

Economism's Antecedents

How we were taught to love growth

Books Reviewed by Paul Rondell

In the 1950s and 1960s Vance Packard wrote several books in which he documented and analyzed contemporary social trends. *The Hidden Persuaders* and *The Waste Makers* dealt with the development of new techniques for manipulating consumer attitudes and behaviors. His books were extremely popular (*The Hidden Persuaders* went through 27 printings between 1957 and 1974) but have had little lasting impact, except, no doubt, on the advertising industry itself. This is unfortunate since the methodologies described in these books have been honed and polished to contribute greatly to the development of what John Attarian has called "economism," a new secular religion in which nothing seems to matter but the economy — not nation, culture, ethnicity nor language ("Economism and the National Prospect," *The Social Contract*, Vol. X, No.2, Winter 1999-2000).

In *The Hidden Persuaders* Packard documents the introduction of professional psychologists' motivational research into the advertising industry in the 1950s and its powerful effects. As a public we began to be sold products, not because of their intrinsic qualities, but because of their symbolic significance to our wishes, our fears and hopes — our subconscious. The depth probers searched for these symbols with word-association-polling to find which slogans worked effectively and which failed. These were the forerunners of the modern "focus groups" which are used to develop campaign issues and productive slogans.

One advantage in the use of symbols is that they can

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The Hidden Persuaders
by Vance Packard
New York: David McKay Co., Inc. (1957)
275 pages



The Waste Makers
by Vance Packard
New York: David McKay, Co., Inc. (1960) 340 pages

be created and re-created. For example, as Packard describes, the image of prunes was effectively changed from a fruit for old, wrinkled, constipated seniors to a delicious, sweet treat for healthy, regular, active youth. Prune sales soared, to the delight of the California Prune Advisory Board who had hired the motivational researchers to make that happen.

The advancing technologies gave marketers far greater control over what and how much people bought.

In *The Waste Makers* Packard probed the increasing commercialization of American life — the development of consumption for consumption's sake. But even more accurately, and ominously,

consumption for the sake of the economy. In the late 1950s it appeared we might reach a "saturation point" at which people, having everything they needed, might foster a serious sales slump and trigger a recession. Indeed, a recession occurred and the public was bombarded with slogans: "Buy now, the job you save may be your own," "You auto buy now," "Buy your way to prosperity," and more.

Significantly, this sloganeering was prompted, not by the advertising industry but by the government. President Eisenhower himself provided the encouragement and set the theme: that we must consume for the sake of the economy. That commitment continues with such contemporary political catch phrases as "It's the economy, stupid," and "We must grow the economy."

Packard effectively documented how growth became an unexamined virtue. The rise in consumption and in the number of consumers became an unqualified good. He examines the development of planned obsolescence as essential for growth — not only the obsolescence of the product itself, but the fading of its desirability. For instance, traditionally furniture had been purchased for quality and durability. The author shows

how attitudes were manipulated to condition people to expect and desire periodic re-decorating. The manufactured obsolescence of desirability toward automobiles has been legendary.

During recent decades, the growth of consumption ceased to be a luxury and became a national imperative.

Packard examined the implications of this continually expanding growth on natural resources and on the American character. He concluded with some suggested corrective courses of action including the restoration of pride in quality and prudence in maintaining

environmental balance.

If the nation had paid more attention to Packard's observations and admonitions, John Attarian may not have had the occasion to observe, nearly a half-century later, that America is

... a culture that prized self-restraint and loyalty to high standards and presented heroes for emulation (but which) has been replaced by a commercially fabricated "culture" of entertainment which does economism's work.
[op.cit.] €