

Shop 'Til You Drop

JULIET SCHOR: The typical middle to upper middle class household occupies more than 2,000 square feet of floor space, owns at least two cars, a couple of couches, numerous chairs, beds and tables, a washer and dryer, more than two televisions, a VCR, and has cable. The kitchen contains a conventional oven, a microwave, a frostfree refrigerator, a blender, a coffee maker, a teakettle, a food processor, and so many pots, pans, dishes, cups, glasses, storage containers, kitchen utensils, and pieces of flatware that they aren't even counted. Elsewhere in this house are a personal computer and a printer, telephones and answering machine, a calculator, a stereo or CD player, musical instruments, and many pieces of art. In addition to painting and reproductions, there are decorative items such as vases, plates, and statuettes, photographs in frames, and knick-knacks. In the bathroom are a hairdryer, a scale, perhaps an electric toothbrush or shaver, and cabinets overflowing with towels, shampoos, conditioners, face creams, and other cosmetics. The closets are stuffed with clothes and shoes of all types, dresses, suits, pants, shirts, sweaters, coats, hats, boots, sneakers, flats, pumps, walking shoes, patent leathers, and loafers. And don't forget the jewelry. In addition to watches, the diamond ring, and other high value items, there's usually a large collection of costume jewelry, bead necklaces, bracelets, and earrings, earrings, earrings. The family room is filled with books, videos, tapes, CDs, magazines, and more photos and knick-knacks. The floors are covered with rugs or carpet, and throughout the house there's scattered other pieces of furniture, accented perhaps with dried or silk flowers. Stored in the garage or basement is all the sports equipment, such as bicycles and skis, as well as luggages and totes, lawn and garden tools. In addition to all these durable products, households spend heavily on services such as childcare, movies, restaurants and bars, hotel stays, airplane trips, haircuts, massages, visits to Disneyworld, lawyer bills, insurance premiums, interest payments, and sometimes rental on the storage space where even more stuff resides. If you are a typical consumer, you did not always have so much. There was probably a time in your adult life when you could fit everything you owned into your car and drive off into the sunset. Now you need professionals to transport your possessions.

WOMAN ON STREET: If I find something that I really love, I've got to have it. If that's materialistic, yes.

MAN ON STREET: Americans are in fact too materialistic.

WOMAN ON STREET: Is that a joke question? Oh my god, it's disgusting!

WOMAN ON STREET: We're an extremely materialistic culture.

MAN IN ARCHIVAL FILM: Now wait a minute, just a minute. What's wrong with this type of materialism?

DUANE ELGIN: I think many of us in our society, our consumer society, are so distracted, so alienated, so fragmented by the whole consumption process that we are not sure if we've actually been alive.

CECILE ANDREWS: Feeling alive in this country has come to be a counterfeit feeling and that we think that, when we buy something, we have an excitement and we think we're feeling alive.

ELI JAXON-BEAR: The problem is that the moment doesn't last because it's brought on by particular circumstances, so then you have to shop again or have sex again, or do whatever it is that brought on the blissful experience.

WOMAN SINGING IN ARCHIVAL FILM: I wish my living room were all redone.

CECILE ANDREWS: In most of human history, having more did make you happier. And that's not true anymore.

NARRATOR: On one level, the industrial revolution transformed the very nature of work – replacing the slow, deliberate age of craftsmanship with the planned frenzy of the factory.

MAN IN ARCHIVAL FILM: Chains, inventions, power, black out the past, forget the quiet cities, bring in the steam and steel, the iron men, the giants, open the throttles faster and faster.

NARRATOR: But on another level, as the sheer speed and efficiency of the new age exploded into unprecedented levels of productivity, something more fundamental was in the process of being transformed – the very way people saw themselves and their place in the world. In the process, revolutionizing not only how much stuff we were able to produce for others but how much we were able to acquire for ourselves.