

An Excerpt From

***Affluenza 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Mutation)***  
***How Overconsumption is Killing Us- and How to Fight Back***

by John de Graaf, David Wann, and Thomas Naylor  
Published by Berrett-Koehler Publishers

# AFFLUENZA

How over-consumption is killing us — and how to fight back

Third Edition  
*Mutation*

NOW  
more alarming  
than ever!

INCLUDES  
extra-strength  
relief!

JOHN DE GRAAF    DAVID WANN    THOMAS H. NAYLOR

Foreword by Annie Leonard, author of *The Story of Stuff*

## More Praise for *Affluenza*

“This witty yet hard-hitting book provides evidence of the social problems caused by the American obsession with acquiring ‘stuff’ and proposes solutions for living more sustainably. Highly recommended.”

—*Library Journal*

“Now here is a good reason to go shopping! The wonderful book that made consumerism the issue it should be, *Affluenza*, is here in a third, fully updated edition. The story of the Joneses, of ‘keeping up with the Joneses’ fame, is itself worth the very modest price you will have to pay to enjoy this classic, now new and improved.”

—**James Gustave Speth, author of *America the Possible* and former director, Yale University School of Forestry and Environmental Studies**

“If ever there was a right book at the right time, *Affluenza* is it. This country needs this book.”

—**Lester R. Brown, President, Earth Policy Institute, author of *Plan B 4.0* and *Full Planet, Empty Plates***

“*Affluenza* makes us take a hard look at how the drive to excessive consumerism is personally, socially, and environmentally disastrous and then takes us on an exciting path to deeper happiness and satisfaction. It is a must-read for all who strive to create more healthy, just, and secure communities.”

—**Anthony D. Cortese, former Commissioner, Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, and founder, American College & University Presidents’ Climate Commitment**

“De Graaf, Wann, and Naylor have achieved something special with *Affluenza*. They take an unflinching look at the train wreck of America’s consumer culture and then extricate us from the wreckage by providing practical policies and achievable actions for building a healthier society. *Affluenza* is also a great read; it contains the hopeful ideas we need to reach a livable future.”

—**Rob Dietz, coauthor of *Enough Is Enough***

“The programs offered at the end of the book work on many levels, from making personal choices to changing the rules of the game to reward all actions moving us toward a thriving, just, and sustainable future. So enjoy! This is a great book about a tough-to-face set of problems.”

—**Vicki Robin, coauthor of *Your Money or Your Life* and author of *Blessing the Hands That Feed Us***

“*Affluenza* is an engagingly conversational, thought-provoking look at where we have perverted the American dream. Though the nature of books like these is to preach to the converted, *Affluenza* offers enough support to the arguments and enough depth to the solutions to have a good chance of reaching the unconvinced.”

—*Detroit Free Press*

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**AFFLUENZA**

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# AFFLUENZA

HOW OVERCONSUMPTION IS KILLING US—  
AND HOW WE CAN FIGHT BACK

THIRD EDITION

John de Graaf  
David Wann  
Thomas H. Naylor



**BK**

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.  
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# Affluenza

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**In memory of Dr. Henry J. Frundt (1940–2010)**

**In loving memory of Marjorie Southworth Wann (1926–2012)**

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## **FOREWORD**

When *Affluenza* was first published in 2001, its diagnosis of the sickness in consumer society and its prescriptions for the cure stood in marked contrast to the nation's prevailing optimism. The American economy was at a postwar peak. The stock market had tripled in the previous decade, topping the once-unimaginable 10,000 level. Soaring housing values were making ordinary homeowners rich (on paper, at least). The first dot-com boom was minting young millionaires and billionaires in the high-tech entrepreneurial class.

Then the World Trade Center attacks sent the stock market plunging, triggering a recession and exposing the hollowness of a system whose leaders advised us that the patriotic response to terrorism was to go shopping. In the years following, the dot-com boom went bust, and the near-collapse of corrupt financial institutions plunged millions of homeowners into debt and foreclosure. Today, even as the economists tell us the Great Recession has ended, the real unemployment rate—those without work, those who need more work, and those who have stopped looking—remains scandalously high. The Occupy movement has sharpened awareness of the inherent inequities of an economy in which the wealthiest get richer and richer while most of the rest of us work longer hours with less job security, health insurance, and retirement security just to keep our heads above water.

But if *Affluenza* was ahead of its time, more than ever its time is now.

From book groups to congregations to classrooms, *Affluenza* has become an enduring classic—not only for its insight into the emptiness and unsustainability of a system based on ever-expanding consumption but also for boldly pointing a way out. Its ultimately hopeful message—that it is possible to build a society based on not *more* but *better*, not selfishness but sharing, not competition but community—has inspired millions to rethink their lives and question the status quo. Its very title has become a part of the language, an indispensable tool for describing the ills of a society where, to paraphrase the personal-finance guru Dave Ramsey, we work too much to buy things we don't need with money we don't have to impress people we don't even know. It has played an immeasurable role in informing my own work on *The Story of Stuff* films, which the authors so generously cite in chapter 22.

The third edition of *Affluenza* is in many ways a new book. The first edition was an outgrowth of a PBS TV special of the same name; this revision goes deeper in its

analysis, providing a somewhat more serious discussion of the issues. The data and references cited in the text and footnotes have been extensively updated to reflect the many changes that have rocked the world in the past thirteen years. The authors want this book to contribute to the rich and exciting discussions that are taking place everywhere about community, citizenship, and voluntary simplicity. If we take their lessons to heart, perhaps a future edition will be a history of how we found a cure for the plague of affluenza.

Annie Leonard, author of *The Story of Stuff*

Berkeley, California

July 2013



# Introduction

*AFFLUENZA (n.) — a painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more.*

*I*n his office, a doctor offers his diagnosis to an attractive, expensively dressed female patient. “There’s nothing physically wrong with you,” he says. His patient is incredulous. “Then why do I feel so awful?” she asks. “So bloated and sluggish. I’ve got a big new house, a brand-new car, a new wardrobe, and I just got a big raise at work. Why am I so miserable, Doctor? Isn’t there some pill you can give me?” The doctor shakes his head. “I’m afraid not,” he replies. “There’s no pill for what’s wrong with you.” “What is it, Doctor?” she asks, alarmed. “Affluenza,” he answers gravely. “It’s the new epidemic. It’s extremely contagious. It can be cured, but not easily.”

Of course, the scene is an imaginary one, but the epidemic is real. A powerful virus has infected American society, threatening our wallets, our friendships, our families, our communities, and our environment. We call the virus *affluenza*. And because the United States has become the economic model for most of the world, the virus is now loose on every continent.

