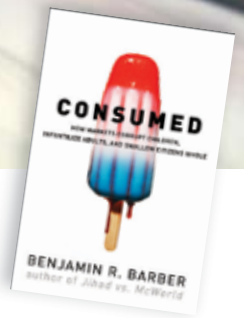




Hyper-Consumerism



Manufacturing needs, not meeting them

BY SUSAN KOPP

WE KNOW WHO WE ARE. HERE in our Western world, we love our freedom. We love to shop and we like to spend. Even what we don't have.

Figuring out what we really want, what we really need, and what's good for us and society is another thing entirely.

Harvard-trained author and political theorist Benjamin Barber has written extensively on a wide range of issues relating to democracy and citizenship, globalization, and the common good. His newest book is *Consumed: How Mar-*

kets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole.

Barber argues that capitalism initially began as a system for meeting the real needs of consumers. Hard work to produce the necessary products and ser-

vices both generated livelihoods and contributed concretely to the growth of a nation and its people. And, of course, while supplying goods and services, an entrepreneur or business secured a profit as well.

Political theorist Dr. Benjamin Barber is a distinguished senior fellow at Demos (a non-partisan public policy research and advocacy organization) and New York director of the Democracy Collaborative. He is the former Walt Whitman Chair of Political Science at Rutgers University and currently a distinguished professor at the University of Maryland.



COURTESY OF BENJAMIN BARBER, © FRANZISKA RICHTER | DREAMSTIME

“Doing good for others turns out to entail doing well for yourself,” wrote Barber in the *L.A. Times* in April. “But capitalism so successfully met the needs of wealthier, developed countries that it eventually resulted in overproduction.” And here, according to Barber, is where things began to go astray.

“Capitalism,” Barber writes, “requires us to ‘need’ all that it produces in order for it to survive. So it busies itself manufacturing needs for the wealthy while ignoring the wants of the truly needy.”

“Global inequality means that while the wealthy have too few needs, the needy have too little wealth.”

By making consumers slaves to more and more “created needs,” true freedom is lost. Citizens are no longer able to see beyond individual wants to the greater community at large. Herein lies a threat to democracy.

Barber wants readers to see recent trends in marketing and advertising. Western markets, he says, are doing two things: they have systematically begun targeting children as a kind of last consumer frontier and, secondly, they’re discovering that the longer adults are encouraged to remain like teenagers or kids, the more likely they are to spend money rather than save it—a phenomenon Barber calls the “infantilist ethos.”

We asked Dr. Barber a few questions about his new book.

“To sustain itself, capitalism will once again have to respond to real needs instead of trying to fabricate synthetic ones—or risk consuming itself.”

Benjamin Barber

What are your hopes for this book and its impact on thoughts and ideas?

I hope the book will help Americans and others around the world understand that while consuming and shopping are a necessary part of our lives, they cannot become *all* of our lives.

As citizens, we can shape our public environment so as to make space for the full diversity of human life, including space for religion, culture, creativity and spontaneity.

In a nutshell, can you explain how the infantilist ethos and its effect on capitalism and Western culture are a threat to the very core of democracy?

We must begin by recalling that capitalism started as a formula for marrying self-interest to altruism. By helping individuals who manufactured goods to meet real human needs, early “productivist” capitalism allowed society to meet needs and individuals to prosper.

Instead today, capitalism is focused on

consuming, not producing. But consuming demands spending, not saving; shopping, not hard work; narcissism, rather than service to others. The infantilist ethos, as I call it, dumbs down adults and targets children in the name of selling to all of us goods that we don’t need. These tendencies distort capitalism and endanger our ability to control our own lives (democracy!).

Is there a connection between the central ideas in *Consumed* and the leading role you play in the annual Interdependence Days that were first held in Philadelphia and then in other parts of the world?

