

The American way of life

A book review by BADRINATH RAO

Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic by John De Graff, David Wann and Thomas H. Naylor; Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, 2003; pages xvi + 268, \$17.95 (pb).

FEW illusions have riveted the imagination of urban India so overwhelmingly as the myth of the `American Dream' with its emphasis on high consumption, compulsive acquisition and instantaneous gratification. A corollary of this illusion seems to be that the only way to accomplish it is through an Information Technology- and biotechnology-driven economy. The new elites of the knowledge-based economy, with their sumptuous salaries and fast and fun-filled lives, are the exemplars of the consumerist nirvana that the vast, rural hinterlands of India yearn to attain. Even if one concedes that illusions are the stuff of life, the deceptive notion that happiness consists of possessing things, regardless of the price one has to pay, needs to be subverted.

What lends urgency to this task is the disturbing evidence from the very America we tend to idolise uncritically. Partly owing to the insidious propaganda of the Western media and partly because fantasising about an unblemished world numbs the heartbreaking realities of our society, associating affluent America with social pathologies appears totally counterintuitive. Yet, as John De Graff and his co-authors clearly point out in their acclaimed book, there is no denying that the `American Dream' has gone sour for millions of Americans. Despite its trite shibboleths such as `freedom', `land of opportunities', `free trade' and `democracy', the juggernaut of capitalism has not only pauperised but also infected them with what the authors describe as `affluenza'.

"Affluenza", according to the authors, is "a painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more". This metaphor of a disease is an apposite characterisation of a malignant condition that is eating into the entrails of America. Americans' insatiable urge to acquire things, whether or not they are necessary, has indeed reached epidemic proportions. It has caused severe social and cultural dislocations and warped the basic values of American society.

Affluenza is based on two highly regarded documentaries, *Affluenza* and *Escape From Affluenza*, telecast on the PBS channel in the late 1990s. Graff and his co-authors Thomas Naylor, an economist, and David Wann, an environmental scientist, conducted research for three years thereafter, updated data, and wrote the book with several additional stories. The book provides compelling statistical details about the havoc caused by unbridled consumerism and offers a cogent analysis of its causes and consequences.

ONE of the ways in which capitalism thrives is by generating constantly needs among people. While some needs are legitimate, others are not. The main contention of *Affluenza* 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". Further, as the authors put it: "[T]he message of the book isn't to stop buying; it's to buy carefully and consciously with full attention to the real benefits and costs of your purchases, remembering, always, that the best things in life aren't things."

Simple though this thesis might seem, it just cannot be overstated for three reasons. First, overspending and overconsumption engender a variety of problems such as social fragmentation, excessive ego-focality, "time famine"

and chronic stress, factors that seriously imperil social harmony. Second, hyper consumption in America has deleterious consequences for the rest of the world. For instance, though Americans comprise just 4.7 per cent of the earth's population, they account for 25 per cent of its global warming and greenhouse gas emissions.

At a retail store in Illinois, United States. Shopping has become the most preferred activity of Americans with 70 per cent of them visiting shopping malls each week. Also, American spending is totally out of sync with the needs of the rest of the world and results in the depletion of precious resources. The book points out: "According to the United Nations Environment Program, Americans spend more for trash bags than 90 of the world's 210 countries spend for everything!". Third, consumption patterns in America produce an incredible amount of pollution. Every time Americans eat red meat, go jet-skiing, travel on a cruise ship or drive a sports utility vehicle, they cause irreparable damage to the earth's ecosystem. Most people who equate America with development and progress seem to be oblivious to the colossal price all of us have to pay to sustain its high levels of consumption.

Graff and his co-authors illustrate, with a cornucopia of facts, how the American "urge to splurge continues to surge" and what its ramifications are. They point out that Americans spend nearly \$6 trillion a year, more than \$21,000 per person, most of it on consumer goods, which account for two-thirds of the recent growth in the U.S. economy. They spend more on shoes, jewellery and watches (\$80 billion) than on higher education (\$65 billion).

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spend six hours a week shopping and only 40 minutes playing with their own children. One poll found that 93 per cent of teenage American girls rate shopping as their favourite activity. Interestingly, only a quarter of mall shoppers come with a specific product in mind; the rest come just to shop. Impulse shopping, Internet shopping, shopping to amuse oneself, shopping as a form of therapy, these are now part of the core cultural values of mainstream Americans. Small wonder, then, that there are now twice as many shopping centres as high schools in America.

Equally egregious is the fact that shopping is almost always done with borrowed money!

Most Americans now have five or more credit cards, for a nation-wide total of well over a billion cards. The average American household carried \$7,564 in credit card debt during 2000. Even college students carry an average debt of \$2,500. Credit card debts tripled in the 1990s, resulting in a steep escalation of personal bankruptcies. In 1980, as many as 313,000 people declared bankruptcy. Now, each year more than a million people file for bankruptcy, a figure greater than the number of people who graduate from college annually.

