

# The Sins of Affluence

Two prominent liberal thinkers offer impassioned critiques of modern capitalism—and solutions that are the policy equivalents of bake sales.

By James K. Galbraith

Overwritten does not begin to describe *Consumed*, in which Benjamin Barber takes aim at kid culture, mass market juvenilia, and the infantilization of just about everything in American life. A political theorist, Barber is the Gershon and Carol Kekst Professor of Civil Society at the University of Maryland, and author of sixteen books, including the best-selling *Jihad vs. McWorld*. Economy is not one of the virtues of his prose. Here's a typical sentence, from a passage on Puritanism in the New World:

*Planted on a bounteous new continent and combining the burgeoning new free economy's core values of work, investment and saving with an energetic and enlightened selfishness on behalf of the common good, the ethos was fortified by a spiritual catechism celebrating altruistic toil, ascetic self-denial, deferred gratification, and a devotion to good works and to charity—all laced with an egalitarianism in which work and faith, virtues available to all, generated both worldly and otherworldly rewards.*

Nothing wrong with it, of course, apart from some things it leaves out, like witch hunts and King Philip's War and the price controls that were a ubiquitous feature of economic regulation in Massachusetts Bay. It's just long. Also, I doubt Barber can document an economics of *investment*, as distinct from *thrift*, in colonial North America. Thrift is simply a matter of pinching pennies, but you don't get investment before you have industry, which the colonists did not. Proto-Reaganauts, in short, they weren't.

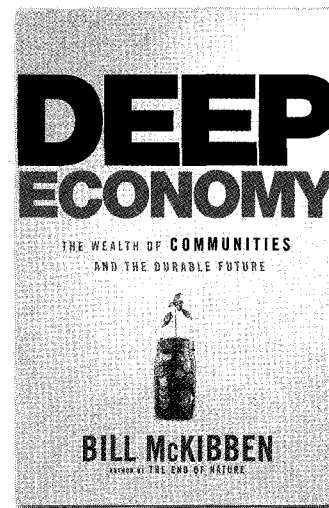
But Barber is determined that Paradise has been Lost, and on occasion he states this view without guile: "Once upon a time, in capitalism's more creative and successful period, a *productivist* capitalism prospered by meeting the real needs of real people." The problem is that this is not history. It is, rather, like all sentences that begin "Once upon a time," the stage setting for a fairy tale, a rendition of truths for children. And this is curious, in a book that is, from soup to nuts, a critique of infantilization. *Consumed* is self-referential. It is, to some degree, an instance of the problem it describes. Barber serves up some of the longest sentences since Proust, yet underneath is largely a simple moral tale, an allegory not more complicated than, say, social Darwinism or Horatio Alger.

Infantilization exists, of course. Dumbing down is big business. In a rare moment of syntactic simplicity, Barber gives the basic contours of the culture: "EASY over HARD, SIMPLE over COMPLEX, and FAST over SLOW." The stages of capitalism reproduce the stages of physical and psychological development, except in reverse. We



## Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults, and Swallow Citizens Whole

by Benjamin R. Barber  
W. W. Norton, 381 pp.



## Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future

by Bill McKibben  
Henry Holt & Company, 261 pp.

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are trapped in a world dominated by the reduction of physical and cultural artifacts to the tastes and capacities of children. Fast food, fast sports, cheap love, shout-fest politics. No one with cable television could disagree.

And there are pleasures to be found in this relentless, one-message book. On occasion, Barber can be witty and withering: he describes fast food as the "grease and starch, sugar and salt" business; he writes about instant messaging that "[k]ids will [do it] for hours as if they have but seconds, the mad seconds accumulate, leaving them time to compose sonnets ..." But you have to search for these gems, buried as they are in a vast bog of pop sociology and commonplace erudition—roughly, from Weber and Freud to David Brooks and Thomas Friedman. One gets the picture very quickly: Standards have fallen. Yes! We know!

