratic society.

One of the contradictions of growth is that it produces goods and needs at the same time, but does not produce them at the same rate—the rate of production of goods being dependent on industrial and economic productivity, the rate of production of needs on the logic of social differentiation. Now, the upward and irreversible mobility of the needs ‘set free’ by growth (i.e. produced by the industrial system as it obeys its internal logical constraints) has its own dynamic, which is different from the dynamic of the production of the material and cultural goods supposedly meant to satisfy those needs. Beyond a certain level of urban socialization, status competition and psychological ‘take-off’, aspiration is irreversible and unlimited, and develops to a rhythm of accelerated socio-differentiation and generalized interrelativity. Hence the specific problems linked to this ‘differential’ dynamic of consumption. If aspirations were simply concurrent with productivity, subordinate to it, there would be no problem. In fact, by their very own logic, which is a logic of difference, they constitute an uncontrollable variable. They are not just another variable in the economic calculation—a socio-cultural variable of situation or context—but a crucial structural variable which governs all others.

We must, admittedly, accept (as the various studies on this point, particularly on cultural needs, have done) a certain sociological inertia of needs. In other words, a certain indexing of needs and aspirations to the social position achieved (and not in the least, as conditioning theorists believe, to the goods on offer). Once again at this level, we find the same processes which are those of social mobility. A certain ‘realism’ means that people in a particular social situation never have aspirations much beyond what they can reasonably hope to attain. By having aspirations a little beyond their objective chances, they internalize the official norms of a growth society. By having aspirations which are little beyond, they internalize the real norms of expansion of that society (Malthusian even in its expansion) which are always short of what is possible. The less one has, the lower one’s aspirations (at least up to a certain threshold, where total unrealism takes over to compensate for destitution). Thus, the very process of the production of aspirations is egalitarian, since resignation at the bottom end of the social scale and freer aspirations at the top compound the inequality of objective possibilities of satisfaction. Here again, however, the problem must be seen in the round: it is quite possible that strictly consumer aspirations (material and cultural)—which, for their part, display a much greater degree of elasticity than
professional or cultural aspirations – in fact compensate for the serious underachievement of certain classes in terms of social mobility. The compulsion to consume might be said to compensate for failure to rise up the vertical social ladder. At the same time as expressing a status demand, the aspirations to ‘overconsume’ (on the part of the lower classes in particular) might be seen as expressing the felt failure of that demand.

The fact remains that needs and aspirations, activated by social differentiation and demands for status, tend in a growth society always to progress a little more quickly than available goods or objective chances. Moreover, the industrial system itself, which presupposes the growth of needs, also presupposes a perpetual excess of needs over the supply of goods (in the same way as it speculates on a reserve of unemployment to maximize the profit it extracts from labour power: we meet here once again the deep-level analogy between needs and productive forces). Speculating upon this discrepancy between goods and needs, the system does, however, verge on a contradiction in that growth not only implies the growth of needs and a certain disequilibrium between goods and needs, but further implies the growth of that very disequilibrium between the growth of needs and the growth of productivity. Hence the ‘psychological pauperization’ and the chronic, latent state of crisis, which is itself functionally linked to growth, but which can lead to a point of breakdown, an explosive contradiction.

Confronting the growth of needs and the growth of production means bringing out the decisive ‘intermediate’ variable that is differentiation. Hence, it is the increasing differentiation of products and the increasing differentiation of the social demand for prestige that must be seen in their interrelations. Now, the former is limited, whereas the latter is not. There are no limits to man’s ‘needs’ as a social being (i.e. as a being productive of meaning and relative to others in value). The quantitative intake of food is limited, the digestive system is limited, but the cultural system of food is, for its part, indefinite. And it is, moreover, a relatively contingent system. The strategic value of advertising – and also its trick – is precisely this: that it targets everyone in their relation to others, in their hankerings after reified social prestige. It is never addressed to a lone individual, but is aimed at human beings in their differential relations and, even when it seems to tap into their ‘deep’ motivations, it always does so in spectacular fashion. That is to say, it always calls in their friends and relations, the group, and society, all hierarchically ordered within the process of reading and interpretation, the process of ‘setting-off’ or ‘showing-off’ [faire-valoir] which it sets in train.