Affluenza's costs and consequences are immense, though often concealed. Untreated, the disease can cause permanent discontent. In our view, the affluenza epidemic is rooted in the obsessive, almost religious quest for economic expansion that has become the core principle of what is called the American dream. It's rooted in the fact that our supreme measure of national progress is that quarterly ring of the cash register we call the gross domestic product. It's rooted in the idea that every generation will be materially wealthier than its predecessor and that, somehow, each of us can pursue that single-minded end without damaging the countless other things we hold dear.

It doesn't work that way. The contention of this book is that if we don't begin to reject our culture's incessant demands to "buy now," we will "pay later" in ways we can scarcely imagine. The bill is already coming due. At its most extreme, affluenza threatens to exhaust the earth itself. As the corporate critic Jeremy Rifkin told John some years back, "We human beings have been producing and consuming at a rate that far exceeds the ability of the planet to absorb our pollution or replenish the stock."

Scientists say we'd need several more planets if everyone on earth were to suddenly adopt the American standard of living.

Welcome to the third edition of *Affluenza*, fully updated with a different subtitle. Much water has run under the bridge since the first edition was published in 2001, following a period of galloping economic prosperity in America. The book quickly became a hit and has been translated into nine languages while selling nearly 150,000 copies. A second edition was published in 2005, when signs were clear that the prosperity we discussed in the first edition was beginning to falter.

Now eight more years have passed, and during those years the chickens have come home to roost and the hubristic assumptions of 2001 have crumbled. The flaws in the affluenza economic model we described then, coupled with glaringly stupid policy decisions encouraging rampant financial speculation, brought the whole show to a crash in 2008. Since then we have been picking up the pieces all over the world. Personal bankruptcies exceeded 1.5 million the following year, the most ever. Even in 2012, there were 1.4 million such declarations in the United States, about equal to the number of students earning bachelor's degrees.

In this book, we bring theory and data up to date. There have been many changes since 2001, perhaps equally positive and negative. But the overall impact of the disease called affluenza has not diminished, and the stakes are higher, given the realities of climate change, technological unemployment, and the massive shift toward inequality that began emerging in the United States in the 1980s and exploded after 2001.



**AFFLUENZA: THE FILM**

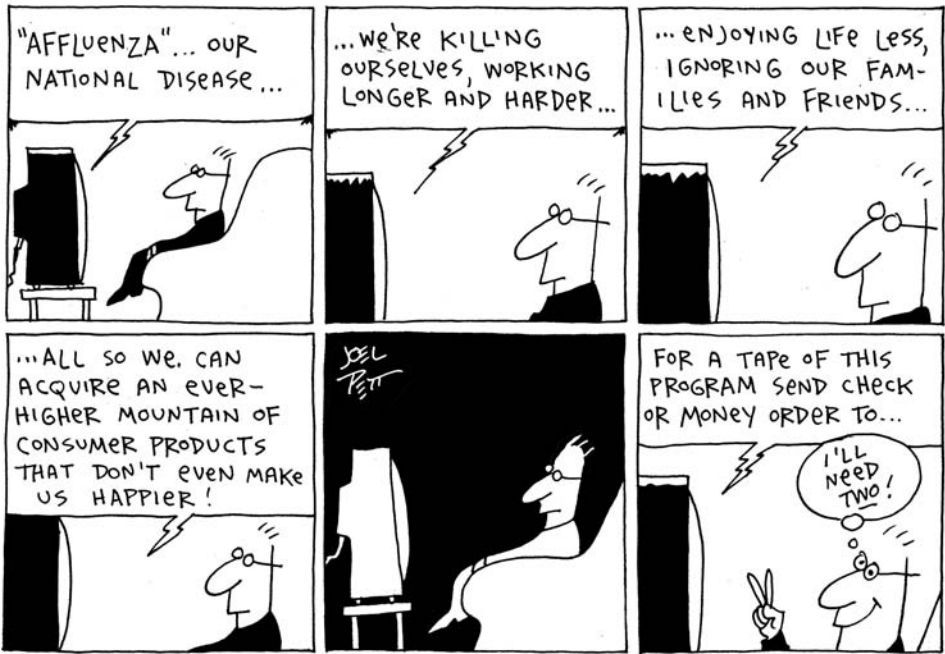
Most movies start with a book, but this book started with a movie. John, a coauthor of this book, and Vivia Boe produced a documentary in 1996 about the subject of overconsumption and its many not-so-benign consequences for American society. Their research told them the subject was a huge one, touching our lives as Americans in more ways than any other social or environmental issue. But how to make sense of it? How to present the issue so that viewers could see that multiple problems were caused by our consuming passion and were all connected to one another?

After videotaping more than two-thirds of the program, John and Vivia were still wondering how to weave together the wide range of material they had collected. Then, on a flight from Seattle to Washington, DC, to do still more videotaping, John happened to see the word *affluenza* used in passing in an article he was reading. It was like that moment in cartoons when the light bulb goes on over someone's head. That was it: *affluenza*. A single word that not only made a catchy (pun intended) TV title but also suggested a disease resulting from overconsumption.

Here was a way to make the impacts of overconsuming more clearly understandable—as symptoms of a virus that, in the United States at least, had reached epidemic proportions. They could then look at the history of this disease, trying to understand how and why it spread, what its carriers and hot zones were, and finally, how it could be treated.

From that point on, they began to use the term, asking interviewees if the idea made sense to them. And indeed, physicians told John and Vivia they could see symptoms of *affluenza* in many of their patients, symptoms often manifesting themselves physically. A psychologist offered his observation that many of his clients “suffer from *affluenza*, but very few know that that's what they're suffering from.”

The documentary, *Affluenza*, premiered on PBS on September 15, 1997, and was greeted with an outpouring of audience calls and letters from every part of the United States. Clearly, it had touched a deep nerve of concern. Viewers as old as ninety-three wrote to express their fears for their grandchildren, while twenty-year-olds recounted sad tales from the lower depths of credit card debt. A cover story in the *Washington Post* Sunday magazine about people trying to simplify their lives introduced them as they were watching the program. A teacher in rural North Carolina showed it to her class of sixth graders and said they wanted to talk about it for the next two weeks. On average, the kids thought they had three times as much “stuff” as they needed. One girl said she could no longer close her closet door. “I've just got too many things, clothes I never wear,” she explained. “I can't get rid of them.”



© 2001 by Joel Pett

### CROSSING POLITICAL LINES

Though past criticisms of consumerism have come mostly from the liberal side of the political spectrum, *Affluenza* spoke to Americans of all political persuasions. The head of one statewide conservative family organization wrote saying, “This issue is so important for families.” Ratings and audience response were as high in conservative cities like Salt Lake and Houston as they were in liberal San Francisco or Minneapolis. In colleges, the program was more popular at Brigham Young than at Berkeley. At Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina, students and faculty showed it to audiences in both poor mountain communities and upscale churches, recording audience comments and producing a video of their own called *Escaping Affluenza in the Mountains*.