The question is, what are we going to do about it? Are we going to do anything about it? Almost fifty years ago, in *The Affluent Society*, my father wrote about this problem, which he defined as "private affluence and public squalor." His solution was "social balance": public goods, including schools and parks and libraries and higher culture. Liberalism stood for its own values. It stood against corporate dominance, business thinking, and commercial culture. And it was backed by the power of trade unions, of churches, and of the educational and scientific estate.

Barber offers no similar recourse. Everything he would do, he would do through markets, not against them or by bringing them under control. He speaks mainly of the "slow food" movement, of Hernando de Soto's property-rights-for-the-poor and of the Grameen Bank's micro-lending programs, each of these the projects of enlightened voluntarism, presupposing that markets can be as much a force for good in principle as they are presently a force for ill in practice. The democracy he would like to build lacks social or political organization; it isn't about parties and agendas and laws and new government agencies tasked with meeting national needs. The New

Deal and the Great Society are not Barber's antecedents. He seeks merely the willed capacity to conduct one's own life beyond the reach of mass culture, and offers the wishful thought that sensible people, each acting alone, will somehow manage to do just that. Good luck. Barber speaks of "capitalism triumphant," and he proposes to leave it that way.

Environmentalist Bill McKibben is a better, shorter writer, and in *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future* he shows himself to be an adept critic of capitalism writ large. That is because McKibben, unlike Barber, drills into the fundamental question of the planet's physical limits. (The term "climate change" does not appear in *Consumed*, while McKibben sounded the alarm on global warming back in 1989 in his first book, *The End of Nature*.) For as McKibben points out, the carbon blanket—a "mirror image in the sky" of every drop of oil, every ton of coal ever burned—will change everything, and quite soon.

So what comes next? Climate change and peak oil (the eventual start of decline in world oil production) are inevitable; we will have to scale back. But McKibben has hope, founded improbably on an emerging field within—of all subjects—economics: happiness studies. Here researchers have found (and McKibben accepts) that happiness does not depend on economic growth, after the first \$10,000 per capita in GDP.

So McKibben sets out to find happiness in simpler, less eco-destructive lives. His investigative technique is to travel the world and report what he sees, from factory life in northeast China (surprisingly humanized in his account) to organic farming in urban Havana, and as far afield as the Bengali river deltas. He is an elegant travel writer. But most of all, he writes from close to home, in northern Vermont, and most of what he is concerned with, here and there, is food.

Can we actually feed ourselves for less? Can we do it without sowing millions of tons of petroleum, in the form



of fertilizer, into the Iowa soil, and without the billions of gallons of oil required to process grain and meat and move them around the world? McKibben thinks we can, and he has tried it, personally, with good results; local farming works in the Vermont woods if you have a good freezer to get the vegetables through the winter. The Cubans have tried it too, and they've gotten back the calories they gave up when their Soviet markets collapsed. From this follows a larger lesson: when the oil-and-coal economy ends, some of us will get along fine, eating local potatoes and cheese. Incomes will diminish, but happiness need not.

It's a beautiful tale, but it can't be altogether right. The climate collapse—which may bring the flooding of New York, Boston, London, Calcutta, and Shanghai—will be a calamity next to which the end of the Soviet Union will seem very small. Long industrial chains, for jet aircraft, automobiles, telecommunications, electricity, and much else, will crumble, as they did in the USSR and Yugoslavia, particularly if new interior boundaries form and countries break up. And interior boundaries *will* form, as those on the high ground seek to defend it. The demographic effects will be similarly dire: Older, urban males (like me) with no survival skills will die. Rural New England will turn into a deforested exurban slum.

This brings us back to the sphere that both McKibben and Barber largely ignore: public policy. The function of the government, in principle, is to foresee these dangers, and avert them. The powers of the government exist to permit the mobilization of resources required. And only government can hope to do the job.