The forces of consumer markets operate globally. Pope John Paul II, whom I had the great honor of meeting before our Interdependence Day in Rome in 2004, recognized that interdependence means no one nation or people can meet the challenges they face alone.

When I speak of the reality of interdependence, I speak of it in the manner that I believe Pope John Paul II meant when he

Interdependence Day

“WE THE PEOPLE OF THE WORLD DO herewith declare our interdependence as individuals and members of distinct communities and nations,” begins the Declaration of Interdependence, the cornerstone of the first Interdependence Day in Philadelphia on September 12, 2003 and for each annual celebration since.

In its first five years, Interdependence Day has spanned the globe, in Rome (2004), Paris (2005), and Morocco (2006). This year’s will be in Mexico City. Regardless of location, Interdependence Day’s underlying mission has remained “to

increase the awareness of our interdependence and create a new vision of what it means to be a global citizen in this interdependent world.”

First initiated by political theorist Benjamin Barber through the international non-governmental organization *CivWorld*, Interdependence Day brings together local and international celebrities.

“Vivified by brotherhood, the concept of interdependence will evolve from a simple ‘fact’ or ‘tool’ to becoming the propelling force for positive pro-



cesses,” declared Chiara Lubich at the second event in Rome.

Interdependence Day takes place each year on September 12, a date chosen not only to memorialize the tragedy of September 11 but also to “seek an affirmative interdependence that allows us to create a world that honors

rather than exploits our children,” Barber explained, “helping them grow up with the dignity and ethical clarity that should define us as adults.”

For more information: www.civworld.org or www.benjaminbarber.org

said the world is linked together—like it or not—by intersecting forces, meaning that no nation can act alone (he used the term interdependence in several of his encyclicals).

I have in mind health plagues such as the HIV epidemic and Avian flu, ecological warming, crime, prostitution, terrorism, drugs and war. No one nation, not even one as powerful as the United States, can deal with these forces alone. Interdependence suggests that capitalism must serve real global needs (and there are plenty of these needs) rather than inventing false needs.

An example: in the United States, we have clean water from our taps, yet we buy 10 billion dollars a year in bottled water, for which there is no real need whatsoever! Meanwhile, in the developing world, billions are without clean, potable water. Entrepreneurs ought to be helping them develop needed goods like hand-pumps (for clean ground water) or rainwater

Rome, September 2004
Dr. Benjamin Barber with Chiara Lubich at the second annual Interdependence Day in Rome. Supporters of the event included Rome's City Council, Focolare, and the Community of St. Egidio.



COURTESY OF BENJAMIN BARBER

cisterns. Why not use microcredit and international financial investment to help people get the clean water they need in the Third World, instead of forcing “boutique water” on people in the First World who don’t need it?

In the concluding chapters, you speak of interdependence and

the need for citizens to return to their civic calling both globally and nationally—a calling that will better enable them to resist the forces of hyper-consumerism. Do you see the positive spiritual forces in our world as aiding this resistance and fostering a civic calling?

Youth Life

Sharing Through Music

The column by young people for young people

BY SO YOUN ROSA KIM

Those of us who know Cristina Estipona know her as a gifted musician and songwriter. This month, she talks about how she is using her natural ability and love of music in different ways.

The Focolare spirituality has become important to me because it has made many things in my life so much clearer.

I realize that many young people like me can be so lost; they don’t seem to have a leg to stand on. I have felt that way before, but I now sense a certainty within me that comes from trying to

live the Gospel and build unity with those around me through love—it is like finding firm ground. It has influenced me in every aspect of my life, and most importantly, in my passion and love of creating and performing music.

Music has always been a major driving force in my life. Since I’m a musician, I have the chance to perform at a number of different events with different purposes.


Recently, however, whenever I perform for an event that is not connected with the Focolare, I always feel there is something missing, even though I put maximum effort into using my talent.