### THE WHOLE WORLD IS WATCHING

We’ve become convinced that this is an issue that troubles people *throughout the world*. We’ve heard from countries where we couldn’t imagine anyone would be concerned about affluenza—Thailand, Estonia, Russia, Nigeria, for example—but

where, indeed, citizens hoped to adopt what was good about the American lifestyle and avoid what was harmful.

An Islamic business magazine in Sri Lanka asked us for a short article about the disease. Activists in rural northern Burma translated the TV program into the local Kachin dialect. A sixteen-year-old Israeli girl sought permission to project it onto the wall of a Tel Aviv shopping center. Seeing overconsumption as a disease, they said, helped them understand it better and explain it to others.

## **A SOCIAL DISEASE**

Often, writers speak of “affluenza” with different emphases. Some have used the term primarily with reference to the spoiled children of the super-rich. Defined as such, it loses the sociopolitical message we put forward and becomes a matter of purely personal behavior. In our view, however, the virus is not confined to the upper classes but has found its way throughout our society. Its symptoms affect the poor as well as the rich, and our two-tiered system (with rich getting richer and poor poorer) punishes the poor twice: they are conditioned to want the good life but given very little possibility of attaining it. Affluenza infects all of us, though in different ways.

## **AFFLUENZA: THE BOOK**

Television, even at its most informative, is a superficial medium; you simply can't put that much material into an hour. And that's the reason this book was written: to explain affluenza in more depth, with more examples, more symptoms, more evidence, more thorough exposition. If you've seen the video, you'll recognize a few of the characters and stories.

The first edition arrived on the market just before the terrible tragedy of September 11, 2001. Families and friends suddenly seemed more important than things and work. But then, the consumption propaganda machine kicked into high gear again. If you want to be patriotic, President George W. Bush told Americans, go to the malls and shop. Buy to fight terror.

From Democrats, the message was the same. San Francisco mayor Willie Brown had a million shopping bags printed with big flags on them and bold words: AMERICA: OPEN FOR BUSINESS. Washington senator Patty Murray proposed “Let's go shopping” legislation that would have removed the sales tax on products during the 2001 holiday shopping season. Almost no one dared to mention that anger and envy over the profligate spending of Americans might encourage sympathy for terrorists in developing countries.

Since the first edition of *Affluenza* was published, it's been used widely by book groups and in university classes. We had hoped *affluenza* would become a household word, and that seems to be happening. An Internet search before our PBS broadcast turned up about two hundred cases of the word on the Web—all of them in Italian, where *affluenza* simply means affluence. In 2005, a check of the word on Google found 232,000 references to it (!), referring, in the vast majority of cases, to overconsumption. A similar check in 2013 found 2.3 million references, a leap of an order of magnitude. London's *Independent* newspaper picked it as one of its most popular new words for the year 2003, and dictionaries are considering including it in the next few years.

Moreover, use of the term continues to grow: a popular play called *Affluenza*, by James Sherman, has been touring the country for several years. Clive Hamilton wrote a fine book by the same title in Australia in 2007, graciously asking us to borrow the title. Oliver James, a British psychologist, also wrote a good book with the same name in 2009, when there were already one million references to *affluenza* on the Internet, but unlike Hamilton, James suggested that he had invented the word!

## SYMPTOMS

We have divided the book into three sections. The first explores many of the symptoms of affluenza, each—only half whimsically—compared to a real flu symptom. Think of how you feel when you've got a bug. You're likely to be running a temperature. You're congested. Your body is achy. You may have chills. Your stomach is upset. You're weak. You might have swollen glands, even a rash.

In the Age of Affluenza, America as a society shows all of these symptoms, metaphorically at least. We present each as a chapter. We start with individual symptoms, then move to the social conditions, and finally turn to the environmental impacts of affluenza.

Some chapters may greet you with the shock of self-recognition—"Honey, that's me!" You might notice the conditions discussed here taking hold of your friends. You might find some more troubling than others and worry more about your children than about your Mother Earth. You might be well off materially but feel stressed out or empty, as though your life lacks purpose or meaning. Or you might be poor, and angry at your inability to give your children what marketers say they "gotta have" to fit in. Or you have watched bulldozers destroy the only open space left around your community to make room for row upon row of identical tract homes with three-car garages. If you're elderly, you may have noticed your children's inability to balance their budget, and you may worry for their children as well.

If you're young, you may be anxious about your own future.

Wherever you're coming from, we believe you'll clearly recognize that at least some of the symptoms of affluenza affect you. Then, as you read on, you'll begin to see how they're connected to others less obvious from your vantage point.

## GENESIS OF THE DISEASE

In Part Two of this book, we look beneath the symptoms to search for causes. Is affluenza simply human nature, as some would suggest? What was the genesis of this powerful virus? How has it mutated throughout history, and when did it begin to reach epidemic proportions? What choices did we make as a society (between free time and stuff, for example) that deepened our infection? We look carefully at warnings from across time and cultures and at early efforts to eradicate the disease with controls and quarantines.

Then we discover how the spread of the disease has become not only socially acceptable but actively encouraged by all the powerful electronic carriers our technological civilization keeps perfecting. We suggest that affluenza promises to meet our needs—but does so in inefficient and destructive ways. And we contend that an entire industry of pseudo physicians, handsomely rewarded by those with a huge stake in the perpetuation of affluenza, conspire to keep the diagnosis of the disease and the extent of its symptoms from reaching the general public.

## CURING AFFLUENZA

But far be it from our intent to leave you permanently depressed. Affluenza *can* be treated, and millions of ordinary Americans are already taking steps in that direction. A 2004 poll by the Center for a New American Dream ([www.newdream.org](http://www.newdream.org)) found that 49 percent of Americans had claimed to have cut back on their spending.<sup>1</sup>

The same poll also revealed that 85 percent of Americans think our priorities as a society are out of whack; 93 percent feel Americans are too focused on working and making money; 91 percent believe we buy and consume far more than we need; 81 percent think we'll need to make major changes in the way we live to protect the environment; and 87 percent feel our current consumer culture makes it harder to instill positive values in our children.

Several cultural indicators seem to show that Americans are building their immunity to affluenza. For example, the number of golfers (an enjoyable sport but a costly one) is down while home gardening is up, and some courses are being converted to parks and other recreational areas. Sales of smaller hybrid cars have jumped in the United States, while SUV sales have fallen somewhat, and total driving in the US leveled out in 2005 and has begun to decline. Reports from cities like

Seattle show that many young millennials prefer to rent cars from companies like Zipcar and Car2Go, or to walk, bike, and use public transit. They also seem to be putting off getting driver's licenses until college age or older.

For the first time in many years, there are more farms rather than fewer, indicating the entry of small, often organic farmers into agriculture and a great new interest among the young in wholesome, unprocessed food. Trends like these are reported in Part Three of the book, along with many natural, technical, and even social remedies for beating affluenza. As with symptoms, we look at treatments, starting with the personal and advancing to the social and political. Our treatments, too, employ the medical metaphor.