In a small group, needs, like competition, can doubtless stabilize. There is less of an escalation in the signifiers of status and the stuff of distinction. We can see this in traditional societies or micro-groups. But, in a society of industrial and urban concentration such as our own, where people are crowded together at much greater levels of density, the demand for differentiation grows even more quickly than material productivity. When the whole social world becomes urbanized, when communication becomes total, ‘needs’ grow exponentially – not from the growth of appetite, but from competition.

That escalation, that differential ‘chain reaction’, sanctioned by the total dictatorship of fashion, has the urban space as its locus. (And, reciprocally, the process reinforces urban concentration by rapid sculation of the rural or marginal areas. It is, therefore, irreversible. Any vague desire to halt it is naïve.) Human density in itself exerts a fascination. But the language of cities is competition itself. Motives, desires, encounters, stimuli, the endless judgements of others, continual eroticization, information, the appeals of advertising: all these things make up a kind of abstract destiny of collective participation, set against a real background of generalized competition.

Just as industrial concentration results in an ever increased production of goods, so urban concentration results in a limitless promotion of needs. Now, though the two types of concentration are contemporaneous, they nonetheless have their own dynamics, as we have seen, and their results do not coincide. Urban concentration (and hence differentiation) outstrips productivity. That is the basis of urban alienation. A neurotic equilibrium does, however, establish itself in the end, somewhat to the advantage of the more coherent order of production – the proliferation of needs washing back over the order of products, and becoming integrated into it after a fashion.

All this defines the growth society as the opposite of an affluent society. Thanks to this constant tension between competitive needs and production, thanks to this shortage-based tension, to this ‘psychological pauperization’, the order of production manages only to give rise to – and only to ‘satisfy’ – the needs appropriate to it. In the growth-based order, there are, by this logic, no autonomous needs and there cannot be any. There are only the needs of growth. There is no place for individual goals in the system; there is room only for the goals of the system. All the dysfunctions pointed out by Galbraith, Bertrand de Jouvencel, etc., are logical. It is reasonably clear that cars and motorways are a need of the system, but so is the university training of middle managers. Hence the ‘democratization’ of the university is as much a systemic need as car production. Because the system produces only for its own needs, it is all the reader systematically to hide behind the allib of individual needs. Hence the gigantic growth of private consumption by comparison with public services (Galbraith). This is no accident. The cult of individual spontaneity and the naturalness of needs is, by its nature, father to the productivist option. Even the most ‘rational’ needs (education, culture, health, transport, leisure), cut off from their real collective significance, are taken up, in the same way as the incidental needs deriving from growth, into the systematic future perspectives of that growth.
Furthermore, it is in an even deeper sense that growth society is the opposite of an affluent society. Before being a society productive of goods, it is in fact a society productive of privileges. Now, there is a necessary, sociologically definable relationship between privilege and penury. There could not (in any society whatever) be privilege without penury. The two are structurally linked. Growth is, therefore, by its social logic, paradoxically defined by the reproduction of a structural penury.

That penury no longer has the same sense as primary penury (a dearth of goods); that could be regarded as provisional and it is, in part, overcome in our societies, but the structural penury which substitutes for it is definitive since it is systematized as a booster function and power strategy in the very logic of the order of growth.

In conclusion, we shall state that there is, at any event, a logical contradiction between the ideological hypothesis of growth society, which is social homogenization at the highest level, and its concrete social logic, based on a structural differentiation — this logically contradictory whole forming the basis of an overall strategy.

And, lastly, we shall once again stress the major illusion, the cardinal myth of this false affluent society: the illusion of distribution on the idealist pattern of ‘communicating vessels’. The flow of goods and products does not find its level like the sea. Social inertia, unlike natural inertia, does not lead to a state of distortion, disparity and privilege. Growth is not democracy. Profusion is a function of discrimination. How could it be the corrective to it?