Those who manage to dodge bankruptcy are not better off either. Six million Americans are close to bankruptcy. Sixty per cent of families have so little financial reserves that they can sustain their lifestyles for about a month if they lose their jobs. Those that are slightly wealthier can manage for just about three and a half months. Thus, the singular achievement of capitalist development in America has been the near-total obliteration of the concept of thrift. It is no surprise, therefore, that currently America's national saving rate is around zero and in some months falls below that line. In contrast, workers in China, India and Pakistan save a quarter of their incomes.

WHAT have Americans got for all their spending? Things, things and more things. According to the authors, most Americans suffer from 'possession overload', the problem of dealing with too much stuff". The average supermarket contains 30,000 items, two and a half times as many as it did 20 years ago. To keep these largely useless items, homes have become twice the size they were in the 1950s, though the family size has shrunk. Typically, American homes now have 2,300 sq. ft. and three garages. But even this is not sufficient. There are now more than 30,000 self-storage facilities in the U.S. providing over a billion square feet of storage space. The authors point out that this industry has grown 40-fold since the 1960s, when it was insignificant, to one with an annual turnover of \$12 billion now, making it bigger than the music industry in America.

Furthermore, things that were considered luxuries in the past have now become absolutely essential. Take cars, for instance. America has more cars (203 million) than registered drivers. Americans drive twice as much as they used to 50 years ago. Nothing, not even traffic congestion resulting in lost time and fuel to the tune of \$60 billion a year, will diminish the American love affair with the car. What is worse, there is nary a word about building an efficient public transportation system.

A salient feature of the consumption mania is that even children are not immune from it. The authors rightly emphasise that one of the most distressing aspects of affluenza is what they call "childhood affluenza". Businesses, marketers, and advertisers have discovered that colonising the imagination of the child is the most effective way of securing a life-long conspicuous consumer. And they are right. The book states: "Spending by - and influenced by - American children 12 or younger recently began growing at a torrid 20 % a year, and is expected to reach \$1 trillion annually within

the next decade." Such a staggering level of spending is only to be expected as the monies spent on children's advertising is increasing exponentially.

Between 1980 and 1997, the amount spent on children's advertising in America zoomed from \$100 million to \$1.5 billion a year. American children watch up to 200 television commercials per day. The average 12-year-old in America spends 48 hours a week watching television advertisements and just about 90 minutes per week "in significant conversation with his or her parents".

Consumer activist Ralph Nader describes advertisements aimed at children as "corporate child abuse". Advertising-driven consumerism has thus invaded and desecrated the most sacrosanct segments of human relationships. The authors point out that this trend has reached such deplorable levels that "nearly 90 [per cent] of American adults worry that their children are becoming 'too focussed on buying and consuming things'".

Some consequences of the acquisitive mania are apparent while others are not. The authors have incisively assayed the patent and latent ill-effects of consumerism. One thing most apparent is that in spite of all the goodies Americans possess, happiness and contentment still elude them. Otherwise, they would not be exerting themselves beyond endurable limits. In the light of the phenomenal prosperity of America, this statement might seem absurd. As the authors explain, it is true that since the Second World War, productivity in the United States has more than doubled, leading to a doubling of consumption as well. Yet, it is equally true that countries that have the most prosperity also have the most stress. Stress can come from plain greed masquerading as the 'noble' desire for a higher standard of living. It could be the result of being overworked and constantly pressed for

time. Americans suffer from all these and much more. As the Harvard economist Juliet Schor has argued, full-time American workers now toil 160 hours - one full month - more on average than they did in 1969. According to another study, American couples now find just 12 minutes a day to converse with each other. Thus, the notion that prosperity leads to leisure has been debunked. On the contrary, it is clear that economic growth inevitably leads to scarcity of time.

Americans lack time because they work more. They work more because they want more. The authors observe insightfully: "As a culture... we have chosen money over time."

This choice leads to time scarcity and "free floating hostility". In turn, these factors have created a new form of "homelessness". "We have people living in houses with one another but not connecting with one another."

THE most corrosive impact of consumerism has been on human relationships. It flourishes by promoting a use-and-throw culture, a culture of planned obsolescence. The authors rightly posit that "attitudes formed in relation to products eventually get transferred to people as well". Just as things are discarded after use, people too are cast off if they lose the capacity to participate in the cycle of consumption. In a consumerist culture, therefore, one's master status is linked exclusively to one's ability to buy.