We encourage a restored interest in fresh air and the natural world, with its remarkable healing powers. We agree with the futurist Gerald Celente, author of *Trends 2000*. "There's this commercial out," he says, "and it shows this middle-aged man walking through the woods pumping his arms, and all of a sudden in the next cut, there he is on the back porch, woods in the background, walking on this treadmill that must have cost a fortune. It doesn't make sense. It was so much nicer walking through the woods, and it cost nothing at all."

We suggest strategies for rebuilding families and communities, and for respecting and restoring the earth and its biological rules. We offer "policy prescriptions," with the belief that some well-considered legislation can help create a less affluenza-friendly social environment and make it easier for individuals to get well and stay that way.

We also present preventive approaches, including vaccines and vitamins that can strengthen our personal and social immune systems. And we suggest an annual checkup of our vital signs. Ours comes in three phases:

1. You can take a little test to see how you're doing personally in staying well (see Chapter 17).
2. We find a useful substitute for our current outmoded measure of national health, the gross domestic product (GDP). We recommend an index called the *Genuine Progress Indicator* (GPI), currently being fine-tuned in several American states. Using multiple indices to discover how we're doing, the GPI paints a different picture of our success as a society. While GDP has risen steadily throughout our history, the GPI has been falling since 1973 in the United States, and since 1978 globally, because "bads" like pollution are subtracted rather than added to its index.

3. Finally, using the “gross national happiness index”—an idea that comes from the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan—we can begin to take stock of how satisfied we really are with our lives and what we might do to be more content with less stuff.

## CHANGES IN OUR THINKING

We’ve gotten a lot of feedback from readers since we wrote the first edition of this book—hundreds of personal reviews and some excellent journalistic assessments as well. Much of the feedback has been contradictory, so we’ve had to go with what made most sense to us. Criticisms of the book have taken two lines. Our accessible, sometimes flippant, writing style has been praised, and even used to teach writing in college English classes, but other readers have felt it engaging to the point of superficiality—“It feels like a television program” was how some put it. While trying to maintain the book’s light quality, we have also responded to this criticism by taking out some of the silliest stuff, and we have substituted deeper analysis for some of our storytelling. We think this makes this edition a more serious book and hope that it will be seen that way, though we know these changes will not please everyone.

The second major criticism of the first two editions is that we were “too political.” Many readers said that they agreed with our criticisms of consumerism and overspending, but they thought these were personal problems and that we should have stuck to giving people tips to live more frugally and not gotten into dreaded politics. The fact that our historical section includes some ideas from Karl Marx (though it also includes ideas from several prominent conservative economists) waved a red flag for some readers. But we do not apologize for looking to a broad range of ideas. A current Russian joke is illustrative. It goes like this: “Everything Marx said about communism was false. Unfortunately, everything he said about capitalism was true.” If we are to get a handle on affluenza, we must be open to all ideas, not just those deemed “American.”

Moreover, we believe that, if anything, our first editions, and the TV program on which they were based, *underestimated* the importance of policy while focusing too much on personal behavior. Many of the drivers of affluenza are structural—our economy, as the activist Michael Jacobson put it, is simplicity unfriendly and “structurally opposed to simpler living.” We can see this in the financial crisis, driven in part by personal spending beyond our means but greatly exacerbated by public policies rewarding greed and speculation. So we won’t back down on this

one; indeed, this version of the book calls greater attention to the need for better policies.

We want to make clear from the outset that much spending in the United States is driven not by some special American greed, but by reasonable fear and a desire for basic financial security. As we will argue, the insecurity and inequality central to life in the United States are greater drivers of this virus than the gross desire to consume.

### LET'S BEGIN A DIALOGUE

This book contains little truly new information, yet the issue in this “information age” isn't more information. It's how to make sense of what we already know and how to use values, not just information, as a lever for getting healthy again. We offer a way of understanding seemingly disconnected personal, social, and environmental problems that makes sense to us—as symptoms of a perilous epidemic that threatens our future and that of generations to come. Our intention is to encourage a national dialogue about the American consumer dream so that whatever choices each of us makes about consumption—and the choices we make as a society through policy change—are made with a clearer understanding of their possible consequences.

The underlying message of this book isn't to stop buying; it's to buy carefully and consciously with full attention to the real benefits and costs of our purchases, remembering, always, that the best things in life aren't things.

A NOTE ON NOTES: As we have updated our endnotes from the previous volume, it has become clear to us how quickly numbers change. And in some cases, we offer statistics that are best understood by looking at trends. Occasionally, therefore, we point to sources of multiple data and to more that can be useful to you, rather than simply the source for the number we mention. Moreover, since far more people now get their information online, we have chosen where possible to direct you to supporting material that can be accessed online rather than simply the names of hard-copy articles. We have occasionally cited *Wikipedia* as a source, knowing that might encourage scolding from some quarters. But the advantage is that *Wikipedia* pages point readers to many other sources and references, allowing them to dig far deeper into a subject. It is our hope that by opening up more sources for information, we can encourage you to better explore the complex issues surrounding this subject. Finally, where we have not cited the source of quotations, they have all come from personal conversations with the authors.

Happy reading!



PART ONE

---

# *Symptoms*



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# *Feverish expectations*



*Let's put it bluntly: we can't grow on like this. In these pages, we'll argue that affluenza has overheated our economy and our planet while leaving us feverish with desire for ever more consumer products. Never before has so much meant so little to so many. In the blink of an eye, geologically speaking, our feverish expectations are changing our planet beyond recognition, with little thought for those who will come after us.*

The late, great environmentalist David Brower, who turned the Sierra Club from a tiny California hiking society into America's most powerful conservation organization, used to give what he called his sermon as part of his many speeches. He compressed the age of Earth, estimated by scientists at some 4.6 billion years, into seven days, the biblical week of creation, if you will. When you do this, a day represents about 650 million years, an hour 27 million years, a minute about 450,000 years, and a second 7,500 years.

On Sunday morning, Earth congeals from cosmic gases. In the next few hours, land masses and oceans begin to form, and by Tuesday afternoon, the first tiny “protocells” of life emerge, probably from scalding primordial vents in the bottom of the oceans. In the next few days, life forms become larger, more complex, and more wondrous. Shortly before dawn on the last day—Saturday—trilobites and other strangely shaped creatures swim by the millions in the Cambrian seas. Half a billion years later, in real time, we will be amazed by their fossils, scattered about the globe.

Around the middle of the very last day of the week, those gargantuans, the great reptiles, some mild, some menacing, thunder across the land and fill the sky. The dinosaurs enjoy a long run, commanding the earth’s stage for more than four hours, until a monstrous meteorite, landing in the Gulf of Mexico, makes the climate too cold and ends their reign. By the late afternoon and evening on Saturday, mammals, furry, warm-blooded, and able to withstand a colder world, flourish and evolve, until, a few minutes before midnight on that final night of the week, *Homo sapiens*, walking erect on two legs, learns to speak, use fire, and create increasingly complex forms of organization.