For example, I have performed with various bands, playing guitar for them, singing and so on. While this can all be very exciting, I have noticed a different feeling in performing for Focolare events, which I yearn for when I perform elsewhere. When I am involved in an artistic



Rosa Kim

program with the Focolare, big or small, I freely give my talent and love to others around me. In turn, I feel complete; it is a different type of joy I can’t quite describe. I think the reason is that we try to love each other and all that we do is for God; there is no trace of anything else.


The greatest feeling is that in my heart I know this is real, and it is how life should be. In a way, the concerns and troubles that are typical of young people my age don’t exist for me. When I choose to love according to the Gospel, I feel free and confident because Jesus gives me a new sense of certainty and guidance. I am so grateful that I met the Focolare, and I want to share this life with others through my music. 

So Youn Rosa Kim is a 19-year-old college student from Maryland. Send your story ideas for Youth Life to youthlife@livingcitymagazine.com.

Resistance must be global, not just national, and it is here that the role of moral and spiritual forces is so important. It is here that the moral spirit of Chiara Lubich and the global presence of the Focolare Movement can play a vital role.

Underlying the obsession with consumerism and material acquisition is obliviousness to the plural nature of human beings, and the absolute core value of the spiritual dimension of human life.

Happily, this dimension is so powerful that it resists naturally when it is confronted by hyper-consumerism and materialistic narcissism.

Focolare does not need to sell us on the importance of the religious and the spiritual in our lives. There is a deep-felt need for this, which is why many young people are finding ways to resist consumerism through religious, civic and cultural commitments focused on service, fellowship and generosity. 

Acceptance, Affection, Care

The Focolare spirituality of unity has many facets that reflect on family life.

What happens when families adjust their lifestyles and let these shine?

BY DAN AND MARY JENNINGS

CHIARA LUBICH HAS WRITTEN that the family, invented by God as a masterpiece of love, can inspire the world of tomorrow. “The family,” she said, “is the natural setting where life begins and ends and where the disabled, the elderly and the terminally ill find acceptance, affection and care.”

At a time in our family’s lifecycle when three of our five children were still living at home, Mary’s widowed mother, due to infirmity and age, came from another part of the country to live with us.

The fruits of having tried to live the spirituality of unity with our children over the years became evident. Everyone tried to make her feel at home. The children’s friends would come and visit with her and were so friendly that she wondered if they were related to us.

Our parish priest came regularly to bring her Communion and asked her to pray for him. She did this faithfully, marking on her calendar where he was and the specific things he wanted her to pray for. He explained to her, and in fact mentioned from the pulpit one day, that one specific vocation of the elderly and infirm is to pray.

She lived with us for about a year. Then, after suffering a stroke, she needed nursing home care, and we would visit her daily. Mary’s brother, a priest, said that their mother had some of the happiest days of her life while living in our home.




Dan and Mary Jennings

DENNIS CLIFFORD

One Christmas morning, we received a call from a priest friend asking if we could come to a youth shelter to pick up a homeless runaway teenage boy who was now being reconciled with his parents in another state. Arrangements were being worked out for him to go home by bus. We talked with the children about this request, and their response was that they would give the Christmas gift money from their other grandmother to buy an airline ticket for this youth to join his parents for Christmas dinner.

As parents of these five now-adult children, we are blessed with the acceptance, affection and care that Chiara speaks of. This takes many forms. At times we receive help with housecleaning; thoughtful gifts arrive, not only on special occasions; unexpected financial help, perhaps in the form of repayment of loans made long ago; or more recently, when moving, our five adult children, along with their spouses, helped with this arduous task.

We were a little startled recently when one of the five said that their family did not need all the space in their large home, and if and when it would be needed, there was space to accommodate a hospital bed, should one of us need such, and that one floor of their home could be made available to us.

As Chiara has said, when mutual love is put into practice in the family, such precious values can be extended and applied to the whole of humanity and transform it into one large family. 



Cristina Estipona (seated) with Megan Bodenschatz on flute

STELLA VISCHER (2)