
Schoolbooks, Shops and Subsidies: Renegotiating Paper Consumption

Ashis Nandy, the Indian psychologist and social critic, once defined progress as "growth in the awareness of oppression".

What he meant, in part, is that we are fortunate that due to the rise of feminist movements we are more aware of the way women have been exploited than formerly, that due to anti-racist struggles we are clearer about many of the ways of oppression, and that due to the long hours radical scholars put in at their libraries we understand economic exploitation better.

And who could deny that paper consumption -- writing materials, books -- have played a part in all this?

But does it follow that we can equate paper consumption with progress?

In today's world, it is impossible even to equate paper consumption with literacy, let alone progress. US citizens currently consume 1.7 times more paper per capita than British people, four times more than Malaysians and 83 times more than Indians. Does it follow that they are 83 times more literate than Indians, 4 times more literate than Malaysians and 1.7 times more literate than the British? Or consider another example: the single-year increase in per capita consumption of paper between 1993 and 1994 in Sweden was double the total (!) per capita consumption of Indonesia.

This suggests that to understand what paper consumption is really about, we need to look at what paper is used for, and the power struggles out of which current patterns of its consumption have developed.

Two centuries ago the modern paper-making machine was invented in France -- on the account of its own inventor, not to meet the needs of children clamouring for schoolbooks, but to take power away from paper artisans at a time of artisan unrest and put it more into hands of machine financiers and managers. It wasn't until a century later, when the invention of wood-based pulps inaugurated the era of cheap paper, that consumption began to take off and many of the uses of paper we know today began to be found. That's also when the paper-producing industry began to be wedded to its current dynamic of ever-increasing scale, capital intensity, large-scale industrial forestry, and recurring cycles of excess capacity. Trapped by this dynamic, the industry has been constantly haunted by what David Clark, a European paper industrialist, has recently called the "need to create our own growth [and] stimulate demand".

Luckily for the industry, a number of powerful actors with their own political and economic agendas have continually lent a hand.

Over the last century, for example, manufacturers of food, soap, medicine and other goods have been constantly developing and redeveloping a remarkable invention: the modern paper or cardboard package.

One thing the package did was to eliminate shop staff who, many manufacturers felt, stood between them and potential consumers. If you don't have to ask a shopkeeper to get you something, but can merely pick a package off a shelf and pay for it, it's often a lot easier to buy it. Paper packaging, with its built-in colourful advertising, also made possible an explosion in "impulse" buying: purchases of things you didn't know you wanted until you saw them.

Small wonder, then, that over the 20th century, shops have been progressively turned into warehouses of individually wrapped, coloured packages containing their own sales pitches and constantly replenished by long-distance transport using still other types of paper packaging. The new type of consumption stimulated by supermarkets, of course, fed back into increased demand for yet more paper packages.

Today by far the largest use for paper -- over 40 per cent of production -- is not for books, not for newspapers, not for needy schoolchildren's notepads, not for indigent university students' studies, but in packaging and wrapping. An increasing proportion of the rest is devoted to advertising, mail-order catalogues, junk mail, disposable nappies, and computer paper. Even in the South, where there are real shortages of reading and writing materials, the biggest focus of paper marketing is not on goods to aid literacy, but rather on disposable nappies, tissues and the like.

Another part of constructing paper demand has consisted in simply moving the effects of production out of sight. By making sure that the people affected by the monoculture plantations established to feed paper pulp factories are not your neighbours and have no way of contacting or influencing you to convince you to rethink paper manufacture and paper subsidies, industry ensures that manufacturers and consumers will have fewer second thoughts about increasing their paper use.

By taking advantage of cheap land or forced labour or government-subsidized waste sinks, in addition, moving production around the globe helps keep consumer prices low and consumption growing. Dividing people from other people along power lines, race lines and gender lines is part of what consumption is all about.

Thus when the Japanese paper industry's supply of cheap wood residues from the US Pacific Northwest began to run out, threatened by environmentalist opposition and physical shortage, it simply expanded its operations in Indonesia, Thailand, Australia, PNG, Viet Nam, Siberia, Fiji, Chile, Brazil, New Zealand, Hawaii and elsewhere, leaving a trail of rural destruction and social strife all around the Pacific Rim.

Demand for paper, in short, like demand for many consumer goods, does not simply arise from people's pre-existing desires for basic necessities or even for progress. But nor is it simply imposed unilaterally on people by corporations and their helpers. Its construction is the result of two centuries of continuing social and class struggle and maneuver among many different groups over matters as diverse as industrial structure, access to information, and the cultural meanings of time, work and leisure.

It follows that consumption is going to undergo as many changes in the future as it has in the past. There's no reason why some of these changes, instead of increasing consumption in still more irrational and degrading ways, may not instead bring consumption once again under human control.

The question, of course, is how to do this. Here there must be many avenues of experiment. But all of them are bound to stress the close connections among consumption, production and power politics.

Companies engage in politics when they work at managing consumption. Bringing consumption under more democratic control also requires political action.

At a minimum that means bringing to light connections which corporations often work to conceal. It means opening channels of information and contact between consumers and affected people that have been blocked by corporate interest and cultural barriers. It means helping to make it possible for consumers and affected people to enter into a new, more civilized kind of negotiation over what reasonable consumption might consist in -- a negotiation less dominated and mediated by industry. It means imagining ways of setting prices which take account of hidden subsidies for repression and environmental violence.

Consumption, in short, is simply too important a matter to be left to corporations and people's consuming selves. People are not only consumers but political actors and citizens, and with the political parts of their brains it's time to think new thoughts.

It's not enough to say that "if we want change it's up to us as individual consumers to alter our buying habits and pioneer new lifestyles". Saying that may be a good way of making people feel guilty or confused. But any action it inspires, because it will be likely to spring from personal guilt rather than from learning, or from anger at exploitation, or from solidarity with those who are being stomped on, is not likely to be very effective. Do the problems of consumption begin with you as an individual? And do the solutions depend only on the choices you make as an individual consumer? To think that is more likely to make you want to withdraw from society than to engage with it.

To say that paper consumption can be dealt with merely through the blunt instrument of standing in front of a supermarket shelf and deciding which brand to buy -- or not to buy at all -- is to deceive yourself. The labels on these products may ask you to choose them, but they can't tell you what happens if you do or don't buy the product.

They won't allow you to negotiate with the people affected by its production, and, if the company's advertising agency or PR firm have done their job, will conceal from you as much as possible about the political history which went into the product's development. If any problems require collective action, it is precisely those thrown up by modern consumption. "Feelbad" recriminations about individual consumption are likely to lead only to superficial "feelgood" solutions rather than meaningful social action.

Rather than Northern overconsumers blaming themselves for having been made ignorant about the effects of consumption, it's perhaps time for them to join with others to counter the structures which make them so. Rather than taking for granted that their interests are necessarily opposed to those of others far away who produce the goods or raw materials they use, it's perhaps time to undertake some projects to see what struggles North and South might have in common. Rather than assume that increasing consumption of everything in sight is biological destiny, it's perhaps time to bring into play more of what Henry James called the "civic use of the imagination" in seeing what other, more humane futures people might negotiate for themselves.

By: Larry Lohmann, e-mail: larrylohmann@gn.apc.org (excerpted from a talk on consumption given in 1998 at a meeting of People and Planet, the University of Warwick, UK)