Only about ten thousand years ago in real time, less than two seconds before midnight in our metaphor, humans develop agriculture and start building cities. At a third of a second before midnight, the Buddha is born; at a quarter of a second,



Christ. Only a thirtieth of a second before midnight, we launch the Industrial Revolution, and after World War II, perhaps a hundredth of a second before midnight in our week of creation—again, on the final night—the age of consumerism begins, the age of stuff, the Age of Affluenza.

In that hundredth of a second, Brower and others have pointed out, we have managed to consume more resources than did all human beings all together in all of previous history. We have diminished our soil, fisheries, fossil fuels (which took hundreds of millions of years to form), and who knows what other resources, by half. We have caused the extinction of countless other species, and we have changed the climate. Think about it; try to grasp in your mind what it means to have done all of this in this blink of the geological eye.

There are people, Brower went on to say, who believe that what we have been doing for that last one-hundredth of a second can go on indefinitely. If they even think about the issue, they believe, without evidence, that science and new technologies will allow our continued hyperexploitation of the planet's resources. They are considered normal, reasonable, intelligent people—indeed, they run our corporations and our governments. But in reality, they are stark, raving mad. They are like Frankenstein's monster. They are rampaging all over the globe now, but as a race they were born in the USA.<sup>1</sup>

It will be hard to change their mind, hard to change our practices, but not nearly as hard as it would be to change the laws of physics. We can't grow on like this.

## CONSUMER MANIA

Since World War II, Americans have been engaged in an unprecedented consumer spending binge. We now spend 71 percent of our \$15 trillion economy on consumer goods. For example, we spend more on shoes, jewelry, and watches than on higher education.<sup>2</sup> We spend as much on auto maintenance as on religious and welfare activities. In 1986, America still had more high schools than shopping centers. Less than twenty years later, in 2005, we had more than twice as many shopping centers (46,438) as high schools (22,180). In the Age of Affluenza (as we believe the century following World War II will eventually be called), shopping centers have supplanted churches as a symbol of cultural values. In fact, 70 percent of us visit malls each week, more than attend houses of worship.<sup>3</sup>

Until recently, our most profitable shopping centers were megamalls. Typically, they cover areas of fertile farmland that formerly produced bumper crops instead of traffic jams. Indeed, sixty-nine acres of prime American farmland are lost to “development” every hour. When a new megamall opens, the pomp and ceremony rival anything Notre Dame or Chartres might have witnessed in medieval times.

The Super Mall in Auburn, Washington, opened to a stampede of a hundred thousand shoppers in October 1995. The crowd gathered under an imitation of the state's 14,410-foot Mount Rainier. Rising above the Super Mall's front entrance, the imitation mountain provided one show which the real thing could not: a display of fireworks, set off as soon as the ribbon-cutting ceremony was over.

In a spirit of boosterism that would have impressed Sinclair Lewis's Babbitt, speaker after speaker extolled the wonders of the new shopping center, the biggest in the state. "The number of shoppers expected to visit here over the next year exceeds 1.2 million," burbled Auburn's mayor, adding that "committed shoppers can shop till they drop in 1.2 million square feet of shopping space." Along with a new racetrack and casino in the area, the mall was expected to become a "destination attraction" for vacationers from the entire western United States and Canada. It would, they said, create four thousand jobs and "improve the quality of life throughout the region." Thirty percent of the expected business would come from tourists who would each spend about five hours and more than \$200 at the mall.<sup>4</sup>

#### **FUN FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY**

The thousands of eager shoppers on hand for the opening wore bored and impatient expressions during the speeches but pushed eagerly through the open doors when the rhetoric stopped. One woman said she was "really excited about the mall because this is something we haven't had in this part of Washington. We were waiting for something like this."

"We said, 'If we build it, they will come,' and they did," gushed a happy shopkeeper. Another explained that its hardwood floors "add a little sense of excitement to the mall. They're much easier than walking on tile or granite and make the Super Mall really special." She hoped children would enjoy it, "because shopping has become such a family experience that's really important."

"Shopping malls have really become the centers of many communities," says Michael Jacobson, founder of the Center for the Study of Commercialism in Washington, DC. "Children as well as adults see a shopping center as just the natural destination to fill a bored life."<sup>5</sup>

#### **WHAT ELSE MATTERS?**

The host of the TV program *Affluenza*, Scott Simon, visited Potomac Mills, a large Virginia shopping mall, during production of the program. Shoppers were eager to answer his questions about where they came from and what they thought

of the mall. None of the people Simon talked to were sweating profusely. But all seemed infected by feverish expectations, often the first symptom of affluenza.

Two women from Dallas, Texas, said they'd been at the mall for three days straight, while their husbands golfed nearby. "We're always looking for a bargain. You've got to know the brands, and we have experience, we're proud to say," they proclaimed. "I didn't need anything. I just went to shop," said a man with a cart full of merchandise. "Whatever I like, I buy." "I bought a lot more than I planned to," another woman admitted. "You just see so much."

Yes, you do, and that's the idea. Seeing so much leads to impulse buying, the key to mall profitability and to the success of big-box stores like Wal-Mart. Impulse: a devilish little snake that cajoles first, then bites later, when the credit card bill comes due. Only a quarter of mall shoppers come with a specific product in mind. The rest come just to shop. "What else matters?" asked one of the ladies from Dallas at Potomac Mills, only half in jest.

"I came here with one overriding interest, to spend money," said a proud teenage girl, who was getting rid of the hundred dollars her mother had given her for this particular spree. "I like to shop," she explained. She's not alone. One poll found that 93 percent of teenage American girls rate shopping as their favorite activity.<sup>6</sup>

An older couple passed by with a shopping cart piled to the brim. "This is only half of what we've purchased," the man said cheerfully. "We brought a long list of things to buy," his wife added, "and then we bought a lot of stuff that wasn't on the list."

But Potomac Mills is a mere mini-mall compared to the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota. With 4.2 million square feet of shopping space (100 acres), the country's biggest mall ("Where It's Always 72 Degrees!") spreads over an area the size of seven Yankee Stadiums and will soon double in size. It employs twelve thousand people and attracts forty million visitors a year. The Mall of America is more than metaphorically a cathedral; some people get married there. It is also a world-class affluenza hot zone.