Not many people understand that consumerism starts as an all-encompassing desire for things but imperceptibly mutates into an instrumentally rational worldview. It claims to celebrate "achievement"; in reality, though, all it does is it promotes an egocentric outlook on life. What follows, then, is the neglect of higher ideals in the "icy water of egoistical calculation", as the Communist Manifesto puts it. This is clearly evident from

the fact that America has the world's highest rate of divorce and, according to family counselors, "arguments about money are precipitating factors in 90 per cent of divorce cases".

Another commonly observed aberration that crass consumerism creates is "chronic self-absorption". The unremitting craving for things leaves people with little time and patience to think about others. Hence most Americans are unmindful of the maladies of their society. For instance, how many of them know that "on any given night, at least 750,000 Americans are without shelter, and nearly two million experience homelessness during the course of the year"? Over three million children are abused every year. America has incarcerated over two million of its citizens, the largest number for any nation.

In spite of these dismaying statistics, the vast majority of Americans not only do not seem to care, but are also withdrawing from civic life. According to the Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam, participation in community activities such as volunteering for the Red Cross has been steadily declining.

The biggest winners of the consumerist boom are big businesses, financial institutions and multinational corporations. They continue to post record profits by inveigling people into buying their products. Besides, in virtually all segments of business - be it home hardware, books, hotels, funeral homes, cinemas and so on - big businesses dominate through their franchises resulting in what the authors refer to as the "chaining of America". As they point out, "more than half a million franchise businesses in 60 different industries control 35 per cent of the retail market". These behemoths have formed cartels and they spare no effort - from fixing prices, lobbying for favourable legislation to stamping out small businesses - to consolidate their vice-like grip on the market.

Equally worrisome is the escalating polarisation between the rich and the poor as a direct result of consumerism. The lower classes are buying their way into poverty; the elites, meanwhile, continue to batten on the former's folly. To wit, by 1999, the top 20 per cent of American families owned 92 per cent of all financial wealth (stocks, bonds and commercial estate) and of them, the top 10 per cent owned 83 per cent of the stock. In stark contrast, "40 per cent of all Americans own no assets at all". Consistent with this trend, a new under class of servants has emerged in America. Upper middle class Americans are now employing domestic servants in a big way. Some economists describe this trend as the "Brazilianisation of the American economy".

The authors' rigorous analysis of consumerism is based on solid, incontrovertible facts. However, their explanations regarding why Americans have become mindless consumers could have benefited from a richer, nuanced and theoretically informed inquiry. The authors cite a number of factors such as plain greed, a feeling of emptiness inside, and the quest for greater recognition and acceptance to explain the lure of consumerism. Besides, they approvingly quote the conservative philosopher Ernest van den Haag's thesis that "the benefits of mass production are reaped only by matching de-individualising work with equally de-individualising consumption". Unfortunately, however, while they fleetingly invoke Karl Marx's analysis - drawn from *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* and the *Communist Manifesto* - regarding why people develop "imaginary appetites", they do not even mention his thesis about alienation. More glaring is the cursory treatment of the role of big business in creating and sustaining affluenza.

True, the authors indeed discuss the role of advertising in promoting consumerism but do not extend it to other big corporations. Similarly, they do address another crucial problem, namely, how the political system can tame big businesses while depending on them for campaign contributions. They advocate campaign finance reform, something that has been attempted but still is ridden with loopholes. Corporate lobbyists have repeatedly thwarted attempts to emancipate the political system from the clutches of big business.

Likewise, the authors' point about substituting economic indices such as gross national product (GNP) and gross domestic product (GDP) with what they call GPI - Genuine Progress Index - is well taken. The crucial question is: Will those who run the system and benefit from the status quo ever agree to change it in a manner that will be inimical to their interests? All told, the authors emphasise personal and psychological inadequacies to account for the contagion of affluenza.

In keeping with this line of thinking, the authors suggest voluntary poverty and a series of personal improvement measures such as thrift, minimising wants, not buying things, reducing working hours, and so on. In addition, they place their faith in corporate responsibility to curb wasteful consumption. They want corporations to be accountable for the entire lifecycle of their products.

That there is a great deal of merit in the authors' suggestions regarding changing one's attitude towards consumption cannot be gainsaid. The moot point, however, is: Will changes at the individual level alone suffice to cure affluenza? One could argue that, alongside cultivating mindful consumption habits, a more fruitful strategy would be to strive for a radical social transformation that will obviate the need for reckless consumption.

Needless to say, such a new social order, based on equity and social justice, would minimise if not totally eliminate alienation, one of the root causes of affluenza. That the book does not pursue this analytical framework is perhaps its only lacuna. Nonetheless, Affluenza is a great book written in an accessible and engaging style. It has several lovely cartoons, graphics, tables, charts and a useful "Affluenza Self-Diagnosis Test".