The Palaeolithic, or the First Affluent Society

We must abandon the received idea we have of an affluent society as a society in which all material (and cultural) needs are easily met, for that leaves all social logic out of account. We should rather espouse the notion recently propounded by Marshall Sahlins in his article on the first affluent society, that it is our industrial and productivist societies which, unlike certain primitive societies, are dominated by scarcity, by the obsession with scarcity characteristic of the market economy. The more one produces, the more clearly does one show up, amidst plenty, how irremediably far off is that final point which affluence would represent, defined as an equilibrium between human production and human goals. Since what is satisfied in a growth society, and increasingly satisfied as productivity grows, are the very needs of the order of production, not the ‘needs’ of man (the whole system depends indeed on these being misconceived), it is clear that affluence would extend indefinitely; more precisely, it is irrevocably rejected and the organized reign of scarcity (structural penury) preferred.

For Sahlins, it was the hunter-gatherers (the primitive nomadic tribes of Australia, the Kalahari, etc) who, in spite of their absolute ‘poverty’, knew true affluence. The primitive people of those societies have no personal possessions; they are not obsessed by their objects, which they throw away as and when they need to in order to be able to move about more easily. They have no apparatus of production, or ‘work’; they hunt and gather ‘at their leisure’, as we might say, and share everything within the group. They are entirely prodigal: they consume everything immediately, make no economic calculations and amass no stores. The hunter-gatherer has nothing of that bourgeois invention, economic man, about him. He is ignorant of the basic principles of Political Economy. And, indeed, he never exploits human energies, natural resources or the effective economic possibilities to the full. He sleeps a lot. He has a trust – and this is what characterizes his economic system — in the wealth of natural resources, whereas our system is characterized (ever more so with technical advance) by despair at the insufficiency of human means, by a radical, catastrophic anxiety which is the deep effect of the market economy and generalized competition.

The collective ‘improvisation’ and ‘prodigality’ characteristic of primitive societies are the sign of real affluence. We have only the signs of affluence. Beneath a gigantic apparatus of production, we anxiously eye the signs of poverty and scarcity. But poverty consists, says Sahlins, neither in a small quantity of goods, nor simply in a relation between ends and means: it is, above all, a relation between human beings. The basis for the confidence of primitive peoples and for the fact that, within hunger, they live a life of plenty, is ultimately the transparency and reciprocity of social relations. It is the fact that no monopolization whatever of nature, the soil, the instruments or products of ‘labour’ intervenes to obstruct exchange and institute scarcity. There is among them no accumulation, which is always the source of power. In the economy of the gift and symbolic exchange, a small and always finite quantity of goods is sufficient to create general wealth since those goods pass from one person to the other. Wealth has its origin not in goods, but in the concrete exchange between persons. It is, therefore, unlimited since the cycle of exchange is endless, even among a limited number of individuals, with each moment of the exchange cycle adding to the value of the object exchanged. It is this concrete and relational dialectic which we find inverted, as a dialectic of penury and unlimited need, in the process of competition and differentiation characteristic of our civilized, industrial societies. Where, in primitive exchange, every relationship adds to the social wealth, in our ‘differential’ societies every social relationship adds to individual lack, since every thing possessed is relativized in relation to others (in primitive exchange, it is valorized by the very relationship with others).

It is not, therefore, paradoxical to argue that in our ‘affluent’ societies abundance is lost and that it will not be restored by an inextricable increase in productivity, by unleashing new productive forces. Since the structural definition of abundance and wealth lies in social organization,
only a revolution of the social organization and of social relations could bring those things about. Will we return, one day, beyond the market economy, to prodigality? Instead of prodigality, we have 'consumption', forced consumption in perpetuity, twin sister to scarcity. It was social logic which brought primitive peoples the 'first' (and only) affluent society. It is our social logic which condemns us to luxurious and spectacular penury.