### **A WORLD PHENOMENON**

Today, the malls of America have rivals in other countries. The Phoenix City Market Mall in Mumbai, India, is only slightly smaller than the Mall of America, and the New South China Mall is nearly twice as big, while the Dubai Mall has become the world's most visited leisure and shopping destination, with sixty-five million annual visitors.<sup>7</sup>

But the malling of the world may be starting to lose steam. The big Indian and Chinese malls are full of vacant space, as many of India's and China's poor, unable to afford the products, come only to look, not to buy. In an even more promising development, recent demonstrations in Turkey began when the government announced plans to demolish Istanbul's popular Taksim Gezi Park and build a shopping mall in its place, striking a powerful blow against affluenza.<sup>8</sup>

In the United States, too, many malls are losing tenants. Retail experts predict that a tenth of the approximately one thousand megamalls in the US will close their doors within the decade. Part of this downturn was the result of the recent recession. But much of it can be blamed on greater consumer spending options.

### HOME SHOPPING

While many malls, and vast discount megastores like Wal-Mart and Costco, still boast growing sales (and still drive smaller, locally owned stores out of business), Americans are now doing a whole lot of shopping right from their couches. Nearly twenty *billion* mail-order catalogs (more than fifty million trees' worth of paper) flood our homes each year,<sup>9</sup> about seventy for every one of us, selling everything from soup to nuts (to refrigerators to underwear). "Buy Now, Pay Later!" they shout. While some resent their arrival, most Americans eagerly await them and order from them with abandon. In some cases, we even pay for the catalogs (such as Sears's) so that we can pay for what's in them. Then there are the home shopping channels. Critics mock them as presenting a continual succession of baubles on bimbos, but for a sizable minority of Americans, they're the highlight of the cable TV systems, and highly profitable. And to think someone once called TV "a vast wasteland." That was before the shopping channels, of course.

Mail-order catalogs and shopping channels carry a lot more than products. They are highly contagious carriers of affluenza.

In the past several years, a new affluenza carrier has entered the mix in a big way. In time, it threatens to someday outdraw malls, catalogs, and shopping channels combined. The intense frenzy with which the ubiquitous Internet has been embraced as a shopping center can be compared only to that which followed the discovery of gold in California and Alaska, or to the Texas oil boom. Americans now spend an average of thirteen hours a week online, and much of that time is spent shopping, since a majority of Internet sites are selling something.

Ten years ago, consumers spent \$50 billion online, nearly double what they had spent four years earlier. By 2012, online sales had topped \$200 billion, and they continue to double every four years. Though they are still only a fraction of total retail sales (\$4.4 trillion), the trend is clear.<sup>10</sup>



## A BIT OF BACKGROUND

Take a walk down memory lane. Way down. If you're as old as the authors, your memories carry you back to the 1950s at least. World War II and the Great Depression were over, and America was on the move. Suburban houses were going up everywhere. New cars were rolling from the assembly lines and onto new pavement. Ground breaking began for the National Defense Interstate Highway System, soon to stretch from sea to shining sea. A TV dinner (introduced in 1953) came from every oven.

"It's a great life, eh Bob?" a man in a '50s commercial intones as a young couple and their towheaded son sit on a couch watching the tube. "And tomorrow will be even better, for you and for all the people." Of course, the great life wasn't great for the millions who were poor or discriminated against. And even for middle-class America, it wasn't worry-free. On the same day in 1957 (October 4) that *Leave It to Beaver* premiered on American television, those pesky Russians shot Sputnik into space. Nikita Khrushchev promised to bury us "in the peaceful field of economic competition." We know how that came out.

But 1957 was important for another, less heralded reason. It was the year the percentage of Americans describing themselves as "very happy" reached a plateau never exceeded and seldom matched since then. The following year, a year when Americans bought two hundred million Hula-Hoops, the economist John Kenneth Galbraith published an influential book calling the United States "the affluent society."

We *felt* richer then than we do now. Most Americans today don't think of themselves as affluent, says the psychologist Paul Wachtel, "even though in terms of gross national product we have more than twice as much as we did then. Everybody's house has twice as much stuff in it. But the feeling of affluence, the experience of well-being, is no higher and perhaps even lower." Liberal economists argue that since about 1973 the real wages earned by middle-class Americans haven't risen much and, for many workers, have declined. Young couples talk of not being able to afford what their parents had. But one thing is incontestable: *We have a lot more stuff and much higher material expectations than previous generations did.*

## STARTER CASTLES

Take housing. The average size of new homes is now more than double what it was in the 1950s, while families are smaller. Right after World War II, 750 square feet was just right (in Levittown, for example). By the '50s, 950 square feet was the norm; by the '60s, 1,100 square feet was typical; and by the '70s, 1,350. Now it's 2,500.<sup>11</sup>

In recent years, before the housing bubble burst, homes became a symbol of conspicuous consumption, as beneficiaries of the '90s stock market boom began to buy real estate, bulldoze existing (and perfectly functional) homes, and replace them with megahouses of 10,000 square feet and more. Starter castles, some have named them. Others call them monster homes. In places like the spectacular mountain towns of the West, many such megahomes are actually *second homes*, mere vacation destinations for the newly rich.

### CAR WARS

As with homes, so with cars. Until 2000, the eighteen-foot-long Chevy Suburban set the standard for gigantism. Then, not to be outdone, Ford introduced the Excursion, a seven-thousand-pound titan that was a foot longer than the Suburban. Ford Motors chairman William Ford even apologized for making so many SUVs, calling his Excursion “the Ford Valdez” for its propensity to consume fuel. He condemned SUVs as wasteful and polluting but said Ford would continue to manufacture them anyway because they were extremely profitable.

“For a lot of people an SUV is a status symbol,” says car salesman Mike Sullivan. “So they’re willing to pay the thirty- to forty-odd thousand dollars to drive one of these vehicles.”

Never one to give up without a fight, General Motors came charging back at Ford, acquiring ownership of the Hummer, a more luxurious version of the military transport vehicle used during the Gulf War. GM is “placing a big bet that the decade-long trend toward ever larger and more aggressive-looking sport utility vehicles would continue,” according to the *New York Times*.<sup>12</sup> “It’s like a tank with fashion,” says one teenager quoted by the *Times*. The kid says he loves the Hummer because “I like something where I can look down into another car and give that knowing smile that says ‘I’m bigger than you.’ It makes me feel powerful.”

A Hummer dealer website ([www.lynchhummer.com](http://www.lynchhummer.com)) features a link to “Stupid Hummer Tricks.” The link offers photos of, among other things, a Hummer in a standoff against a buffalo, another proudly knocking aside trees as it plows up an incline in a forest, and a third nearly submerged in a pretty mountain stream. Now what will Ford counter with, an even bigger SUV called The Extinction?

### LET’S DO LUNCH

We’ve talked about houses and cars. Now consider food. The '50s did give us TV dinners. Turkey, peas, and mashed potatoes in a throwaway tray for sixty-nine cents—thank you, Swanson’s. As kids, we considered them delectable. Our standard

diets were pretty bland. “Exotic” meant soggy egg rolls, chow mein, and chop suey. “Mexican” was tacos and tamales (how did we cope without chimichangas and chalupas?). “Thai” wasn’t even part of our vocabulary. Now, city streets and suburban malls sport a United Nations of restaurants. We remember waiting for certain fruits and vegetables to be in season. Now everything is always available. When it’s winter here, it’s summer in New Zealand, after all. Yet we often feel deprived. Strawberries lose their flavor when you can have them all the time. More food choices and more diversity certainly aren’t a bad thing, but they come at a cost. The exotic quickly becomes commonplace and boring, requiring ever newer and more expensive menus.