This is bleak news not only in the present climate of thought, but also given the decay of the public sphere since at least 1981. Whatever government might have been (or seemed) capable of in the 1940s or the 1960s, it plainly is not capable of today. A government that cannot establish a functioning Homeland Security Department in half a decade, a government that

is capable of creating the Coalition Provisional Authority or Bush's FEMA, is no one's idea of an effective instrument for climate planning. Plainly the destruction of government—the turning over of regulation to predators, military functions to mercenaries, the Justice Department to a vote-suppression racket, and the Supreme Court to fanatics—has been the price of tolerating the Bush coup of November 2000. Soon we will face the aftermath of all this, with the fate of the earth in the balance.

Therefore: government will have to be rebuilt. The competencies necessary will have to be learned. The necessary powers will have to be legislated. Safeguards—against corruption, against abuse, against predation, against regulatory capture—will have to be designed. The corporate consumer culture will have to be brought to heel, and the long food production chains McKibben warns against will, indeed, have to be shortened. At the same time, a new project of physical, technological, and urban social engineering will have to get under way.

I'd rather it didn't. But, to borrow Margaret Thatcher's famous words, "There is no alternative." John Kenneth Galbraith, let me suggest, got it right, not merely in *The Affluent Society* but in *Economics and the Public Purpose* as well:

*The role of the government, when one contemplates reform, is a dual one. The government is a major part of the problem; it is also central to the remedy. It is part of the problem of unequal development, inequality in income distribution, poor distribution of public resources, environmental damage and bogus or emasculatory regulation. And it is upon government that reliance must be placed for solution.*

Sad, but still true. WM

James K. Galbraith is the Lloyd M. Bentsen Jr. Chair in Government/Business Relations and professor of government at the University of Texas. His new book is *Unbearable Cost: Bush, Greenspan, and the Economics of Empire*.

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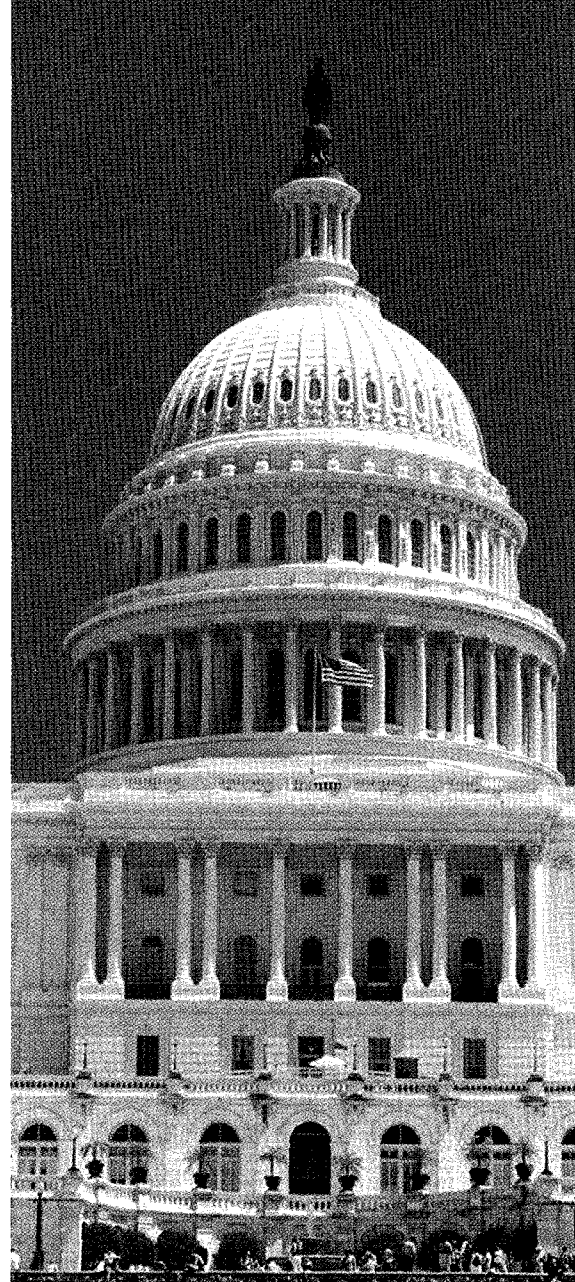
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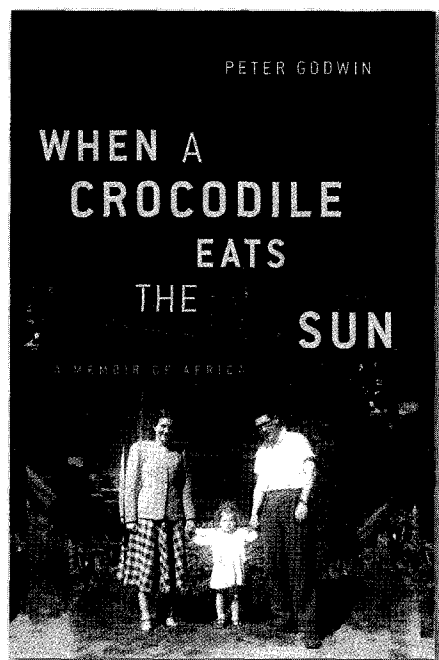
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# Things Fall Apart