Eating out used to be a special occasion. Now we spend more money on restaurant food than on the food we cook ourselves. Swelling expectations. Swelling stomachs too, but that’s another symptom.

### INVENTION IS THE MOTHER OF NECESSITY

Consider, also, the kinds of goods that were deemed luxuries as recently as 1970 but are now found in well over half of US homes and thought of by a majority of Americans as necessities: dishwashers, clothes dryers, central heating and air conditioning, color and cable TV. Back in 1970, there were no microwave ovens, DVDs, cell phones, smartphones, fax machines, iPads, iPods, leaf blowers, Xboxes, or personal computers. Now, more than half of us take all of these goods for granted and would feel deprived without most of them. In the past ten years, the cost of using cell phones has more than doubled the amount that Americans spend on phone service. It takes a lot of energy to run all this stuff.

There always seems to be a “better” model that we’ve just got to have. Writing in 2000 about Compaq’s then-new iPaq 3600 Pocket PC, *Seattle Times* technology reporter Paul Andrews warned that the iPaq, with its “sleek Porsche-like case and striking color screen,” cost \$500 more than an ordinary PalmPilot. “But without the color display, music, and photos of the iPaq, life seems pretty dull,” he lamented.<sup>13</sup> Now, the iPaq is mostly forgotten, replaced by new “gotta have it” devices.

With the newest smartphones, we may never have to be patient again, except when they aren’t loading properly, writes *Seattle Times* columnist Monica Guzman, in an article that is hopefully somewhat tongue-in-cheek.

Smart phones are making things like long lines and late appointments more bearable. When I have to wait, though, even I’m surprised by how irritating it feels. Like during takeoff and landing. “Put away and stow all electronic devices.” . . . Beautiful views are just out the window, but I can’t do exactly what I want to be doing. . . . No wait is too small for a

smart phone to vanquish. When I work from home, the phone is never far. It's there, ready to go, when I need to not wait for food to warm up in the microwave or for the Keurig to pour a cup of tea.<sup>14</sup>

We expect the information to come faster and faster with each new device, and we grow anxious when it doesn't, another feverish expectation. In such a world, nature's pace becomes unbearable, "irritating," and worst of all, "boring."

We drive twice as much per capita as we did a half century ago and fly more than twenty-five times as much.<sup>15</sup> Middle-income Americans seldom ventured more than a few hundred miles from home then, even during two-week summer vacations. Now, many of us (not just the rich) expect to spend occasional long weekends in Puerto Vallarta or (in the case of New Yorkers) Paris. Everywhere, humble motels have been replaced by elegant "inns," humble resorts by Club Meds. Now, "I need a vacation" means I need to change continents for a few days.

### **THE CHANGING JONESES**

It may be fear rather than greed that primarily drives our swelling expectations. Fear of not succeeding in the eyes of others. In one magazine ad from the '50s, readers are encouraged to "keep up with the Joneses" by driving what the Joneses were driving: a Chevy. A Chevy sedan at that, not even a Corvette. Just about the cheapest car around even then.

But the mythical Joneses don't drive Chevrolets anymore. And they're no longer your next-door neighbors either, folks who make roughly what you do. The economist Juliet Schor studied people's attitudes about consumption in a large corporation and found that most Americans now compare themselves with coworkers or television characters when they think about what they "need."

But corporations have become increasingly stratified economically in recent years. One frequently comes into contact with colleagues who are much better paid than oneself. Their cars, clothes, and travel plans reflect their higher incomes, yet set the standard for everyone else in the firm.

Likewise, says Schor, "TV shows a very inflated standard of living relative to what the true standard of living of the American public is. People on television tend to be upper-middle class or even rich, and people who watch a lot of TV have highly inflated views of what the average American has. For example, people who are heavy TV watchers vastly exaggerate the number of Americans with swimming pools, tennis courts, maids, and planes, and their own expectations of what they should have also become inflated, so they tend to spend more and save less."<sup>16</sup>

Schor says that as the gap between rich and poor grew during the 1980s, people with relatively high incomes began to feel deprived in comparison to those who were suddenly making even more. “They started to feel ‘poor on \$100,000 a year’ as the well-known phrase puts it, because they were comparing themselves to the Donald Trumps and the other newly wealthy.” It happened all the way down the income line, Schor says. “Everybody felt worse compared to the role models, those at the top.”

Until the recent economic crisis began, Americans’ feverish expectations had been reducing our personal savings rate steadily since the 1980s, from roughly 11 percent in 1982 to 1.5 percent in 2005. By contrast, the Princeton historian Sheldon Goran (*Beyond Our Means: Why America Spends While the World Saves*), points out that savings rates in Germany, Italy, France, and some other western European nations have continued to exceed 10 percent, with the notable exception of the United Kingdom, where the savings rate has actually been negative.<sup>17</sup> Curiously, conservatives have often claimed that a strong social safety net would discourage savings because people would feel they didn’t need to prepare for old age or emergencies. But in fact, a strong safety net, including free health care and education, seems to encourage savings, providing needed services at lower cost than the private marketplace.

### THE EXAMPLE NOT TO FOLLOW: US

The Italian economist Stefano Bartolini calls the United States “the example not to follow.”<sup>18</sup> He suggests that the American model of high spending and skimpy safety nets encourages greater consumption—and therefore longer work hours (see chapter 3). The pressures of work and consumption create stress and leave people little time for each other, increasing loneliness and unhappiness while at the same time creating a less inviting or sustainable natural and built common environment. We then try to restore social connections and environmental quality through private purchases. (Lonely? Buy a new car, and you will attract others. Living in an ugly world of strip malls? Visit a tropical paradise for a few days.) And so we spend more. It’s the vicious cycle that affluenza encourages.

### THE ADDICTIVE VIRUS

You suspect you may be a coffee addict when you’re so hyped up that you start answering the front door *before* the doorbell rings! But when you can’t resist buying a coffee mug with a picture of a coffee mug on it, it’s official. You’re hooked. For you and at least thirty-five million other javaholics (four to five cups a day), coffee is life; the rest is only waiting.

But coffee's not the worst of our addictions, not by a long shot. Fourteen million Americans use illegal drugs, twelve million Americans are heavy drinkers, and sixty million are hooked on tobacco. Five million Americans can't stop gambling away their income and savings. And at least ten million can't stop buying more and more stuff—an addiction that in the long run may be the most destructive of all.<sup>19</sup>

Lianne, a department store publicist in New York City, is a problem shopper. Every year, she uses her employee discount to rack up more than \$20,000 in clothing and accessories. She finally suspected she might be addicted when she broke up with her boyfriend and moved her stuff out of his apartment. "Some women tend to shop a lot because they live out of two apartments, theirs and their boyfriend's," she explains. "You never look at your wardrobe as one wardrobe. But when I saw how many things I had that were identical, I began to see that maybe I did have a problem."<sup>20</sup>

Addiction to stuff is not easily understood. It's a bubbling cauldron of such emotional states as anxiety, loneliness, and low self-esteem. "I'd like to think I shop because I don't want to look like everybody else," Lianne confides anonymously, "but the real reason is because I don't want to look like myself. It's easier to buy something new and feel good about yourself than it is to change yourself."

Addicts need to go back for more in order to feel good again. The addictive substance or activity takes away the emotional discomfort of everyday life and also releases the built-up tensions of craving. The goal is to get back to a place of perceived power and carefree abandonment. The drinker suddenly becomes loose and uninhibited, certain he's the funniest man in the world. The gambler feels the elation of risk and possibility—putting it all on the line so Lady Luck can find him. The addicted shopper seeks the high she felt a few days earlier, when she bought a dress she still hasn't taken out of the box.

According to professor Ronald Faber, who has studied American advertising, compulsive buyers often report feeling heightened sensations when they shop. Colors and textures are more intense, and extreme levels of focus and concentration are often achieved—literally, altered states of consciousness. Some extreme shoppers compare their highs to drug experiences, while others have compared the moment of purchase to an orgasm.<sup>21</sup>

"I'm addicted to the smell of suede, the smooth texture of silk, and the rustle of tissue paper," admits one shopping addict. She also loves the captive attention she commands when she shops. And because her credit card is always ready for use, she can shop whenever she wants. Now, that's power.

## NEVER ENOUGH

The thrill of shopping is only one aspect of the addiction to stuff. Many Americans are also hooked on building personal fortresses out of their purchases. Whether it's a new set of golf clubs or a walk-in closet full of sweaters and shoes, having the right stuff and sending the right signal somehow reassures addictive buyers. The problem is that the world's signals keep changing, so addicts never reach a point of having enough. The computer never has enough memory or virus protection and is never as fast as everyone else's. The SUV doesn't have a satellite-linked Global Positioning System, so how do we know where we are? The phone system is obsolete without Internet access, image messaging, and call waiting; the refrigerator doesn't dispense ice cubes, filter water, or have push-button, movable shelves (some even have flat-screen TVs on the door); and the big-screen TV is a good six feet narrower than the living room wall. Glaring deficiencies like these become unacceptable when affluenza sets in.

Economists call it the law of diminishing marginal utility, jargon that simply means we have to run faster just to stay in place. As the social psychologist David Myers phrases it, "The second piece of pie, or the second \$100,000, never tastes as good as the first."<sup>22</sup>

Yet, despite diminishing returns that are plain to see, affluenza victims get stuck in the *more* mode, not knowing when or how to stop. If eating pie fails to satisfy, we think we need *more* pie to become satisfied. At this point, the affluenza virus has become an addiction. "Consuming becomes pathological because its importance grows larger and larger in direct proportion to our decreasing satisfaction," says the economist Herman Daly.

In terms of the social factors that trigger the addictive virus, our thanks go first to the pushers on the supply side. For example, when the highways to which we are addicted become clogged, dealers push *more* highways, which very soon become clogged as well. When we get used to a certain level of sexually explicit advertising, the pushers push it a step further, and then further, until preteens pose suggestively on network TV ads in their underwear.

It's the same in restaurants, fast-food outlets, and movie theaters, where portions get bigger, and then get huge. Plates of food become platters, Biggie Burgers become Dino Burgers, and boxes of popcorn become buckets. What's next, barrels requiring hand trucks? Our stomachs expand to accommodate the larger portions, which we soon regard as normal (sixty-four-ounce soft drinks and 1,400-calorie Monster burgers, normal?!).

Sometimes more and bigger are not enough. When we can't maintain our consumer highs with familiar products and activities, we search for new highs. Sports become extreme sports or fantasy sports in which thrill seekers bungee jump off skyscrapers or gamble in Internet fantasy sports leagues. Even real professional athletes, with fantasy salaries, can never get enough. When a bright young baseball prospect signs for \$25 million a year, a veteran who makes only \$12 million suddenly feels dissatisfied. This is the plight of the affluenza addict: even too much is not enough.

### SHOPPING TO FILL THE VOID

Similarities among addictions are alarming. When the pathological becomes normal, an addict will do whatever is necessary to maintain the habit. Gamblers and overspenders alike bounce checks, borrow from friends, and go deep in debt to support their habit, often lying to loved ones about their actions. It's not hard to see the connection between addictive behavior and the huge craters in our culture and environment. Just as gamblers sell family heirlooms to continue gambling, so do addicted consumers sacrifice priceless natural areas, contentment, and tradition to maintain a steady stream of goods.

Psychologists tell us that pathological buying is typically related to a quest for greater recognition and acceptance, an expression of anger, or an escape through fantasy—all connected to shaky self-images. Writes Faber,

One compulsive buyer bought predominantly expensive stereo and television equipment but demonstrated little interest when discussing the types of music or programs he liked. Eventually, it came out that his motivation for buying came mainly from the fact that neighbors recognized him as an expert in electronic equipment and came to him for advice when making their purchases.<sup>23</sup>

Faber reports that anger is often encoded in pathological buying. Debt becomes a mechanism for getting back at one's spouse or parent. Or in other cases, extreme shopping is a fleeting getaway from reality:

Buying provides a way of escaping into a fantasy where the individual can be seen as important and respected. Some people indicated that the possession and use of a charge card made them feel powerful; others found that the attention provided by sales personnel and being known by name at exclusive stores provided feelings of importance and status.<sup>24</sup>



In the years just after World War II the super-rich sought to conceal their profligacy, but since Ronald Reagan's first inaugural ball many have begun to flaunt it again. As the economist Robert Frank points out, there's been a rush on \$15,000 purses, \$10,000 watches, even \$65 million private jets. Twenty million Americans now own big-screen TVs costing at least \$2,000 each. Some buy their children \$5,000 life-size reproductions of Darth Vader and \$18,000 replicas of Range Rovers, \$25,000 birthday parties and million-dollar bar mitzvahs. Yachts the size of mansions burst their berths in many a marina.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, from the hot zones of popular culture and stratified workplaces, our new Joneses—consciously or otherwise—spread the affluenza fever, swelling our expectations as never before. And stuffing us up.

An Excerpt From

***Affluenza 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Mutation)***  
***How Overconsumption is Killing Us- and How to Fight Back***

by John de Graaf, David Wann, and Thomas Naylor

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