## When a Crocodile Eats the Sun: A Memoir of Africa

by Peter Godwin  
Little Brown, 352 pp.

An affecting, elegant memoir of life in Mugabe's Zimbabwe

By Joshua Hammer

**A**mong the many examples of failure in Africa, the descent of Zimbabwe from hope of the continent into beggar is one of the saddest. More than a quarter century after leading his guerrilla army to victory over the racist regime of Ian Smith in white-minority-ruled Rhodesia, President Robert Mugabe has morphed into a caricature of the African Big Man, and taken his country down with him. In 2000 Mugabe launched a ruinous policy of seizing Zimbabwe's 4,000 white-owned farms and handing them to generals, ruling party hacks, and self-proclaimed "war veterans" in the name of land reform. The result, as is now well known, was a national tragedy: Agricultural production was gutted. Foreign exchange dried up. Social services disintegrated. Crime soared. Hundreds of thousands fled the country. Throughout it all, Mugabe has remained defiant, a snarling figure peering through oversize spectacles, lashing out at Great Britain, America, and the country's whites and threatening to kill anyone who dares to challenge him.

Peter Godwin's new memoir, *When a Crocodile Eats the Sun: A Memoir of Africa*, brings home the consequences of Mugabe's descent into paranoid despotism with unflinching detail. (The title refers to a myth of the Shonas, Zimbabwe's largest tribe, that attributes a solar eclipse to a crocodile devouring the sun and regards the event as a portent of evil.) Godwin is an author and foreign correspondent whose first memoir, *Mukiwa*, was the bittersweet story of his boyhood in rural Rhodesia and the civil war that swept away that period of innocence. This gripping sequel picks up the story in the 1990s, after Godwin has moved away from the country to pursue a journalism career in London and New York. His parents, however, and younger sister, Georgina, a TV and radio journalist, have remained in Harare, the capital, where they begin to bear the full brunt of Mugabe's disastrous policies. Returning frequently to document Zimbabwe's collapse, Godwin deftly weaves scenes of brutal farm confiscations with the poignant decline—both physical and material—of his elderly parents. In doing so, he elevates what could have been simply another work of good journalism into a story with devastating emotional impact.

Godwin doesn't dispute the exploitation that allowed white colonialists in the early part of the twentieth century to grab the country's best land, but he blames the inequities that persisted long after Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 partly on Mugabe's own failures. A voluntary land-redistribution program, funded by the British government, managed to get the land of 40 percent of white farmers into the hands of blacks before it fell apart, largely because Mugabe had turned it into a tool to enrich his cronies. By 2000, the issue was off the table: only 9 percent of Zimbabweans saw land redistribution as a priority, according to a poll conducted that year by the Helen Suzman Foundation. The same year, however, Mugabe faced an unprecedented challenge from a nascent opposition movement, the Movement for Democratic Change, led by the former labor leader Morgan Tsvangirai. Mugabe evidently concocted the violent land-seizure program to take revenge on the country's whites—whom he blamed for funding the MDC.

Godwin is at his best nailing down the small details that convey the loss of his parents' comfortable world. As hyperinflation renders their savings worthless, and